

British novelist john fowles history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ In essence the Renaissance was simply the green end of one of civilization’s hardest winters.” Discuss this assessment of the Renaissance, and the viewpoint that it heralded a cultural and artistic ‘ rebirth’ from the ‘ darker’ Middle Ages it followed, with reference to arguments for and against this sentiment.

A British novelist John Fowles wrote in his novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*[1], “ In essence the Renaissance was simply the green end of one of civilization’s hardest winters.” – Many historians consider the Middle Ages a time period of ignorance, where no advancements took place. The church heavily influenced the culture and the society and gave no room to individual thinking. The Renaissance put an end to this ten-century-long period of hardship that eventually resulted in depopulation, deurbanization, barbarian invasions, manorialism, and feudalism. The word “ Renaissance” translates to “ rebirth” or the fresh beginning of something new. The revival of classical learning and education that occurred during this time was in direct opposition to the suppression of learning during the medieval times. Creativity in art leaped greatly through new tools, such as perspective, realism, and individualism. Though most agree that the amount of advances made during the Renaissance in all areas cannot be paralleled to the social and cultural improvements set forth in the middle Ages, many historians today point out that a lot of the negative social factors that are known to be associated by the medieval times – poverty, warfare, religious and political persecution, for example – seem to have worsened in this era of “ rebirth” and “ reformation.”

Historians have had differing opinions as to what triggered the European societies to end the long years of poverty and desperation in the Middle Ages. After the Black Death that killed more than half the European population, every survivor became much richer and enjoyed a more “civilized” and luxurious life style[2], eating from the most beautiful and elegant porcelain dishes and drinking from crystal goblets decorated with precious stone. Those who could afford to have more “civility” in life were given higher social status and thus more power within the society. In the Middle Ages, societies were dominated by the Christian and chivalric ideals that the Church set forth for everyone and the military class of knights and entrepreneurs who fought for the finer living. In contrast to the ancient society, which valued participation in the political and social life of cities, this shift of empowered social class gave power to different people - not to priests and knights, but to a widely-based citizen class.

Often referred as the “Spirit of the Renaissance,” humanism was a new way of thinking that became popular in the fourteenth century, the time of the Renaissance. It emphasized human beings over deities and highlighted their interests, achievements, and capabilities over those of God. It emphasized on finding reason - people started questioning why and how life came about. Honest doubt replaced unreasoning faith[3], asking and doubting the existence of God and His plans for humans. A classical story about Hercules shows much greater confidence in man’s ability to make decisions for himself - one day, Hercules, known for his toughness and heroism, had to choose between a smooth, grassy path leading downhill towards a beautiful young woman, and a rocky, uphill path that led to an unwelcoming matron.

The choice of path was Hercules' own to make, yet he took the stony path, achieving stardom for his willingness to take the tougher decision.[4] Unlike the Catholic faith, humanism did not promote original sin. People of Greece and Rome thought that children's natures at birth were capable of being impressed with positive or negative influences until they reach the age of discretion. This was why, as Plato explained in *The Republic*, education was so important to children and why they should never be subjected to evil influences until they had developed their powers of reason[5]. This new idea of human nature and humans' ability to make proper judgments imposed more discipline on young people to set them on the right path.

The Renaissance marked the turning point in the history of art. With the development of humanism, God, the previous subject of most art pieces, had been nudged out. Much more of humans in natural world then began to be presented on the canvas. Perhaps the most famous artwork in the world, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is simply a portrait of a woman; she is positioned in the center of the frame as other harmonizing features fill the space of the canvas. She is, undoubtedly, the focus and heart of the work - not any divine beings. Partly interested in the natural world and somewhat intrigued by the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome, portraits played a significant role that represented earthly success and status in Renaissance society. Painting in general reached a higher level of techniques. To aesthetically express the full exquisite beauty that speaks volumes about this grand era, artists adopted the new perspectives to create the illusion of depth, framed and constructed their figures mathematically, used highly realistic details, and applied new textiles and patterns within their works[6].

A Florentine artist Leon Battista Alberti described the laws of perspective^[7] and expressed his idea of the “ Florentine Renaissance” in his treatise *On painting*. He insisted that he would like the painter to be “ as well-versed as possible in all liberal arts... know geometry... learn to enjoy poets and orators, for they have many adornments in common with the painter.”^[8] Alberti, as a scholar rather than a practitioner, popularized the idea that the artist should be a man of culture and learning, not just a mere craftsman, and raised the general status of artists within the society.

However, despite the popular belief that the Renaissance movement changed the world for good, some are not hesitant to assert that the Renaissance did very little to no good for Europe’s progress. A Dutch historian Johan Huizinga questioned whether Renaissance was a positive change; though he did acknowledge the positive significance that the “ rebirth” or “ reformation” had on the European societies, he argued that it destroyed much of what used to be important while declining from the High Middle Ages. In his book *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, he insisted that the Renaissance obsession for classical purity arrested the evolution of the Latin language which was being actively used in the church and elsewhere. In some ways, Huizinga claimed, the new teaching encouraged less independence than the old scholasticism. By denying the role of disputation and promoting the repetitious recital of facts, it was better adapted to creating obedient bureaucrats and courtiers than self-governing, independent citizens. In the medieval period, girls, as well as boys, were taught to read and write in communal schools, and more women enjoyed higher education in convents than did in Renaissance courts and

universities[9]. Roman law, which was used by most Italian cities, deprived women of independent legal status and ensured that after marriage women became the possessions of their husbands. The classical revival in general did nothing to encourage greater equality for women, but quite the reverse.

After one thousand years of hardship stretched throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, it was time for some change. People who endured the Black Death and survived became richer with the resources that were left behind. As the standards of living went up in general, people started to inquire more "civility" that was of posh living - expensive clothes, food, and adornments, to name a few. The social power was now equally distributed among the members of the society, not just among priests and industrialists. With their social status grew the concept of humanism. They started to focus more on their own interests, achievements, and goals, and less about those of God. This became evident in arts; unlike the paintings from the medieval times where God was the sole subject, Renaissance paintings exhibited a lot of human attributes. However, this rectification did not come with only positive aspects. Some claimed that the obsession for classical purity held the Latin language from developing further and that the new teaching discouraged independence in learning for boys and girls alike.