Poetry I.
The inevitability of death. William Shakespeare and Andrew Marvell

The Sixteenth Century

The sixteenth century witnessed the spread of humanism, the emergence of the reformation, a growing spirit of nationalism, and a diversity of attitudes including optimism, exuberance, anxiety and ambivalence. This was also the age of individualism. The poets and dramatists of the time are among the most famous in the English literary canon and include Sir Thomas Wyatt, Sir Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser.

The sixteenth century was characterised by a growing awareness of the richness and power of the English language as well as an awakening of national consciousness. There was an outburst of creativity in literature, music and art which reflected and incorporated a pride in being English.

Two of the most famous monarchs in English history ruled during this period: Henry VIII, who acceded to the throne in 1509, and Elizabeth I, one of the longest ruling English monarchs. Her rule stretched from 1558 to her death in 1603. During this period, England became a nation of colonisers and merchant adventurers. Trade was developed with Europe, and the cloth industry became a major export industry. With the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, England’s naval power was consolidated. Queen Elizabeth symbolised national glory and progress, just as Queen Victoria was to do three hundred years later.

Humanism was a leading movement during the period. It originated in Italy and was a response to the intellectual and cultural movement known as the Renaissance, i.e. the rebirth of learning and letters initiated in the fifteenth century. Humanism emphasised the dignity and potential of the individual, and the value of temporal life. Sir Thomas More was a prominent humanist. His masterpiece, *Utopia*, advocated a society based on reason.

One of the prime concerns of the English humanists was education. Humanist education incorporated grammar, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Its emphasis, however, was on rhetoric and classical texts. The English humanists also stressed the importance of Christianity. Many humanists, including Sir Thomas More, chose to write in Latin but others, e.g. Roger Ascham favoured the vernacular.

Associated with Humanism was the Reformation sparked off by Martin Luther in Germany in 1517. The overriding principles of the Reformation included: the Scriptures and not the church have authority in religious matters; personal faith combined with the Grace of God was the source of salvation, and not good works or religious observance; belief and action must be determined by enlightened private conscience and not by priests or ministers. Supporters of the Reformation were known as Protestants, i.e. protesters against the Roman Catholic Church.

As part of the Reformation, King Henry VIII made himself Head of the Church of England. English monasteries were dissolved and the wealth transferred to the King and his nobles. The progress of the Reformation was temporarily reversed on the accession to the throne of the Catholic Mary Tudor. The latter’s death in 1558 brought the Protestants back to power. Queen Elizabeth I was an ardent advocate of the Reformation.
Queen Elizabeth was also a generous supporter of art and culture. Many of the great writers of the time, e.g. Sir Philip Sydney and Sir Walter Ralegh enjoyed court patronage. Success in the literary world depended on acceptance at court.

The sixteenth century saw the beginning of the publication of printed books. Censorship was enforced by among others the Privy Council, the highest political authority under the queen. There was no such thing as copyright, and manuscripts were often borrowed and/or re-written by other writers. Plots, characters and language were frequently appropriated without acknowledgement.

The Elizabethan Age was the age of the pastoral mode, the lyric and the sonnet. It was during the sixteenth century that the earliest anthology of poetry to appear in England, Tottel’s *Miscellany* (1557), was published. The pastoral mode, with its shepherds and shepherdesses, was very popular. The simple country life was exalted over urban life.

Lyrical poems were much appreciated by the Elizabethans. They celebrated nature, love and the good life. Lyrical poems were exalted in tone and characterised by an elevated language. The stanzas were frequently long and employed complex patterns.

The sixteenth century also saw the publication of long poems such as Edmund Spenser’s ‘The Faerie Queene’, Shakespeare’s ‘Venus and Adonis’, and ‘The Rape of Lucrece’. Long versified epics were also composed by Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton.

The sonnet gained in importance during the sixteenth century, particularly in the second half of the century. The traditional fourteen-line sonnet was devoted to love, though it might also treat religious devotion or other topics. The Shakespearean sonnet is divided into three quatrains and a couplet; its rhyming pattern is abab cdcd efef gg. ‘Sonnet 18’ is a celebration of art which survives its creator. At the same time, it is a poem of love and beauty.

**Sonnet 18 (William Shakespeare)**

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.
Selected bibliography


Literary theory

New Criticism
(Refer back to the relevant section in ‘Literary Theory and Writing an Academic Essay on Literature’ for additional information)

New criticism is a text-centred theory which propounds the view that the text is independent of context, authorial intention and reader response. The text must stand on its own. The literary critic is not concerned with external circumstances or effects of a work but with a detailed consideration of the work itself. As a result, s/he is not concerned with the biography of the author or the social conditions at the time of writing. Neither is s/he interested in psychological and/or moral effects on the reader. Instead, the critic focuses on oppositions, ambiguities, ironies and tensions in the text. Focus is also placed on figures of speech and symbols.

The distinctive method of the New Critic is explication or close reading, i.e. the detailed and subtle analysis of the multiple meanings and complex interrelations in a text. The aim of a New Critical analysis is to establish an organic unity in a text, i.e. a central idea or theme.

