Characteristics of the Elizabethan Age (1558-1603) The age of Queen Elizabeth comprising the latter half of the 16th centuryis the golden age in the history of the English people. It was an age in which theminds of the people were set free from religious persecution, from fear ofpoverty and starvation and from the fear of foreign invasion. It was an era ofsocial, political and religious peace. It was also an era of great adventure, traveland discovery. It was the golden age of literature, an age in which theRenaissance could come to full flowering. The reign of Queen Elizabeth proved to be a rich flowering season forliterature.

There were various reasons for this high rate of productivity: 1. Renaissance spirit: The general atmosphere of the nation was charged withthe spirit of new learning. "Every breeze was dusty with a pollen of Greece,Rome and Italy” and it stimulated the intellectual and aesthetic faculties of thepeople.

2. Reformation: The English Bible was adopted and Anglican Church becamea reality. The Reformation awakened the spiritual nature of the people andindependent theological enquiry resulted in greater moral earnestness.

3. Social and Political peace: Queen Elizabeth's wise policy of moderationresulted in social and political peace. Queen Elizabeth was a true child of theRenaissance and the people worshipped her for they "rightly saw in her theincarnate spirit of the nation and the age"

.4. Intense Patriotism: There was an upsurge of patriotism which sprang fromEngland's growing consciousness of her strength, her pride of prosperity and thespirit of adventure. The English considered themselves to be the chosen peopleof God and "the living God is only the English God" became the popular belief.Elizabethan love of letters had its beginning in patriotic pride.

5. Imperialism: England emerged as a naval power and there was an upsurge ofmaritime activity. The exploits of John Hawkins, Walter Raleigh and FrancisDrake fired the imagination of the people. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in1588 made England the supreme naval power in Europe.

The East IndiaCompany was founded in 1600 and thus were sown the seeds of Britishimperialism. In the 16th century the British began to establish overseas colonies. There was a keen interest in England's past, pride in England'sgreatness and hatred of England's enemies during the Elizabethan period. It wasan age in which "men lived intensely, thought intensely and wrote intensely".

Hamlet's remark, "What a piece of work is man!" is the very epitome of theRenaissance spirit. It was an age when people were very eager to respond to theappeal of genius. In short, it was a glorious age in which men of genius likeShakespeare, Spenser, Marlowe, Sydney and Bacon could make their significantcontributions to English literature.

Impact of Renaissance on Elizabethan Literature. Or, Elizabethan age is the golden age of English Literature.

The Renaissance is a French word which means re-birth, revival or re-awakening. The Renaissance was both a revival of ancient classical mythology, literature and culture as well as a re-awakening of the human mind, after the long sleep of the dark Middle Ages, to the wonder, the glory and the beauty of the human body and the world of nature. “It was a re-discovery by mankind of himself and of the world.” In the words of the M.H. Abrahams Renaissance is “the birth of the modern world out of the ashes of the dark ages.” Renaissance began with the fall of the Constantinople in 1453. Mohamad-II, the sultan of the Ottoman Turks and a crusader defeated the Christians in 1453 and occupied Constantinople. It was the capital of Byzantine Empire and the center of classical learning. The scholars of ancient learning fled away to Italy and different other countries with their books and knowledge. They tried to spread their knowledge there. This revival of the classical knowledge is called Renaissance. Its salient features are– curiosity about more knowledge, desire for unlimited wealth and power, love of adventures, own country, beauty, humanism and the past.

It was a period of great enlightenment in the life of humanity. It was a revival of the trendy of beauty, “the beauty of woman, the beauty of nature, the beauty of art and literature.” It began in Italy as early as the 14th century with the works of Petrarch and others and was greatly inspired by the fall of Constantinople in 1453, by the invention of printing in Germany about this time. Its influence reached England as late as the last years of the 15th century and the opening years of the 16th century. Renaissance is also the supreme Romantic Movement in English literature of language. It had transformed not only English but also European life.

