

ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

1. Introduction

The Elizabethan Age occupies a distinguished place in the history of English literature. It was the period of the reign of **Queen Elizabeth I**, from 1558 to 1603, and is often regarded as one of the most creative periods in English literary history. Poetry, prose, music, exploration, science, and drama developed considerably during this period. Among these achievements, the growth of drama was perhaps the most remarkable.

Elizabethan drama refers broadly to the dramatic literature written and performed during the latter part of the sixteenth century, particularly during the reign of Elizabeth I. It marks the transition of English drama from the religious and didactic traditions of the Middle Ages to the secular, professional, and artistically sophisticated drama of the Renaissance.

The drama of the Elizabethan period did not develop from a single source. It was the result of the interaction of several traditions. Medieval **Mystery Plays, Miracle Plays, Morality Plays, and Interludes** provided the native foundation. At the same time, the Renaissance revival of classical learning introduced English writers to Greek and Roman drama. The influence of Roman writers such as **Seneca, Plautus, and Terence** was particularly important. These influences were further strengthened by Renaissance humanism, the growth of education, the expansion of London, and the establishment of professional theatres.

The Elizabethan period produced a remarkable group of dramatists. **Christopher Marlowe** brought heroic ambition and powerful blank verse to tragedy; **Thomas Kyd** established the conventions of revenge tragedy; **John Lyly** developed courtly comedy; **Robert Greene** and **George Peele** contributed to romantic and spectacular drama. Above all, **William Shakespeare** brought together many of these developments and transformed English drama into an extraordinarily rich literary and theatrical form.

Elizabethan drama is therefore important not merely because of Shakespeare but because it represents a **collective achievement in the development of English theatre**.

2. Historical Background of Elizabethan Drama

The development of Elizabethan drama must be understood against the larger background of the English Renaissance. When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, England was experiencing important political, religious, social, and intellectual changes.

The Renaissance had encouraged a renewed interest in classical Greek and Roman literature. Scholars studied classical languages, philosophy, rhetoric, history, and mythology. Education expanded, particularly among the educated classes, and universities became important centres of humanist learning. At the same time, London was growing rapidly as a commercial city, creating a large potential audience for public entertainment.

The Elizabethan period was also associated with a strong sense of national confidence. England's political position improved, overseas exploration expanded, and English people became increasingly conscious of their national identity. These developments influenced dramatists, who frequently turned to English history for dramatic subjects.

The theatre thus developed within a society that was undergoing considerable transformation. The new drama reflected the interests and anxieties of this society. It dealt with **love, ambition, political power, religion, revenge, social hierarchy, individual freedom, moral responsibility, and human desire.**

The Elizabethan theatre was therefore not merely a place of entertainment. It became an important cultural institution through which contemporary society could examine itself.

3. Medieval Origins of Elizabethan Drama

Elizabethan drama developed partly from the dramatic traditions of medieval England. During the Middle Ages, drama was closely associated with Christianity and the Church. Religious stories were presented through dramatic performances to communicate Biblical narratives and moral lessons to audiences who might not have been able to read.

The earliest important dramatic forms were the **Mystery Plays** and **Miracle Plays**. Mystery plays dramatized stories from the Bible, while miracle plays generally represented the lives and miracles of saints.

Later, the **Morality Play** became important. Unlike the mystery play, which presented Biblical stories, the morality plays usually presented an allegorical conflict between good and

evil. Characters were often personifications of abstract qualities such as Virtue, Vice, Knowledge, Death, and Good Deeds.

The most famous example is *Everyman*. In this play, Everyman is confronted by Death and discovers that worldly possessions and relationships cannot accompany him after death. The play therefore teaches a moral and religious lesson.

Another important development was the **Interlude**, a shorter form of dramatic entertainment. Interludes were often comic, satirical, and secular. They helped move English drama away from exclusively religious subjects.

The Elizabethan dramatists inherited several important features from this medieval tradition. They retained the use of dramatic dialogue, allegorical tendencies, comic figures, theatrical spectacle, and the mixture of serious and comic material. However, they transformed these elements by introducing Renaissance ideas and more complex characterization.

