

Q : Write a note on the influence of the Renaissance on English literature.

Ans : The Middle Ages (1066-1500) :

In the Middle Ages, men's minds and activities were greatly circumscribed¹ by Scholasticism², the Church, and the Feudal Despotism³. But the decline in the power of the Church and the Feudalism because of the rise of nationalism, the invention of gun powder, printing, and the mariners compass which helped in the exploration of new seas and discoveries of new regions emancipated⁴ the individual from the shackles⁵ of the Middle Ages and brought in the Renaissance.

The Renaissance (1500-1660) :

The name 'Renaissance' is applied to the period of European history following the Middle Ages. Etymologically the term, which was first used in England only as late as the nineteenth century, means 'rebirth' or 'revival'. Broadly speaking, the Renaissance implies the reawakening of learning which came to Europe in the fifteenth century.

In Italy the impact of Greek learning was first felt when after the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Greek scholars fled and took refuge in Italy carrying with them a vast treasure of ancient Greek literature in manuscript. The study of this literature fired the soul and imagination of the Italy of that time and created a new kind of intellectual and aesthetic culture quite different from that of the Middle Ages. The light of the Renaissance came very slowly to the isolated island of England, so that when it did come to this island in all its brilliance in the sixteenth century, the Renaissance in Italy (in Europe too) had already become a spent force.

In the beginning, the Renaissance was just a revival of interest in the classical literature (the literature of ancient Greece and Rome). Slowly the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, along with literature, reached an eminence⁶ not exceeded by any civilization in any age.

The Renaissance marks the birth of the modern world out of the ashes of the Dark Ages⁷. If the Middle Ages were theocentric, the age of the Renaissance was geocentric, i.e. there is the discovery of the world and of man. The Renaissance is the 'discovery by mankind of

¹ **circumscribed** - restricted; confined.

² **Scholasticism** - /skə'læstɪsɪzəm/ a system of philosophy taught in universities in the Middle Ages, based on religious principles; stubborn adherence to traditional teaching methods and values.

³ **despotism** - /'despətɪzəm/ tyranny.

⁴ **emancipated** - freedom from restraints, esp. social, religious, or political.

⁵ **shackles** - /'ʃækəlz/ fetters; chains; restraints.

⁶ **eminence** - state of being famous.

⁷ **the Dark Ages** - the period in Europe between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, C 500 - 1100 AD, a time in which the art of writing was apparently lost.

himself and of the world'. It gave man a new perception, a new judgement, a new insight. In fact, the Renaissance is a loose term covering so many issues – the revival of ancient classical knowledge; the spirit of the scientific enquiry; free expression of man's thought; emancipation of the individual from the shackles and dogmas of society; the spirit of humanism; the spirit of adventure; love for beauty and sensuous pleasures; love for wealth; love for power; and above all an amoral attitude towards life.

Its influence on literature :

The greatest impact of the Renaissance, however, is seen on literature. Hardly does any writer or his writing escape the influence of the Renaissance.

Its first impact :

Naturally enough, the first impact of the Renaissance in England was registered by the universities, being the repositories⁸ of all learning. Some English scholars⁹, becoming aware of the revival of learning in Italy, went there to be benefitted by it and to examine personally the manuscripts brought there by the fleeing Greek scholars of Constantinople. Prominent among these scholars were **William Grocyn**¹⁰ (1446-1519), **Thomas Linacre**¹¹ (1460-1524), and **John Colet**¹² (1467-1519). After returning from Italy they organised the teaching of Greek in Oxford. They were such learned and reputed scholars of Greek that **Erasmus**¹³ (1466-1536) came all the way from Holland to learn Greek from them.

Apart from scholars, the impact of the Renaissance is also to be seen on the works of the educationists¹⁴ of the age such as **Thomas Elyot**¹⁵ (1490-1546), **Sir Thomas Wilson** (1525-1581), and **Sir Roger Ascham**¹⁶ (1515-1568). Out of all these educationists the last named is the most important on account of his The Schoolmaster¹⁷ published two years after his death. Therein he puts forward his views on the teaching of the classics.

1) ENGLISH PROSE

Among prominent prose writers who exhibit well the influence of the Renaissance on English prose are Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, Lyly, Sidney, and above all Bacon.

⁸ **repositories** - storehouses.

⁹ **a scholar** - a learned person, esp. an academician; a person who studies.

¹⁰ **Grocyn** - /'grəʊsɪn/

¹¹ **Linacre** - /'lɪnəkə/

¹² **Colet** - /'kɒlɪt/

¹³ **Erasmus** - /ɪ'ræzməs/

¹⁴ **an educationist** - an expert in methods of education (or study).

