

# The Spirit of the Renaissance in British Literature

Abdelkrim Aoul

Department of English, Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts, IBN Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

**Abstract:** *British literature cannot be studied in isolation from the wider sphere of European trends of literary production. From its early manifestations, British literature has shown clear adherence to the powerful influence of the artistic traditions set by the European Renaissance movement in its different dimensions. Based on this general impression, this article sets out to highlight how the spirit of the Renaissance is reflected British literary tradition. Special focus is laid on how essential philosophical bases such as humanism, individualism, and reformist aspirations are drawn on as inspiration source of literary production.*

**Keywords:** British literature, the Renaissance, humanism, artistic production, Europe, Britain.

## 1. Introduction

Following the cultural, religious, social and economic stagnation that surged during the Middle Ages, there came a period, that later came to be known as 'the Renaissance' period, where Europe saw drastic upheavals at many levels. In this era, many European countries, Western European in especial, underwent a number of historic changes and advances in different areas that not only led to a break out from the feudal mode of production characteristic of the middle ages, but which also made it possible to question previously indisputable religious dogmas, and to seek more social, political and intellectual emancipation. In Italy, the pre - eminent country in this historical lift, was the birth place of most of the ideas, principles, and artistic bases of the trend that spread throughout the continent. England, despite its peculiarity as being geographically distinct from the rest of the continent, was no exception to other European countries as it came powerfully under the inescapable influence of the movement.

### The Origins: The outburst of the Renaissance

Starting from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, winds of change began to blow ahead in Europe. Economically, science made possible a number of geographical explorations, which in turn concretized the trade potential between Europe and other parts of the world. Europe could eventually secure itself an outlet from the internal economic pressure resulting from its growing population and the shortage in raw materials.

Concomitantly, an intellectual outburst started flourishing especially after the invention of printing by Gutenberg in 1445. This invention dramatically revolutionised people's access to education and books which were, up to that time, restricted to the clergy. By allowing more reading material at lower costs, the bookmaking industry became a major strong engine in the intellectual revolution of The Renaissance period. As a result, a growing number of individuals had become avid consumers of philosophical, scientific and literary works and productions. Seeking knowledge and learning was indeed of much import to the contemporaries of the period.

As regards religion, Europe had been subdued to a long period of religious decay that ultimately led to a state of frustration and to a need for an alternative. Contemporary thinkers began to question the legitimacy of church practices

which, at the time, had come to its zenith. The selling of indulgences by the church is only one example among many others, as the appropriation estates and the collection of taxes. This state of affairs soon led to the emergence of many outstanding reformists across the continent calling for radical religious brush up in order to reduce the abusive dominance of the church. Many of them refuted the idea of granting indulgences and seeking salvation in good works. Rather, they conceived of personal faith as the only way to salvation and redemption. Another significant change brought about during the Renaissance uprising is the rejection of any form of mediation between God and the individual.

All these shake - ups inevitably led to a strong and well - justified need to re - read the Bible and to conduct new radical interpretations. Such reformists as Erasmus and Martin Luther prominently influenced the religious and liturgical fields. They challenged the medieval religious practices of the Catholic Church, thereby leading this deeply rooted institution to its demise as it gradually lost ground the humanistic philosophy established by Renaissance philosophers.

The philosophy of humanism, in this sense, came in reaction to the religious and cultural stagnation of the middle ages. This new intellectual movement in Europe signalled a shift away from a God - centred mode of thought to a Man - centred philosophy. Put differently, the Renaissance period was marked by revolutionary ideas that displaced the clergy and laid emphasis on Man, on his life, and on his intellect. Erasmus, a Dutch thinker, is most credited for the humanist concern with mankind as being central to the world. The glorification of the human mind, body and potential as well as the emphasis on the primordality of Man and his right to free inquiry and will were the basis of much of the Renaissance thought.

