

What do you understand by the phrase 'University Wits'? Highlight their contribution in development of English drama. (Formula to remember: JTGTRCT)

The University Wits

Commenting on the contribution of the "University Wits" to the British drama, Nicoll writes : "The classicists had form, but no fire, the popular dramatists had interest but little sense of form. Drama, that is to say, was struggling between a well-formed chill and a structureless enthusiasm. The great merit of the University Wits was that they came with their passion and poetry, and their academical training, to unite these two forces, and thus to give Shakespeare a pliable and fitting medium for the expression of his genius."

1. **John Lyly (1554-1606)**. The leader of the "University Wits" was Lyly. His education was classical and he selected classical themes and stories for his plays. His famous plays are *A Most Excellent Comedy of Alexander and Campaspe* and *Diogenes* (1584), *Sapho and Phao* (1584), *Gallathea* (1588), *The Man in the Moon* (1588), *Midas* (1589), *Mother Bombie* (1590), *Love's Metamorphosis* (1590) and *The Woman in the Moon* (1597).

Lyly wrote for private theatres. So his plays differ from those of other playwrights of this group. His contribution to English drama is historically very important :

(a) Lyly was essentially a court dramatist. He added to drama the qualities of delicacy, grace, charm and subtlety which were lacking in the rougher and bombastic pieces wrought for performance in public theatres.

(b) Lyly was the first who gave shape to romantic comedy. He found contemporary comedy lacking in form and atmosphere. He first of all elaborated the romantic sentiment and created an atmosphere infused with humour and romantic fancy. This romantic fancy with him is more idealistic than it was with Greene and Peele. There is in his comedies "a mellowed spirit under which seriousness and laughter meet, a world of poetic fancy wherein the deities of the classical mythology live and move by the side of human figures."

(c) Lyly did not completely reject the classical pattern. Terence taught him the technique which is displayed in his plays. The Greek myths, with which few Renaissance artists were acquainted, led him into a strange realm. "The classical age is seen through the eyes of romance. There are delicate colourings, a certain mellowed sadness, a linking of the earth with the spirit world. Here are realism, classicism and romanticism welded into one."

(d) In Lyly's comedies for the first time we find a suitable blank verse for comedy. Marlowe's rich, imaginative and highly poetical blank verse was incapable of expressing lighter sentiments. Lyly's verse, delicate, if artificial, could convey excellently the quickness of his thought

and the humorous images constantly fleeting through his brain. High comedy also demands a nice sense of phrase, and Lyly is the first great phrase maker in English. He knew the use of skilled phrases for purposes of character delineation and plot construction. He gave to English comedy a witty phraseology.

(e) Lyly definitely established prose as an expression of comedy. He deftly used prose to express light feelings of fun and laughter. The interweaving of prose and verse in his comedies corresponds to the two worlds of the reality and the ideal. Shakespeare learnt, it seems, this device of using both prose and verse in his comedies from Lyly.

(f) Lyly made an important advance at successful comic character portrayal. Although some of his plays show Terence's influence, he shakes himself free from the presentation of merely "imitative humours". Each of his characters is endowed with individuality.

(g) The device of the girl dressed as a boy is traced back to Lyly.

(h) The introduction of songs symbolical of the movement or mood of a particular comedy owes its popularity to Lyly.

2. George Peele (1557-1596). Peele's work consists of *The Arraignment of Paris* (1581), *The Battle of Alcazar* (1594), *The Famous Chronicle of King Edward the I*, *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe* and *The Old Wives' Tales* (1595). Peele's contribution to drama is given below :

(a) He widened the range of English drama by writing a romantic tragedy, a chronicle history, a kind of mystery play and a romantic literary satire. In all of them we notice a high level of poetic attainment.

(b) As a humorist he showed the way to Shakespeare. He could induce laughter of a peculiar mellowed sort by the juxtaposition of reality and romance, and he could create an atmosphere which unites these two worlds in one harmony.

(c) Into the purely romantic fantasy, Peele succeeded in introducing an amount of literary satire. *The Old Wives' Tale* is the first dramatic literary satire in English. In it he does not create laughter by comic presentation or clownery, but by dramatic irony in the contrast of romantic plot and realistic diction.

