

Chapter 1

The Elizabethan Age

William Shakespeare; Sir Philip Sidney; Christopher Marlowe;

Edmund Spenser; Ben Jonson

Part I Reading and Appreciation of Poem

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. His father was a trader in agricultural products and manufactured articles and later became an alderman. Shakespeare went to the grammar school at Stratford. He was married to a yeoman's daughter, Anne Hathaway, in 1582. Between 1585 and 1586 he left Stratford for London to evade a persecution by Sir Thomas Lucy, a rich landlord and county magistrate who accused Shakespeare for writing a satirical ballad to smear his character. Shakespeare allegedly composed the ballad to readdress a severe punishment he received for stealing the magistrate's deer.

Shortly after his arrival in London, Shakespeare got employment either in or near a theater, taking care of gentlemen's horses or serving as the prompter's assistant. Then he became an actor and later he started to write plays, either in collaboration with other playwrights or revising old plays of others. By the end of the 16th century Shakespeare already gained the popularity of a successful playwright of both tragedies and comedies. Later he became the shareholder of the theater. In 1612

he retired from the stage and went back to live in his native town at Stratford.

Shakespeare's complete works include 37 plays, 2 narrative poems and 154 sonnets. The first complete edition of his writings was published by his fellow players and friends in 1623.

Sonnet 18



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:
 5 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven¹ shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed²;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 10 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade³,
 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.

Notes

1. **the eye of heaven:** here referring to the sun
2. **untrimmed:** stripped of beauty
3. **Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade:** Nor shall death boast that you roam about in his darkness, i.e., you shall not fall under the threat of death. Here "death" is personified.

Discussions

1. Who is "thee" in the poem? What do the metaphors in Lines 1-8 assert? Why does the speaker emphasize life's brevity?

2. The last two lines say, "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." Do you think the poem really can do this? Explain.

Chinese Translation:

我怎么能够把你来比作夏天？
你不独比它可爱也比它温婉：
狂风把五月宠爱的嫩蕊作践，
夏天出借的期限又未免太短：
天上的眼睛有时照得太酷烈，
它那炳耀的金颜又常遭掩蔽：
被机缘或无常的天道所摧折，
没有芳艳不终于雕残或销毁。
但是你的长夏永远不会雕落，
也不会损失你这皎洁的红芳，
或死神夸口你在他影里漂泊，
当你在不朽的诗里与时同长。
只要一天有人类，或人有眼睛，
这诗将长存，并且赐给你生命。

【梁宗岱译】

Commentary:

This poem, composed around 1595 and published in 1609, is probably the most famous sonnet of Shakespeare. It adopts the format of a sonnet with iambic pentameter rhyming *ababcdcdefefgg*.

The sonnet can be divided into two parts. The first eight lines are about the transient nature of the natural beauty, exemplified in the swift passage of summer, short-lived sunshine and in blossoming and withering flowers. The last six lines are about the immortality of the protagonist's beauty. The sonnet begins with

the question: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Summer in Britain is a beautiful season, but in the poet’s mind, the person he praises is lovelier and more temperate than the summer season. The flower buds that appear in May (spring time is usually thought of as the time for love) are destroyed by the strong winds; thus, summer can be cruel and rough, which the protagonist is not. Summer is also not long-lasting, which is inadequate for the description of this protagonist. It is said that the protagonist whom the poem praises is a young man, not a lady.

This sonnet is also about the permanence of art and poetry. The poem uses some rhetorical devices to enhance the theme—the human society is always viewed as an echo of the natural world. For example, human’s developmental stages, such as childhood, youth, middle-age, old age and finally death correspond to the cycle of nature—spring, summer, autumn, and winter.



Part II Literary Background

When Henry VII became the King in 1485, a new age started in England. During the Tudor’s time, England changed from a medieval kingdom to a modern state and its economy was transformed from an agrarian one into an industrial capitalism. The merchant class became a more important social force vis-a-vis the nobility. It cooperated with the Tudor monarchs in Parliament on various issues and in return the Tudor monarchs promoted commerce and trade, reformed the church, and built up the English navy. The social change laid the ground for the great expansion of the British Empire.

The Tudors had three generations: Henry VII (1485-1509), Henry VIII (1509-1547) and his three children—Edward VI (1547-1553), Mary I (1553-1558), and Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Henry VIII was a strong king and he always had a will of his own. One thing he did during his reign was proven to be the source of the trouble for England for many years

to come. He wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon, who had only one daughter, Mary. When the Pope in Rome refused to end the marriage, he rebelled by marrying Anne Boleyn without permission of the Pope. He soon declared himself head of the English Church. So England was separated from Rome. These actions of King Henry VIII revealed the influence of the Renaissance spirit of individual freedom.