The Medieval world was curiously limited and narrow. It was limited spiritually, intellectually and physically. Geographically it’s bound by the frozen seas, to the west by the Atlantic; and to the South and East by the Mediterranean. However, even as early as the 14th century, this limited narrow world had begun to decay. It was specially so in Italy. In England the Renaissance influences were aided and strengthened by the wise policies of Queen Elizabeth. She was herself cultured and refined; she patronized men of letters and encouraged literary activity. She followed a wise policy of compromise and religious peace was restored to the country. Similarly, her political policies resulted both in internal peace and freedom from the fear of external attack. Literature and art are peace-time activities, and the policies of the glorious queen did much to promote art and literature.

Thus both influence of the Renaissance and the influence of the Queen combined to make the age, “the golden age of English Literature.” The revival of ancient Greco-Roman culture had a profound impact on the ideas of life. The ascetic ideal of the middle Ages was replaced by the new ideal of the enjoyment of life. This new ideal reflects everywhere in Renaissance literature. The test for life automatically and naturally found its expression in song. England was transformed into a true nest of singing birds. Men longed for entertainment and in response to this demand; there came the drama and the novella. The drama and the short story are the characteristic modes of expression in the Elizabethan era.

During the Elizabethan era the Renaissance had made a massive contribution to art, culture and literature. In drama there has been massive progress or development. There arrived the host of dramatist including Shakespeare. The literary temper of Elizabethan England was distinguished by a splendid vitality and vivacity, a rare catholicity of taste and width of outlook. Prose and Poetry alike rang with a fervid enthusiasm for life in its most varied aspects. The Elizabethan was gifted an exceptional power of integration. The matter and manner of Elizabethan literature owed an enormous debt to foreign influence, but Elizabethan individuality survived the foreign invasion. Major writers of this period are: Philip Sidney, Thomas Moore, Edmund Spenser, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon and Ben Johnson etc.

The Elizabethan era saw a great flourishing of literature especially in the field of drama. William Shakespeare is considered an Elizabethan dramatist in the broader sense, although most of his work was produced during the reign of James-I. Shakespearean comedy is different from other contemporary comedy. Its primary aim is neither a satire nor a correction of the evils prevalent in our society. It aims at giving pleasure and joy. Charlton classifies Shakespearean comedy into four categories– (1) Romantic Comedy (2) Anti Romantic Comedy (3) Middle Comedy (4) Late Comedy. On the other hand Shakespeare’s tragedies are concerned with the ruin and restoration of the soul and the life of the men. In other words, it is subject to struggle of good and evil in the world. Examples of Elizabethan comedy are– John Lily’s The women in the Moone, Thomas Dekker’s The Roaring Girl, William Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. Examples of Elizabethan tragedies are– Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi.

Revenge Tragedy or Revenge play is a type of drama which flourished in the Elizabethan age under the Roman dramatist, Seneca. Its main theme was revenge for murder. The first example of this type was Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and the play Hamlet written by Shakespeare.

Shakespeare is different. It has been said that we cannot find the man Shakespeare through his style because he has a different style for every character. One of the reasons for Shakespeare’s world-wide appeal is the number and variety of characters he created. They include persons of all types, who came from all walks of life– kings, lords, nobles, general and great warriors, common people, drunkards, thieves, robbers, clown, men, women and children, all walk across the stage of Shakespeare. In the delineation of character, Shakespeare stands unrivalled in English Literature.

Shakespeare is admirable for his humanity. He loves human beings and has an infinite feelings of sympathy for his creations. He is not rapid satirist like his contemporary Ben Johnson. Shakespeare’s greatness lies in his sympathy for human beings. His language and style impress us most. At last, we can say that in the realm of English Drama, Shakespeare is surely without a peer.

In fine, we can say that this age was a glorious period. It is like sunrise after a long period of darkness. In the words of Milton “We suddenly see England, a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks.” It was a glorious in which men of genius like Shakespeare, Spenser, Bacon and Marlowe could make their marks. The Elizabethan literature becomes very pregnant for the impact of Renaissance.