

The renaissance and the elizabethan age england as an example of the european reb...

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



The Renaissance was a re-awakening of learning following about a thousand years of "sleep." Europe began to experience great change by about 1450. Within one hundred years, Columbus had sailed to America, literacy spread, scientists made great discoveries, and artists created work that still inspires us today. Historians call the next period of European history the "Renaissance," or the "rebirth." The Renaissance is the beginning of modern history. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the Renaissance is that it was, above all, a kind of rediscovery. The Europeans of the early Renaissance looked back across time to the examples of Greece and Rome. But they wrote their works in their own languages. Although the Renaissance officially began in the fifteenth century, it "peaked" in the sixteenth. The sixteenth century in Europe was a time of unprecedented change. It was the beginning of the modern era, and it saw a revolution in almost every aspect of life. The century opened with the discovery of a new continent. The Renaissance, which began in Italy, was peaking and spreading north, even arriving in backwaters like England. Life was largely prosperous for the average person, the economy was growing. The mechanisms of commerce, systems of international finance, ocean-going trading fleets, an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, were all building a recognizably capitalist, money-based economy. Geniuses were stepping all over each other on the street corners producing scientific innovation after innovation. Technological innovations like gunpowder were changing the nature of warfare and the military caste nature of society -- the cannon probably had a great deal to do with the rise of the centralized nation state as we know it. Review, cont.

Because the Renaissance was so wide-spread, and involved such a major

change in all areas of Europe--and by a less-than-peaceful extension, the world--we will focus here on the English Renaissance of the sixteenth century. Sixteenth century England was ruled by the Tudor dynasty. This dynasty began with Henry VII, then continued through the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I (Bloody Mary), and Elizabeth I. The English Renaissance reached its height during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. This period (1558-1603) has often been called "The Golden Age" of England. During Elizabeth's reign, England went from a backwater to the most powerful country in the world. Arts and literature flourished, along with commerce. Many of the writers that worked in Elizabeth's time are still read today. One of them, William Shakespeare, is believed by many to be the greatest of all time. Review, cont. In fact, so many great writers created so many great works during the Elizabethan Age, it is impossible to discuss even a meaningful fraction of them here. Writers like Sir Thomas More, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, John Lyly, Thomas Nashe, Mary Herbert, and Thomas Campion (to name a few) thrived in the can-do atmosphere of Elizabethan England. Drama was reborn during the Elizabethan Age. Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare were the foremost dramatists during the reign of Elizabeth. Their plays were performed on stage in London to audiences that ranged from groundlings (commoners who paid almost nothing to stand in front of the stage) to royalty. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) wrote many of his plays, and his celebrated sonnets, during this time. Review, cont. We know that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (probably written in late 1594 or 1595), *Romeo and Juliet* (probably 1595) *Richard II* (probably 1595), *King John*

(probably 1596) *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-97) and the Henry IV plays (probably 1597-98) date from the last decade of the sixteenth century. The 1590's are often called Shakespeare's lyric period based on the poetry in plays such as *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard II*. By 1599 Shakespeare must have composed *Much Ado About Nothing*. He may well have also composed *As You Like It* in 1599. He certainly composed *Henry V* that year and began his string of great tragedies with *Julius Caesar*. There is a record of a performance of *Julius Caesar* at the Globe on September 21, 1599. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* probably also belongs to this period, following upon the popularity of the Henry IV plays, though it may be slightly later. Had Shakespeare died in 1599, he would still be thought the greatest playwright the world had ever known, even before his most mature work had been accomplished.

Renaissance England William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into a nation undergoing massive social change. The Renaissance had arrived in England. After a brief period when its effects were concentrated in religious circles, new and controversial Renaissance ideas exploded into everyday discussion and popular culture. It must be remembered that Shakespeare's plays were a form of popular culture. In many ways, Shakespeare was a kind of Elizabethan Steven Spielberg. He was rich, famous, courted by royalty, and able to comment publicly on the foibles of his generation in such a way as to compare them to the foibles of the ages--in ways comical, historical, and tragic.

