

The Renaissance period - History of English Literature

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The Renaissance period (1500-1660)

The word "Renaissance" means rebirth. This period brought back the knowledge and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. It started in Italy in 1453 after the fall of Constantinople. Many scholars escaped to Italy with old books. Slowly, these ideas came to England after 1500. That's why the English Renaissance began around 1500 and lasted until 1660. It includes four sub-periods:

the

Elizabethan Age (1558-1603), the Jacobean Age (1603-1625), the Caroline Age (1625-1649), and the Commonwealth Period (1649-1660).

(Additional) The Early Tudor Period (1500-1558) saw the beginning of change. In this time, the ideas of the Renaissance began to enter England. Writers like Thomas More wrote about ideal societies. Poetry also started to change. Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard brought the sonnet form from Italy to England.

The Renaissance was a time of great change. People started thinking about life, human power, and knowledge. This period encouraged people to ask questions. It gave importance to human life and personal freedom. The idea of the "**Renaissance Man**" became popular. A Renaissance Man is someone skilled in many subjects, like science, art, and writing. Leonardo da Vinci is an example.

Humanism became very important in this period. Humanism means focusing on human beings, their values, and their abilities. It gave importance to education, classical knowledge, and moral values. Humanists believed in human dignity and the power of reason. **Pantheism** was another idea during the Renaissance. It is the belief that God exists in everything in nature. It helped people to love nature and understand the universe in a new way.

The Reformation was a big religious movement during this time. It started in Germany by Martin Luther in 1517. It protested against the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church. In England, it led to the rise of the Protestant Church. King Henry VIII broke away from the Pope

and started the Church of England. This church was also called the Anglican Church.

The Anglican Church was the new national church in England. It followed Protestant ideas. It became powerful under Elizabeth I. Many people supported it, but some Catholics and Puritans were against it. Puritans wanted a simpler form of worship. There was conflict between Catholics, Protestants, and Puritans.

During this time, literature became very rich. Writers wrote about love, nature, politics, and human emotions. Drama, poetry, and prose flourished. Writers took inspiration from classical Greek and Roman works. English literature reached a golden age in the time of Queen Elizabeth I. William Shakespeare was the greatest writer of this period. He created strong characters and realistic dialogues. His works are still read and performed all over the world.

Drama grew very fast during the Elizabethan period. Theatres were built to show plays. **The Globe Theatre** was the most famous. It was opened in 1599 in London. Shakespeare's plays were performed there. It was a round building with a stage in the center and open roof. People from all classes came to watch plays.

The Renaissance also gave birth to two types of poetry: **Metaphysical and Cavalier poetry**.

Metaphysical poetry used complex ideas, clever comparisons, and deep thoughts. It talked about love, God, time, and the soul. John Donne was the leader of the Metaphysical poets. Others were George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan. The features of Metaphysical poetry include: use of metaphysical conceits (clever comparisons), sudden changes in thought, abstract themes, and mixed emotions (like love and pain.)

Cavalier poetry was written by poets who supported King Charles I. They were known as the Cavalier poets. They wrote about love, beauty, honor, and loyalty. Their style was simple, smooth, and musical. Famous Cavalier poets were Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, Thomas Carew, and Sir John Suckling. The features of Cavalier poetry include: celebration of life, carpe diem (seize the day), and loyalty to the king.

Another important group was the **University Wits**. They were a group of young university-educated playwrights. They improved English drama and made it more interesting. They used strong plots, tragic and comic elements, and strong characters. The main University Wits were Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, George Peele, and Thomas Kyd.

The historical and political background of this period is also important. After Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, James I became king. His time is called the Jacobean Age. After him, Charles I

became king. But he had conflicts with Parliament. This led to the English Civil War. In 1649, King Charles I was executed. Then England became a republic under Oliver Cromwell. This time is called the Commonwealth Period. It lasted from 1649 to 1660. In 1660, the monarchy was restored with King Charles II. This marks the start of the Restoration period.

Important Features of the Renaissance Period

Humanism: The Renaissance believed in human power and value. Writers focused on people's lives and feelings. They showed human emotions in their writing. They studied old books from Greece and Rome. They wrote about humans and their experiences.

Classical Influence: Renaissance writers loved ancient Greek and Roman ideas. They read old stories and copied their styles. They used old forms like the sonnet and epic poems. Their stories had classical gods and heroes.

Love and Romance: Love was a very common topic in this time. Writers talked about deep emotions. They showed the beauty of love and lovers. They followed courtly love rules. They wrote poems, plays, and sonnets about love.

Religion and Spirituality: This period had big changes in religion. The Protestant Reformation challenged the Catholic Church. Writers wrote about God, faith, and right or wrong. Poems, plays, and essays showed their thoughts on religion.

Nature and the Natural World: Writers loved nature. They described forests, rivers, seasons, and the sky. They showed how humans are connected to nature. Their words created beautiful pictures in the reader's mind.

Exploration and Discovery: Many new lands were found during this time. Writers wrote about journeys and adventures. They described new places and people. They were curious about the world and wanted to learn more.

Politics and Power: Writers talked about kings, queens, and rulers. They wrote about good and bad leadership. They asked what makes a good government. Their stories showed real political problems.

