

**Ministry of Higher Education
& Scientific Research
The Islamic University
Department of English**



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Seventeenth Century Poetry:

The Cultural and Literary Background:

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Introduction:

The early period of the Seventeenth Century imitated nearly the same characteristics of the Sixteenth Century. The poets of the early decades considered the writers (poets, playwrights, and prose writers) as masters whose works are non-stoppable source of imitation. Accordingly, the classical (the Renaissance) influences were still existed strongly in the early period of the Seventeenth Century.

However, new forces and trends appeared in the life of the Seventeenth Century which did not make a great shift from the previous century; rather, the change is very gentle and hardly noticed. One reason for these changes is the 'rapidly changing world' which means that the world around the British society was remarkably changing and these changes affected that society. One example of these changes is the British people's contact with the other civilizations whom the Great Britain invaded in the Sixteenth and the following centuries. That contact made the British society realizes that their civilization, as well as the Europeans, was not the highest one in the world; rather, the ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptians', the Sumerians', the Assyrians', the Persians', the Indians', and so on, were far developed even they preceded the Renaissance period with thousands of years.

The changes which existed in the Seventeenth Century exist in the poems of the major poets like Ben Johnson, John Donne, and others. Most of those poets started their writing in the late of the Sixteenth Century but their fame appeared in the Seventeenth Century. However, most of the poets of the Seventeenth Century followed either the School of Ben Johnson or the School of John Donne except John Milton (the blind poet) who neither belonged to any of the preceding schools.

As a type of poetry, however, the lyric (short poem written to be sung) was still the most popular form of the poetry. The poets of the Seventeenth Century preferred shorter poems rather than the long ones (most of the Sixteenth Century poets preferred sonnets as well as the long poems). In the Seventeenth Century poetry there appeared some topics which were not - or at least not manifested – widely discussed in the previous century; for example, the paradoxical forces which appeared in the British culture at that time.

These contradictions appeared in the crisis between the old and the modern ways of living in the British society. Some people preferred the new ways of living, while others considered the old ways and manners are the most respected ones. Another example of the contradiction is the clash between the native British people and those who came to settle in England such as the Africans, the Asians as well as other races who began to constitute their own societies. Most of those foreigners came originally from the colonized countries which were under the British colonization at those times. The third type of paradoxical culture was the clash between the Christian and the Non-Christian people. In the preceding ages, however, the majority of the British society was Christians. In the Seventeenth Century, and due to the prosperity of the society as well as the emergence of the foreign mini-societies, there appeared a considerable group of Non-Christian society who were either non-believers or believe in different religions such as Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, and so on. All the aforementioned paradoxical forces found its way to appear in the poetry of the Seventeenth Century since the poetry is considered as a mirror which reflects the events of a society.