Three steps in New Critical analysis. Identify:

The tensions, oppositions, ironies, ambiguities and paradoxes in the work.
How the ambiguities are resolved, i.e. what is the central idea unifying the work?
The images, devices, e.g. symbols, metaphors, similes that enable the ambiguities to be resolved.

The following questions will help you:

a) If the text has a title, what is the relationship of the title to the rest of the text? Read the
text several times before trying to answer this question.

b) What words, if any, need to be defined?

c) What allusions, if any, are in the text? Trace these allusions to their appropriate sources, and explore how the origins of the allusion help elucidate meaning in the particular text.

d) What is the tone of the work?

e) What is the chief paradox or irony in the text?

f) How do all the elements of the text support and develop the text’s chief paradox?

Selected bibliography


**Biographical Criticism**
(Refer back to the section ‘Literary Theory and Writing an Academic Essay on Literature’ for additional information)

The primary assumption of the biographical critic is that a literary work is a personal achievement, i.e. the product of a great mind. The aim of the biographical critic is to understand both the work and its creator as well as the relationship between the two. The life of the writer, his/her circumstances at the time of writing, and his/her relationships with others and more specifically, with other writers, are of primary importance. An interesting branch of biographical studies is psychobiography, in which the focus is on the author’s psychological development. Psychobiography emphasises the role of the unconscious and disguised motives in shaping the author’s personality.

Three steps in a biographical analysis. Identify:

- The author’s biography.
- How the biographical background helps us to understand the work.
- Alternatively, consider how the work contradicts or is divorced from the biographical background.
- What other texts of the same period or by the same author might be related to the work.

The following works may be of assistance in biographical research:

- *Biography Index*
- *Book Review Index*
- *Dictionary of National Biography* (British)
- *Dictionary of American Biography*
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*
The Seventeenth Century

The seventeenth century was an age of revolution characterised by major political change, a growing scepticism towards dogma and tradition, and an increasing acceptance of divergence. This is the century of the English Civil War, which resulted in the execution of a king and the establishment of a republic. The second half of the century marked a return to the monarchy, but political life had changed. By the end of the century, the English monarch was not English but Dutch.

Two major questions exercised the minds of the leaders of the day: “How far should the Reformation of the Protestant Church be allowed to go?” and “How much authority should the Monarch be permitted independent of Parliament?” The seventeenth century established the Protestant faith once and for all. And from the seventeenth century onwards, the Monarch must accept that Parliament holds the purse strings and enacts laws. This has remained unchanged until the present day.

This was the age of new thinking and of science. Physicists such as Boyle, Hooke and Newton, mathematicians such as John Wallis, astronomers like Edmund Halley, and the anatomist, William Harvey changed our notion and understanding of the universe for ever.

The seventeenth century was a period of intellectual freedom as people gradually accepted that there is no one, universal truth. “Difference” and “toleration” became key words. These concepts were reflected in the literature of the time, in the writings of John Milton, Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

In the field of poetry, the sonnet became increasingly focused on religious themes. This is seen clearly in the sonnets of John Donne and John Milton. Formal verse satire became popular in the seventeenth century and acted as a welcome relief to the formal earnestness of the Puritan faith and practices. Pamphlets and newsletters also became popular. Increasingly, the seventeenth-century audience was alert and anxious to be informed. It appreciated sharp arguments with a dash of imagination. This was the beginning of modern literature.

Andrew Marvell was a metaphysical poet whose works are characterised by complexity, dialectical argument and wit. His themes are love, death and nature. Both Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 18’ and Marvell’s ‘To his coy mistress’ (below) acknowledge the inevitability of death. Their methods of coping with this realisation are, however, different.

To his coy mistress (Andrew Marvell)

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime.
We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, Lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.
But at my back I always hear
Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust:
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapt power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Selected bibliography


Literary Theory

**New Criticism** (see above)

**New Historicism**
(Refer back to the relevant section in ‘Literary Theory and Writing an Academic Essay on Literature’ for additional information)

In contrast with New Criticism and biographical criticism, New Historicists focus primarily on the historical and cultural conditions of the production of a work as well as its reception at different periods. New Historicists share three fundamental assumptions:

History is accessible and understandable. It is interpreted in the same way as all texts are interpreted, i.e. by analysis, argument and speculation.
Literature is not a reflection of historical reality. History shapes literature; literature shapes history. Literature may even distort history.
The “facts” of history are the creation of historians and critics. History must be viewed subjectively.

Three steps in a new historical analysis. Identify:

The historical setting of the work, including the conditions of production. How the historical background helps us understand the work. How was the work received at the time, and by whom? How was it reviewed, i.e. favourably or unfavourably, and by whom? How the work fitted in with, or stood apart from, other works at the time.

**Selected bibliography**

Alternative sources

Primary materials for other disciplines, e.g. psychology, architecture, and other manuals and guidebooks.
Newspapers and magazines which offer descriptions of events and reviews.
Artifacts from the period. These are useful because they offer insight into the cultural environment in which a literary work was produced, read, understood and reviewed.