The Elizabethan Age (1558 - 1603) refers to the period of Elizabeth 1's reign and is considered the **Golden Age** of English literature. It is characterized by vigorous intellectual thinking, an age of adventure and discovery, a time in which new ideas and new experiences were sought after. The period revolutionized many aspects of English life, most significantly literature. This new approach to things found its genesis in the **Italian Renaissance** and was also much influenced by the development of intellectual thought in **France** and other European nations. It was a time of discovery, when sailors journeyed far and wide and were introduced to many new cultures and civilizations. All this impacted on the way people thought. The world, as it were, had been 'opened up' to them.

1. **Historical Background**

Before the sixteenth century, there was no real sense of a nation or country that could have been applied to England. English society was torn by an endless cycle of civil wars and conflicts. In the sixteenth century, England witnessed crucial changes on various levels: political, social and economic. These changes shaped England as a strong nation and imperial power in the world.

The family that was responsible for these changes was the Tudors, the royal family that ruled England throughout the sixteenth century. The first king was Henry Tudor, or Henry VII (7th), who ascended the throne in 1485 after the end of the War of Roses and the slaying of Richard (3rd). This king worked to initiate peace, unity and prosperity for English people. He managed to establish a strong army that helped the courts to impose laws and fines on all nobles and farmers.

After Henry VII died, his son, Henry VIII, became the new king of England in 1509. This had made something unprecedented to the relationship between

religion and the state in England. After the Pope, the highest authority in Christianity, refused to divorce Henry VIII from his wife, Henry VIII broke up with the Pope. He became the supreme head of the church. In so doing, he supported what is referred to as "Reformation."

When Henry VIII died, his son, Edward VI, was announced king though he was only nine years old. He ruled under the supervision of councils. After he died Mary became the queen of England, who died in 1558 to let the throne to the most important queen of sixteenth-century England, **Elizabeth**.

**Queen Elizabeth** was Henry VIII's daughter. She ruled England from 1558 to 1603, for 45 years. She had the most significant contributions to the stability and prosperity of England. Her works can be summarized as follows:

1. She was able to unite English people within one church in spite of the different sects that they adhered.

2. She also managed to have the poor looked after in churches where they found food and shelters.

3. She encouraged scientific and geographical discoveries.

4. She managed to defeat the most powerful naval army in Europe, the Spanish Armada. With this victory, Britain arose as an imperial power in the world. Under the reign of Elizabeth, England became "Merry England."

**2. Cultural Background**

 **Reformation**.

Reformation refers to a revolutionary movement against the authority of religion that was encouraged by the writings of Martin Luther, a German priest. This movement resulted in the division of Christianity into **Protestantism** and **Catholicism**. Several factors led to reformation, among them the corruption within the religious system; the abuse of authority by priests; the reaction of princes against the religious authority; and the sudden wealth of religious. In England, it occurred during the reign of Henry VIII. 3

 **Humanism**

Humanism is a diverse cultural movement that rooted in the writings of the classic philosophers and writers. It emphasizes the value of man in the universe as opposed to other entities. It gives due importance to man's ability to discover and innovate. This movement arose in the sixteenth century injecting a new spirit in man to achieve new discoveries.

 **Renaissance**.

From about 1500 to 1600 the world was reborn in many ways. As England became the most powerful nation in Europe, new worlds were discovered and new ways of seeing and thinking developed. Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492. Copernicus and Galileo made important discoveries concerning the stars and the planet, confirming that the earth is not the center of the universe but the sun is the center of universe and all planets move around it. Ferdinand Magellan sailed all around the world. Renaissance was worldwide.

**Renaissance,** however, refers to the rebirth or the revival of the classics. The term 'classics' is always associated with the great European writers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Horace, Dante and Chaucer, whose writings shaped the traditions of Europe on all levels.

The main reason of Renaissance was **the fall of Constantinople** to the Turks, which caused the scholars to flee this city to Rome. In Rome, these scholars started to teach classic texts to people. In the sixteenth century, people reused the classic writings, after the texts became available to readers with the help of the **invention of printing**. Renaissance began in Italy, then spread in all over Europe and reached England late, during the reign of Elizabeth.

**3. Literary Background**

Just as England as a nation was shaped in the sixteenth century, English literature, poetry and drama in particular, experienced the same flourish. After Geoffrey Chaucer died in 1400, there was no real sense of greatness could have been applied to English literature. **Chaucer** is referred to as **the father of English**

**language and literature**. He was the first English poet, the first to use English language to write poetry. Before Chaucer, English was viewed as a vernacular language invalid for literary writings. Chaucer chose one dialect of English, among many others, and made it the language of his poetry. With the spread of his poetry, this dialect also spread to become the official language in England. In addition, Chaucer is considered the first English dramatist, realist and novelist.

Sixteenth century English poetry includes a variety of artistic writings completed during the Renaissance in Europe. Poetry of this period was considered among **the greatest ever created** and a transition between poetic style of the middle ages and the modern. This poetry was heavily influenced by the **classical** style of the **ancient Romans and Greek** but also invoked the issues and beliefs of the European people during this time period.

Poets of this period, “**courtly poets**,” like Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard borrowed, imitated and translated from Italian and French poets as well as from each other. Their poetic interest focused on the lyric in all its form; **a song, a sonnet, or a madrigal, which was a pastoral folk song**. They were delighted to write lyrics and songs of pleasure to be sung with the use of musical instruments. Hence music and poetry reached their highest level and some poets were themselves musicians.

**Lyrics** were written for exiting tunes; Edmund Spencer’s roundelay represents an imitation in the style of English folk songs.

**Sonnet** was the most popular form of the Lyrics.

 Elizabethan age was the age of sonnet.

 The word sonnet is derived from the Italian word “sonnetto” that means little song or lyric.

 In poetry, a sonnet is divided into two stanzas, (octave and sestet) and has fourteen lines.

  Sonnet is classified into different groups based on the rhyme scheme they follow.

 The rhyme scheme in English is usually abab-cddc-efef-gg and in Italian abba-abba-cde-cde.

 Sonnets originally were resources of expressing the immense range of emotions of **love and passion** but in later English poetry the sonnet was useful to express themes like; social criticism, liberty and alienation.

**Types of Sonnets:**

 **Petrarchan:** the most common type of sonnets is the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet which was firstly introduced into England by Sir Thomas Wyatt with its main structural division into octave and sestet but the octave is further divided into quatrains, and the sestet into tercets.

 **Shakespearean:** the second major type of sonnets is Shakespearean or English sonnet. Its main structure is of **three quatrains and a couplet**. The couplet, the last two lines represent a conclusion, amplification or even rejection of the previous three stanzas.

 **Spenserian:** The English poet Edmund Spenser used a slightly different rhyme scheme in his sonnet: abab-bcbc-cdcd-ee. This provides a tighter connection between the different stanzas.

Generally, the sixteenth century is the age of sonnet. It opened with the courtly poets, who linked English traditions to the European ones, and closed with Shakespeare, the most talented poet and playwright that England ever produced after Chaucer.

\*Related Terms: Courtly Poets or Courtly Makers, unrequited love, pastoral poetry, and sonnet.