

# **GOLDEN ERA IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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Edward II and Doctor Faustus. Marlowe's plays are all tragedies, he had no bent for comedy and the comic parts found in some of his plays are always inferior. One can trace the growing sense of theatre through his plays. All his plays, except Edward II, revolve around one figure and his characters do not show the complexity and subtlety of development and are the embodiment of a single idea. To judge his plays, we must put aside all the conventional ideas of drama since all his plays are expressions of a poetic vision that is a typical Renaissance quest for power. As a poet Marlowe excels. He was the first to exploit the possibilities of blank verse and make it supreme. His verse is notable for its burning energy, its splendor of diction, its sensuous richness, its variety of pace and its responsiveness to the demands of varying emotions. It was Christopher Marlowe who established blank verse as the standard form for later Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic writing. In the hands of Marlowe, it attained perfection and the reason why Ben Johnson called it Marlowe's "mighty line."

### **Conclusion**

The condition of drama that preceded the pre-Shakespearean dramatists was precarious and chaotic. They had form but no fire; the popular dramatist had interest but little sense of form. Thus the drama was struggling between the well-formed chill and structureless enthusiasm. The pre-Shakespearean dramatists who are known as the University wits were able to unite the classical conditions of the drama and enthusiasm and fervor of the popular dramatists. They came with their academic training; they came with their poetry and their passion which gave Shakespeare a pliable and fitting medium for the expression of his genius.

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In English literature the period from 1660 to 1700 is known as the Restoration Age. It is called so because in 1660 English people restored the monarchy. They brought back Charles II, the son of the last king Charles I, from France and restored him on the English Throne. The new king brought with him French culture, manners, arts and literature. Therefore, the English writers begin to imitate French literature in order to impress the king. King Charles II was morally weak. He had many bad habits like drinking wine, stealing money from the public treasure etc. The outcome of it was that his officers became corrupt, literature immoral, armada lost its status and so on. W. J. Long, in this regard, says,

“Unspeakably vile in his private life, the king had no redeeming patriotism, no sense of responsibility to his country for even his public acts. He gave high offices to blackguards, stole from the exchequer like a common thief, played off Catholics and Protestants against each other, disregarding his pledges to both alike, broke his solemn treaty with the Dutch and with his own ministers, and betrayed his country for French money to spend on his own pleasures.”

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However, the restoration age produced some beautiful pieces of prose, poetry and plays. John Dryden showed his talent in all the above types. He dominated the literature of the age. Consequently, he was appointed as the poet Laureate of England and his age is known after his name.



## 1. Prose

### 1.1. Character Sketches:

In the mid-17th century, character sketches were published in essay form. The main writers of this prose form were Hall, Overbury, Temple and Earle. They described and satirized various types of imaginary characters such as the Hypocrite, the Milkmaid and the Affected Traveller.

### 1.2. Critical Essay:

John Dryden introduced a new variety of prose called critical essay. Its subject was literary criticism. His well-known critical prose is *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. His 'Preface' to *Fables* and plays are also pieces of Criticism. In the former work Dryden tried to prove the superiority of English drama to the French and the ancient dramas. Jeremy Collier, a clergyman, also wrote a critical essay. It is "Short View of the Immortality and Profaneness of the English Stage". It helped largely to correct the low tendencies of the Restoration drama.

### 1.3. Diaries:

In Restoration Age some persons wrote Diaries. However, two diaries are famous. In diary they recorded the daily incidences of their own lives. While writing it they did not think that the world would read their Diaries. The Diary of John Evelyn covers the greater part of his life. It gives us vivid pictures of the society of his time. It also exposes the frightful corruption of the Royal Court. Samuel Pepys was an officer in court. His diary records the rumours of the court, affairs of his neighbours, fashion of dresses, food, and corruption in court and so on. W. J. Long, while quoting Pepys's *Diary*, writes

... now the old plays begin to disgust this refined age, since his Majesty's being so long abroad." Since Shakespeare and the Elizabethans were no longer interesting, literary men began to imitate the French writers, with whose works they had just grown familiar; and here begins the so-called period of French influence, which shows itself in English literature for the next century

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#### **1.4. Philosophical Essay:**

John Locke is famous for his single great philosophical work *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). This is a study of the nature of human mind. This essay is too philosophical to understand easily.

#### **1.5. Political Prose:**

The political and philosophical work, *Leviathan* is written by Thomas Hobbes in 1651. In it he advocates monarchy. He believes that monarchy alone can save society from its disruption.

#### **1.6. Fictions:**

John Bunyan, the writer of about 66 books, wrote a famous prose fiction, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). It is a religious dream allegory. In dream, the author writes, Christian named character is reading a book / the Bible. From the book Christian Learns that the village he lives in will be burnt by fire. This village is the City of Destruction. He flies to save his life to the Celestial City. On the way, he meets with Mr Worldly Wiseman, youthful Ignorance, sweet Piety, garrulous Talkative, honest Faithful, Mr Blindman, Mr Helpful, Mr Nogood, Mr Giant Despair and so on. He visits the places like Interpreter's House, Palace Beautiful, Valley of Humiliation, Valley of Shadow, Vanity Fair etc.

