



## Morality and Ethics in Elizabethan Literature: Theory and Practice in Today's Personal Life and its Development

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### Abstract

This Paper examines the lessons of morality and ethics in Personal life and its development inherent in English Literature with the special focus on the writers of the Elizabethan Period (1558-1603). The strongest endeavor of the present study is to deal with the didactic and the ethical notes from the major works of Edmund Spenser (1552-99), Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), Thomas Kyd (1557-1595), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) & above all, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) with a view to showing the presentness of those didactic philosophies, which the study believes, will strengthen one's moral and ethical values in personal life in the present time of the degenerated & chaotic social context. The morality taught in those literary works might develop the present modern man's understanding the distinction between right and wrong and living according to that understanding; and the ethical notes may guide our today's Individual and group behavior.

**Keywords:** Elizabethan Age, Morality, Ethics, Theories & Practices

### Introduction

At the very onset of this research, it is needed to learn about the differences between morality and ethics. Morality has always been an unacknowledged and crucial role in defining ethics. Principles tend to be a virtue that applies only within society and can be distinguished from law, religion, or ethics. Morality in its defining sense can be different from each other, depending on the foundations of the society that claim their morality. Different societies have a different sense of what their moral priority would be like. Their morality can be based on purity and honesty when others concerned with practices. But, there are some philosophical truths of morality and ethics which continue to guide the people through the path of righteousness through generations after generations. These generalized truths of ethics and morality found especially in the literatures of the Elizabethan period are the chief concern of the present research through which the researcher believes that the present generation might well be guided through the virtuous and righteous ways of life. The Elizabethan Age is the name given to the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, from 1558 to 1603. It is often referred to as the golden age of English history - the highest peak of the English Renaissance and the "Golden age" of English literature in this period. The Crisis of Religion in the Elizabethan Age underwent a continuing crisis of religion that was marked by a deepening polarization of thought between the supporters of the recently established Protestant Church and the larger number of adherents to the Roman Catholic faith. So, the major writers of that Age considered it as their duty to lead people through the path of ethics and morality (Ahmad, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>. Among the famous writers of the Age, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Sir Philip Sidney etc. are prominent. In this present world of anarchy, chaos, immorality and secularism, those moral guidance of the Elizabethan writers will certainly prove as an effective way out and will surely drive an individual through the path of moral and ethical way.

### Objective of The Study

The main objectives of the present study are three-fold:

- To dictate the notions of ethics and moral concepts to develop one's worldly gaining through righteousness
- To guide every individual modern man to develop his/her spirituality
- To recommend theories and practices to enhance the flow of the country's sustainable development

## Methodology

To reach to the satisfactory level of the research mentioned above in the objective, the study follows the qualitative research design. Only the secondary data have been collected from the available sources. First, the moral and ethical notes in various writings of the Elizabethan Age are analyzed. Almost the reference of all the famous writers of the then time is brought into consideration to clarify the pulse of the Elizabethan time. Some masterpiece books from the selected writers are into the special focus to find out the moral and didactic notes in their writings. A comparison between the Present Age and the Elizabethan Age are also drawn to show the condition and applicability of those ethical philosophies. In this study, the present progress and the development schemes of our country have been acknowledged although with high admiration, it also feels a great urge to follow the path of ethics and morality. So, the study recommends some new strategies after diagnosing the lessons of literature to elevate the moral and ethical values of every individual, which can be termed as the pathway to enhance the sustainable development of the country and the world. Above all, In this paper the study examines a variety of perspectives on the role of literature in moral education. These proceed from general considerations to more specific issues that remain contested to the present day, such as distinction between individual and social morality. Others bring any literature under suspicion in the post-structuralist era, such as the cultural relativity of morality, distinctions between aesthetic and moral dimensions of literary works, and between moral awareness and behavior (Little, 2023)<sup>[8]</sup>. To illustrate the discussion, the study focuses on the considerations of the place of Elizabethan literature in English moral ' education as a pathway to personal life and its development.

