

**Poetry**  
**Professor. S. P. Dhanavel**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture 9**  
**Elizabethan Poetry**

(Refer Slide Time: 00:15)

## Elizabethan Poetry



- 16<sup>th</sup> century historical context
- 16<sup>th</sup> century literary context
- Various Poetic Forms
  - Petrarch's influence
  - Tottell's *Miscellany* (1557)
  - Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence
- Renaissance Humanist Ideal
- The Self-Fashioning poet



We come to the second module of our course on Elizabethan poetry. In this module we deal with Elizabethan poetry, particularly the ‘sonnet.’ To begin with, we will see the historical context in which the poets wrote, further we will look into the literary context which shaped this Elizabethan Poetry. We will see some of the poetic forms which flourished during this period.

One of the major cultural points that we have to notice at this point is the influence of the Italian poet Petrarch. Many of the poets who wrote during this period, they wrote sonnets and songs. There was a publisher called Richard Tottell, he published all of them together in a book called ‘Miscellany,’ it was published in 1557. This became later on an impetus for an extraordinary phenomenon called ‘Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence.’

Elizabethan poetry gave expression to the important aspect of Elizabethan culture and life that is the ‘Renaissance Humanist Ideal.’ This ideal helped to poets and others to fashion themselves. So, we have this topic ‘The Self-Fashioning poet’ in this background to Elizabethan Poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:09)

## Historical Context



- Stable Tudor monarchy
- Henry VII, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I
- Dissolution of monasteries and opening of schools
  - Development of English as a literary language
  - Establishment of the Stationer's Company in 1557
- Queen Elizabeth's balanced approach to the conflict between Catholics and Protestants



What are the historical conditions which contributed to the development of Elizabethan Poetry? One thing that we have to notice is stability in government, particularly offered by this Tudor monarchy. We have three rulers in this period from Tudor family. Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I.

During this Tudor monarchy, we have an unthinkable event that happened that is dissolution of monasteries and opening of schools. Both of these had an effect on the development of English as a literary language. We saw how Chaucer took upon himself the task of using English for a literary purpose.

And here, there is a collective endeavor to use English as a literary language. It was at this time the Stationer's Company was established in 1557. This company took care of all the books that were published from England at this time. Again, an important point that we have to remember is queen Elizabeth's own balanced approach to the conflict between two sets of people that is Catholics and Protestants.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:46)

## Literary Context



Translations from European culture

➤Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Dante, Petrarch, Plutarch

➤*A Mirror for Magistrates* (c.1555/p.1559)

➤Richard Tottell's *Miscellany* (1557)

Conflict between native literature and foreign literatures in English translation

➤Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* (1570)

Concern for a rich literature in English

Abundant patronage for poets in the court

More writers and more readers



Now, let us look at this literary context. A major event of this literary period is translation activity, translations from European literature and culture. Many of these writers like Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Dante, Petrarch, Plutarch and many others were translated into English. One of the first shapes to take was this anthology 'A Mirror for Magistrates.' It was compiled in 1555 but it was not published until 1559. That is how Richard Tottel's miscellany was published first in 1557 containing the songs and lyrics of many Elizabethan poets.

In this period, we notice the conflict between native literature that is English literature and foreign literatures in English translation. There was a kind of interaction between literatures from English and literatures in translation in English. And this interaction enabled many poets to experiment with different forms of writing.

There was also an educationist and humanist Roger Ascham, he published this book called 'The Schoolmaster' in 1570, urging the youth to use English to promote English. And hence we find a common concern for a rich literature in English language. We also notice abundant patronage for poets in the court. More writers we had and more readers also we had during this time.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:44)

## Various Poetic Forms



- Queen Elizabeth's reign: 1558-1603
- Pastoral: Spenser and Sidney
- Epic: Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*
- Minor epics: Marlowe, Shakespeare
- Sonnets: Wyatt, Surrey, Drayton, Daniel, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth I, Raleigh
- Lyrics: Shakespeare, Raleigh, Campion
- Drama: Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson
- Satire and epigram: Davies and Harrington
- Verse epistle and history: Drayton



For accessing this content for free (no charge), visit : [nptel.ac.in](http://nptel.ac.in)

Various poetic forms were explored during queen Elizabeth's period, from 1558 to 1603. Here we have some of them. Pastoral was well exemplified in Spenser and Sydney. Epic form was used by Spenser in his poem 'The Faerie Queene.' There were many minor epics written by various authors especially by Marlowe and Shakespeare. The notable feature of this period is this sonnet writing. We have a large number of sonneteers in this period starting from Wyatt, Surrey, Drayton, Daniel, Sydney and many others like Spenser, Shakespeare, including queen Elizabeth I. Walter Raleigh also wrote some sonnets in this period.

