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English Department

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Elizabethan Drama

Elizabethan Age, in British history, the time period (1558–1603) during which Queen Elizabeth I ruled England. Popularly referred to as a “golden age,” it was a span of time characterized by relative peace and prosperity and by a flowering of artistic, literary, and intellectual culture to such a degree that it (along with the succeeding reign of James I) is sometimes designated as the “English Renaissance.” (Kulik & M, 2025)



The Renaissance means rebirth, and the name refers to the rebirth of those intellectual and artistic energies of the Greek and Roman civilization. The Renaissance gave a special interest to humans and the world they live in. Scholars and educators who called themselves Humanists began to emphasize the capacities of human mind and the achievements of human culture in contrast to the medieval emphases on God. The Renaissance had its origins in Italy, in the writings of Petrarch and Boccaccio, in the paintings of Giotto, in the architecture of Brunelleschi, and the sculpture of Donatello. Gradually this trend of artistic and intellectual excitement spread northward to other European countries__ to France, to Germany, to the low countries, and lastly to England. The Renaissance was not only a period of artistic and intellectual enterprise but also a time of territorial exploration and discovery. The expansion was not merely a matter of geographical discovery. These voyages marked the first stages of European colonial and commercial domination that would establish complex and often oppressive links between Europe and both Asia and the Americas. (Holt, 1996)

The main reason that Elizabeth’s rule is sometimes called the English Renaissance was because of the innovative and creative artistic achievements of the age. Elizabeth herself had a reputation as a lover of the arts, especially music and theatre. Her court was joined by distinguished artists and writers. The most famous of these writers is of course playwright and poet William Shakespeare. Other writers who rose to prominence under Elizabeth included Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, Roger Ascham, Richard Hooker, John Lyly, and Edmund Spenser. (Kulik & M, 2025) literature reached its peak in the period. In poetry new forms of

poems had been presented, which famously known as the Petrarchan sonnet, later was fixed by Shakespeare, and were written in blank verse.

For drama, it was the most distinctive achievement of Elizabethan literature. Toward the middle of the 16th century, writers educated in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge began to produce plays influenced by their study of classical dramatic theory and practice. But the best of these plays still contained elements of the native dramatic tradition. Therefore, we may say, then, that the dramatic work of later Elizabethan drama, of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries, grew from the fusion of native English and classical tradition. (Holt, 1996)

The most ambitious forms of the Elizabethan drama are **tragedy** and **comedy**. Starting with **tragedy**, in which can be simply defined as a play that ends with the death of the main character. Most of the tragedies were called revenge tragedy. such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As for **comedy** which consists of laughing at people caught in difficult situations which we know will usually be resolved. Traditional comedy ends with marriage or a dance, and disorder that threatened the social unity having been overcome (Peak & Coyle, 1993)

This thriving also included the establishing of theatres. Before building theatres, plays were performed by traveling actors who traveled across the country and performed their plays in public yards and inns. Halfway the 16th century witnessed building the first permanent theatre which was called "The Theatre". However, the most well-known theatre at the time was "The Globe Theatre" in which Shakespeare's plays were performed.



Tragedy is a serious play representing the disastrous downfall of a central character, the *PROTAGONIST, which ends with his/her death. From the works of the Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, the philosopher Aristotle arrived at the most influential definition of tragedy in his *Poetics* (4th century BCE) which implies: (the imitation of an action that is serious and complete, achieving a *CATHARSIS ('purification') through incidents arousing pity and terror.) Aristotle uses this distinctive effect on the reader, which he calls “the pleasure of pity and fear,” as the basic way to distinguish the tragic from comic or other forms.

With the Elizabethan era came both the beginning and the peak of dramatic tragedy in England. The tragedies of this period owed much to the native religious drama, the miracle and morality plays, which had developed independently of classical influence, but with a crucial contribution from the Roman writer Seneca, whose dramas got to be widely known earlier than those of the Greek tragedians. Senecan drama, in the Elizabethan Age, had two main lines of development. One of these consisted of academic tragedies written in close imitation of the Senecan model, including the use of a chorus, and usually constructed according to the rules of the three unities. The other and much more important development was written for the popular stage, and is called the revenge tragedy, or (in its most sensational form) the tragedy of blood. This type of play derived from Seneca’s favorite materials of murder, revenge, ghosts, mutilation, and carnage. Elizabethan dramatists usually represented them on stage to satisfy the appetite of the contemporary audience for violence and horror. Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586) established this popular form; its subject is a murder and the quest for vengeance, and it includes a ghost, insanity, suicide, a play-within-a-play, sensational incidents, and a gruesomely bloody ending.

Until the close of the seventeenth century almost all tragedies were written in verse and had male protagonists of high rank whose fate affected the fortunes of a state. A few minor Elizabethan tragedies, such as *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (of uncertain authorship), had as the chief character a man of the lower class, but it remained for eighteenth-century writers to popularize the bourgeois or domestic tragedy, which was written in prose and presented a protagonist from the middle or lower social ranks who suffers a commonplace or domestic disaster. The protagonists of some recent tragedies are not heroic but antiheroic, in that they manifest a character that is at an extreme from the dignity and courage of the protagonists in traditional dramas.

Traits of the Tragic Hero

- 1- the tragic hero is a character of noble stature and has greatness but he is not perfect.
- 2- While being heroic, the character must also have a tragic flaw (also called hamartia) or more generally be subject to human error, and the flaw must lead to the character's downfall.
- 3- The character should suffer a terrible reversal of fortune, from good to bad. Such a reversal does not merely mean a loss of money or status. It means that the work should end with the character dead or in immense suffering.
- 4- The fall is not purely loss. There is some increase in awareness and some gain in self-knowledge.

“The best tragedies are conflicts between a hero and [their] destiny”

– Aristotle

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