The Renaissance: Historical Context

**KEY IDEAS** Writers, as well as kings, queens, and everyday citizens, could not help being affected by the religious conflict that defined their society during the Renaissance years.

**The Monarchy and the Church**

Writers during the English Renaissance often found their fates married to the shifting winds of political influence. As kings and queens rose to power and as varying forms of Christianity became the law of the land, writers found themselves either celebrated for their work or censured for it. Some writers, including Sir Thomas More and Sir Walter Raleigh, were even put to death for falling out of favor with the ruler of the day. As you will see, the kings and queens who ruled during this period held widely differing views on just about everything of importance, but especially religion.

**THE TUDORS** In 1485, Henry Tudor took the throne as Henry VII. A shrewd leader, Henry negotiated favorable commercial treaties abroad, built up the nation's merchant fleet, and financed expeditions that established English claims in the Americas. He also arranged for his son Arthur to marry the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon, thereby creating a political alliance with Spain, England's greatest "New World" rival. When Arthur died unexpectedly, the pope granted a special dispensation, allowing Arthur's younger brother Henry, the new heir to the throne, to marry Catherine—a marriage that would have lasting consequences.

**THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION** During the reign of Henry VIII, dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church was spreading in Europe. The great wealth and power of the church had led to corruption at many levels, from cardinals living in luxury to friars traveling the countryside selling "indulgences" to peasants in exchange for forgiveness of their sins.

In response, in 1517 a German monk named Martin Luther wrote out 95 theses, or arguments, against such practices and nailed them to the door of a church. Though the pope condemned him as a heretic, Luther's criticisms created a sensation, and printed copies were soon in circulation across Europe. Luther wanted the church to reform itself, but other protesters went farther, splitting off from Rome into reformed, Protestant churches.

**THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND** Henry VIII had at first remained loyal to Rome, yet he became obsessed with producing a male heir and so sought an annulment from his wife (who had given him only a daughter, Mary). When the pope refused, Henry broke with Rome and in 1534 declared himself head of the Church of England. He then divorced Catherine and married her court attendant, Anne Boleyn. In all, Henry went through six wives, but only one produced a son—the frail and sickly Edward VI, who succeeded at the age of 9 but died when he was just 15. During Edward's reign, a group of radical Protestants believed the church needed even
further reform and sought to "purify" it of all Roman practices. This group became known as **Puritans**. In coming years, Puritans would increasingly clash with the monarchy.

Following Edward, Catherine's daughter, Mary, took the throne. To avenge her mother, she brought back Roman Catholicism and persecuted Protestants, which earned her the nickname **Bloody Mary**. On her death in 1558, most citizens welcomed the succession of her half-sister, Elizabeth.

**The Elizabethan Era**

**Elizabeth I**, the unwanted daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, proved to be one of the ablest monarchs in English history. During her long reign, England enjoyed a time of unprecedented prosperity and international prestige. Elizabeth was a consummate politician, exercising absolute authority while remaining sensitive to public opinion and respectful of Parliament. She kept England out of costly wars, ended the unpopular Spanish alliance, and encouraged overseas adventures, including **Sir Francis Drake's** circumnavigation of the globe and **Sir Walter Raleigh's** attempt to establish a colony in Virginia.

In religion, she steered a middle course, reestablishing the Church of England and using it as a buffer between Catholics and Puritans. Catholics, however, considered her cousin **Mary Stuart**, the queen of Scotland, to be the rightful heir to the English throne. After enduring years of conspiracies, Elizabeth ordered Mary beheaded in 1587. In response, Catholic Spain's Philip II sent a great Armada, or fleet of warships, to challenge the English navy. Aided by a violent storm, the smaller, more maneuverable English ships defeated the Spanish Armada, making Elizabeth the undisputed leader of a great military power.

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**A Voice from the Times**

*I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm.*

—Elizabeth I

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**ANALYZE VISUALS**

This portrait of Queen Elizabeth is rich with symbolism. The pearls adorning her hair and gown suggest purity, the imperial crown to her right suggests power, and the scenes of the defeat of the Spanish Armada behind her represent her greatest victory. In addition, Elizabeth's right hand is resting on a globe—specifically, her fingers rest upon the Americas. What might this last symbol suggest?
The Rise of the Stuarts

With Elizabeth's death in 1603, the powerful Tudor dynasty came to an end. Elizabeth was succeeded by her cousin James VI of Scotland (son of Mary Stuart), who ruled as James I of England. James supported the Church of England, thus angering both Roman Catholic and Protestant extremists. Early in his reign, a Catholic group including Guy Fawkes plotted to kill him and blow up Parliament in the unsuccessful Gunpowder Plot of 1605. James and his son Charles both aroused opposition in the Puritan-dominated House of Commons with their extravagance, contempt for Parliament, and preference for Catholic-style “High-Church” rituals in the Anglican Church. Clashes with the Puritans only worsened when Charles I took the throne in 1625.

