

ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION TO MARLOWE AND SHAKESPEARE

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

An answer key is provided at the end of this handout.

Text used: M. H. Abrams, ed. The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 2000.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) is usually called the _____ Age of English Literature because so many great authors wrote during that period.

2. This was the time of the great epic writer Edmund Spenser, the pioneer tragic playwright Christopher _____, the comic genius Ben Jonson, the brilliant poet John Donne, and, of course, the greatest writer in English and probably the world's greatest writer, William _____.

II. ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

1. This is the major period in the history of drama for both comedy and tragedy.

2. A comedy is a play which ends _____. It often deals with _____ lovers; typically a comic play ends with _____. Shakespeare is our greatest comic playwright with such sparkling comedies as As You Like It and A Midsummer Night's Dream.

3. A tragedy is a play which ends _____. Its characters are often middle-aged or _____. Tragedies typically end with _____, usually portraying a character falling from power. Again Shakespeare is the greatest tragic playwright; his tragedies include such immortal works as Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear, the last of which we will be studying in class.

III. CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564-93; 1593-94)

1. Shakespeare learned much about writing tragedies from his predecessor Christopher Marlowe, whose tragedy Doctor Faustus you are reading for an outside-of-class assignment.

2. The heroes of Marlowe's plays typically are filled with "_____, the impulse to strive ceaselessly for absolute power" (1593).

3. It is Marlowe who "launched" "the great period of Elizabethan drama" (1593), although he wrote for only six years before his early death at 29 (1564-93).

4. His greatest play is Doctor Faustus. It portrays a hero "who passionately seek[s] power . . . the power of _____" (1593). To get this power, Faustus sells his soul to the _____. "His fall is caused by [his] pride and ambition" (1593).

5. The three great scenes of Doctor Faustus are "the first scene (with its brilliant representation of the insatiable aspiring mind of the hero), the ecstatic address to Helen of _____, [and] the searing scene of Faustus's last _____" (1593).

IV. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1026-27)

A. LIFE

1. Because Shakespeare is arguably the world's greatest writer, students should know some aspects of his life.

2. He was born "in the small market town of _____-on-Avon" on _____ 22 or 23, 1564. His family was upper middle class, but he probably attended school only briefly (1026).

3. When he was 18, he was married to Ann _____ (she was 26); it was perhaps a shotgun wedding since she gave birth to their first child only six months after the ceremony.

4. By his middle 20s, Shakespeare was in London and established as a playwright and actor. His dramas were very popular and frequently were performed before Queen _____ I and her successor King James I.

5. In his middle 40s, Shakespeare retired from the theater and moved back to _____, where he died on _____ 23 (the same day as his birth, some contend), 1616, at the age of 52.

6. His contemporary Ben Jonson summed up the importance of Shakespeare as a writer: "He was not of an _____, but for all _____!" (1027).

B. SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS (1028)

1. The most important lyric poetry genre in the Elizabethan period was the sonnet.

2. A sonnet is a **14-line poem** in iambic pentameter (basically 10 syllables in each line).

3. There are **two major types of sonnets**:

(1) **The Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet** has a two-fold division, the **octave**—the **first eight lines**—and the **sestet**—the **last six lines**. It usually **rhymes abbaabba cdecde**.

(2) **The English or Shakespearean Sonnet** has a four-fold division, **three quatrain** followed by a **couplet**; it **rhymes ababcdcdefefgg**.

4. Often sonnets in the Elizabethan period were connected to tell a story, called a **sonnet sequence**. The sonnet sequence typically deals with love and explores the contrary states which the poet feels for a lady. The sonnets praise her beauty, her power over him, her cruelty to him, his sleeplessness, the fire of his love and the ice of her chastity, the pain of absence, the renunciation of love, etc.

5. The most famous sonnet sequence in English is **Shakespeare's**, which has **154 sonnets**. Major characters in Shakespeare's sonnets, who become involved in a love/friendship triangle as the sonnet sequence progresses, include the following:

(1) **the poet** (whose name is significantly **Will**);

(2) **the poet's friend** who is a little younger than the poet and is usually dubbed **the Fair Friend**; and

(3) a lady (**the poet's girlfriend**, who willingly allows herself to be seduced by the poet's friend); because of her black hair, she is usually called **the Dark Lady**.

6. The following notes on the Shakespearean sonnets which we are studying are simplistic explanations of very complex works of art.

C. SONNET 18: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (1031)

1. The poet compares a friend to "a _____ day"—summer here meaning spring, as in the poem "Summer is a-coming in" or in Chaucer.

2. The poet says that unlike a beautiful summer day, which lasts only a brief time, his friend will never grow old or die: "But thy _____ summer shall not fade" ((8). He continues that never "shall _____ brag" (11) that it killed his friend.

3. How can this be?, we wonder, since everyone dies. The poet gives the answer in the last three lines: This sonnet, he says, through its "_____ lines" (12) will keep the friend's memory alive forever.

D. SONNET 29: "When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes" (1032)

1. The poet is in deep despair; he is alienated from others; he is down on his luck; he envies the success of others and bemoans his own failures.

2. He has reached the point of "almost _____" (9) himself.

3. What brings him out of this manic-depression hell is thinking about his best friend; the memory of this person causes him to sing "hymns at _____ gate" (12).

4. Thus in 14 lines, the poet goes from hellish despair to heavenly elation.

E. SONNET 73: “That time of year thou mayst in me behold” (1035)

1. The poet compares growing old to three situations:

(1) A season, _____.

(2) A time of day, _____.

(3) A fire that is about to _____ itself out.

2. Each situation becomes more narrowed: A season is a longer span of time than a day; a fire burns out more quickly than a day “dies.” The narrowing of time emphasizes that the poet feels he has little time before he dies.

3. In the last two lines, the poet says he is thankful that at this difficult time of his life his friend has stayed there to comfort him.

F. SONNET 116: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds” (1038)

1. The theme of this sonnet is the nature of true love as expressed through the “_____ of true minds” (1).

2. The poet begins by defining what love is not: true love does not depend on physical appearance: “Love is not love / Which _____ when it alteration finds” (3), that is, you cease loving someone because that person grows old.

3. No, the poet says, love “is an ever-fixèd mark” (5); that is, you fix your love on one person _____—through marriage to that person.

4. No matter what bad things happen in your marriage—the poet calls these bad things “_____” (6)—your love, if it is true, will never be “_____” (6).

5. Love is not “Time’s _____” (9), the poet repeats; it will not change when the person you are married to becomes wrinkled and gray.

6. Because marriage is religiously sanctioned (see footnote 4, p. 1038), it should last up “to the edge of _____ [Judgment Day]” (12).

Answer Key

I.

1. Golden.
2. Marlowe; Shakespeare.

II.

2. happily; young; marriage.
3. unhappily; elderly; death.

III.

1. Faustus.
2. ambition.
4. knowledge; devil.
5. Troy; hour.

IV.

2. Stratford; April.
3. Hathaway.
4. Elizabeth.
5. Stratford; April.
6. age; time.

V.

C. 1. summer's.

2. eternal; death.
3. eternal.

D. 2. despising.

3. heaven's.

E. 1. (1) late autumn.
(2) sunset.
(3) burn.

- F. 1. marriage.
2. alters.
3. individual.
4. tempest; shaken.
5. fool.
6. doom.