



# Elizabethan age: A shift in the pattern of the writing of the English language and literature

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## Abstract:

English language has always been open to adopt new words and phrases since centuries and the process is still going on. The fact that English had taken the sobriquet “Lingua Franca” is perhaps because of this flexibility to accept these lexical invasions. From the Norman Conquest, many intellectuals tried to modify the English language from time to time and Geoffrey Chaucer is one among them. The sixteenth century in the history of Britain witnessed geographical and intellectual progress and a growth in adding foreign words which became the part of English language and by the time of Shakespeare, English language became distinctly modern. This paper attempts to focus on the aspect of changes of writing pattern, addition of new words and will try to find the origin of newly added words. The paper will also explain briefly other changes that took place in England during the Elizabethan period.

**Key words:** English language, Elizabethan Age, Lexical invasions, intellectual progress

## Introduction:

England had a long history of literature where almost all the literature up to the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons was oral in nature. English as a language began to develop over several centuries as the nation underwent in molding the nation’s cultural and linguistic identity. The language that became the national language got influenced from Iceland and Vikings, Latin and French, German and Celtic as well as many local linguistic, cultural and social forces that all made a venture of the language that became the English [1]. However, the English language that we use today is not same as that of Angles, Saxon or Jutes. The language had undergone through huge number of alterations and with the time its style approached to the modern one. The first person who lived before Elizabethan age, whom we called modern poet of English before Shakespeare and first finder of English language was Geoffrey Chaucer (1350-1400). He made a significant contribution to English as many critics and historians of later age feel that it was in his work that the first full expression of the English sense was found. It was not merely English which was used in England of the Chaucer’s time, the clergy continued to use Latin and the courtiers continued to use

the French language as well. French was also used in some measures in law court until the Statute of Pleading (1362) replaced the English with French completely. As the year 1066 is considered as beginning of the huge impact of the French language on England, in the same way the Statute of 1362 in the consideration of most philosophers and historians is said to be the impact of English language on French [2]. The writings of Chaucer in which Canterbury Tales is considered as *magnum opus*, and his contribution to the development of English language titled the century as the Age of Chaucer. After the death of Geoffrey Chaucer and before the start of Tudor dynasty, England was again in the period of darkness and with the start of the Elizabethan age which became to be known as golden age, English and England regained its status becoming the powerful nation of that time.

### **Background:**

After the Hundred Years War (1337-1457), another war started in England called the War of Roses that was a series of civil wars fought for the throne. The war lasted for 30 years resulting in the political disturbances of the country. In the year 1485, war of the roses came to an end. During the ending phase of the war of the roses, some important events occurred that changed the picture of England rather the picture of the world got affected by these events:

1. Invention of printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1456
2. Caxton's printing press established in Westminster in 1476
3. Tudor dynasty established with the reign of Henry VIII in 1485
4. Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492
5. Vasco da Gama discovered sea route to India in 1498
6. Queen Elizabeth I comes to power in 1558

After the death of Mary I, her step sister Elizabeth, a woman of twenty-five, succeeded to the throne in 1558. A combination of skill and luck allowed her, to impose a Protestant type base in the country and reasserted Crown authority over the Church. The year 1558 is seen as a dividing line in English history which had been because of the fact that queen Elizabeth I survived so long and her political and religious settlements existed [3]. The period witnessed an internal peace in the country not only because of the political stability but other additional features like, the long quarrel between Catholics and Protestants got decreased as the court of the Elizabeth was secular in nature as compared to the other monarchs before. Although, due to political needs and advice from her council, some Catholics were prosecuted by her and Protestants in the reign of Elizabeth I enjoyed her favor. In fact, a lot of Protestants migrated to London in the hope of better life and safe future. General prosperity in England led to a cosmopolitan way of thinking in the people that in turn resulted to a transition in terms of society, culture, individualism, intellectualism, travel, etc. Apart from that, a change in terms of language and literature also can be observed also.