In 1629, Charles I dismissed Parliament, and he did not summon it again for 11 years. During this time, he took strong measures against his opponents. Thousands of English citizens—especially Puritans—emigrated to North America to escape persecution. Then, in 1637, Charles’s attempt to introduce Anglican practices in Scotland’s Presbyterian churches led to rebellion there. In need of funds to suppress the Scots, Charles, in 1640, was forced to reconvene Parliament, which promptly stripped many of his powers. He responded with a show of military force, and England was soon plunged into civil war.

The Defeat of the Monarchy

The English Civil War pitted the Royalists (mainly Catholics, Anglicans, and the nobility) against supporters of Parliament (Puritans, smaller landowners, and the middle class). Under the leadership of General Oliver Cromwell, the devout, disciplined Puritan army soundly defeated the Royalists in 1645, and the king surrendered a year later.

At first, Parliament established a commonwealth with Cromwell as head; later, they made him “lord protector” for life. The Puritan-dominated government proved no less autocratic than the Stuart reign, however. England's theaters were closed, most forms of recreation were suspended, and Sunday became a day of prayer, when even walking for pleasure was forbidden.

When Cromwell died in 1658, his son inherited his title but not his ability to handle the wrangling among political factions and an increasingly unruly public. In 1660, a new Parliament invited Charles II, son of Charles I, to return from exile and assume the throne. His reign ushered in a new chapter in English history, the Restoration.
Cultural Influences

**KEY IDEAS** Creativity flourished during the Renaissance, a time of invention, exploration, and appreciation for the arts.

**The Renaissance**

For writers, artists, scientists, and scholars—in fact, for anyone gripped by curiosity or the urge to create—the Renaissance was an amazing time to be alive. The Renaissance, which literally means “rebirth” or “revival,” was marked by a surge of creative energy and the emergence of a worldview more modern than medieval. It began in Italy in the 14th century and rapidly spread north throughout Europe. In England, political instability delayed the advent of Renaissance ideas, but they began to take hold after 1485, when Henry VII took the throne, and reached full flower during the reign of Elizabeth I.

**THE RENAISSANCE WORLDVIEW** All through the Middle Ages, Europeans had focused their energy on religion and the afterlife, viewing this world primarily as preparation for the world to come. During the time of the Renaissance, people became much more interested in, and curious about, life on earth. A new emphasis was placed on the individual and on the development of human potential. The ideal “Renaissance man” was not a bold and dashing knight or a scholarly monk but a well-rounded person who cultivated his talents to the fullest.

**CREATIVITY AND EXPLORATION** Renaissance Europeans delighted in the arts and literature, the beauty of nature, human impulses, exploration, and a new sense of mastery over the world. This was the time of Shakespeare, Galileo, and Columbus, after all. Inventions and discoveries made possible things that had been previously unimaginable. The compass, for example, along with advances in astronomy, allowed ships to venture into uncharted seas, and subsequent exploration profoundly altered narrow medieval perceptions of the world. Gutenberg’s printing press expanded horizons of a different sort. It meant that books no longer had to be copied out by hand. Once the rare and precious treasures of a privileged few, books were now widely available. In turn, by 1530 more than half of England’s population could read.

The Renaissance flourished in Elizabethan times, when theater and literature reached new heights. Even Elizabeth’s successor, James I, contributed to the period’s literary legacy with his commissioning of a new translation of the Bible. With the reign of Puritan Oliver Cromwell and his closing of theaters, however, the period was near its end. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 marked the official conclusion of the Renaissance period in English history.
Renaissance Literature

**KEY IDEAS** The English Renaissance nurtured the talents of such literary giants as Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne. Poetry, drama, humanist works, and religious writings defined the literature of the period.

**Pastoral Poems and Sonnets**

During the Renaissance, the creative energy of the English people burst forth into the greatest harvest of literature the Western world had yet known. Poets and playwrights, readers and listeners, all delighted in the vigor and beauty of the English language.

The glittering Elizabethan court was a focus of poetic creativity. Members of the court vied with one another to see who could create the most highly polished, technically perfect poems. The appreciative audience for these lyrics was the elite artistic and social circle that surrounded the queen. Elizabeth herself wrote lyrics, and she patronized favorite poets and rewarded courtiers for eloquent poetic tributes. Among her protégés were Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh. Raleigh, in turn, encouraged Edmund Spenser, who wrote the epic *The Faerie Queene* (1590) in honor of Elizabeth.

