

The English Renaissance (Explanation)

The word 'renaissance' comes from the French for 'rebirth', so it was a fitting name for the artistic and cultural transformation of Europe from the late 14th to the early 17th Century. What was specific about the English Renaissance, and how did England change artistically, culturally, and economically?

The English Renaissance Summary

The Renaissance started in Italy in the late 14th Century and spread across Europe, marking the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. Exactly when the Renaissance began in England depends on who you listen to, and there is no consensus among historians and scholars. Some put the beginning of the English Renaissance at 1485, with the rise of the Tudor dynasty, while others put it around 1520, during [Henry VIII](#)'s reign. What is certain is that the second half of the 16th century, during [Elizabeth I](#)'s reign was the height of the English Renaissance.

Differences between the English and Italian Renaissance

Although the Renaissance started in Italy, the specifics of the period varied, and England went through its own 'rebirth', which differed from Italy in the following ways:

1. The dominant art forms in England were literature and music.
2. Visual arts, such as drawing and sculpting, were much less significant in England than Italy.
3. The Renaissance period in England began much later than in Italy. By the 1550s, when the English Renaissance had barely begun, the Italian Renaissance had already moved into **Mannerism**, known as the Late Renaissance, and the **Baroque style**.

Literature in the English Renaissance Period

England already had a strong tradition of literature in the English language, which intensified when printing became common during the mid-16th century. The rise of printing led to literature in the English language gaining international prestige.

Did you know? The goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press around 1440 in Germany. His Gutenberg Bible was the first-ever printed version of the Bible.

Literature in the English language

The tradition of literature in the English language mainly began with the **Protestant Reformation**. Before this, works had been written in Latin— a language many English people did not speak. During the **Reformation**, it was believed that people should be able to interpret the Bible for themselves rather than accepting the Catholic Church's interpretation of the Latin version.

In 1526, **William Tyndale** published his translation of the English Bible. His work influenced the **King James** Version of the Bible; this achievement made Tyndale's influence on the use of the English language in literature even more significant than that of **Shakespeare**.

Another person who supported the English language in literature was **Roger Ascham**, who is often called the '**father of English prose**.' Ascham was a tutor to **Elizabeth I** during her teenage years, and she wrote occasional poems herself, such as '**On Monsieur's Departure**'.

Literature, Poetry, and Politics in the English Renaissance

What is the connection between literature, poetry, and politics in the English Renaissance?

With the Renaissance came a new emphasis on **humanism** and individuality. Writers also started to satirise (ridicule) existing institutions such as the Church, and

their works became **secular**, leading to a revival of three types of English literature listed below.

1. Poetry is a form of literature that uses aesthetics and the rhythmic qualities of language. It is set in lines and verses rather than paragraphs. Examples of poetry include sonnets and limericks.
2. Prose is a form of written or spoken language, and it typically exhibits a natural flow of speech and grammatical structure. Prose can be fiction or non-fiction. Examples of prose include novels.
3. Drama is a form combined with music and dance. Playwrights write these plays, which are intended to be performed in theatres. For a long time, nearly all drama was in verse form.

Examples include the plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

Humanism, or Renaissance humanism, was an intellectual movement that celebrated the advancement of humanity, with a renewed interest in the classical Roman and Greek world as its basis.

Secular means not connected to religious or spiritual matters.

Elizabethan literature in the English Renaissance period

Elizabethan literature in the English Renaissance period refers to the works produced during the reign of Queen [Elizabeth I](#). In this period, writers such as Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Roger Ascham, and William Shakespeare flourished. The Elizabethan age saw the rise of poetry, such as sonnets. It was a golden age of drama, and it inspired a wide variety of prose.

William Shakespeare

While there are many notable writers from this period, the most famous name of all is William Shakespeare. This playwright and poet is widely regarded, back then and today, as the greatest dramatist of all time. His most famous works include:

(Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Othello, King Lear)

Did you know? Shakespeare is often called 'England's national poet', and the 'Bard of Avon' (or simply 'the Bard').

Attitudes during the English Renaissance period: Humanism

Humanism led to people's renewed interests in classical education, including philosophy, history and physics. Before the English Renaissance, people were more focused on heaven and the afterlife in the Middle Ages. They tended to believe that their life was simply a test of their goodness .

However, this view changed after experiencing the widespread deaths of the **Black Death** (bubonic plague). People began to think more about the 'now'. This re-education led to discoveries and developments all over Europe, such as the printing press, firearms, and the nautical compass.

Why did the English Renaissance end?

The Renaissance ended in the 17th century. Considering the Renaissance took place all over Europe, but on different timelines, scholars believe that the end of the Renaissance was the result of various factors.

- By the end of the 15th century, several wars plagued the Italian peninsula, causing great instability in the region.
- There was a period of economic decline after trade routes changed, leading to less funding from wealthy benefactors, as money had to go elsewhere.
- The Counter-Reformation, or Catholic Reformation, meant that the Catholic Church censored artists and writers in response to the Protestant Reformation, thus preventing artists from being creative. As a result, they were producing less.
- In 1545, the Council of Trent introduced the Roman Inquisition. Humanism and all views that questioned the Catholic Church were considered **heresy** (religious beliefs that went against the Church), and heresy was punishable by death.

- By the early 17th century, the Renaissance movement died out and gave way to the **Age of Enlightenment**.

✚ **The Age of Enlightenment** is an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

✚ **The English Renaissance - Key Takeaways ((Imp))**

- The Renaissance was a period of European cultural, artistic, political, and economic rebirth.
- The Renaissance started in Italy in the 14th century, spread across Europe, and lasted until the 17th century.
- The English Renaissance started either in 1485 or around the 1520s, depending on historians' views.
- England already had a strong tradition of literature in the English language, but it became even more common and prominent in the mid-16th century.
- The concept of humanism was critical to the English Renaissance period, changing people's outlook on life.
- The English Renaissance saw the emergence of notable figures such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe.
- Visual arts were not as big in England compared to Italy, with most visual arts only being portraits.
- Some historians argue that the English Renaissance did not even happen.