Satire and Social Criticism: Writers used humor to talk about serious things. They made fun of bad people and wrong ideas. They laughed at leaders, rich people, and religious leaders. This made people think and sometimes change.

Education and Knowledge: People wanted to learn more in the Renaissance. Books and schools became more popular. Writers talked about the power of learning. They showed that education helps people grow.

Individual and Self-expression: The Renaissance was about the individual. Writers shared their personal thoughts. They wrote about feelings, dreams, and their own lives. People started writing diaries, essays, and personal stories.

Main literary figures and their works in Renaissance

Thomas More (1478-1535)

- **Utopia** (or Kingdom of Nowhere). The book was originally written in Latin in **1516**.

Norton (1532-84) and Sackville (1536-1608)

- **Gorboduc (1562), the first English tragedy.**

Edmund Spenser (1552-99), the poet of the poets:

- **The Faerie Queene (1590)**
- The Shepherd's Calendar (1579)

Nicholas Udall (1504 - 1556)

- **Ralph Roister Doister (1553), the first English Comedy**

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86)

- **An Apology for Poetry** (1595), critical writing for defending poetry.
- Arcadia (1590)

John Lyly (1554-1606), a university with:

- Campaspe (1584)
- Sapho and Phao (1584)

- Midas (1589)
- Euphues (1579)

Thomas Kyd (1557-1595), a university wit:

- **The Spanish Tragedy (1585)**

Robert Greene (1558-92), a university wit:

- **Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay (1589)**
 - James-IV (1591)
- **Orlando Furioso (1594)**

George Peele (1558-98), a university wit:

- David and Bethsabe (1599)
- Arraignment of Paris (1584)
- **The old Wives Tale (1595)**

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), natural philosopher:

- **Essays (1597)** (Of Marriage and Single Life, Of Truth, Of Plantations, Of Great Place, Of Revenge, Of Love, Of Studies)
- **Advancement of Learning (1605)**
- Novum Orgum (1620)
- Some new essays were added to the new edition of his **Essays (1625)**

Christopher Marlowe (1564-93), the central sun of the university wit:

- **Tamburlaine the Great Part I & II (1587-88)**

- **The Jew of Malta (1589)**

- Edward II (1591)

- **Doctor Faustus (1592)**

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the bard of Avon, wrote 37 plays and 154 sonnets, Shakespearean age (1590-1616)

- Henry VI (1st. Part 1591-92)
- Henry VI (2nd. Part 1591-92)
- Henry VI (3rd. Part 1591-92)
- Richard III (1593)

- **The Comedy of Errors (1593)**

- Titus Andronicus (1594)
- The Taming of the Shrew (1594)
- Love's Labour's Lost (1594)

- **Romeo and Juliet (1594)**

- **A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595)**

- The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1595)
- King John (1595)
- Richard II (1596)

- **The Merchant of Venice (1596)**

- Henry IV (1st. Part. 1597)
- Henry IV (2nd. Part. 1598)
- Much Ado about Nothing (1598)
- Henry V (1599)

- **Julius Caesar (1599)**

- The Merry Wives of Windsor (1600)

- **As You Like It (1600)**

- **Hamlet (1601)**

- **Twelfth Night (1601)**

- Troilus and Cressida (1602)

- **All's Well That Ends Well (1602)**

- **Measure for Measure (1604)**

- **Othello (1604)**

- **Macbeth (1605)**

- **King Lear (1605)**

- **Antony and Cleopatra (1606)**

- Coriolanus (1606)

- **Timon of Athens (unfinished-1608)**

- Pericles (in part-1608)
- Cymbeline (1609)
- The Winter's Tale (1610)

- **The Tempest (1611)**

- **Henry VIII (in part-1613)**

Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), a university wit:

- **The Unfortunate Traveller (1594)**

Ben Jonson (1573-1637), a neo-classicist because he followed the classical rules of drama:

- **Every Man out of His Humour (1600)**
- **Every Man in His Humour (1601)**
- **Volpone (1605)**
 - The Silent Woman (1609)
- **The Alchemist (1610)**

John Webster (1580-1625)

- The White Devil (1612)
- **The Duchess of Malfi (1614)**

John Donne (1572-1631), a metaphysical poet:

- The Flea (1633)
- **The Good-Morrow (1633)**
- **A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning (1633)**
 - Song: Go and catch a falling star (1633)
- **The Sun Rising (1633)**
- **The Canonization (1633)**

Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), a metaphysical poet, Renaissance poet but his most famous poems are published after Renaissance Period:

- **To His Coy Mistress (1681)**
- **The Definition of Love (1681)**

George Herbert (1593-1633), a metaphysical poet:

- **The Temple (1633)**, collection of poems in which “**Easter Wings**” and “**The Collar**” are included.

John Milton (1608-74), These are from Renaissance Period:

- Comus (1634)
 - Lycidas (1637)
 - Of Education (1644)
- **Areopagitica (1644)**

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), a political philosopher:

- **Leviathan (1651)**

Jeremy Taylor (1613-67)

- Holy Living (1650), a sermon in prose
- Holy Dying (1651), a sermon in prose