Sir Walter Raleigh and his contemporary Christopher Marlowe wrote excellent examples of a type of poetry popular with Elizabeth’s court: the pastoral. A pastoral is a poem that portrays shepherds and rustic life, usually in an idealized manner. The poets did not attempt to write in the voice of a common shepherd, however. Their speakers used courtly language rather than the language of common speech. The pastoral’s form was artificial as well, with meters and rhyme schemes characteristic of formal poetry.

**IMPROVING NATURE** The Elizabethans viewed nature as intricate, complex, and beautiful. To them, however, the natural world was a subject not for imitation but for improvement by creative minds. Nature provided raw material to be shaped into works of art. The greater the intricacy or “artificiality” of the result, the more admired the artistry of the poet. Elizabethan poets thus created ingenious metaphors, elaborate allegories, and complex analogies, often within the strictures of a popular verse form that came from Italy, the sonnet (see page 302).

Earlier poets, such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, had introduced into England the 14-line verse form, modifying it to better suit the English language. During Elizabethan times, the sonnet became the most popular form of love lyric. Sonnets were often published in sequences, such as Edmund Spenser’s *Amoretti*, addressed to his future wife. William Shakespeare’s sonnets do not form a clear sequence, but several address a mysterious dark lady some scholars think may have been the poet Amelia Lanier. The English sonnet eventually became known as the Shakespearean sonnet, in tribute to Shakespeare’s mastery of the form.
Shakespearean Drama

Although Shakespeare's contributions to poetry were great, he left an even clearer mark on drama, which came of age during the Elizabethan period. Elizabethan drama emerged from three sources: medieval plays, 16th-century interludes, and Latin and Greek classics.

The mystery, miracle, and morality plays of medieval times—simple plays performed in churches, inns, and marketplaces as a way of spreading religious knowledge—provided the opportunity for actors and writers to develop their craft within biblical story outlines already familiar to audiences. In the 16th century, another form of drama arose. Certain noble families of the time maintained their own companies of actors who, when they weren't doubling as household servants, amused their patrons with brief farcical interludes that ridiculed the manners and customs of commoners. These interludes had little to do with the Bible, paving the way for later Elizabethan dramatists to write plays with secular themes. The third source, Latin and Greek dramas that were revived during the Renaissance and studied at university centers such as Oxford and Cambridge, modeled for Elizabethan playwrights the characteristics of comedy and tragedy.

Renaissance dramatists borrowed devices from these earlier works but inserted their own elements consistent with the thinking of the age. As products of the Renaissance mindset, dramas dealt with the complexities of human life on earth rather than with the religious themes of earlier times. Plays were often staged at court, in the homes of wealthy nobles, and in inn yards where spectators could sit on the ground in front of the stage or in balconies overlooking it. A similar plan was used in England's first theaters, such as the famous Globe Theatre in London.

SHAKESPEARE'S INFLUENCE  By 1600, London had more playhouses than any other European capital. The Globe was the most successful, thanks to actor, poet, and playwright William Shakespeare. Tremendously versatile and prolific, Shakespeare contributed 37 plays to the theater's repertory: tragedies, such as Othello, comedies, such as A Midsummer Night's Dream; and histories about the kings of England. Shakespeare's clever wordplay, memorable characters, and complex plots appealed to everyone in his audience, from the uneducated "groundlings," who paid a penny to stand and watch, to the royal family, who received special private performances.

Being an actor himself, Shakespeare knew well the capabilities and limitations of the theater building and of the acting company for whom he wrote his plays. It wasn't easy putting on a crowd-pleasing performance in Elizabethan times. Besides having to memorize their lines, actors had to be able to sing and dance, wrestle and fence, clown and weep. Because the stage had no front curtain, the actors always walked on and off the stage in full view of the audience. Plays had to be written so that any character who died on stage could be unobtrusively hauled off.
In retrospect, Shakespeare dominates the theater of the late 16th and early 17th centuries—in fact, his plays represent the height of the English dramatic tradition. At the time, however, others were equally admired. Christopher Marlowe was the first playwright to exploit the potential of the English language as a dramatic medium. His tragedies show the kind of psychological probing that is a hallmark of the finest Elizabethan and 17th-century dramas. Also popular were the comedies of a rugged, boisterous poet and playwright named Ben Jonson. His plays provided a satiric, somewhat cynical commentary on the lives of ordinary Londoners. Jonson’s masques, especially, attracted aristocratic audiences, who flocked to the spectacular pageants with their elaborate scenery, costumes, music, and dance.