## Literature review

In order to get a clear picture of that era, the study considers literary journals, reference books, Elizabethan social conditions, websites about the political and religious aspirations of the then time, and the biographies of the major authors and their works before beginning this work. Edmund Spenser was the poet who best encapsulated the concepts and fads of the English Renaissance. Presented in a variety of literary styles, his unfinished epic poem *The Faerie Queen* (1596) is a treasure trove of romance, allegory, adventure, Neo-platonic concepts, patriotism, and Protestant morality. The ideal English Renaissance man was Sir Philip Sidney—scholar, poet, critic, courtier, diplomat, and soldier—who died in battle at the age of 32. His best poetry is contained in the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) and his *Defence of Poesie* and *An Apology for Poetry* are among the most important works of literary and didactic criticism in the tradition. Many others in a historical era when poetic talents were highly valued, were skilled poets. Important late Tudor sonneteers include Spenser and Shakespeare, Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, and Fulke Greville. More versatile even than Sidney was Sir Walter Raleigh—poet, historian, courtier, explorer, and soldier—who wrote strong, spare poetry uplifting the necessity of didacticism. Early Tudor drama owed much to both medieval morality plays and classical models. Ralph Roister Doister (c.1545) by Nicholas Udall and Gammer Gurton's Needle (c.1552) are considered the first English comedies, combining elements of classical Roman comedy with native burlesque. During the late 16th

and early 17th cent., drama flourished in England as never before or since. It came of age with the work of the University Wits, whose sophisticated plays set the course of Renaissance drama and paved the way for Shakespeare. The Wits included John Lyly, famed for the highly artificial and much imitated prose work *Euphues* (1578); Robert Greene, the first to write romantic comedy; the versatile Thomas Lodge and Thomas Nashe; Thomas Kyd, who popularized neo-Senecan tragedy; and Christopher Marlowe, the greatest dramatist of the group. Focusing on heroes whose very greatness leads to their downfall, Marlowe wrote in blank verse with a rhetorical brilliance and eloquence superbly equal to the demands of high drama. The moral and didacticism mentioned in his drama will surely be the guiding force to the people of all generations. William Shakespeare, of course, fulfilled the promise of the Elizabethan age. His history plays, comedies, and tragedies set a standard never again equaled, and he is universally regarded as the greatest dramatist and one of the greatest poets of all time; And the real greatness of him lies in leading us through the path of ethics and morality.

The text, *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism*, an insightful book that provides enough information and data for the current study. It is a collection of essays, aiming, in the words of the editor, "to search for a new critical approach to literature, say, ethical literary criticism" (Nie *et al.* 4). Shakespeare revitalizes ancient and traditional literary motifs, displaying in his verse a strong sense of ethical concerns as a humanist (Quoted in Nie *et al.* 155). The Researcher also goes through a series of books written by various critics like – commentators Alan C. Dessen (1986)<sup>[4]</sup>, Matthew Winston (1981)<sup>[9]</sup> who observed and declared the steady influence of Shakespeare's morality. Similarly, Carol Strongin Tufts (1987) examines Macbeth's violent disturbance of the moral order with his murder of Duncan and considers Shakespeare's intricate representation of evil and its consequences. The implications of unmitigated evil inform Lee A. Jacobus's (1992) analyses of the amoral figures Iago and Richard III of *Othello* & Richard III respectively. Moreover, Gene Fendt (1995)<sup>[6]</sup> interprets *As You Like It* as a play about desire (eros) that temporarily puts aside judgment of its characters in order to provide audience with a cultural, moral and religious catharsis. Notes and discussion of Professor Ramjilall on "Doctor Faustus", 'Bacon's Essays' etc. also contributes to further intelligence in this study.

## Discussion and Analysis

An in-depth analysis of the major writings of the Elizabethan Era will be helpful to understand the notions of ethics and morality which are mostly applicable to our present generation. In doing so, Out of the long list of Elizabethan writings, the researcher distinguishes one poem- Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, one collections of Essay- Bacon's *Essays* & one Tragedy by Shakespeare- *Macbeth* and one by Marlowe- *Doctor Faustus* are taken into special consideration to show the color of didactic notes with a view to leading us and our generation through the path of morality and ethics.