### **Some important writers of the Elizabethan era:**

The literature of English Renaissance includes some of great names in the world in terms of literature. The period gave us Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster and Jonson as dramatists; Spenser, Milton, Sidney and Donne as poets; Bacon, Nashe, Hooker and Browne in prose and above all of them, the authorized version of the Bible that got published in 1611 [1]. Some of the important writers of the Elizabethan age are:

**Edmund Spenser (1552-99):** He was one of the great poets of Elizabethan period known for his long allegorical poem, *The Faerie Queen*. Spenser's early life is little known to us except that he was born in East Smithfield. He got his early education from Merchant Tailor's school in London and continued in Cambridge. He read the classics and acquainted with great Italian poets and wrote many poems of his own. After leaving the Cambridge, Spenser went to north of England and tried to fall in love and to record his melancholy over the lost Rosalind in the *Shepherd's Calendar*. Upon his friend's advice, he came back to London and brought his poems with him. Here he entered Leicester House and finished *Shepherd's Calendar*; met Sidney and all the favorite people of the queen. In 1580, he was made secretary to Lord Grey, the queen's deputy in Ireland. After crushing of Irish rebellion, he was given a big estate with the castle of Kilcolman. After completing his sixteen years in Ireland, Spenser wrote, *View of the State of Ireland* in 1596. Also in Kilcolman, he finished three books of *Faerie Queen*. In 1589, Raliegth presented his poem to queen Elizabeth and the queen conferred him a yearly pension of fifty pounds on the success of the publication of first three books of *Faerie Queen*. After some years the Kilcolman castle was attacked by the rebellions of Ireland where Spenser hardly escaped death. He returned England and in 1599 he died in an inn at Westminster [4].

**Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586):** Sidney was born in Kent England in 1554. His father was the lord president of Wales and his uncle was Earl of Leicester, Queen Elizabeth's friend and advisor. Philip Sidney attended Christ Church College in 1568 but left the study in complete to travel to Europe. He returned to England in 1575 and was appointed cupbearer to Queen Elizabeth. This was in fact a prestigious position. In the year 1577, he was sent to Germany as an ambassador. He then became the admirer of Spenser. He continued his involvement in politics and was appointed as governor of the Dutch town of Flushing. He fought a battle against Spain in 1586 and due to unbearable wounds; he died several days later [5].

**William Shakespeare (1564-1616):** A Poet, dramatist and actor often called the English national poet and considered by many to be the greatest dramatist of all time. The unique position that Shakespeare had occupied in the world can't be ignored. The factual knowledge about his little but he was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England. Two outward influences developed the genius of Shakespeare, his village that was surrounded by beautiful scenery and the city of London that was the hub of England's political activities. According to the parish register of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford, Shakespeare was baptized on 26<sup>th</sup> of April,

1564 but his birthday is celebrated on 23<sup>rd</sup> of April. His father was John Shakespeare who was a burgess of the borough and was then chosen as an alderman and in 1568 as bailiff [6]. Shakespeare died on the probable anniversary of his birth, 23 April, 1616. At the time of his death twenty-one plays existed in manuscripts in various theaters. Some of the writings had already been printed in quarto form. The first printed collection of his plays, were put forward by Heming and Condell who were the two actors of his theatre. They according to them accessed the papers of the poet and made an edition from it.

**Francis Bacon (1561-1626):** Bacon was born in London on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1561. He was youngest son in family. His father Nicholas Bacon held a powerful position of Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. Bacon's education was given at home until he aged twelve. He then entered the University of Cambridge and here he was given tutored privately as he belonged to a high class family. He studied arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, grammar etc. Here at Cambridge, Bacon first met Queen Elizabeth and she got impressed by his ideas and intellect. The queen then called him by the name "The young Lord Keeper" [8] He with an English ambassador went to France, where he said that he busied himself with the practical study of statistics and diplomacy. On his father's death he returned to London and without money, he approached to his uncle for giving him a position which got refused. He then studied law and joined the bar in 1582. Bacon enjoyed his political positions throughout his life and finally he was proved guilty for taking bribe. He was banished from the politics and he returned to his scientific study. In 1626, in snowy cold night, he thought of making snow as a preservative instead of salt. The experiment chilled him and he died [4].