By the time of Elizabeth’s death in 1603, the influence of the Puritans had begun to grow in England. Puritans, who believed that the Elizabethan dramas and the rowdy crowds they attracted were highly immoral, worked to close all the theaters. They were not immediately successful.

Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest tragedies, including Macbeth (see page 340), during the reign of Elizabeth’s successor, James I. Shakespeare’s interest in issues of power may have been sparked by the intense conflicts between the king and Parliament. When the Puritans overthrew James’s son Charles in 1649, however, they finally closed all the playhouses. This act brought the final curtain down on the golden age of drama.

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A Voice from the Times

Soul of the age!
The applause, delight, the wonder of our stage!
My Shakespeare, rise...
Thou art a monument, without a tomb,
And art alive still, while thy book doth live,
And we have wits to read, and praise to give.

—Ben Jonson
The Rise of Humanism

During the Renaissance, literature reflected another important influence: humanism. At this time, the universities of Europe buzzed with new ideas—about the worth and importance of the individual, about the spiritual value of beauty in nature and art, about the power of human reason to decide what was good and right. Those who taught these new ideas were called humanists, because they studied the humanities (art, history, philosophy, and literature; in other words, subjects that were human rather than sacred) and looked to the classics for wisdom and guidance.

Humanists were often devout Christians—one, in fact, became Pope Pius II—and they tried to reconcile the new ideas with their religious beliefs. In northern Europe, Christian humanists led by the Dutch monk Erasmus studied ancient Greek and Hebrew so they could read not just the classics but also the Bible and other sacred writings in the original. Naturally, reading the words of history’s greatest thinkers gave Erasmus and his followers high ideals, and they sharply criticized European society, and especially the church, for falling short.

ENGLISH HUMANISTS Erasmus traveled widely throughout Europe, writing and teaching, and made many friends, among them the artist Hans Holbein the Younger and English writer and scholar Sir Thomas More. Like Erasmus, More saw much to criticize in the way the world was being run and believed humans could do better. In 1516, he published his book called Utopia (from the Greek for “no place”), about a perfect society on an imaginary island. In Utopia, there was no poverty or greed—not even private property; everything was shared, and everyone was equal. War and competition were unknown, and people were governed by reason.

Humanists were concerned with classical learning. One of their aims was to educate the sons of nobility to speak and write in Latin, the language of diplomacy and all higher learning. For humanist writers, however, reverence for the classics created a conflict: should they write their own works in Latin or English? Although many wrote in the classical Latin, others urged scholars to improve English by writing ambitious works in it. In any case, the humanist reverence for classics combined with a pride in the English language led to many distinguished translations throughout the period, including the Earl of Surrey’s translation of Virgil’s Aeneid and George Chapman’s translations of Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey.

Interestingly, the humanists reflected a fact of life during the Renaissance period—religion was a subject
Spiritual and Devotional Writings

Despite the religious turmoil that marked this period in English history, England remained a Christian nation, and its literature reflects the beliefs of its people. Spiritual and devotional writings became some of the most popular and influential works of the day. In fact, the King James Bible likely did more to mold English prose style than any other work.

For centuries, the church had resisted calls to translate the Latin Bible into languages the common people could understand, on the grounds that it would diminish church authority and lead to heresy. In fact, when the first English version of the Bible was translated by the 14th-century scholar John Wycliffe, he was attacked by a British archbishop as "that wretched and pestilent fellow ... who crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue." Another English translator, William Tyndale, fled to the continent during the early years of Henry VIII's reign, only to be condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake.

THE KING JAMES BIBLE  Ironically, in the meantime Henry had broken with Rome, and in the following years English translations of the Bible proliferated. Finally, in 1604, James I commissioned 54 leading biblical scholars to create a new, "authorized" version, one based on the original Hebrew and Greek as well as on earlier translations from the Latin. Masterpieces of literature are not generally created by committee, but the King James Bible, completed in 1611, proved to be an exception. Its beautiful imagery, graceful simplicity, and measured cadences made it the principal Protestant Bible in English for more than 300 years, and it still remains the most important and influential of all the English translations.

TWO MASTERPIECES  One of the earliest writers to be influenced by the King James Bible was the Puritan poet John Milton. In fact, it has been said that he knew the Bible by heart. His epic blank-verse poem Paradise Lost is based on the biblical story of the first humans, Adam and Eve, who are tempted by Satan to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. They eat and then are punished by being driven from the Garden of Eden out into the world, where they and all their descendants must suffer and die. A devout believer, Milton filled his work with energy and power, and none of the many "rebel" characters in literature since can equal his portrayal of Satan, the fallen angel. Dignified and elevated, even biblical, Milton's language is meant to evoke reverence for his religious
themes. His rich and complex style, married with his devotion to religious themes, places Milton with other Renaissance Christian humanists, but his talent sets him apart as an artist.