Thus, Elizabethan drama represents a **transition from medieval religious drama to Renaissance secular drama**.

4. Influence of the Renaissance

The Renaissance profoundly changed the intellectual atmosphere of England. The word “Renaissance” means “rebirth,” referring particularly to the revival of interest in classical Greek and Roman culture.

This revival influenced literature in several ways. Writers became interested in classical mythology, history, philosophy, rhetoric, and dramatic theory. They also developed a greater interest in the individual human being.

This emphasis on human potential is closely connected with **Renaissance Humanism**.

Humanism encouraged people to study human nature and human achievement. Instead of concentrating exclusively on life after death, Renaissance writers increasingly explored human experiences in this world.

Elizabethan drama reflects this change very clearly.

Marlowe's **Doctor Faustus**, for example, presents a scholar who is dissatisfied with the limits of conventional knowledge. He desires unlimited knowledge and power. His ambition reflects

the Renaissance fascination with the possibilities of human intellect, while his eventual downfall also reminds us of the dangers of excessive ambition.

Similarly, Shakespeare's characters are often individuals confronted with difficult moral and psychological choices. Hamlet questions the meaning of existence; Macbeth struggles with ambition and guilt; Othello struggles with jealousy and trust; King Lear confronts authority, family, suffering, and human weakness.

Elizabethan drama therefore reflects both the **confidence and anxiety of Renaissance humanism**.

5. Classical Influence on Elizabethan Drama

The Renaissance revival of classical literature introduced English dramatists to Greek and Roman models of drama. Among the classical writers, **Seneca, Plautus, and Terence** were particularly influential.

Senecan Influence

Seneca, the Roman tragedian, had a major influence on English tragedy. His tragedies frequently dealt with murder, revenge, ghosts, violence, madness, and moral conflict. They also contained long rhetorical speeches and powerful expressions of emotion.

These features became important in Elizabethan **revenge tragedy**.

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* is an important example of this tradition. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* also contains several Senecan and revenge-tragedy elements, although Shakespeare develops them in a much more psychologically and philosophically complex way.

Influence of Plautus and Terence

Plautus and Terence were important Roman writers of comedy. Their plays influenced English comedy through devices such as mistaken identity, disguise, romantic complications, clever servants, and intrigue.

Elizabethan dramatists borrowed these techniques but adapted them to English social and theatrical conditions.

Thus, classical influence did not result in simple imitation. English dramatists **combined classical models with medieval traditions and English popular culture**.

6. The Rise of Professional Theatre

One of the most significant developments of the Elizabethan period was the establishment of the professional theatre.

Before permanent theatres were built, dramatic performances could take place in churches, inns, courtyards, aristocratic residences, and temporary performance spaces. The construction of permanent playhouses changed the nature of English drama.

In 1576, **James Burbage** built *The Theatre*, one of the first permanent public playhouses in London. Other theatres followed, including the Curtain, the Rose, the Swan, and eventually the Globe.

The establishment of these theatres created a regular demand for new plays. Dramatists could now write for professional acting companies and a paying public.

This development had an enormous impact on literature. Drama became not merely an occasional religious or courtly entertainment but a **commercial profession**.

The playwright had to consider the interests of the audience. A successful play needed to be entertaining, dramatic, memorable, and suitable for performance.

Consequently, Elizabethan drama combines literary sophistication with theatrical effectiveness.

7. The Elizabethan Theatre and Its Audience

The Elizabethan theatre attracted people from different social backgrounds. Aristocrats, merchants, craftsmen, apprentices, students, and ordinary Londoners could all attend performances.

This mixed audience helps explain why Elizabethan plays contain such a wide range of material. A Shakespearean play may include philosophical reflection alongside popular jokes, political discussion alongside songs, and tragic suffering alongside comic entertainment.

The playwright had to appeal simultaneously to different levels of taste.

This is one reason why Elizabethan drama frequently combines **high and low styles**. A king and a common labourer may appear in the same play. A philosophical soliloquy may be followed by a comic scene. A tragic plot may contain bawdy humour.