Influenced by the principles of Humanism, Europe eminently outgrew ancient ways of thinking, which eventually led to remarkable breakthroughs in artistic, literary and scientific works. In order to establish solid grounds for this intellectual and artistic uprising, scholars of the early Renaissance period relied on the revival of ancient works referred to as 'the Classics' from which they derived their inspiration. Thus, ancient Greek and Roman intellectual productions were rediscovered and studied,

hence paving the way for a new Greek - inspired literature to spread across the continent, including poetry and drama in particular. As a manifestation of the artistic flow of that era, mention must here be made of painting and sculpture. These two artistic fields, influenced also by humanism, were marked by a tendency to glorify, and place much importance on, the human body. The use of light colours in paintings also reflected the humanistic thought of the era. Leonardo Da Vinci is an ever - lasting prominent figure in this respect. Of special interest also is the influence of Humanism on music, which received much attention by composers who gave it a new flavour, stressing the sacred side of this artistic form. The same influence can also be evidenced in the classical architectural designs of the period, where emphasis was placed on symmetry, regularity and proportion.

Most accounts of the Renaissance might seem to suggest that the term refers to the rebirth or revolution in architecture, sculpture, painting, and in literature, philosophy, and theology. The Renaissance is also often said to have signalled an emancipation of conscience and religion, and a progress in criticism, philology and science (e. g. progress in research on the human anatomy by Vesalius, Harvey's theory on blood circulation, the development of new scientific methods, developments in the gunpowder industry, the invention of the telescope, and of printing, etc). It is also said to be the period of major discoveries made about the solar system by Copernicus and Galileo and about the discovery and exploration of new worlds by Ferdinand Magellan who sailed around the world and Columbus who discovered America. The term renaissance may also refer for some scholars to developments in political economy and to a number of historical and religious changes (i. e. the collapse of feudalism, the growth of the monarchy, and the limitation of ecclesiastical power, etc), (cited in Symonds, 2005: 2 - 3). However, for some scholars, such as Symonds (2005) and Rundle (1999), who have worked extensively on the Renaissance period, these developments are only facets or aspects of the movement. The renaissance movement, in other words, cannot be explained by one or another characteristic. Rather, it should be viewed in Symonds's (2005: 3) words as "a natural movement" and as "an effort of humanity". Associated with same idea is Rundle's (1999: 1) contention that "the conventional interpretation of 'the Renaissance' underestimates the complexity - and the excitement - of two hundred years of European history". Symonds expands on this idea, stipulating that the Renaissance is "neither any one of these [aspects] (. . .) taken separately, nor, indeed, all of them together." He (ibid.) goes on to argue that the history of the renaissance is:

not the history of arts, or of sciences, or of literature, or even of nations. It is the history of attainment of self - conscious freedom to the human spirit (. . .) It is no mere political mutation, no new fashion of art, no restoration of classical standards of taste. The arts and the inventions, the knowledge and the books which suddenly became vital at the time of the Renaissance, had long lain neglected on the shores of the dead sea which we call the Middle Ages. It was not their discovery which caused the Renaissance. But it was the intellectual energy, the

spontaneous outburst of intelligence, which enabled mankind at that moment to make use of them.

(Sydmonds, 2005: 3)

As was said earlier in this paper, this natural outburst spread powerfully all throughout Europe, reaching out in like manner to England. Britain was inevitably affected by the spread of the Renaissance thought at all rates and on all levels; namely the political, religious, social and artistic levels. The spirit of this movement inspired English people as it did with other European peoples to usher in an era of intensive and unprecedented creativity and innovation.

#### Early influence: The adoption

The political, religious and economic contexts in England during the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century set the ground for the spread of the pan - European renaissance; so much so that that the influence of the renaissance permeated every single field.

Politically speaking, the accession of the Tudor king Henry VIII to the throne paved the way for the English intellectual and religious Renaissance. He was much fascinated by the cultural life in Italy such that he was himself quite knowledgeable of the classics. He also encouraged English scholars to master the renaissance 'new learning' and surrounded himself with such men as Thomas Linacre and Sir Thomas More who promoted such learning. Erasmus reported in 1505 that London had become England's most important educational center, where "there are (. . .) five or six men who are accurate scholars in both tongues [Greek and Latin], such as I think even Italy itself does not at present possess." (cited in Michael Van Cleave Alexander, 1981: 165). Thomas Lincare, once back from Italy, was hired as the king's personal physician and tutor to Prince Arthur (Michael Van Cleave Alexander: *ibid*). Another instance testifying to the king's awareness of his accomplished and learned scholars is his appointment of John Colet as Dean of St. Paul's in 1505 (Michael Van Cleave Alexander: *ibid*).

