

## Queen Elizabeth I and the Elizabethan Era of English Literature:

### [ ] Introduction

At the death of Mary on November 17, 1558, Elizabeth I came to the throne. Queen Elizabeth I claimed the throne at the age of 25 and held it until her death 44 years later. The Elizabethan age contrasts sharply with the previous (Tudor period) and following (Jacobean era) reigns. It was a brief period of internal peace between the English Reformation and the religious battles between Protestants and Catholics and then the political battles between parliament and the monarchy that engulfed the remainder of the seventeenth century. The Protestant/Catholic divide was settled, for a time, by the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, and parliament was not yet strong enough to challenge royal absolutism. England was also well-off compared to the other nations of Europe.

Elizabeth's reign became known as the Elizabethan era. England experienced an intense phase of economic and cultural development. It was one of the most interesting periods in the British history because it is characterized by explorations, cultural changes such as in literature or theatre, religion, education and politics. It was considered the English Renaissance. The period is famous for the flourishing of English drama, led by playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe.

Many of the great works of English literature were produced during these years: art, poetry, drama, and learning in general flourished as the confidence and nationalism Elizabeth inspired spilled from the economic sector to cultural achievements. Elizabeth's reign saw playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, poets like Edmund Spenser, and men of science and letters like Francis Bacon. The era also saw the beginning of William Shakespeare's work. Many of the writers, thinkers and artists of the day enjoyed the patronage of members of Elizabeth's court, and their works often involved or referred to the great Queen; indeed, she was *the* symbol of the day. The "Elizabethan Age," generally considered one of golden ages in English literature, was thus appropriately named: these cultural achievements did not just happen to be created while Elizabeth was on the throne; rather, Elizabeth's specific actions, her image, and the court atmosphere she nurtured significantly influenced--even inspired--great works of literature. Elizabeth herself was known for being a very good dancer and a particularly talented musician, although she only played for her closest friends.

Elizabeth was particularly fond of inviting theatre companies to perform at her palaces during holidays, and these performances increased the theatre companies' reputation. The dramatic presentations before the royal court became an important

social event, and Elizabeth even proudly brought ministers from other countries to see them, in order to show off the achievements of English culture.

#### [ ] Monarchy

Queen Elizabeth I was the regent queen of England and Ireland between 1558 until 1603. Elizabeth, Henry VIII's daughter, was the fifth and last monarch of the Tudor dynasty. She assumed the throne after the death of her brother Edward VI and her sister Mary I. She is known by several nicknames but one of the most famous is The Virgin Queen because she decided not to get married although there were several petitions from the Parliament.

Elizabeth was crowned after Mary's death. Mary was unpopular and her death was celebrated by the English population. At the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, her foreign policy was characterized by its cautious relationship with Spain and the troubled relations with Scotland and France. According to religion, the queen took over a country divided by religious issues. One of the first steps that she took was to establish a Protestant church independent of Rome, which later evolved into the present Church of England, which became the highest authority.

#### [ ] Culture

Elizabeth's reign not only sealed the emergence of England as a great power on the European scene, it was characterized by great cultural development, which has gone down in history as "Elizabethan." The heyday of education in all social classes made that culture grew rapidly in this period. This blooming occurred in the literature, mainly in the theatre, especially William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, John Lyly and others. Development was also great music with William Byrd or John Bull and architecture, influenced by Italian Renaissance and flamenco culture.

#### [ ] Education

Children would be taught at home. The basic principles of childhood education would be basic elements such as: respecting their mother and father, asking their parents blessing or the basic etiquette of proper manners.

On one hand, boys attend to Grammar school, where students used to use the Horn Book that was the most important tool used in these schools. After Grammar schools, boys continued their education at university when they were only fourteen. On the other hand, girls were rarely allowed in any place of education other than Petty schools that were for all girls aged from 5 to 7 years of age. Only the most wealthy people allowed their daughters to be taught, and only at home. These

schools were usually run for a small amount of money by a local and cultured housewife. Students' education was based on reading and writing in English, learn about religion and also learn lessons in behaviour.