Renaissance is an intellectual and cultural movement which began in Italy in the 14th century and spread to Europe through the 15th and 16th centuries. Renaissance is a French word meaning "rebirth" and it refers particularly to the revival of interest in classical Greek and Roman civilizations. Renaissance scholars did not just study ancient Greece and Rome as history; they also absorbed the thoughts and values embodied in classical texts and civilizations. In their views, what distinguishes ancient Greece and Rome is the value and importance they placed on the secular life, human potentials and human capabilities. In contrast to Christianity's otherworldliness, the classical thoughts emphasize the value and importance of life in this world and the possibility of fully developing an individual's potentials. The emphasis, in short, is placed on the life we live rather than what happens after death; concurrent with the shift of emphasis is the shift of value system, which places the values on human beings rather than on God, on the knowledge of human learning rather than on Gospel. This way of thinking is called humanism, as opposed to the religious asceticism and self-denial. Ancient Greece and Rome were the champions of Man, not of God.

This way of thinking triggered creative energy and innovative spirit during this historical period. The English Renaissance saw the rise of large numbers of writers and humanistic thinkers. Among them were Thomas More, the author of *Utopia*, Sir Philip Sidney, the author of *An Apology for Poetry*, Edmund Spenser, the author of *The Faerie Queene*, Christopher Marlowe, the author of *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, and William Shakespeare, the greatest playwright and the greatest poet in English literary history. The Renaissance writers had special views on poetry and they emphasized the artistic values of literature. Naturalness

is a virtue, but careful design is a sign of human ingenuity and of artistic achievement. Therefore, the poetry of this period is characterized by intricate metrical patterns and rhyme schemes.

The popular verse form “sonnet” is a lyric poem of 14 lines which follow a designated rhyme scheme. The sonnet is written in iambic pentameter. The two basic types of sonnets are the Petrarchan (or Italian) and the Shakespearean (or English).

The Petrarchan sonnet follows the rhyme scheme: *abbaabba cdecde* or *abbaabba cdccdc*. The Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two parts, the octave (first eight lines) and the sestet (the final six lines). The octave usually proposes a question, develops a narrative, or delineates an idea. The accompanying sestet will answer the question, comment on the story, or countermand the idea. The thought-division is often signaled by an enjambement in Line 9.

The Shakespearean sonnet follows the rhyme scheme: *abab cdcd efef gg*. The Shakespearean sonnet’s thought-division is a 4-4-4-2 plan. There are four parts—three quatrains and a final couplet. In the Shakespearean sonnet each quatrain deals with a different aspect of the subject and the couplet either summarizes the theme or makes a final, sometimes contradictory, comment. Edmund Spenser followed the English thought-division of three quatrains and a couplet. However, he altered the rhyme scheme to *abab bcbc cdcd ee* as a transition of the quatrains.



Part III Reading of Poetic Theory

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)

Sir Philip Sidney was born on November 30, 1554, at Penshurst, Kent. He was regarded as the model of the English Renaissance gentlemen: a courtier, soldier, statesman, scholar, and poet. Sidney was the seminal author of the Elizabethan Age. In his short life he created the first major critical essay, the first important prose romance, and the first Petrarchan sonnet-sequence in English. He influenced Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, John Donne, and many others.

Sidney ended his short life as a military governor in Flushing during the Battle of Zutphen. Sidney is said to have courteously declined water and medical attention in favor of a fellow soldier. Some 22 days later Sidney died of the unhealed wound at not yet 32 years of age. His death occasioned much mourning in England as the Queen and her subjects grieved for the man who had come to exemplify the ideal courtier. He was given the grandest funeral of any private Englishman until Sir Winston Churchill.

An Apology for Poetry (also known as *The Defence of Poesy*), published in 1595, was the first landmark of literary criticism in English. In 1579, a Puritan minister named Stephen Gosson published an attack on the theaters titled *The Schoole of Abuse*, dedicating it, without permission, “to the right noble Gentleman, Master Philip Sidney, Esquire”; Sidney countered the following year with his defense, *An Apology for Poetry*. Though his work responded to specific attacks, Sidney addressed himself less to Gosson than to Plato, whose *Republic* provided most of the ammunition for the Puritans.