The religious renaissance in England can also be said to have been ushered in by Henry VIII, and subsequently by his daughter Elizabeth. Declaring that the king of England was the Supreme Head of the Church of England not only signaled the break up with the Catholic Church and the Pope in Rome, but also paved the way for Protestantism to gain ground in England. Being a strong opponent of religious extremism, Elizabeth the 1<sup>st</sup>, attempted to restore her father's Anglicanism, in a more moderate form. Hence, religion began to be freed from medieval thought as human beings were now regarded as central in the big chain of beings starting from God as the head of that chain and going down to primary elements like air, fire, earth and water.

Economically, England at the time had witnessed a remarkable economic growth as a result of a starting industrialisation and of the gains of geographical explorations. This economic improvement made many people head for cities. Consequently, civil life began to flourish and, as a matter of course, cultural and intellectual activities were enriched. Thus, English, in its written form, gained more ground over Latin as the newly emerged educated populace demanded reading material in their own

language. Poets, playwrights and philosophers immediately furnished the English literary and intellectual scene with their works. Sonnets, plays, philosophical and political essays were the main works of that period that reflected and, sometimes, criticised the social and political life in England. Among the prominent literary figures of that era are Sir Thomas More, John Skelton, Sir Thomas Wyatt The Elder, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and the legendary William Shakespeare, to name but a few.

As a pioneer of English Renaissance, Sir Thomas More, who served under The reign of Henry VIII as a Lord Chancellor of England, set about to criticise the political life in England and Europe in general in his famous philosophical book 'Utopia'. In this work, Thomas More shows much of his humanistic drive that he adopted from his contact with the Dutch humanist Erasmus by providing an antithesis of the political and social state of affairs in Europe at that time. Closely association with Sir Thomas More, there was Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder who served also as a courtier and diplomat under King Henry the eighth. This famous literary man in England revolutionised English poetry when he adapted Italian sonnets originally introduced by Petrarch, Sannazaro, and Alamanni to fit into English social and cultural life. Wyatt's poems signalled a remarkable departure from old English poetry which was characterised by the male merry lover towards a hopeless lover. Indeed, the theme of unrequited love is present in most of Wyatt's poems, depicting relations between men and women.

### The Flourishing of the British literary Renaissance

The Elizabethan era, or what has come to be known as 'the Golden Age', also witnessed highly sophisticated literary works. During Queen Elizabeth's rule, literary figures such as Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and the famous William Shakespeare produced a significant number of poems, dramatic and non - dramatic publications. Philip Sydney, also a courtier as well as a diplomat and a soldier, expressed his support of Protestantism in his writings. He also defended poetry and its prestige, which shows his fine taste and appreciation of fine literary productions and, thus, became one of the founders of modern poetry in Renaissance England. Edmund Spenser, Sydney's fellow, known as the greatest non - dramatic poet of the Renaissance era, translated many anti - Catholic propaganda poems, which reflected, to some extent, the growing English religious identity of the period. After publishing the three books of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser deserved the name of 'the prince of poets' of his time.

It may sound unfair to leave unmentioned many English Renaissance literary figures, but it is fair enough to say that the richness of the period in terms of literary and artistic production makes it almost impossible to accommodate a comprehensive account of the works and literary figures of the era in an eight - page paper. Yet in doing any review of the English literature of the Renaissance period, one cannot leave out the ever - lasting worldwide acknowledged dramatist and poet William Shakespeare. Much of the early life of this genius playwright and poet remained shaky till he became well - known in London as an actor and playwright. One can say that Shakespeare is the one who established solid grounds for theatrical arts by his writing and enactment

of many plays; plays which reflected his mood as a tragic and romantic dramatist. As a poet, William Shakespeare wrote a number of beautiful and appealing sonnets that only his plays could rival. The beauty and the metaphorical style of his poems compelled the appreciation, attention and admiration of a wide audience, not only in England and Europe, but rather at a universal scale.

## 2. Conclusion

Having concisely overviewed the circumstances and historical background that led to the emergence of a significant cultural movement in the history of Europe and England, it should be noted that the Renaissance period was not only a point in European and human history, but also a starting and turning point which set new directions for the entire world to follow. The effects of the Renaissance proliferated so dramatically in such a way that they had a powerful and indelible influence on our modern times. The European Renaissance was, in fact, a revolution in human thought and intellect that spread to reach out nations everywhere. England, the focus of this paper, was a country which this revolution did not miss. By its massive intellectual, literary, artistic and scientific production, England and its people eagerly joined the Renaissance journey.

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