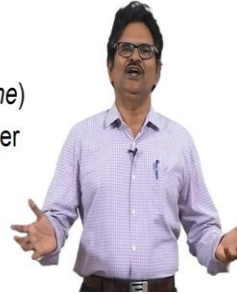
Lyrics were also common, written by well-known dramatists like Shakespeare and other writers like Raleigh and a musician called Thomas Campion. Of course, it is a well-known fact, 'Drama' was the glory of this period as seen in the writings of Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and Ben Johnson. In addition to all these poetic forms, we have Satire and Epigram in writers like Davies and Harrington. Another aspect of this Elizabethan period is the interest in Verse Epistle and History illustrated by Drayton.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:31)

## Lyric Poetry



- Most Elizabethan poets tried their hands in different poetic forms, including lyrics
- Included some lyrics in all kinds of writings
- Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, a pastoral romance
- Shakespeare: "Blow, blow, thou winter wind"  
(*As You Like It*)
- Jonson: "Come, my Celia, let us prove" (*Volpone*)
- Other playwrights like Lyly, Peele, Nashe, Dekker
- Thomas Campion a poet and musician



Lyric Poetry was very common among most of the Elizabethan poets. They tried their hands in different poetic forms including lyrics. In some form or other they would include lyrics in whatever writing they published. For example, Sir Philip Sydney published *Arcadia*. It is a pastoral romance. Even in this Sydney included some lyric poems.

Shakespeare wrote a number of plays, and in his plays, he included lyrics. Here is one example from *As You Like It*, "Blow, blow, thou winter wind." Similarly, we have one more example from Johnson, that is, the play is *Volpone*, "Come, my Celia, let us prove." Other playwrights like Lyly, Peele, Nashe and Dekker also included lyrics in their plays. An interesting writer is Thomas Campion. He was a poet and also a musician. So, he set his own poems to music and sang them primarily for religious purposes.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:48)

## The Sonnet



- 11 syllabled and 14 lined Italian poetic form
- Invented by **Giacomo da Lentini** in 13<sup>th</sup> century
  - A Sicilian poet in the court of Frederick II
  - Themes of love in the courtly tradition
- Practiced by **Dante** in *La Vita Nuova* (1294)
  - 25 sonnets for Beatrice
- Perfected by **Petrarch** in *The Canzoniere*
  - 319 sonnets for Laura
  - Antithesis, balance, paradox, instability



As we indicated earlier, the Sonnet was an extraordinary art form which flourished during this period. The Italian poetic form sonnet had 11 syllables and 14 lines. It was invented by Giacomo da Lentini in the thirteenth century. He was a Sicilian poet in the court of Frederick II. He wrote about the themes of love in the courtly tradition. That was a beginning. Later on, Dante practiced sonnet writing in his book ‘La Vita Nuova.’

He published 25 sonnets for his idealized beloved Beatrice. Further, Petrarch perfected this Italian Sonnet in his book ‘The Canzoniere.’ He wrote a number of sonnets, numbering 319 for a lady called Laura. This sonnet form somehow or other had a tendency to incorporate certain qualities like antithesis, balance, paradox, and instability. When we see some of the poems by the Elizabethan Poets, we will see some examples for these characteristics.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:14)

## The Canzoniere



➤ Petrarch's *Canzoniere* – 369 poems

- A loose structure
- Written over 20 years for Laura
- Saw her only once but expressed his ideal love
- Two divisions before and after her death

*Rime in vita Laura* (263 poems)

*Rime in morte Laura* (103 poems)

- Inspired a whole generation of English sonneteers



Let us pay a little more attention to ‘The Canzoniere.’ Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* had 369 poems out of which 319 sonnets were included. This had a loose structure, because it was written over a period of 20 years for this lady Laura. Interestingly, he was happened to see her only once, but he continued to express his ideal love for this ideal lady over a period, a long time.