This variety is not a weakness. It is one of the distinctive strengths of Elizabethan drama.

8. The Globe Theatre

The **Globe Theatre** is perhaps the most famous symbol of Elizabethan theatre. It was closely associated with William Shakespeare and his acting company.

Shakespeare's company, originally known as the **Lord Chamberlain's Men**, became associated with the Globe after its construction in 1599. Shakespeare was not simply a playwright for the company; he was also an actor and shareholder.

The Globe was an open-air theatre, and performances took place during daylight. The stage did not depend on the elaborate scenery characteristic of modern theatres. Instead, the playwright's language, costumes, props, music, and the audience's imagination helped establish the setting.

This theatrical arrangement gave Elizabethan dramatists considerable freedom. A play could move quickly from one location to another without the need for complicated scene changes.

The Globe therefore represents an important feature of Elizabethan drama: **theatre depended heavily on language and imagination rather than elaborate scenery**.

9. The University Wits

The group traditionally known as the **University Wits** played a major role in the development of Elizabethan drama.

The term generally refers to a group of educated writers associated with Oxford or Cambridge who became important figures in late-sixteenth-century English literary culture. The principal names traditionally associated with the group are **Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, John Lyly, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, and Thomas Nashe**.

They were not a formal literary society or organized school. Rather, the term is a convenient critical label for writers who shared certain educational and literary characteristics.

Their importance lies in the fact that they brought the learning of the Renaissance university to the commercial stage. They were familiar with classical literature, rhetoric, mythology, and humanist ideas.

They also helped develop the use of **blank verse**, heroic themes, romantic plots, and sophisticated dramatic language.

In this sense, the University Wits helped prepare the ground for Shakespeare.

10. Christopher Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe is one of the most important dramatists of the English Renaissance.

His major plays include *Tamburlaine the Great*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *Edward II*.

Marlowe's greatest contribution was his transformation of English tragedy through the use of powerful blank verse and ambitious protagonists.

His heroes are frequently extraordinary individuals who desire something beyond ordinary human limitations.

Tamburlaine desires unlimited political power. Faustus desires unlimited knowledge. Barabas desires wealth and power.

These characters embody the Renaissance fascination with the **ambitious individual**.

Marlowe's heroes are powerful because their desires are enormous. At the same time, their ambition frequently becomes destructive. Marlowe therefore presents both the attraction and danger of limitless aspiration.

His dramatic language is energetic, rhetorical, and passionate. His influence on later dramatists, including Shakespeare, was considerable.

11. Thomas Kyd and the Revenge Tragedy

Thomas Kyd is particularly important for the development of English revenge tragedy.

His most famous play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, contains many of the conventions that later became associated with the genre.

The play involves murder, revenge, madness, ghosts, intrigue, violence, and death. The protagonist, Hieronimo, seeks revenge after the murder of his son.

The revenge plot creates suspense because the audience expects revenge but does not know precisely when or how it will occur.

Kyd's achievement is important because he established a dramatic pattern that Shakespeare later developed in *Hamlet*.

However, *Hamlet* is much more than a conventional revenge tragedy. Shakespeare uses the revenge framework to explore philosophical questions concerning action, uncertainty, morality, death, and human existence.

12. John Lyly and Courtly Comedy

John Lyly occupies an important position in the development of Elizabethan comedy.

His plays include *Campaspe*, *Endymion*, and *Galathea*.

Lyly's drama is associated with courtly culture, mythology, romance, wit, and elaborate language.

He is also famous for **Euphuism**, a highly decorative prose style characterized by balanced constructions, antithesis, alliteration, rhetorical patterns, and classical references.

Lyly's importance lies in his development of refined and sophisticated comedy. His work helped demonstrate that comedy could involve intellectual wit and artistic language rather than merely crude popular humour.

13. Robert Greene

Robert Greene was another important dramatist associated with the University Wits.

His best-known dramatic work is *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. The play combines magical elements, romance, political ambition, national concerns, and tragic conflict.

Greene was particularly interested in romantic and fantastic subjects. His plays often contain beautiful language, exotic settings, supernatural elements, and spectacular events.

