

THE RENAISSANCE (1485-1603)

WARM UP

Work in small groups to create a list of the most outstanding representatives of the Renaissance period in literature.

THEME OPENER

The Renaissance is a word of French origin, which means “rebirth”. The effort at recovery from barbarism of the Middle Ages had its beginnings in Italy in the 14th century, and spread out from Italy over Europe. In England it began to be felt towards the close of the 15th century. For medieval Christianity human life was worthless in comparison with the eternal life of the soul after death because it was blind to possibilities in human life. For Greeks and Romans human life was significant for itself, they believed in the possibility of happiness in this life and admitted the greatness of human nature. Everywhere scholars studied the past, learning Greek and Latin. They wanted to gain more knowledge of the ancient world, so that they might make their own world a better place to live.

Characteristic features of the Renaissance:

- Extraordinary and far-reaching change- the Age of Discovery, commerce between Europe and East; Columbus Voyages, when people gained the opportunity to show themselves initiative, ambitious, heroic with a sense of personality.
- Humanist outlook, marked with optimism, belief in man’s great abilities; interest in the matters of men-human rather than divine.
- A revival of interest in the ancient culture of Greece and Rome but with a new sense of what had been lost throughout the Middle Ages.
- Creating of new culture, new literature, new outlook, and new hopes.

The Renaissance gave the mankind such great men in literature as: Petrarche, Boccacio, Cervantes.

In England the most notable of the men who care to create a new literature were: Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon and William Shakespeare.

Some words should be said about the historical background against which these literary men wrote. It was the time of Queen Elizabeth I who came to the throne in 1558 and reigned till 1603. She very quickly became popular with the people of England because it was evident to everyone that under her leadership, England was developing into a strong nation, peaceful and wealthy at home, powerful overseas.

The Elizabethan age is marked by features so distinct and so superior that it has been called the “Golden Age in English literature.” We judge its greatness not only in the works of Shakespeare but also in new forms of literature that it explored successfully and in its great quantity of talented poets and dramatists.

The Elizabethan age is the age of poetry: lyric poetry and poetic drama. The meeting of poetry and drama in English literature- in the plays of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, to name just a few – was glorious but relatively brief. It was glorious in the poetry as they produced plays in verse that endure to this day. Yet after them, the poetic drama becomes very rare in English literature.

If we are going to try to understand drama, plays of the period we have to get rid of our today’s understanding of the theatre completely because Elizabethan Theatre was nothing like modern one at all. Plays and theatres were very new. The first theatre or playhouse was built in 1576 by James Burbage. It was simply called the theatre and was very successful. Soon other people started their own theatres to satisfy the growing demand for more and more plays, which were performed in the afternoon by men and boys only. Costumes and properties were extravagant (such as guillotines, fountains, etc.); extensive music was constantly used and such sound effects as cannon drums, or unearthly screams were common.

EDMUND SPENSER (1552-1599)

Known as the “prince of poets” or the “poet’s poet” as he had a rich dreamy music and a skill in poetic form. His most notable poetic achievement is *The Faerie Queene*, set in the world of King Arthur and his knights. For this work he invented a new stanza- a group of lines forming a unit in a poem, known now as Spenserian stanza- a nine-line stanza, rhyming *ababbcbcc* which was later used by many great English poets - Byron, Keats, Shelley.

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY (1554-1586)

Philip Sidney is perhaps the supreme example of the ideal Elizabethan gentleman: a brave soldier, a great traveller, a noted patron of the arts, a courtier, a particular favourite of Queen Elizabeth and a gifted writer. His *Arcadia*, a story of romance, intrigue, and politics, is probably the finest imaginative prose work of the Elizabethan era, and his *Defense of Poesy* is the outstanding piece of literary criticism of the age. He is perhaps best noted, however, as the author of *Astrophel and Stella*, a series of 110 brief poems - sonnets that develop a single subject, love

LITERARY SELECTION

1. Comment upon Philip Sidney’s words “ Fool! Said my muse to me, look in thy heart, and write. “ (*Astrophel and Stella*)
2. Read sonnet 31 by Sir Philip Sidney and sonnet 75 by Edmund Spenser. What is their subject matter? Is there any difference between the two speakers’ attitudes to love?

Sonnet 31

Sir Philip Sidney

With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb'st the skies!

How silently, and with how wan a face!

What! may it be that even in heavenly place
That busy archer his sharp arrows tries?
Sure, if that long-with-love-acquainted eyes
Can judge of love, thou feel'st a lover's case:
I read it in thy looks; thy languish'd grace
To me, that feel the like, thy state describes.
Then, even of fellowship, O Moon, tell me,
Is constant love deem'd there but want of wit?
Are beauties there as proud as here they be?
Do they above love to be loved, and yet
Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?
Do they call "virtue" there--ungratefulness?

Notes:

That...archer: Cupid, god of love

Describes: reveals

Even of fellowship: that is, because we both know what it is to be in love

Wit: intelligence

Sonnet 75

Edmund Spenser

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
Vain man, said she, that dost in vain assay
A mortal thing so to immortalize!
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eek my name be wiped out likewise.

Not so (quoth I), let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name;
Where, whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew.

Notes:

Strand: seashore

Assay: try

Eke: also

Quod: said

Eternize: make eternal

CREATIVE WRITING

In a brief essay contrast the feelings of the two speakers about love in their sonnets. First state the feelings expressed in Sidney's poem, using details from the poem to support your statements. Then describe the emotions expressed in the poem by Spenser. Conclude with a short paragraph stating the differences between the two speakers' attitudes toward love.