Sidney’s text focuses on three major topics. The first part defends the dignity of poetry, demonstrating its superiority to philosophy and history because it combines the moral precepts of the one with the entertaining examples of the other, all the while cloaking its lessons with the pleasurable devices of art. Along the way, Sidney discusses the ethics of genre, ranging from pastoral, elegy, and satire to comedy, tragedy, and epic. The second part deals with the specific objections raised against poetry; in particular he declared: “Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth.” Poets’ imitations are not lies, as Plato charged, because poets make no truth claims. The third part of the essay examines the then current state of English literature.

From *An Apology for Poetry*



And first, truly, to all them that, professing learning, inveigh against poetry, may justly be objected that they go very near to ungratefulness

to seek to deface that which, in the noblest nations and languages that are known, hath been the first light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges. And will they now play the hedgehog that, being received into the den, drove out his host? Or rather the vipers, that with their birth kill their parents? Let learned Greece, in any of her manifold sciences, be able to show me one book before Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, all three nothing else but poets. Nay, let any history be brought that can say any writers were there before them, if they were not men of the same skill as Orpheus, Linus, and some other are named, who, having been the first of that country that made pens deliverers of their knowledge to their posterity, may justly challenge to be called their fathers in learning: for not only in time they had this priority (although in itself antiquity be venerable), but went before them, as causes to draw with their charming sweetness the wild untamed wits to an admiration of knowledge. So as Amphion was said to move stones with his poetry to build Thebes, and Orpheus to be listened to by beasts, indeed stony and beastly people, so among the Romans were Livius Andronicus and Ennius. So in the Italian language, the first that made it aspire to be a treasure-house of science were the poets Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. So in our English were Gower and Chaucer, after whom, encouraged and delighted with their excellent fore-going, others have followed to beautify our mother tongue, as well in the same kind as in other arts.

This did so notably show itself, that the philosophers of Greece durst not a long time appear to the world but under the masks of poets. So Thales, Empedocles, and Parmenides sang their natural philosophy in verses; so did Pythagoras and Phocylides their moral counsels; so did Tyrtaeus in war matters and Solon in matters of policy; or rather, they being poets, did exercise their delightful vein in those points of highest knowledge which before them lay hid to the world. For that wise Solon was directly a poet, it is manifest, having written in verse the notable fable of the Atlantic Island, which was continued by Plato.

And truly, even Plato, whosoever well considereth shall find that in

the body of his work, though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin as it were and beauty depended most of poetry, for all standeth upon dialogues, wherein he feigneth many honest burgesses of Athens to speak of such matters, that if they had been set on the rack they would never have confessed them; besides his poetical describing the circumstances of their meetings, as the well ordering of a banquet, the delicacy of a walk, with interlacing mere tales, as Gyges' ring and others, which who knoweth not to be flowers of poetry did never walk into Apollo's garden.

...

But now, let us see how the Greeks named it and how they deemed of it. The Greeks called him a poet, which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word *poiein*, which is, to make, wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker: which name, how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences than by my partial allegation.

There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth. So doth the astronomer look upon the stars, and by that he seeth, setteth down what order nature hath taken therein. So do the geometrician and arithmetician in their diverse sorts of quantities. So doth the musician in times tell you which by nature agree, which not. The natural philosopher thereon hath his name, and the moral philosopher standeth upon the natural virtues, vices, and passions of man; and follow nature (saith he) therein, and thou shalt not err. The lawyer saith what men have determined; the historian what men have done. The grammarian speaketh only of the rules of speech, and the rhetorician and logician, considering what in nature will soonest prove and persuade, thereon give artificial rules, which still are compassed within the circle of a question, according to the proposed matter. The physician weigheth the nature of a man's body, and the nature of things

helpful or hurtful unto it. And the metaphysic, though it be in the second and abstract notions, and therefore be counted supernatural, yet doth he indeed build upon the depth of nature. Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit.

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.

But let those things alone and go to man, for whom as the other things are, so it seemeth in him her uttermost cunning is employed, and know whether she have brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes, so constant a friend as Pylades, so valiant a man as Orlando, so right a prince as Xenophon's Cyrus, so excellent a man every way as Virgil's Aeneas. Neither let this be jestingly conceived, because the works of the one be essential, the other in imitation or fiction; for any understanding knoweth the skill of the artificer standeth in that *Idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *Idea* is manifest by delivering them forth in such excellency as he hath imagined them. Which delivering forth also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air, but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency, as nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him.

...

Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or

figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight. Of this have been three several kinds.