There were two divisions in this book; one contains the poems about Laura before her death, the second part had poems which dealt with Laura after her death. So, we have two titles ‘*Rime in vita Laura*,’ ‘*Rime in morte Laura*.’ This particular sonnet sequence compiled by Petrarch inspired a whole generation of English sonneteers.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:30)

## Petrarch's Influence



- First one sonnet translated into English by Chaucer
- Introduced into English by Thomas Wyatt
  - Petrarchan: abba, abba, cde cde (tercet)
- Developed by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey
  - Shakespearean: abab, cdcd, efef, gg (couplet)
- Regularized in print by Tottell's *Miscellany*
- Attempted by others, including Sir Walter Raleigh
- A combined role of the poet, lover, and courtier



Not surprisingly, we can see the enormous influence of Petrarch on the English writers. We have the interesting case of Jeffrey Chaucer translating a sonnet from Petrarch into English. This was primarily introduced into English by Thomas Wyatt in sixteenth century. This Petrarchan sonnet has this rhyme scheme ‘abba abba cde cde.’

It was further developed by Henry Howard, otherwise known as the Earl of Surrey. He gave rise to this sonnet form called Shakespearean; ‘abab cdcd efef gg’ that is a Shakespearean rhyme scheme. These sonnets were put into print by Richard Tottel, in his book *Miscellany*, he regularized all of them in some format.

Many other writers attempted the sonnet, for example, Sir Walter Raleigh. Many writers, when they wrote different kinds of poems, adopted a combined role like that of a poet, a lover, and a courtier.



(Refer Slide Time: 12:56)

## Tottell's Miscellany (1557)



- Actually titled *Songes and Sonettes*
- Published to honor the English tongue
- 9 editions between 1557 and 1587
- Changed the course of poetry in English from native tradition to innovative translations from foreign languages
- Totally 271 poems (54 sonnets) in the first edition
- Surrey: 40 (15 sonnets), Wyatt: 96 (27 sonnets)  
Nicholas Grimald; 40 (3 sonnets), Others: 95
- Led to the extraordinary sonnet output in English



As you can see, Richard Tottel's 'Miscellany' played a key role in the promotion of sonnet writing in the Elizabethan period. The actual title of this Miscellany is 'Songes and Sonettes.' It has the long subtitle, including the name of Henry Howard and Thomas Wyatt. This book was published to honor the English tongue, that is language.

It went through 9 editions between 1557 and 1587 in a period of three decades. Actually, this book changed the course of poetry in English from native tradition to innovative translations from foreign languages. This anthology had totally 271 poems. Fifty-four of them were sonnets in the first edition. Later on, this edition was expanded. The initial edition had poems by Surrey, 40 of them were there out of which 15 were sonnets.

In the case of Wyatt, 96 poems were there, but then 27 sonnets were there. Other poets like Nicholas Grimald and others contributed to this volume. This volume, actually led to the extraordinary sonnet output in English.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:31)

## Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences



- A distinguishing feature of the renaissance genre
- The French poet Du Bellay's faith in the sonnet
- A means to prove the efficacy of the vernacular
- Popular volumes
  - Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*  
(w.1582, p.1591): **108**
  - Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595): **88**
  - Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592): **50**
  - Michael Drayton's *Ideas Mirror* (1594): **54**
  - Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609): **154**
  - Fulke Greville's *Caelica* (1633): **109**



The extraordinary output in sonnet is expressed in the form of a completely strange phenomenon called Elizabethan sonnet sequence. It is a distinguishing feature of the renaissance genre. At the time the French poet Du Bellay believed that the sonnet can contribute to reviving the native traditions. That is why, he considered this to be a means to prove the efficacy of the vernacular to equal great writings from other languages. Many popular volumes were published during the Elizabethan period, some of them are here. Sir Phillip Sidney's 'Astrophel and Stella.' It was written before or by 1582, but it was published in 1591.

Edmund Spencer's collection is called Amoretti. Samuel Daniel published a sequence called Delia. Michael Drayton came out with another sequence called Ideas Mirror. Of all these, the most popular is Shakespeare's Sonnets. And then, we have one more volume here, Fulke Greville's Caelica, published in 1633. We have included him here, because, he happened to be a friend of Sir Philip Sidney and wrote a biography of Sydney at that time. What are the features of this Elizabethan sonnet sequence? Here are a few characteristics.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:24)

## Features



- Allusions to classical literature
- References to Renaissance literature
- References to contemporary events
- Understanding and assertion of the individual
- Pastoral songs and sonnets