3. Robert Greene (1558-1592). Greene wrote *The Comical History of Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (1587), *The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589) and *The Scottish History of James the IV* (1591). He added the following elements to English drama :

(a) Greene paid great attention to plot. He was a master of the art of plot construction. With him the love story becomes central in the art of drama. He supplied what Lyly lacked – complicated story and simple human feeling. His *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* illustrates this point. In this play he contributed much to the development of romantic comedy. Its plot is based on the theme of love.

(b) Greene deftly interwove diverse moods and surroundings in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, and *James the IV*, which are his best romantic comedies. We have three distinct worlds mingled together – the

world of magic, the world of aristocratic life, and the world of the country. In this way he guided Shakespeare in the writing of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There is peculiar romantic humour and rare combination of realism and idealism in these two plays.

(c) Greene's contribution to the portrayal of women characters, especially of romantic heroines, is noticeable. He is the first to draw the Rosalinds and Celias. Margaret and Dorothea are excellent portraits of women. The real and the ideal are commingled in the portrayal of these characters.

4. Thomas Lodge (1558-1625). Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* contains hardly anything that is new. He does not rise above mediocrity. Lodge, who has decided power over the lyric and a charm in his fiction, gave practically nothing to the theatre.

5. Thomas Nash (1558-1625). He was a pamphleteer and story writer. He also tried his hand at drama. He collaborated with Marston in his *Dido* and in *The Isle of Dogs*.

6. Thomas Kyd (1558-94). Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* occupies an important place in the development of English tragedy. It is a Senecan play adopted to popular requirement. Kyd made it thrillingly effective; he had breathed into it the passion of fine blank verse. *The Spanish Tragedy* (1585) is a landmark in English tragedy due to following reasons :

(a) It is a well-constructed play. The author has skilfully woven passion, pathos and fear until they reach a climax. The play is full of strong external action. The stage effects are well managed and murders are thrillingly committed.

(b) Kyd succeeded in producing dialogue that is forceful and capable.

(c) Kyd brought the revenge theme to the stage. He, thus, influenced Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.

(d) The device of play within play, which Shakespeare employed in *Hamlet*, is used for the first time in *The Spanish Tragedy*.

(e) Kyd contributed a new type of tragic hero to the stage. The main characters in tragedy up to his time had been afflicted princes or grandiloquent supermen. In the character of Hieronimo, Kyd presented the hesitating type, seen most magnificently in *Hamlet*, and allied that with madness, feigned or real. It was the subtlety of characterisation that appealed to his generation. Hieronimo brings English drama to *Hamlet*.

7. Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593). Life and Character : Christopher Marlowe, the son of a Canterbury shoemaker and a clergyman's daughter, was born in February 1564. Educated in the King's School and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, he graduated in 1584. He was regarded as a candidate for Holy Orders, but he refused to take them. In 1587 Marlowe was awarded the M. A. degree.

Marlowe had had a distinguished scholarly career at the University. He acquired vast knowledge which is displayed in his plays. He stormed into popularity with the publication of his first play *Tamburlaine* in

1587-88. His other plays – *Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II* were all immensely popular.

In 1593, Marlowe fell on evil days. He was accused of atheism. He criticised both the Old and the New Testaments. He denounced the general conception of religion. He said that “the first beginning of religion was to keep men in awe.” Kocher calls him “the heir of all the ages of protest against Christianity and a voice for the inarticulate and nameless of his own day.” His atheism is expressed in all his plays.

Marlowe, the versatile dramatist, was killed on 30th May 1593.

Marlowe was a typical representative of the Renaissance. He was called a “wild genius”. John Bakeless recognises him as “the most reckless spirit in all that turbulent age”. Even at Cambridge “the fiery spirit of the youthful Marlowe was already in fierce rebellion against every restriction of any kind whatsoever”. Marlowe’s reckless and restless life finds expression in his plays which are autobiographical. Steane writes : “All of these facts look out in turn from behind his writings : the bold and independent, the mean and sadistic; and the face lit with a rare light of inspiration and strength. But what also emerges from the works is something one does not see in the biography : a restless, conflicting, unstable spirit, and this probably generated the intensity which is most valuable and characteristically Marlovian. It also probably contributed more than anything else to the tragedy of his life and the limitation of his writing.”