Spenser famously wrote that his intention with "*The Faerie Queene*" was "to fashion a gentleman." (Hamilton, 714). An important part of a gentleman's educational process (according to Spenser) is developing a strong, moral compass. And morality and ethics totally shapes almost every single moment in this poem. Whether through encounters

with characters who very explicitly embody moral virtues (such as Prudence) or more complicated characters who find themselves in challenging moral quandaries (like, ahem, Redcrosse with Duessa), Spenser wanted to illustrate moral dilemmas to serve as a learning experience for both his characters *and* his readers. Through the allegorical descriptions of the characters and incidents, Spenser tries to show that the conflict between good and evil is static. Still in our present society, we find characters like Archimago, Duessa etc. ever trying to pour evil into goodness of things. Many people of the present generation fall victim to the seven deadly sins of Pride, Envy, Sloth, Gluttony, Wrath, Lechery etc. In order to regenerate ourselves, we have to remain far off these heinous crimes. The idea of the dungeon of Despair is, indeed, educative for our present time as well as many of our modern people losing their mission and visions of life commit suicide or feel an urge of doing so. The description of the House of Holiness can be the solution to all the frustrated people among us. The eventual wining of the protagonist is also an indication that the people who lead their life with the ethics and morality will surely come out as victorious both in this world and in the life hereafter.

What Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) creates out of the story of *Doctor Faustus* is a medieval morality play with a late Renaissance temper. But the idea upholds through this presentation, Doctor Faustus cannot merely be treated as a figure in the medieval morality play, rather as a play of controlling even the present idea of moral and ethical views. At the very onset of the play, the reference of the Chorus that "his waxen wings did mount above his reach and, melting heavens conspired his over through" clearly warns all the haughty and proud generations. The story of Dr. Faustus stated as-

Doctor Faustus, a well-respected German scholar, grows dissatisfied with the limits of traditional forms of knowledge—logic, medicine, law, and religion—and decides that he wants to learn to practice magic. His friends Valdes and Cornelius instruct him in the black arts, and he begins his new career as a magician by summoning up Mephistophilis, a devil. Despite Mephistophilis's warnings about the horrors of hell, Faustus tells the devil to return to his master, Lucifer, with an offer of Faustus's soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistophilis. Mephistophilis returns to Faustus with word that Lucifer has accepted Faustus's offer with the condition that Dr. Faustus has to sign a bond with his blood. This heinous bond let him to lead his life with voluptuousness and pleasures only for twenty-four years. After twenty-four years, Faustus's soul will be taken to hell for perpetual damnation. Doctor Faustus, though experienced an inner conflict before signing the deed, finally signed the bond. After a few years Faustus's fame spreads throughout the world. He enjoyed every moment, but his inner conflict made him restless. Good Angel and evil Angel are the representing figure of his two conflicting spirits. As the twenty-four years of his deal with Lucifer come to a close, Faustus begins to dread his impending death. He has Mephistophilis call up Helen of Troy, the famous beauty from the ancient world, and uses her presence to impress a group of scholars. An old man urges Faustus to repent, but Faustus drives him away. Faustus summons Helen again and exclaims rapturously about her beauty. But time is growing short. Faustus tells the scholars about his pact, and they are horror-stricken and resolve to pray for him. On the final night before the expiration of the twenty-four years, Faustus is

overcome by fear and remorse. He begs for mercy, but it is too late. At midnight, a host of devils appears and carries his soul off to hell. In the morning, the scholars find Faustus's limbs and decide to hold a funeral for him

So, Marlowe shows the true nature of evil that always infatuates and tries to entrap human beings. The inner conflict between good and evil Faustus experiences throughout the drama is prevalent in every human heart; and the miserable end and cursed life of Faustus will surely lead people through the path of ethics and morality ignoring the least sinful ways of blasphemy.

*The Essays of Francis Bacon* abounds in highly moral and ethical notes. He urges human beings to follow the right path in every field of life- political, social, domestic etc. The *Essay Of Truth* is frankly didactic. Critics, however, criticize his glorifying of falsehood at a portion, yet, the confusions clear out when he utters, "but no pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage ground of truth" A man's mind, says he, should "turn upon the poles of truth". Concluding the essay, Bacon says that falsehood is wicked and that such wickedness will duly receive its punishment on the doomsday. The essay, *Of Great Place*, contains many moral principles to guide men in high positions. Bacon mentions the four chief vices of authorities which must be avoided- delays, corruption, roughness and facility. Bacon shows the same high reverence for moral principles in some other essays like- "A man that hath no virtue in himself ever envieth virtue others," (Of Envy); "But power to do good is the true and lawful end of aspiring" (Of Great Place); "The principle duty of a Judge is to suppress force and fraud" (Of judicature); "Suspensions among men are like bats among birds. They ever fly by twilight.... they dispose kings to tyranny, husbands to jealousy, wise men to irresolution and melancholy" (Of suspicion) etc. The moral and ethical precepts Bacon offers in his Essays are truly transcendental and are still the guiding forces for the present people.