¹⁵ **Elyot** - /'elɪət/

¹⁶ **Ascham** - /'æskəm/

¹⁷ **The Schoolmaster** - Printed in 1570 after Ascham's death, the plot of this book was apparently provoked by tales of boys running away from Eton (a famous school in England) for fear of flogging (beating; punishment). It argues against excessive discipline in education, warns against idleness, and recommends a method of teaching Latin grammar.

(a) Influence on Erasmus

Erasmus was a Dutchman who came to Oxford to learn Greek. His chief work was The Praise of Folly, which was originally written in Latin but later translated into English. He wrote this work in 1510 at the house of his friend Sir Thomas More. Published in 1511 after the accession of Henry VIII, it is like a song of victory for the new learning, in which the vice and cruelty of kings, the selfishness and ignorance of the clergy, and the foolish standards of education are satirized without mercy. It is, according to one critic, 'the best expression in literature of the attack that the Oxford reformers were making upon the medieval system'.

(b) Influence on Thomas More

Sir Thomas More's famous prose romance Utopia¹⁸ (1516) is, in the words of Legouis, 'true prologue to the Renaissance'. It was written in Latin and only as late as in 1555 was translated into English. Utopia is an ideal imaginary island, a wonderful Kingdom of Nowhere, in which there is no private wealth or money, no war, no lawyers, no loss. In this writing we find for the first time the three great words— Liberty, Fraternity and Equality. Here More discards medieval thinking in all its implications, and exalts the ancient Greek culture. His indebtedness to **Plato's Republic** is quite obvious.

(c) Influence on Lyly

Lyly's Euphues (1579) talks about Euphues who is a man of learning and culture belonging to Athens. It is now known mainly for its highly ornamental style known as euphemistic style.

(d) Influence on Sidney

Sidney's Arcadia (1590) is of course an arcadia – the fairyland of idyllic¹⁹ beauty with meadows and trees – where shepherd boys pipe as though they would never be old. Thus both the setting and story are far removed from reality and everything in it is on the ideal plane. The style is euphemistic and ornamental.

(e) Influence on Bacon

Bacon is a complete Renaissance man. In his Essays (1597 following; complete collection of fifty-eight, published in 1625), he shows the splendour as well as the sordidness²⁰ of the Renaissance. On one hand, he reveals the Renaissance love for knowledge infinite and an insatiable thirst for seeking the truth :

¹⁸ **Utopia** - The idea of utopia was first introduced by Plato in his The Republic in which he gives us the concept of an ideal state. Thus Thomas More's prose romance Utopia is an indebtedness to Plato.

¹⁹ **idyllic** - /i'dɪlɪk/ peaceful and beautiful; perfect, without problems.

²⁰ **sordidness** - immorality or dishonesty.

I have taken all knowledge to be my province²¹.
and
Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability.
and
Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.
and
Mixture of falsehood is like allay²² in coin of gold and silver, which may make the metal work the better, but it embaseth it.

On the other hand, he reveals the Renaissance materialism, Machiavellianism, and an amoral attitude towards life :

Folly of one man is the fortune of another.
and
All rising to great place is by a winding stair; and if there be factions, it is good to side a man's self whilst he is in the rising, and to balance himself when he is placed.
and
A mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure.

He comes up as a pragmatic, utilitarian, the high priest of, what **Ruskin** calls, 'the Goddess of success' showing his Machiavellianism. He preaches to 'practise secrecy in habit'. His essays, as he himself observes in his prefatory letter, 'come home to all men's business and bosom'.

2) ENGLISH POETRY

(a) Influence on Wyatt and Surrey

In the field of poetry, **Sir Thomas Wyatt** and the **Earl of Surrey** are the pioneers of the new type of poetry under the influence of the Italian Renaissance. This new type, the sonnet, was introduced into England in the first half of the sixteenth century by these two English politicians who, after their return from a diplomatic mission in Italy, wrote verses in this form for pleasure. Their poems were first published posthumously in Tottel's Miscellany (1557), the first printed collection of miscellaneous English Poems. It contained the work of the so-called courtly poets, which had hitherto circulated in manuscript form for the benefit of the court. About half of these poems were the work of Wyatt and Surrey. Both together wrote amorous sonnets modelled after the Italians. Especially Wyatt was much under the spell of his model Petrarch, and out of his thirty-two sonnets seventeen are but adaptations of Petrarch's. Whereas Wyatt

²¹ **province** - area of interest.