**Transitions in the era of Elizabeth:** Transitions in literature and language of English did not came absolutely with the throne of queen Elizabeth rather the period of transition is considered as the period of Tudor dynasty, of which Elizabeth was the forth heir. The period is called as the renaissance which dates from 1485-1660. But in the age of Elizabeth, all the doubts seem to be clear and all the problems got vanished from England. The reigns of Edward and Mary, the defeat, humiliation and internal disturbances, there was a wish of a brave and honest sovereign that got fulfilled by the queen. Milton has said about the England of that period, "a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invisible locks" [4]. Some of the changes that occurred in the period are given below:

1. The religious tolerance was one of the main factors that popularizes the Elizabethan era. Upon taking her seat as queen, Elizabeth saw the whole kingdom was divided in itself. Northern part of the kingdom was catholic and southern protestant; Scotland had followed its own interpreted reformation. Queen favored both the parties and both were acting as the trusted counselors. However, the fact that due to some pressures, Queen also prosecuted many Catholics as discussed above can't be ignored.

2. Trade in the Elizabethan age brought immense wealth to the nation. The increase in wealth resulted in the improvement of living, opportunities for labor and ultimately new literary activity. Overseas trade and foreign relations consolidation and causation expansion happened. The Hanseatic League that earlier enjoyed privileged trade with England was compelled to sign the agreement in 1560 by which special positions were completely abrogated. England also enjoyed free access to Baltic and its vital supplies of naval material [3].

3. The age witnessed sailing and exploring new worlds by Britishers and the phase of colonization also had started. From 1588 onwards, many merchants sailed to India and many successful ships were docked on the boundaries of India. Later Queen granted them Charter and it became East India Company.

**Literary Changes:** Apart from the social, political and economic changes; Elizabethan age was the age where a shift in the pattern of writing took place. Philip Sidney is considered as the model of perfect renaissance gentleman. He gave the concepts of prose romances, author's virtues and beliefs through his *Astrophel and Stella*; and *Arcadia*. The invention of new style of writing poetry by Spenser called as 'Spenserian stanza'. Because of its unique beauty, it was used by many great poets. The new stanza was an improved version of Ariosto's *ottava rima*. By the time Christopher Marlowe was writing, people were moving to a new kind of theatrical performances. Earlier in the century the mystery and morality plays had been performed almost everywhere by moving a wagon from one place to other. In the later part of Elizabeth's reign, these groups came together and form the theatres for performances of new kind of dramas. The age became known for the dramas of which Shakespeare was the master. Shakespeare played an enormous role in the standardization of grammar [6]

Francis Bacon, who perfected the essay form in English on the French model of Montaigne used his writings to ask questions and initiate discussion. Many of his essays rose fundamental issues of the era. So this was the shift of pattern of writing which started in Elizabethan era and made the nation powerful in all respects.

### **Conclusion:**

The age of Queen Elizabeth which is also called the golden age, renaissance, beginning of the British Empire and Age of Shakespeare. Literature before renaissance offered ideal patterns for living which were dominated by rules of the church but in this period, there was a search for individual expression and meaning and reason was promoted instead of faiths. The century witnessed not only geographical and intellectual expansion rather there was a growth in foreign words that became the part of English. The words like nonsense, laughable, French-women entered English. Bible is considered as the big shaper of English language but the relation between the two had been controversial. Vulgate's bible was translated that angered people because they thought English was not worthy to show the emotions of the Bible. With the time many editions of the book were brought before people in English language. Above all, the writers of the age like Sidney, Spenser and the greatest of all William Shakespeare, on whom the century was named gave new wings to England and its literature.

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