Renaissance England, cont. During the sixteenth century, England was ruled by the Tudor dynasty. This dynasty consisted of Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I (Bloody Mary), and Elizabeth I. Shakespeare was born in, and grew up

during, the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Queen Elizabeth I was one of the greatest monarchs of all time. The old saying "The sun never sets on the British Empire" would never have been spoken if Elizabeth had not become queen. Under her reign, England became a super-power. It should never have happened. Elizabeth should never even have become queen. Elizabeth was the second surviving daughter of King Henry the Eighth (yes, that King Henry VIII). Elizabeth was the daughter of Henry and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth's mother was later beheaded. King Henry VIII broke with the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and established the Church of England with himself as its head. This was a huge blow to the Roman Catholic Church, and one which it was not going to take lying down. Henry persecuted stubborn Catholics and expropriated Church property and the property of many monasteries. There were many reasons for this, but the final straw was the Pope's refusal to let Henry out of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry wanted to get rid of Catherine (who had failed to give him a male heir) in favor of Anne Boleyn--who was younger and prettier, and who he thought would give him the son he needed to continue the Tudor Dynasty. Renaissance England, cont. When the Pope refused to grant Henry's divorce, Henry established the Church of England and got out of his marriage on his own terms. Catherine was treated very shabbily and her home nation of Spain insulted. This would later come back to haunt England. Many of King Henry VIII's policies would result in problems for England down the road. However, Henry went ahead with his marriage to Anne Boleyn and his establishment of the Church of England. This was the beginning of a long series of wars between England and Spain. Many of the battles of the

Protestant Reformation and the Counter Reformation which followed were fought between English and Spanish warships and troops. Renaissance England, cont. The result of Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn was the future Queen Elizabeth. However, Anne Boleyn was unable to deliver the son and heir Henry needed. He soon moved on to "greener" pastures. Anne Boleyn was executed and a new wife, Jane Seymour, installed as queen. Jane gave birth to a son--the future Edward VI--and Elizabeth faded into the background. Henry had six wives in all. The last, Catherine Parr, was kind to Elizabeth and gave her the education that would pave the way for her long and successful reign as queen. At Henry's death Edward VI became king. However, the kingdom was ruled by regents because he was a boy.

Renaissance England, cont. Edward VI (1547-1553) was a sickly boy who died at age fifteen. During his reign, England became even more Protestant than during Henry's. At his death, his sister Mary--Henry's first daughter by Catherine of Aragon--was crowned queen of England. The problem was that Mary was a Catholic. She then married Philip of Spain, son of the Emperor Charles V, and brought England once more into the fold of the Roman Catholic Church. The holy war that was raging on the mainland was once again waged on English soil. It was a brutal war, waged on a political battlefield and in the hearts and minds of the English people. Renaissance England, cont. On one side were the Protestants, who had broken with the Catholic Church and founded their own sects. On the other side was the Catholic Church and the Queen. When Queen Mary, who ruled from 1553-1558, tried to force the English people to convert, many resisted. Many Protestants were executed. Religious persecution was general. Queen Mary

became known as "Bloody Mary" for her get-tough policy. Many Protestants fled the country. These "Marian Exiles" would return during the reign of Elizabeth, now much more radical after their exposure to Continental Protestantism, and begin a fundamentalist movement that caused problems for Queen Elizabeth. Later, these same fundamentalists would wage a civil war against the crown that ended with the beheading of King Charles I. The Elizabethan Age However, Bloody Mary would only reign for five years. At her death in 1558, her half-sister Elizabeth was crowned Queen Elizabeth I of England. It was a turning point in the history of England and Western civilization. The impact of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I is difficult to overstate. Under her leadership, England rose to super-power status and helped keep the Protestant faith from being overwhelmed by the Counter Reformation. Queen Elizabeth ruled so effectively because of her ability and willingness to compromise in almost every aspect of English society, including religion, foreign policy, and the economy. The Elizabethan Age, cont. Elizabeth's first area of compromise, and perhaps the most important from the standpoint of national stability, was religion. On her home soil in England, she returned to Protestantism and re-established the Church of England. However, she went back to a less radical version than that of Edward VI. While Catholicism was officially banned, the penalty for private worship was very small. In effect, Elizabeth was reaching out to Catholic moderates and trying to forge a compromise on religion that everyone could live with. The Elizabethan Age, cont. In foreign policy, Elizabeth was also one to compromise when she could. At first, Elizabeth had little choice in the matter, if she wanted for England to survive, and for herself to continue as