## **2. Plays**

With the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 theatres reopened in England. So the suppressed passion to watch play is now released. W. J. Long says, "Most of the dramatic literature of the time is atrocious, and we can understand it only as we remember the character of the court and society for which it was written."

[http://vnsgulibrary.org.in/Free\\_Ebooks/0220%20English%20Literature.pdf](http://vnsgulibrary.org.in/Free_Ebooks/0220%20English%20Literature.pdf) Pp. 141)

### **2.1. Heroic plays or Restoration Tragedy:**

John Dryden and Otway popularized heroic plays. They are called Heroic because they are written in heroic metre, that is, iambic pentameter. It is the metre mostly used for heroic poems, that is, epics. The subjects of the play are love and valour. They are also the subjects of Heroic poetry. The language and diction of the play are serious and of high standard. The play is also didactic in nature. John Dryden's *Conquest of Granada* (1672) and *All for Love* (1678) are its best examples of it.

### **2.2. She Tragedy:**

The heroic tragedies of Otway and Rowe degenerated to sea tragedy She tragedy. It is a tale of love. The heroine and her sufferings dominate the plot.

### **2.3. Comedy of Manners or Restoration Comedy:**

As its name shows it deals with the habits, manners and follies of the upper class people in the society. It shows the relationships and intrigues of men and women. For comic effect it relies on wit and repartee. Scandalous situations are also included in it. It has stereotyped characters like jealous husband, clever servant, old parents, wealthy rivals etc. It, though based on realism, is Immoral. Sir George Etherege's *Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676), William Wycherley's *Country Wife* (1675) And William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) are the best examples of it.

### **2.4. Sentimental Comedy:**

It originated as a reaction to the Comedy of Manners. Colley Cibber and Richard Steele were the chief exponents of this type of comedy. It opposes the comedy of manners in following ways:

- laughter is replaced by tears,
- intrigues are replaced by melodramatic situations,
- rags are replaced by serious lovers,
- virtues are always rewarded etc.

Colley Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* (1696) and Richard Steele's *The Tender Husband* (1703) are the best examples of it.

### 3. Poetry

In the beginning of the age, the poets were influenced by the metaphysical poets and their poetry. Sir Edmund Waller and early works of Dryden show this influence. Later they turned to classical writers and imitated them in their works.

#### 3.1. Lyrics and Sonnets:

Lyrical poetry was not much famous in the age. Dryden, Sidley etc wrote some of the beautiful lyrics. The best example of Sonnet of this age is John Milton's "On His Blindness".

#### 3.2. Ode:

Some of the best odes are written by Dryden and others. The well-known odes by Dryden are "St. Cecilia's Day" and "Power of Music".

#### 3.3. Satire:

Restoration Age is known for the writing of satires. These satires are more bitter and sharper than any satire written in any other age. *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), "The Medal", "MacFlecknoe" are satirical works of John Dryden. In these poems he criticizes his arrival in poetry Shadwell and Shaftesbury. Samuel Butler wrote *Hudibras* (1663). It is a poignant satire on the puritans. The central character is Sir Hudibras. He is a Puritan. His misadventures are narrated in a ridiculous manner. *Comedy of Manners* is satiric in spirit and is written in verse. It satirizes the follies of high class people.

#### 3.4. Narrative Poetry:

Long stories in verse were written by some poets of the age. Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) is a long narrative allegorical history of the age. Butler's *Hudibras* (1663) is a narrative poem about the misadventures of Sir Hudibras.

#### 3.5. Translations:

Writers like Dryden translated old poets from English and

other languages into modern English. He translated the works of Chaucer, Virgil, Ovid, Boccacio, etc.

### **3.6. Religious Poems:**

Dryden's *Religio Laici* (1682) and *The Hind and the Panther* (1687) are religious poems. Milton also wrote in the age. His *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671) are famous religious poems.

### **3.7. Epics:**

John Milton wrote his both the universally praised epics in this age. His *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* published in 1667 and 1671 respectively.

### **3.8. Heroic Couplets:**

They are the rhymed lines of iambic pentameter. They were introduced by Chaucer in English poetry in fourteenth century. Edmund Waller practiced this form for his poetry. He used it extensively. His disciple, Dryden made exclusive and abundant use of heroic couplet. He also supported it at various places. It dominated and was spread over English poetry for one and half centuries.

To sum up, in the Restoration Age prose became simpler and direct. Plays were predominantly realistic and heroic. The realistic plays were mostly immoral due to the use of intrigues and real women characters on stage. Poetry of the age was leaning towards classism. It was mostly satiric in its presentation of the subject.

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