Marlowe’s Works : During the short span of his life, Marlowe reoriented British drama by imparting to it a new mould, technique, conception and versification. Below is given an analysis of his plays :

1. *Tamburlaine* (1587-88) : Marlowe’s first play *Tamburlaine* marks a bold departure from the morality tradition. The protagonist, Tamburlaine, who is a poor Scythian shepherd, is for the first time made a true tragic hero. He embodies the Renaissance urges of attaining power infinite; and enjoying limitless prosperity. He is obsessed with the idea of becoming the mightiest man on earth, to be the “scourge of God” and a terror to the world till “Immortal Jove says, cease Tamburlaine”. Tamburlaine pursues his course and conquers the Eastern monarchs with the blood-thirstiness of a savage beast”. His savageness is calmed down by his love for **Zenocrate**. The play ends tragically because both Tamburlaine and Zenocrate die.

Although *Tamburlaine* is deficient in humour, in the portrayal of female characters and plot construction, it for the first time gave a tragic protagonist in the character of *Tamburlaine*, and introduced blank verse for dramatic writing. Rickett remarks that it is an important play “by reason of its impetuous force, splendid command of blank verse, and its sensitiveness to beauty.” J. B. Steane writes : “*Tamburlaine* is the most solid and unflawed of Marlowe’s plays : more consistent in quality than *Dido* or *Faustus*, more whole and substantial than the *Jew of Malta* and more vigorous in imagination and sustaining power than *Edward II*.”

2. *Dr. Faustus* (published in 1587) : It comes after *Tamburlaine* in order of time, as it shows development in Marlowe's dramatic art and style. In *Faustus*, Marlowe's conception of tragedy matures. Dr. Faustus has the passion of attaining power infinite through knowledge. To attain his desired mission, Faustus falls into the temptations of evil and does not care even for his conscience. Ultimately evil consumes him. Faustus is a true tragic hero who faces downfall and ultimately death due to one fatal flaw in his character, that is, overambition. The tragic conflict within the protagonist's heart is suggested by the Good Angel and the Evil Angel. The idea of Nemesis underlies the play because it suggests that the evil doer who transcends earthly limitations is caught in his own trap. These are the elements which Shakespeare was to use in his tragedies.

Boas remarks : "The power of characterisation has ripened for Faustus is a more complex and human figure than the Scythian conqueror, while **Mephistopheles**, unlike any of the subordinate personages in the earlier play, has an independent interest". Marlowe's blank verse also attains greater artistic excellence in *Dr. Faustus*. "It is a play of vast conflict, fearful failure, intense feeling, stirring emotion ; a play, the central idea of which is loss ; a play in which sin is presented with its inescapable punishment ; a matchless spiritual tragedy in which the mighty protagonists are man and the mysterious powers that surround him; a play the symbolism of which has an irresistible appeal."

3. *Edward II* (1593) : It is the first historical play in English. It is a drama of more sustained power and of greater dramatic excellence. It is the most flawless of Marlowe's plays, though not the most magnificent. Like *Dr. Faustus*, it is not a collection of unconnected scenes, it is a complex and organic whole, working up by natural stages to a singularly powerful climax. Charlton and Waller remark : "The dramatist sometimes seems like a man trying to tie up a parcel in a piece of paper too small for it." In *Edward II*, Marlowe boldly and effectively handles the chronicle, and, in this respect he influenced Shakespeare's *Richard II*. In it, Marlowe moves towards a new subtlety in character portrayal. Language and versification also show signs of change. Boas remarks that "the language is of chastened simplicity, verging at times on baldness, but full for the most part, of silvery charm and grace. "The measure," as has been well said, "that had thundered the threats of Tamburlaine is now made to halter the sobs of a broken heart." The death-scene in this play is one of the most moving scenes in all drama, ancient or modern.

4. *The Jew of Malta* (1592) : It foreshadows the world of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and Shakespeare's Shylock. Steane remarks : "**Barbas** (the Jew of Malta) is the most successful representative of a materialistic society which also victimises and condemns him : a society where those in power are hypocrites, and where low life, nasty, brutish and shorter than usual, thrives on blackmail, prostitution and theft."

5. *The Tragedy of Dido, the Queen of Carthage* (1594) : In *Dido*, Nashe is openly named on the title page as a sharer in the work. Giving

an estimate of *Dido*, Steane writes : "But energy remains the quality that most often impresses and in *Dido* it is found in its best form : a vigorous delight, a rare expression of enthusiasm and relish for the realms of gold, pride in man's stature, respect for the sorrows and loyalties, and a glorying in romantic love which is certainly immature."

6. *The Massacre of Paris* (1596) : It is regarded as the crudest work of Marlowe. The material is weakly arranged and the characters are poorly drawn.