²² **allay** - (also alloy)

mostly adhered to the Petrarchan pattern, Surrey invented a new one for his sonnets. This pattern was later to be adopted by most Elizabethan sonneteers and the most prominent of whom was Shakespeare. Surrey is, however, noted not only for his originality in his sonnets, he is also known for his translation of two books of Virgil 'in strange meter'. The strange meter was the blank verse, which had never before appeared in English. Thus the chief literary work of these two men is to introduce the sonnet and the blank verse which, in the hands of **Shakespeare** and **Milton**, were used to make the world's masterpieces.

b) Influence on Spenser

Spenser represents the spirit of the Renaissance in his various works. The Renaissance spirit of adventure, love for beauty, power and self, and also the love of classical learning are seen in his writings. The various knights in the Faerie Queene share some of the major ideals of the Renaissance. The Renaissance spirit of adventure and active life is represented by the Redcross Knight (the hero of First Book) in The Faerie Queene, Book I (1590):

A Gentle Knight was pricking²³ on the plain
Clad²⁴ in mighty arms and silver shield

... ..

As one for knightly jousts²⁵ and fierce encounters fit

(CANTO I, Stanza 1)

Like a true Renaissance man, Spenser is the painter of human body especially of women's naked body :

[. . .] hath unlaced
Her silver buskins²⁶ from her nimble²⁷ thigh
And her lank²⁸ loins²⁹ and breasts unbraced.

He is deeply influenced by Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Virgil, Tasso, Petrarch, and Ariosto.

3) ENGLISH DRAMA

The Renaissance scored its first clear impact on English drama in the middle of the sixteenth century. Previous to this impact there had been a native tradition of drama, particularly comedy. This tradition had its origin in the liturgy³⁰. It evolved from this religious stage to the

²³ **pricking** - riding.

²⁴ **clad** - dressed.

²⁵ **jousts** - battles; contests; fights; squabbles.

²⁶ **buskins** - thick soled laced boots.

²⁷ **nimble** - agile; quick and light in movement.

²⁸ **lank** - thin and tall.

²⁹ **loins** - inner portion of thighs.

³⁰ **liturgy** - religious ceremony; church service.

moral stage, from moral stage to the interludes, and from that to the regular drama of the Elizabethan age.

(a) Influence on first regular English comedy

The first regular English comedy Ralph Roister Doister (1553) of **Nicholas Udall**³¹ combines well the native comic tradition with the classical Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence. Like the classics, it is the first English play to be divided into acts and scenes.

(b) Influence on first regular English tragedy

But it was in the realm of English tragedy that the classical influence has most fruitful results. The influence of **Seneca**, the Roman tragedy writer, dominated all the Elizabethan writers. The first regular English tragedy Gorboduc (1561), by **Thoman Sackville**³² and **Thomas Norton**, has all the Senecan elements like revenge, murder, bloodshed, ghost, horror, and so on.

(c) Influence on University Wits

All the university wits were Renaissance humanists. Their plays reveal many features of the Renaissance. For example, Marlowe's Tamburlaine represents the Renaissance love for power; his Doctor Faustus displays the Renaissance thirst for knowledge; The Jew of Malta reveals the Renaissance greed for gold. Mark the Renaissance passion for beauty in Doctor Faustus :

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? –
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

(d) Influence on Shakespeare

Shakespeare, too, comes up as a comprehensive Renaissance man. Though his plays do not follow Aristotle's rule of three unities, they reveal many aspects of the Renaissance. For example, his Hamlet is a typical revenge play written on the lines of Seneca. Shakespeare also embodies the Renaissance humanism as in the following lines of Hamlet :

What a piece of work is man!

(e) Influence on Ben Jonson

Ben Jonson strictly follows Aristotle's rule of three unities. In the Prologue to Volpone, he clearly states his motive :

³¹ Udall - /'ju:dəl/

³² Sackville - /'sækvɪl/

As best critics have designed,
The laws of time, place, person [. . .]

In this play he reveals the greed³³, the intrigues, the falling moral standards of the Renaissance.

Conclusion :

Thus we find that the Renaissance had an indelible³⁴ impact on English literature. Rightly observes **Hudson**, 'In the development of literature this revival of learning worked in two ways: it did much to emancipate thought from the bondage of medieval theology by restoring the generous spirit and ideals of pagan antiquity; and it presented writers with literary masterpieces which they might take as models for their own efforts.'

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³³ **greed** - avarice.

³⁴ **indelible** - that cannot be removed or rubbed.