His work contributed to the development of **romantic drama**, which later became an important feature of Shakespearean comedy and romance.

14. George Peele

George Peele was another important dramatist of the period. His plays include *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Arraignment of Paris*, and *Edward I*.

Peele's drama is characterized by romantic plots, mythology, spectacle, music, and poetic language.

His work illustrates the increasing importance of theatrical entertainment in Elizabethan culture. Drama was becoming capable of combining literary poetry with visual and musical spectacle.

15. Major Forms of Elizabethan Drama

Elizabethan dramatists experimented with several dramatic forms. The most important were **tragedy, comedy, history, and revenge tragedy**.

Tragedy

Elizabethan tragedy generally deals with serious conflicts that lead to suffering and catastrophe. Its protagonists are often individuals of exceptional ability or social position whose choices, weaknesses, circumstances, or moral failures contribute to their downfall.

Common tragic themes include:

- ambition,
- revenge,
- jealousy,
- betrayal,
- political power,

- fate,
- free will,
- moral corruption.

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* are important examples.

Comedy

Elizabethan comedy generally deals with love, marriage, disguise, mistaken identity, social relationships, and reconciliation.

Shakespeare's comedies often create a temporary world of confusion before restoring social harmony.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, love, magic, and mistaken identity create confusion, but the play eventually moves toward reconciliation and marriage.

Similarly, *Twelfth Night* uses disguise and mistaken identity to explore love and social identity.

Elizabethan comedy therefore provides entertainment while also exploring serious questions about society and human relationships.

History Play

The history play became an important Elizabethan form.

Shakespeare's history plays dramatize events from English history and examine kingship, rebellion, war, political legitimacy, leadership, and national identity.

Plays such as *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and *Richard III* do more than reproduce historical events. They interpret history dramatically and raise questions about political authority.

The history play was therefore both **entertainment and reflection on national identity**.

16. Elizabethan Tragedy

Elizabethan tragedy deserves special attention because it represents one of the greatest achievements of the period.

The typical tragic protagonist possesses some combination of:

- exceptional ability,
- ambition,
- social importance,
- personal weakness,
- moral conflict.

The tragedy develops through a conflict between the protagonist and circumstances, other characters, society, fate, or the protagonist's own personality.

In Shakespeare's tragedies, the catastrophe is rarely caused by a single factor. Macbeth's downfall, for example, involves ambition, prophecy, Lady Macbeth's influence, personal choice, and moral corruption.

Elizabethan tragedy therefore increasingly became a study of **human psychology**.

17. Revenge Tragedy

Revenge tragedy became especially popular in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

A typical revenge tragedy contains:

1. a murder or serious wrong;
2. a demand for revenge;
3. hesitation or delay;
4. investigation and intrigue;
5. madness or feigned madness;
6. violence;

7. further deaths;
8. final revenge and catastrophe.

The Spanish Tragedy is an important early example.

Hamlet uses many of these conventions but gives them a deeper philosophical dimension. Hamlet does not simply ask how he can take revenge; he questions the morality and meaning of action itself.

18. Blank Verse

The development of **blank verse** was one of the most important achievements of Elizabethan drama.

Blank verse is **unrhymed iambic pentameter**. It generally consists of five metrical feet, with each foot normally following an unstressed-stressed pattern.

Christopher Marlowe demonstrated the dramatic power of blank verse. His long, forceful lines gave English tragedy a new energy.

Shakespeare later developed blank verse into a remarkably flexible instrument. He could use it for:

- philosophical reflection,
- emotional expression,
- argument,
- psychological conflict,
- dramatic confrontation,
- and ordinary conversation.

The development of blank verse therefore helped make English drama a major poetic form.

19. Soliloquy and the Inner Life of Characters

The **soliloquy** is one of the most important techniques of Elizabethan drama.

A soliloquy allows a character to speak thoughts that other characters do not hear. It therefore gives the audience access to the character's private consciousness.

This technique is particularly important in Shakespeare.

Hamlet's soliloquies reveal his uncertainty, philosophical questioning, grief, anger, and hesitation. Macbeth's speeches reveal his growing ambition and fear. Lady Macbeth's later scenes reveal the psychological consequences of guilt.

