

English Renaissance (1): Introduction

Renaissance is commonly applied to the movement or period in western civilization, which marks the transition from the medieval to the modern world. Generally, it refers to the period between the 14th and mid-17th century. It first started in Florence and Venice of Italy, with the flowering of painting, sculpture and architecture. From Italy the movement went to embrace the rest of Europe. In different countries, the movement occurred in different periods with different emphasis upon the newly discovered Greek and Roman classics and the combination or compromise of a newly interpreted Christian tradition and an ardently admired tradition of pagan classical culture, which was stimulated by a series of historical events, such as the rediscovery of ancient Roman and Greek culture, the new discoveries in geography and astronomy, the religious reformation and the economic expansion.

Renaissance, therefore, in essence, is a historical period in which the European humanist thinkers and scholars made attempts to get rid of those old feudalistic ideas in medieval Europe and introduce new ideas that expressed the interests of the rising bourgeoisie, and to lift the restriction in all areas placed by the Roman Catholic Church authorities.

Historical Background

- **Society, Politics and Economy**

- **The Hundred Years' War** (1337-1453) between France and England
- **The War of the Roses** (1455-1485)
--- Red Rose represents the noble family of Lancaster and White Rose represents the noble family of York.
- **The Civil War or Bourgeois Revolution** (1642-1660) between the Monarch and the House of Commons
- **Restoration** (1660-1688)
- **Glorious Revolution** (1688)
- **The Agrarian Revolution** --- the largest scale enclosure of common land
The land was turned into pasture to graze sheep, driving many peasants to the cities.
- **Development of the clothing industry** --- the beginning of the English capitalist production, geographical exploration and trade expansion
- **Discovery of new land**
In England, the exploration had two objects: one was the quest of gold and silver, and the other was the finding of new markets for English cloth.

- **Ideology**

- Copernicus and German Johannes Kepler: heliocentric
Italian Galileo's gravitational force
Jupiter's satellites
Moon's mountainous nature
- **Humanism**
Humanism is the idea that man has a potential for culture which distinguishes him from lower orders of beings, and which he should strive constantly to fulfill.
 - During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church dominated the Western culture. Though at the beginning it helped to create civilization, it gradually came to stifle creative thinking. It advocated the supreme power of God over man. In the eyes of the medieval theologians, man was a miserable creature with his only hope in life after death, because he had already been corrupted by the original sin of Adam and Eve. Human existence was thought of as insignificant. In the field of intellectual thinking, anything that was not in accordance with the Christian theology would be condemned. The humanist thinking was a reaction against the narrow-mindedness of the Catholic Church.

- Rebellious spirit against the Medieval feudal value and blind faith in humbleness, servitude, and after-life
- Belief in man's divinity and capability of self perfection
- Emphasis of the importance of personal worth and enjoyment of the present life

- **Religious Reformation**
In the long reign of Henry VIII the changes are less violent, but have more purpose and significance. His age is marked by a steady increase in the national power at home and abroad and by the entrance of the religious reformation from the Continent.

It was Martin Luther, a young professor at Wittenberg, Germany, who initiated the religious movements of the Reformation out of new interpretations and spiritual questioning of the Roman Catholic beliefs. Luther believed that every true Christian was his own priest and was entitled to interpret Scripture for himself.

Answering to Martin Luther's call for a return to pure Christianity and for an inward and personal knowledge of God, reformers from northern Europe vitalized this protestant Movement. In the early stage of the continental Reformation, Henry VIII was conspicuously faithful son of the Catholic Church. However, a new wife led him to cut ties with Rome. But the common English people had long been dissatisfied with the corruption of the church and inspired by the reformers' ideas from the Continent. So they welcomed and supported Henry's decision of breaking away from the Rome. When Henry VIII declared himself as the Supreme Head of the Church of England in 1534, the Reformation in England came into its full swing. And monasticism, the third medieval institution, received its deathblow in the wholesale suppression of the monasteries and the removal of abots from the House of Lords. The Church of England thus established gradually Protestantized itself, with the brief counter-reformation of the Catholic Mary's reign. By the middle of Elizabeth's reign, Protestantism had been firmly established, with a certain extent of compromise between Catholicism and Protestantism.

The reformation of the church was actually a reflection of the class struggle waged by the new rising bourgeoisie against the feudal class and its ideology.