its ruler. England was weak, and in turmoil. Elizabeth was a woman--and a very young one at that--and seen by many as not having the "stomach" to be the ruler of England. The two great powers on the European Continent at the time were France and Spain. Elizabeth, a young and attractive single woman who was the sovereign of a country, was a tempting prospect. A marriage to Elizabeth by a French or Spanish nobleman would in effect mean his becoming king--and winning England for either France or Spain. The fact that Elizabeth she was attractive and intelligent was a big bonus. Both France and Spain wanted a marriage alliance. The Elizabethan Age, cont. Elizabeth played both ends against the middle. While she put off both parties, she rebuilt her navy and sneakily undermined the efforts of both powers. Through wily diplomacy, Elizabeth gained Scotland as an ally, reduced the power of France, and delayed standing up to the Spanish until she was ready for them. By the time it finally came to war with Spain, Elizabeth had prepared her country to deal with the threat. The newly-rebuilt British Navy spanked the huge Spanish Armada in 1588 and vaulted England into a super-power role as the defender of the Protestant Faith. The Elizabethan Age, cont. Elizabeth also encouraged exploration and economic expansion. One of the ways she combined these two goals was organizing and supporting certain English gentlemen who preyed on Spanish shipping. By taking the gold and silver that was flowing into Spain from the New World, Elizabeth at the same time strengthened England while weakening Spain. Under her reign, the New World began to be exploited by England other ways as well. Her wise, frugal policies helped shape the modern world. The Elizabethan Age, cont. Elizabethan England was a time of unprecedented

opportunity in England for men who were talented and worked hard to get ahead. Shakespeare began his life as a commoner and through genius and hard work became rich and famous enough to join the nobility. He played before queens and kings and earned enough money buy himself a coat of arms. This represented the ultimate leap in social status in Shakespeare's time and was an amazing achievement. The Elizabethan Age, cont. The Tudor dynasty (which ended with Elizabeth) was a time of social upheaval in which old noble families were replaced by new ones and new fortunes were born. This atmosphere of wide-open possibility pervades Shakespeare's plays. Also, the Elizabethans were buoyed by their victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588. These people believed they could do anything. The Elizabethan can-do attitude and their faith in themselves resulted in an age of unparalleled literary development which included the works of William Shakespeare. The Elizabethan Age, cont. Elizabethan England, especially London, was the perfect time and place for William Shakespeare to emerge. The newborn theaters were wildly popular and there was a large audience of educated people who could appreciate the finer points of Shakespeare's plays. However, there were also many less well-educated folks with money enough to spend on the theater so that Shakespeare's plays also had to reach out to a broad audience. This wide-spectrum audience is directly addressed by Shakespeare in his works. The Elizabethan Age, cont. Shakespeare's plays contain much high-minded philosophy and sophisticated humor. This was aimed at the lords and ladies in the audience. These nobles tended to sit high up in the balcony at the theatrical performances--hence the term " High Comedy" which is still in use today. High Comedy is

sophisticated humor aimed at the educated lords and ladies who sat high up in the audience. The plays also contain much low-brow humor--slapstick and sexual references--for the common folks. The common people, often called "groundlings," paid almost nothing to stand in front of the stage. This is the origin of the term "Low Comedy." Low Comedy is the bawdy slapstick Shakespeare meant for the poor and less educated folks who stood in an open space at the base of the stage called the "Pit." The Elizabethan Age, cont. An example of High Comedy is seen in Hamlet in Act II, Scene ii, when Hamlet is making fun of Polonius, who is announcing the arrival of a troupe of actors. The exchange between these two characters, followed by the interplay between Hamlet and the actors, does two things which the more educated lords and ladies in the audience would have found funny. First, Shakespeare pokes fun at actors in general and at the London theater scene in particular in Polonius's speech (lines 345-350) and Hamlet's barbs. Next, Shakespeare makes a Biblical reference to Jephthah, who had to sacrifice his daughter (a parallel to the behavior of Polonius in the play) . The Elizabethan Age, cont. An example of Low Comedy in Hamlet comes in Act II, Scene iii. When Hamlet and Ophelia are watching the play, Hamlet's head is on her lap. This seating arrangement is the subject of a series of bawdy puns. "Head" and "Lap" have double meanings, referring to male and female genitalia. "Country Matters" is an off-color reference to sexual intercourse. "To lie between maids' legs" should need no further explanation... Much of the swordplay at the end of Hamlet is action meant to appeal to the folks in the Pit. The Elizabethan Worldview Another characteristic of Elizabethan England was the currency of two very different ideas about the nature of the

universe and man's place in it. The traditional Medieval idea of the universe was based on the theories of Ptolemy. This view was the official policy of the Church and to believe otherwise was heresy and could result in damnation. Ptolemy's theory put the Earth at the center of the Universe. He thought that 9 spheres revolved around the earth. These spheres were perfect. They made music. This "Music of the Spheres" was like the voice of an angelic choir. The Ptolemaic Universe was seen as being hierarchical. Everything had its assigned place in the universal order, with Heaven above and Hell below.