Part IV Poems for Further Reading

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

Christopher Marlowe was born two months before William Shakespeare in Canterbury. As a dramatist, poet and translator of the Elizabethan era, he had much influence upon William Shakespeare. In 1580, he went to Benet's (now Corpus Christi) College, Cambridge, where he graduated with a B.A. degree in 1584, and M.A. in 1587. Of his life after he left the College, almost nothing is known except the rumor that he worked in espionage, which caused his secret death later. Marlowe's literary legacy includes the two parts of *Tamburlaine the Great*, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II*.

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love



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Come live with me and be my love,  
 And we will all the pleasures prove  
 That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,  
 Woods, or steepy mountains yields<sup>1</sup>.

- 5 And we will sit upon the rocks,  
 Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,  
 By shallow rivers to whose falls<sup>2</sup>  
 Melodious birds sing madrigals<sup>3</sup>.

- And I will make thee beds of roses  
 10 And a thousand fragrant posies,  
 A cap of flowers, and a kirtle<sup>4</sup>  
 Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;  
 A gown made of the finest wool



- Which from our pretty lambs we pull;  
15 Fair lined slippers for the cold,  
With buckles of the purest gold;  
A belt of straw and ivy buds,  
With coral clasps and amber studs:  
And if these pleasures may thee move,  
20 Come live with me, and be my love.  
The shepherds' swains<sup>5</sup> shall dance and sing  
For thy delight each May morning:  
If these delights thy mind may move,  
Then live with me and be my love.

## Notes

1. **yields:** produces
2. **falls:** flow, currents
3. **madrigals:** songs of love
4. **kirtle:** gown, dress
5. **swains:** boys, lads

## Discussions

1. Describe the speaker. What does he do? What does he like? What does he want?
2. Who is the listener? What is the relationship between the speaker and the listener?

### Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-1599)

Born in East Smithfield, London, around 1552, Edmund Spenser was an English poet best known for *The Faerie Queene*. He is recognized as one of the premier craftsmen of Modern English verse in its infancy, and is often considered one of the greatest poets in the English language.

## Sonnet 75



One day I wrote her name upon the strand<sup>1</sup>,  
 But came the waves and washéd it away:  
 Agayne<sup>2</sup> I wrote it with a second hand,  
 But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray.  
 5 “Vayne man,” sayd she, “that doest in vaine assay<sup>3</sup>,  
 A mortall thing so to immortalize,  
 For I my selve shall lyke to this decay,  
 And eek my name bee wyped out lykewize<sup>4</sup>.”  
 “Not so,” quod I, “let baser things devize  
 10 To dy<sup>5</sup> in dust, but you shall live by fame:  
 My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,  
 And in the hevens wryte<sup>6</sup> your glorious name.  
 Where whenas<sup>7</sup> death shall all the world subdew<sup>8</sup>,  
 Our love shall live, and later life renew.”

## Notes

1. **strand:** beach
2. **agayne:** again
3. **“Vayne man,” sayd she, “that doest in vaine assay:** “Vian man,” said she, “that does in vain attempt.”
4. **And eek my name bee wyped out lykewize:** And also my name be wiped out likewise.
5. **dy:** die
6. **wryte:** write
7. **whenas:** while
8. **subdew:** subdue

## Discussions

1. What did the speaker do in this poem? What’s the response of the female protagonist?
2. This poem, as well as the two poems analyzed before, focuses on

the theme of love. In what ways do the three poets present their emotions to their lovers at the end of each poem?

### Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

Ben Jonson was born in London. Eight years younger than William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson had an important position among English dramatists in the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. His major works include: *Sejanus* (1603), *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), *Volpone* (1606), *The Alchemist* (1610).

### Song: To Celia



Drink to me only with thine eyes,  
And I will pledge with mine;  
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,  
And I'll not look for wine.

5 The thirst that from the soul doth rise,  
Doth ask a drink divine:  
But might I of Jove's nectar<sup>1</sup> sup,  
I would not change for thine.

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,  
10 Not so much honoring thee,  
As giving it a hope, that there  
It could not withered be.  
But thou thereon did'st only breathe,  
And sent'st it back to me;

15 Since when it grows and smells, I swear,  
Not of itself, but thee.

### Note

**Jove's nectar:** Jove, or Jupiter, was the principal Roman god. Nectar (a word meaning "overcoming death") was the drink of the gods; a human being who drank it would become immortal.

## Discussions

1. Who is the speaker? What do you learn about him, his knowledge, his wit, and his concern for the listener?
2. What has the speaker sent to the listener? What did she do? And why is he still writing to her?

### Some Reference Books

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