Literature

- **Translation**
 - **Greek and Roman classics**
e.g. Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey* by Chapman
Ovid's Metamorphoses
Virgil's Aeneid
Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Plautus
 - **Contemporary Italian and French works**
e.g. Plutarch, Horace and Dante
à Sonnets and blank verse were introduced into England.
Comedy and tragedy were flourished.
 - **The King James Bible, or the "Authorized Version"**
a work by 47 translators that was published in 1611
- **Imitation and assimilation of classic and foreign writers**
 - **Epics** e.g. Homer, Virgil, Danta -> Spenser, Milton
 - **Sonnets**
e.g. Petrarch, Dante -> Shakespeare, Sidney, Jonson, Donne and Andrew Marvell

- **Drama**
e.g. Seneca, Plautus -> Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson

Origin of English Drama

- **Drama before Renaissance**

- **Mystery Plays**

Mystery plays are circles of religious plays performed in the Middle Ages during the great Church festivals, especially Corpus Christi in June. The material came either from the Bible or from the lives of the saints.

The Mysteries arose out of the performance of the Mass; this is itself already dramatic, and at Christmas and Easter there were sometimes dialogue interpolations illustrating the three shepherds at the cradle of Christ, and the three Marias at the tomb. Such plays were performed by the priests in Latin, but there was in addition a strong lay contribution to the development of the form. Dancing and semi-dramatic performances were a pre-Christian phenomenon among the ordinary people and they survived in Christian times at seasonal celebration. The pagan nature worship expressed through these seasonal festivities was linked with Christianity in the popular mind, and the dating of the Church festivals corresponded to the seasonal ones. Thus the people took increasing part in these special dramatic rituals, until by the 14th century they were taken out of the hands of the clergy by the trade guilds of the town, and were infused with elements about which the Church felt uneasy, though the predominant features remained Christian. By the time the plays became completely secularized, the texts were in English. They commonly consisted of episodes from the Old and New Testaments illustrating God's justice and mercy.

- **Miracle Plays** --- a further development of Mystery plays

- **Morality Plays**

Morality plays had characters representing abstract qualities such as Beauty, Strength, Gluttony and Vice, or generalized classes such as Everyman and King. These plays treated certain themes like the summons of Death, and the conflict of vices and virtues in man's life. There was certain development of characterization in the moralities. The best known of the morality plays are *Everyman* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

- **Elizabethan Drama (early 16th cen. --- 17th cen.)**
The Golden Age of English Drama

- **Main Features**

- Professional playwrights (University Wits) and theatrical troupes were backed up by some noble patronage.
- Dramas were widespread from private houses to public theatres on the outskirts of London.
- No women players
- Simple prop-ups
- Entertaining as well as educational

- **Major reasons for the rise**

- from epic to tragedy and comedy
- from the grander aspirations to worldly life
- from perfect heroes to imperfect ones with flaws, foibles and limitations
- evils shown to teach people lessons

o **Major playwrights**

▪ **Christopher Marlowe** (1564 - 1593)

Christopher Marlowe is considered the first great English dramatist and the most individual and most suggestive Elizabethan playwright before Shakespeare. He worked on tragedy and advanced it considerably as a dramatic medium, and thus, is generally regarded as the father of English tragedy. He is in truth a rebel, not alone against the conventions of his day, but against the common limitation of our creaturely nature. By revealing the possibilities for strength and variety of expression in blank verse, Marlowe helped to establish the verse form as the predominant form in English drama. He expressed the humanist ideals about the infinite capabilities of Man, in the desire for power, knowledge and money. The glory of the Elizabethan drama dates from his *Tamburlaine the Great*.

▪ Representative works:

Tamburlaine the Great (1587 - 1588) --- desire for power

The tragical History of Doctore Faustus (1589) --- desire for knowledge and happiness

The Jew of Malta (1590) --- desire for money

▪ **William Shakespeare** (1564 - 1616)

William Shakespeare is one of the most remarkable playwrights and poets the world has ever known. With his 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long poems, he has established his giant position in world literature. Ben Jonson once wrote a poem eulogizing Shakespeare as being "not of an age, but for all time".

Shakespeare's greatness as a playwright and the success of his plays depend upon his penetrating exposition of human nature, his lively paintings of human life and his truthful reflections of human reality.

▪ Representative works:

History : *Henry IV (1-2)*

Comedy : *Mid-summer Night's Dream*

The Merchant of Venice

Much Ado about Nothing

As You Like It

Twelfth Night

Tragedy :

Hamlet

Othello

King Lear

MacBeth

Famous Plays:

Romeo and Juliet

Julius Caesar

Antony and Cleopatra

The Tempest

▪ **Ben Jonson** (1572 - 1637) --- the 1 st poet laureate

▪ Representative works: *Volpone, the Fox*