The Elizabethan Worldview, cont. This contrasted sharply with the Renaissance idea of the universe. The Renaissance idea of the nature of the universe was based on the observations of Copernicus. Copernicus placed the sun at the center. According to his theory, the earth revolved around the sun. There was evidence to back up the views of Copernicus. The facts could be plainly seen by anyone with a powerful enough telescope. However, the Roman Catholic Church continued to call the idea heresy. To believe it was a sin.

The Elizabethan Worldview, cont. Examples of these two very different worldviews are seen throughout Hamlet. One example of the Medieval view of the universe is the presence of the ghost of Prince Hamlet's father (also named Hamlet) at the beginning of the play. Hamlet Sr. is condemned to Purgatory because he was killed by Claudius without a chance to repent his sins. Not only has he been murdered, but condemned to long-term torment because of the actions of Claudius. An example of the Renaissance view comes at the end, when Prince Hamlet is in the graveyard and sees gravediggers pulling bones out of the ground as they dig Ophelia's grave. This idea of death as merely physical--human remains as food for worms--is

in sharp contrast to Act I. The Elizabethan Worldview, cont. There were also two distinct views on the nature of Man. The Medieval idea of man was based on the philosophy of Plato. According to this official Church view, man was the highest life form. Because he was created in God's image, and had a soul (a little piece of divinity), he was superior to all earthly things and was uniquely endowed with the possibility of salvation. In the Medieval view, Man was a thing apart from all others and so at the top of the hierarchy of beings who inhabited the earth. The Renaissance idea of the nature of Man was based on the philosophy of Montaigne. According to this view, Man was just another animal. It was only his ability to Reason which set Man apart from the rest of the life forms on Earth. The Elizabethan Worldview, cont. Prince Hamlet's struggle with these two ideas of the nature of Man is central to the play. "To be or not to be" is a question whose answer relies in great part on which of the two opposed systems is correct. If Man is "a quintessence of dust" (just food for worms) as Hamlet says in his famous soliloquy, then suicide is a better option than living in misery. However, if there is an afterlife, then eternal suffering is too great a risk to run and suicide should not even be contemplated. Hamlet's last words, "The rest is silence," are seen by many as a look at the author's personal opinion of the nature of man and life after death (or the lack thereof). Hamlet Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. It tells the story of Prince Hamlet of Denmark, whose father has been murdered by his Uncle Claudius. Prince Hamlet should have become king after his father. But Prince Hamlet's Uncle was given the kingship instead because of Hamlet's youth and inexperience. Also, King Claudius has married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, only months

after the death of her husband, Hamlet Sr. At the beginning of the play, Hamlet Jr., the protagonist and title character, is in mourning for the death of his father and freaked out by his mother's marriage. Then when the ghost of his father appears and tells young Hamlet the tale, Hamlet Jr. swears revenge against Claudius. The plot takes off from there. Hamlet, cont. One of the things that Prince Hamlet does is try to decide between the two pervading philosophical outlooks of his day. The Medieval vs. Renaissance conflict is seen throughout the play. Many of Hamlet's great soliloquies (a soliloquy is a speech in blank verse delivered by a character straight from his heart to the audience) question which view of Man and the Universe is correct. Another tool Shakespeare uses is an aside. An aside is a short speech spoken in prose by a character directly to the audience. Hamlet, cont. Both asides and soliloquies were used by Shakespeare in much the same way the ancient Greeks used the chorus. These two tools fill the audience in on the inner feelings of the characters and let the audience know things which are important to the plot. Hamlet, like Shakespeare's other great tragedies, is written in five Acts. Each Act is a major movement of the play which is subdivided into Scenes. The Scenes are segments of action which come together to form major movements. Many people call Hamlet the greatest play ever written Reading Hamlet When you read Hamlet, you should read quickly for the most part. Don't try to look up every term you don't understand. Read for plot, and concentrate on what happens. But when you get to the soliloquies, you should read closely and try to understand the issues Prince Hamlet is trying to work out. These soliloquies are the heart of the play. Some people have a lot of trouble with the language. If you find

yourself unable to comprehend what is going on, you might want to think about getting the Cliff Notes. However, you should still read the play itself. The Cliff Notes should be used for plot clarification only