Most of the Elizabethan sonnet sequences had allusions to classical literature. They had references to renaissance literature also. Further, they had references to contemporary events happening around them. The most important point that we have to remember about the Elizabethan sonnet is that it gave an understanding and assertion of the individual. And many of them had these settings of pastoral and they included sonnets as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:59)

## Renaissance Humanist Ideal



- Sonnet cycle writing
- An essential qualification for an ambitious young man
- Started off by **Philip Sidney** and circulated in his circle
- Represented the ideal Renaissance humanist
- The ideal man of action and contemplation
- The knight, soldier, courtier, scholar, and poet
- An emblem of all virtues
- Unrealized but aspired for by every poet/ scholar
- Sidney was a failure but idealized as a cultural hero



The sonnet sequence and other poems of this period gave expression to one ideal called 'Renaissance Humanist Ideal.' Sonnet cycle writing is one of them. It was considered to be an

essential qualification for an ambitious young man to rise up in life, to reach the level of the court. This kind of ambition was embodied by Sir Philip Sidney. He wrote number of sonnets and in some sequence and he circulated these sonnets among his own friends in his own circle.

He represented the ideal renaissance humanist. He was the ideal man of action and also contemplation. Many aspects of these ideals are here. The Renaissance Humanist is a knight, a soldier, a courtier, a scholar, and also a poet. In some he is an emblem of all virtues. In his own case, Sir Philip Sydney, could not realize completely, successfully in every case. Many other poets were also not so much successful but then the failed Sidney was idealized as a cultural hero.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:24)

## The Self-Fashioning Poet



- Renaissance Self-fashioning (Stephen Greenblatt)
- Awareness of the individual self
- **Great expectations** of a public service and status
  - Queen Elizabeth, the female monarch
    - Unmarried and single
    - Ideal object of ambition
    - Enjoyed amorous admirations
    - Repelled desire by courtiers
- Poetry of love, loss, solicitude, change



Using various poetic forms, the Elizabethan poets fashioned themselves. That is why we have this concept of 'Renaissance Self-Fashioning' from Stephen Greenblatt. If we look at drama or poetry or any other art form of this period, we will find that, poets were giving shape to themselves with a deep profound awareness of their own individual self. They were educated and so they had great expectations of a public service and status.

Queen Elizabeth, the female monarch of this time, gave this kind of expectations to people. She was unmarried and single, so everyone aspired. She was the ideal object of ambition for every man of the time. In her own life, she had a tendency to enjoy amorous admirations from her

courtiers. However, when some courtier expressed some deep desire, she did not like it, she repelled it. So, many of these poets wrote a poetry of love, loss, solicitude, and change.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:45)

## Summary



- 16<sup>th</sup> century historical context
- 16<sup>th</sup> century literary context
- Various Poetic Forms
  - Petrarch's influence
  - Tottell's *Miscellany* (1557)
  - Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence
- Renaissance Humanist Ideal
- The Self-Fashioning poet



In this background to Elizabethan poetry, we have examined the sixteenth century historical context and literary context which shaped the various poetic forms which contributed to the golden period of English literature. This golden period was largely influenced by Petrarch through his sonnet art form.

Just by publishing all these poems, Richard Tottell contributed to this development of native literature in English. One of the poetic forms that took serious shape in this period is known as 'Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence.' A few sonnets were put together on a particular topic and that is why they are called sonnet sequences.

And, this sonnet sequence and other poetic forms were used by poets to give expression to the renaissance humanist ideal. By doing so, the poets fashioned themselves into various roles like knight, soldier, lover, courtier and many others.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:09)

## References

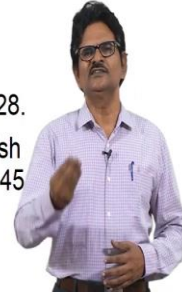


Going, William T. 1947. "The Term Sonnet Sequence,"  
*Modern Language Notes*, 62 (6): 400-402.

Javitch, D. 2015. *Poetry and Courtliness in  
Renaissance England*. Princeton University  
Press, New Jersey.

Marotti, Arthur F. 1982. " 'Love is Not Love:'  
Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and Social  
Order," *English Literary History*, 49 (2): 396-428.

Neely, Carol Thomas. 1978. "The Structure of English  
Sonnet Sequences," *English Literary History*, 45  
(3): 359-389.



We have some references for you. At least one or two articles if possible, you can read, you will understand. Thank you.