During this time, schooling became available even for children of very poor families if they did not have to work at home. The problem was that only in a few places of the country there were financial support for education.

#### [ ] Language

Elizabethan language and vocabulary are different from the modern English language that it is used nowadays. Some of the notably changes are: many words that were used in those days now are no longer in use or they have been replaced; the Elizabethan alphabet contained twenty-four letters while now there are twenty-six and also, there were some letters such as "u" or "v" that were the same letter.

During this era, words were constantly developing and vocabulary was expanded thanks to writers of this period. For example, Shakespeare invented many of the words that he used in his plays. It is said that he created more than two thousand words, more than anyone else. Although there were many new words, language and vocabulary were not formalized. There were not any available dictionary therefore; words were written in many formats. For example, Shakespeare were written in many ways such as Shakspere, Shakespere, Shakkespere or even Chacsper.

#### [ ] Literature

It is often noted that this literary flowering occurred between 1578 and 1660, thus extending beyond the death of the queen. It was not until the English Civil War when this aesthetic rupture occurred. The Elizabethan era saw a great flourishing of literature, especially in the field of theatre.

#### [ ] Theatre

Theatre was a growing industry during era and for this reason, many theatres arose around London. Entrepreneurs and actors were lured by money and fame and they started working in this business.

The Italian Renaissance had rediscovered the ancient Greek and Roman theatre. The Italians were inspired, in particular, by Seneca, but tragedies did not follow Seneca's principle. The new tragedies showed blood and violence on stage, contrary to the philosopher's ethics. Consequently, this kind of violence was perhaps more cathartic for the Elizabethan spectator. The first Elizabethan plays were Gorboduc by Sackville and Norton and The Spanish Tragedy by Kyd and both provided a lot of material to Hamlet by William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare stands at this time as an English poet and playwright. He was not an intellectual and probably he only had a basic education, but this writer had a tremendous talent and he was incredibly versatile, surpassing other “professionals” such as Greene. As a young man, Shakespeare joined a company of actors, and since 1603 he joined in the “King’s Company” with which he was associated and for which he wrote all his works. He was well-paid, and his literary reputation was affirmed. Although most of his works were successful, it is considered that the greatest ones are Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth Anthony and Cleopatra and The Tempest.

Other important authors that developed their works during the Elizabethan era were Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont.

### [ ] Poetry

At the end of the sixteenth century, English poetry was characterized by the development of language and extensive allusion to classical myths. The three most prominent poets of the time were John Lyly, Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. Although Elizabethan poetry has been in the background, there are some people that considered it the best lines ever written.

Depending on the author, each one had a different technique which compound the whole style. Euphues, the anatomy of wit and Euphues and His England is John Lyly’s famous work. His linguistic style is culterano and it is known as euphuism. The first and the best poetic work of Edmund Spenser was The Shepheardes Calendar. Particularly, Spenser used the “Spenserian stanza”, a poetic form that he invented. Each stanza has nine lines: eight lines in iambic pentameter followed by a single ‘Alexandrine’ line in iambic hexameter. The rhyme scheme of these lines is “ababbcbcc.” Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard are considered the introducers of the English sonnet. Finally, Shakespeare also wrote some poems and he popularized the sonnet form, but with some changes in Petrarch’s model. Shakespeare’s sonnets are approximately formed by three four-line stanzas and a final couplet composed in iambic pentameter.

### [ ] Conclusion

This period has marked a before and after in England, but also in European history. All European countries were influenced by these changes that were happening and we still enjoy nowadays. England experienced a remarkable cultural and artistic renaissance, whose best examples were the proliferation of popular theatre and the high level of dramatic production. The importance of this era is present in our lives and for example, we can attend to a Shakespeare’s performance in many places or we can watch a film based on Elizabeth I. Also, we have to thank this queen her

interest for education and the opportunity that it was provided to almost everyone to be taught. If this had not happened, major authors, such as Shakespeare, would never have come to show their talent. Anyway, these are not the only themes that were developed in those days. Music, architecture, sports or even food were in a brilliant moment or even they had modifications that are still latent.