Of all the dramatists of all Ages, the name 'Shakespeare' is highly esteemed (Berley, 2024) <sup>[2]</sup>. If anyone analyzes Shakespeare's dramas, it will be obvious that the chief motif of Shakespeare is to lead people through the moral and ethical way of life. Almost in all his dramas, the poetic justice has been shown; goodness has been glorified and the badness has been shown in the dark light so that the readers can be motivated through the moral and ethical ways of life. Shakespeare deals with the flat characteristics of human life avoiding the round ones. That is why, Shakespeare's ideas of ethics remain, and will ever remain as the guiding force to the generations after the generations.

"Macbeth" is a play based on morality, as seen by the death of Banquo, Duncan, and the MacDuff's. Macbeth is a mortality play and this is shown in the death of Duncan. After Macbeth kills Duncan he says, "I'll go no more/ I am afraid to think of what I have done/ Look on't again I dare not." (II ii 65-68) This shows that he knows that he just did was wrong and not moral. He is repenting in hopes to be forgiven. He had to choose between right and wrong and he chose wrong by killing Duncan. Lady Macbeth also shows how this play is moral when she says, "These deeds must not be thought/ After these ways ; so, it will make us mad" (II i pg 45-46) Lady Macbeth is saying that if they keep dwelling on what they had just done then they would go mad. This is some foreshadowing because Lady Macbeth does end up going mad because of the guilt. The final end of unholy act and unnatural ambition is curse and destruction; and the idea has

been clearly shown through the story of Macbeth.

### Recommendations and Findings

The principal end of almost all the writers of the Elizabethan Age is to guide people through the path of virtue and morality. None can deny the applicability of these ideas for our present generation. Secularism and materialism have been grasped us in such a way that we cannot get out of it. It is time, as the paper recommends, getting back to the mission of our life. It is only the moral and ethical reasoning that a human being differs from animals. From the moral notions stated above, a person should rethink about the way of life. A few recommendations are stated above as-

- a. We should avoid all kinds of blasphemous attitudes. Like the ultimate end of the protagonist of the Elizabethan morality play, such sins of human beings will surely fall into disaster.
- b. We should avoid the lust for power. One mustn't aspire for the unnatural ambition. To fulfill such ambition, one may be entangled with serious crimes like cheat, fraud, treason or even murder.
- c. The Essays of Bacon clearly let us the ideas of moral and ethical ways of life. In various essays, he deals with the smooth dealings with the worldly affairs as well as the prospects of spiritual regeneration.
- d. In the present world of Chaos and anxiety, a person can get a bit rest or solution by the ideas of Shakespeare who deals with the permanent or flat characteristics of human psychology.
- e. Getting back to the ways of morality and ethics is only solution to the unrest of our present generation.
- f. The modern people lacks necessary confidence and courage due to their involvements with the unethical and immoral affairs.
- g. An individual's development depends on his achievement and spiritual blessings; and the later one cannot be achieved with his moral and ethical ways of life. One may have the highest achievement, yet without spiritual fervor, he cannot enjoy the peace of mind.
- h. As human life is short, one can live forever with his moral and ethical views and ways of life.
- i. People with good morals and ethics are ever respected by all. On the doomsday, God will reward them as well.

### Conclusion

Every individual citizen, if morally and ethically sound, can have a greater contribution to the country's development. Every religion teaches humans to adopt certain moral and ethical principles which are never detrimental to the country's development both socially and economically. The basic principles of every creed and cast are to glorify humanity and humane qualities. Due to some misinterpretations of some particular people, conflicts and clash among religion occur in some regions causing a great negative impact on a country's sustainable development. So, the present paper endeavors to suggest every individual to follow the moral and ethical views of life so that the state runners can lead the country through greater development.

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