The soliloquy therefore helped Elizabethan drama move beyond external action toward the representation of **inner psychological experience**.

20. Dramatic Irony

Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows something that a character does not know.

For example, in a tragedy, the audience may understand that a character is walking toward danger while the character remains unaware.

This creates suspense and emotional tension.

Shakespeare uses dramatic irony extensively. In *Othello*, for example, the audience becomes aware of Iago's deception while Othello continues to trust him. The tragic effect becomes more powerful because the audience understands the truth before Othello does.

21. Supernatural Elements

Supernatural elements are common in Elizabethan drama.

Ghosts, witches, prophecies, magic, dreams, and visions appear frequently.

The Ghost in *Hamlet* introduces the demand for revenge and creates uncertainty about the relationship between the supernatural and the human world.

The witches in *Macbeth* introduce prophecies that influence Macbeth's imagination and ambition.

Supernatural elements therefore serve more than a sensational purpose. They raise questions about:

- fate,
- free will,
- knowledge,
- morality,
- religion,
- and the limits of human understanding.

22. Mixture of Tragedy and Comedy

One distinctive characteristic of Elizabethan drama is the mixture of serious and comic elements.

Modern readers sometimes expect tragedy and comedy to remain completely separate. Elizabethan dramatists did not always follow such strict distinctions.

A tragic play could contain comic characters and scenes. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, contains the famous gravedigger scene, which introduces humour into an otherwise deeply tragic play.

This mixture reflects the complexity of actual human experience. Life itself contains both laughter and suffering, and Elizabethan drama frequently attempts to represent both.

23. Freedom from the Classical Unities

Classical dramatic theory emphasized three unities:

Unity of Action, Unity of Time, and Unity of Place.

Unity of action means that the play should concentrate on a central plot. Unity of time suggests that the action should take place within approximately one day. Unity of place suggests that the action should occur in a single location.

Elizabethan dramatists generally did not observe these rules strictly.

A Shakespearean play may move across several locations and cover months or years. *The Winter's Tale*, for example, involves considerable changes of place and time.

This dramatic freedom enabled Elizabethan playwrights to represent a much larger world and to develop complex plots.

24. Language and Imagery

Elizabethan drama is distinguished by its extraordinary richness of language.

Dramatists use:

- metaphor,
- simile,
- imagery,
- symbolism,
- personification,
- pun,
- irony,
- rhetorical questions,
- repetition,
- antithesis.

Shakespeare's language is particularly rich because his characters frequently speak in images appropriate to their emotional and psychological states.

Macbeth's language becomes increasingly associated with blood, darkness, sleep, and unnatural disorder. Othello's language reflects the movement from love and trust toward jealousy and destruction.

Language therefore becomes an essential part of characterization.

25. Characterization

Elizabethan drama marks a significant development in the representation of character.

Medieval morality plays often used allegorical figures representing abstract qualities. Elizabethan dramatists increasingly created characters with distinctive personalities, histories, motives, desires, and psychological conflicts.

Shakespeare brought this development to an extraordinary level.

Hamlet is not simply a “revenge hero.” He is a philosophical and psychologically conflicted individual.

Macbeth is not simply an ambitious villain. He understands the moral consequences of his actions but nevertheless chooses to proceed.

Othello is not simply a jealous husband. He is a noble and respected man whose trust is manipulated by Iago.

This complexity makes Elizabethan drama particularly important in the development of modern characterization.

26. Major Themes of Elizabethan Drama

Ambition

Ambition is one of the most powerful themes of Renaissance drama. Marlowe's protagonists frequently seek extraordinary achievement. Shakespeare's Macbeth demonstrates how ambition can destroy both the individual and the social order.

Revenge

Revenge is central to *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*. The revenge plot raises questions about justice, morality, and the relationship between private revenge and public law.

Love

Love is central to Elizabethan comedy and tragedy. *Romeo and Juliet* presents love in tragic circumstances, while *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* explore love through comedy, disguise, and social confusion.