Milton was a typical “Renaissance man”—a scholar who read widely, studying the classics as well as the Bible, and who was fluent in many languages. Fellow Puritan writer John Bunyan, on the other hand, was an uneducated tinker and preacher who spent many years in jail for his religious beliefs. While in jail, Bunyan wrote his greatest work, The Pilgrim’s Progress—an allegory in which a character named Christian undertakes a dangerous journey from this world to the next. Along the way, he encounters such obstacles as the Slough of Despond and meets characters with such names as Mr. Moneylove and Ignorance. Bunyan modeled his style on that of the English Bible, and he used concrete language and details familiar to most readers, enabling even the most basic of readers to share in Christian’s experiences. Though The Pilgrim’s Progress lacks the grandeur and complexity of Paradise Lost, its deeply felt simplicity made it one of the most widely read books in the English language.

The Metaphysical and Cavalier Poets

In the early 17th century, two new groups of poets emerged. The first was inspired by the literary man-of-all-trades Ben Jonson. Like Shakespeare, his friend and rival, Ben Jonson was not just a playwright but also an accomplished poet. Dissatisfied with the extravagant romance of Elizabethan lyrics, Jonson chose instead to imitate the graceful craftsmanship of classical forms. Far from the typical image of a refined poet, however, Jonson was a great bellowing bear of a man who loved an argument and didn’t mind if it

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**ANALYZE VISUALS**

Gustave Doré was a 19th-century artist known for his wood-engraved illustrations for famous works such as Dante’s Inferno, Cervante’s Don Quixote, and Milton’s Paradise Lost. According to the historian Millicent Rose, “Gigantic scale and limitless space had always fascinated Doré.” How well does this Doré engraving from Paradise Lost capture the scale and space of the heavens?

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**For Your Outline**

**METAPHYSICAL AND CAVALIER POETS**

- Ben Jonson, a boisterous man and an accomplished poet, inspired later poets, called “sons of Ben.”
- These poets were known as Cavaliers because they took the side of Charles I and his Royalist cavaliers.
- Cavalier poetry was charming and witty, dealing with themes of love, war, and carpe diem.
- John Donne wrote metaphysical poetry—poems characterized by themes of love, death, and religious devotion.
- Metaphysical poets used elaborate metaphors to explore life’s complexities.
turned into a brawl, and his forceful personality won him as many admirers as his considerable talent did.

Jonson's followers, called "sons of Ben," were sophisticated young aristocrats, among them Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, and Sir John Suckling. These poets were known as the Cavaliers, because many of them took the side of Charles I in the civil war between Cromwell's "Roundheads" (so called for their closely cropped hair) and the long-haired Royalist cavaliers. Lighthearted, charming, witty, and sometimes cynical, Cavalier poetry dealt mainly with themes of love, war, chivalry, and loyalty to the throne and frequently advocated the philosophy of carpe diem, or living for the moment.

Jonson's contemporary, John Donne, is representative of a second group of poets, the metaphysical poets. These writers broke with convention, employing unusual imagery, elaborate metaphors, and irregular meter to produce intense poems characterized by themes of death, physical love, and religious devotion (see page 506). Whereas the Cavalier poets tended to treat limited, human-focused subjects, Donne and other metaphysical poets tried to encompass the vastness of the universe and to explore life's complexities and contradictions. Some ridiculed Donne for the philosophical tone of his love poems, saying that instead of winning over women he merely succeeded in perplexing them. However, Donne's unique blend of intellect and passion influenced many other poets, from his own time to the 21st century.

**A CHANGING LANGUAGE**

During the "great vowel shift" of the 1400s, the pronunciation of most English long vowels changed, and the final e in words like take was no longer pronounced. Yet early printers continued to use Middle English spellings—retaining, for example, the k and e in knave, even though the letters were no longer pronounced. This practice resulted in many of the inconsistent spellings for which modern English is known.

Renaissance English. By 1500, Middle English had evolved into an early form of the modern English spoken today. Nevertheless, there are some differences. During the Renaissance, thou, thee, thy, and thine were used for familiar address, while you, your, and yours were reserved for more formal and impersonal situations. Speakers used the verb ending -est or -st with thou ("thou leadest") and -eth or -th with she and he ("he doth"). They also used fewer helping verbs, especially in questions ("Saw you the bird?").