Power

Elizabethan drama repeatedly examines political and personal power. The history plays and tragedies ask who has the right to rule and what happens when political authority is abused.

Appearance and Reality

Characters frequently disguise their intentions or identities. Consequently, Elizabethan drama often asks whether things are what they appear to be.

Fate and Free Will

Prophecies and supernatural forces raise questions about whether human beings control their own destiny.

Order and Disorder

Many tragedies begin with an existing social or political order and move toward disorder. The conclusion frequently involves some form of restoration.

27. Elizabethan Drama and Human Nature

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Elizabethan drama is its exploration of human nature.

The dramatists are interested in the forces that motivate people:

- ambition,
- love,
- jealousy,
- greed,
- fear,
- pride,
- guilt,
- desire,
- revenge.

These emotions are not presented as simple or isolated qualities. They interact with one another.

Macbeth, for instance, is ambitious but also fearful and guilty. Othello loves Desdemona but becomes jealous. Hamlet wants revenge but is uncertain about the morality of revenge.

Elizabethan drama therefore presents human beings as **complex, contradictory, and psychologically dynamic**.

28. Women and the Elizabethan Stage

An important feature of Elizabethan theatre is that women did not generally perform professionally on the public English stage. Female roles were performed by boys or young male actors.

This convention is particularly interesting in Shakespearean comedy because many female characters disguise themselves as men.

For example, Viola disguises herself as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*. The theatrical convention of male actors playing female characters adds another layer to Shakespeare's exploration of gender and identity.

29. Elizabethan Drama as Performance

Elizabethan drama should not be treated only as literature on the printed page.

It was fundamentally **performance-oriented**.

The meaning of a play depended on:

- actors,
- voice,
- gesture,
- costume,
- movement,
- music,

- theatrical space,
- audience response.

The relatively limited scenery meant that language played a major role in establishing the world of the play.

When an actor described a battlefield, forest, palace, or storm, the audience participated imaginatively in creating that environment.

This is why the Elizabethan audience was an active participant in the theatrical experience.

30. Shakespeare and the Culmination of Elizabethan Drama

William Shakespeare represents the greatest achievement of Elizabethan drama.

His importance does not mean that the other dramatists were insignificant. On the contrary, Shakespeare inherited and transformed techniques developed by earlier writers.

From Marlowe he inherited the possibilities of powerful blank verse and heroic characterization. From Kyd came the tradition of revenge tragedy. From Lyly and Greene came elements of comedy, romance, and elaborate plotting.

Shakespeare brought these influences together with extraordinary originality.

His plays explore almost every major human experience: love, ambition, political power, betrayal, jealousy, old age, death, family conflict, friendship, identity, and moral responsibility.

His greatness lies particularly in the combination of **poetry, characterization, theatrical action, psychology, and philosophical reflection.**

31. Elizabethan Drama and Society

Elizabethan drama reflects the social conditions of its time.

The plays reveal concerns about:

- monarchy,
- social hierarchy,

- marriage,
- gender,
- religion,
- wealth,
- education,
- political authority,
- national identity.

At the same time, drama could question social assumptions.

Characters who cross social boundaries, women who challenge traditional expectations, rulers who misuse power, and individuals who reject conventional limitations all appear throughout Renaissance drama.

Drama therefore provided a space in which contemporary society could examine its own values and contradictions.

32. Elizabethan Drama and the Jacobean Transition

The Elizabethan period ended with the death of Elizabeth I in 1603. **James I** succeeded her, beginning the Jacobean period.

However, the transition was gradual rather than sudden. Shakespeare continued to write during the Jacobean period, and many of his later plays belong to a period of transition between Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

Jacobean drama often became darker and more pessimistic. It frequently emphasizes:

- corruption,
- revenge,
- political intrigue,
- violence,
- death,

- moral decay,
- sexual politics.

Important Jacobean dramatists include **Ben Jonson, John Webster, Thomas Middleton, and John Ford.**

The relationship between Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is therefore best understood as one of **continuity and development** rather than complete separation.

33. Why is Elizabethan Drama Important?

Elizabethan drama is important for several reasons.

First, it established the professional English theatre. Secondly, it developed tragedy and comedy into sophisticated dramatic forms. Thirdly, it transformed blank verse into a major literary medium. Fourthly, it developed complex individual characterization.

Most importantly, Elizabethan drama expanded the range of subjects that could be explored through theatre.

The stage became a place where writers could examine:

human ambition, political power, moral responsibility, love, revenge, identity, fate, and death.

The drama of this period therefore combined entertainment with serious intellectual and philosophical inquiry.

34. Critical Evaluation

Elizabethan drama can be regarded as a synthesis of different cultural traditions.

It is **medieval** in its continuing interest in religion, morality, supernatural forces, and allegorical patterns.

It is **classical** in its use of mythology, rhetoric, dramatic conventions, and models derived from Roman writers.

It is **Renaissance** in its fascination with individualism, human potential, worldly ambition, and classical learning.

It is also distinctly **English** because of its treatment of English history, language, popular culture, social life, and national identity.

This combination explains its extraordinary richness.

The Elizabethan dramatists did not merely imitate the past. They transformed inherited traditions into a new dramatic language capable of representing the complexity of human experience.

35. Conclusion

Elizabethan drama represents a decisive stage in the development of English literature and theatre. Emerging from medieval dramatic traditions and enriched by classical learning and Renaissance humanism, it developed into a professional and commercially successful theatrical culture.

The establishment of permanent theatres and professional acting companies created an environment in which dramatists could experiment with form, language, characterization, and subject matter.

The University Wits played an important role in this transformation. Marlowe gave English tragedy heroic power and magnificent blank verse; Kyd established the revenge tradition; Lyly developed courtly comedy; Greene and Peele contributed romantic and spectacular elements.

Shakespeare brought these developments to their highest level. His plays demonstrate the extraordinary possibilities of English drama as both literature and performance.

The lasting significance of Elizabethan drama lies in its ability to combine **poetic beauty, theatrical vitality, psychological complexity, philosophical thought, and popular entertainment.**

For students of English Literature, the study of Elizabethan drama is therefore not simply the study of a historical period. It is the study of the moment when English drama became one of the most powerful forms of literary and cultural expression in the world.

Chapter Review

Very Short Answer Questions

1. Who was Elizabeth I?
2. What is Renaissance Humanism?
3. What is a morality play?
4. What is an interlude?
5. Who wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*?
6. Who wrote *Doctor Faustus*?
7. What is blank verse?
8. What is a soliloquy?
9. What is a revenge tragedy?
10. Who were the University Wits?

Short-Answer Questions

1. Explain the medieval origins of Elizabethan drama.
2. Discuss the influence of Seneca on Elizabethan tragedy.
3. What was the contribution of the University Wits?
4. Explain the importance of the Globe Theatre.
5. What is the role of blank verse in Elizabethan drama?
6. Explain the significance of soliloquy.
7. Discuss the characteristics of Elizabethan comedy.
8. Explain the importance of Renaissance Humanism.
9. What are the major themes of Elizabethan drama?
10. Explain the transition from Elizabethan to Jacobean drama.

Long-Answer Questions

1. **Discuss the origin and development of Elizabethan drama.**
2. **“Elizabethan drama is a synthesis of medieval tradition and Renaissance innovation.” Discuss.**
3. **Discuss the major characteristics of Elizabethan drama with suitable examples.**
4. **Examine the contribution of the University Wits to the development of English drama.**
5. **Discuss Christopher Marlowe's contribution to Elizabethan tragedy.**
6. **Examine the development of revenge tragedy in the Elizabethan period.**
7. **Discuss the significance of Renaissance Humanism in Elizabethan drama.**
8. **Examine the importance of the Elizabethan theatre in the development of English drama.**
9. **Discuss Shakespeare's contribution to the development of Elizabethan drama.**
10. **Why is the Elizabethan period regarded as the golden age of English drama?**

Key Takeaway

The development of Elizabethan drama can be remembered as a movement:

**Medieval Drama → Classical Influence → Renaissance Humanism → University Wits
→ Professional Theatre → Shakespeare → Jacobean Drama**