Looking Ahead

Near the end of the 1400s, a cultural movement known as the Renaissance, which had begun in Italy a century earlier, reached England. Although the next one hundred and fifty years in England were marked by bitter conflicts at home and military threats from abroad, they also produced some of the greatest works of English literature, notably William Shakespeare’s plays and the King James Bible.

Keep the following questions in mind as you read:

- What were the characteristics of Renaissance humanism?
- How is humanism reflected in Shakespeare’s works?
- How did the metaphysical and Cavalier poets respond to the religious conflicts of their time?

OBJECTIVES
In learning about the English Renaissance, you will focus on the following:

- analyzing the characteristics of various literary periods and how the issues influenced the writers of those periods
- evaluating the influences of the historical period that shaped literary characters, plots, settings, and themes
- connecting literature to historical contexts, current events, and your own experiences
1485–1650

**BRITISH LITERATURE**

1475

- **1476**
  - William Caxton establishes the first printing press in England
- **c. 1500**
  - *Everyman*, a morality play, is first performed
- **1516**
  - Sir Thomas More writes *Utopia*

1550

- **1549**
  - *Book of Common Prayer* is published
- **1557**
  - *Tottel's Miscellany*, an early collection of English songs and sonnets, is published
- **1564**
  - William Shakespeare is born
- **1576**
  - First professional playhouse opens in London
- **c. 1582**
  - Sir Philip Sidney writes *Astrophel and Stella*

**BRITISH EVENTS**

1475

- **1485**
  - Wars of the Roses end; Henry VII begins reign (until 1509)
- **1509**
  - Henry VIII begins reign (until 1547)
- **1534**
  - Henry VIII breaks with Roman Catholic Church

1550

- **1553**
  - Mary I begins reign (until 1558)
- **1558**
  - Elizabeth I begins reign (until 1603)
- **1580**
  - Sir Francis Drake circumnavigates the globe

**WORLD EVENTS**

1475

- **1492**
  - Columbus reaches New World
- **1498**
  - Vasco Da Gama reaches India
- **1517**
  - Martin Luther posts his *Ninety-Five Theses*, criticizing abuses in the church and spearheading the Protestant Reformation

1550

- **1556**
  - Akbar becomes ruler of Mughal Empire
- **1580**
  - Michel de Montaigne publishes *Essais* (Essays)
Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* is published.

Shakespeare’s sonnets are published.

John Donne writes *Holy Sonnets*.

Theaters are closed by order of the Puritans.

Robert Herrick publishes *Hesperides*.

East India Company is chartered.

Elizabeth I dies; James I begins reign (until 1625).

Gunpowder Plot is uncovered.

Jamestown colony is established.

William Harvey discovers the circulation of the blood.

Charles I begins reign (until 1649).

Ming Dynasty ends in China.

First enslaved Africans arrive in America.

Japan prohibits European contact.

Visit [www.glencoe.com](http://www.glencoe.com) for an interactive timeline.

**Reading Check**

Analyzing Graphic Information Who ruled England longer, Queen Elizabeth I or King James I?
**By the Numbers**

The Spanish Armada

In 1588, during the reign of Elizabeth I, England became one of the great sea powers of the world. In that year, Philip II, king of Spain and the most powerful ruler on the Continent, sent his renowned Spanish Armada, a huge fleet of warships, to fight England’s small navy. Philip II sought to overthrow England’s Protestant monarch and restore the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church in England. The English navy won an impressive victory, aided by the inhospitable climate of the English seas. The defeated survivors of the “invincible Armada” returned to Spain, and England’s mastery over the seas was unchallenged thereafter.

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**HOLIDAYS**

A 1552 act prohibited work on Sundays and listed 23 feast day holidays, with 11 more days off at Easter, Whitsun (the seventh Sunday after Easter), and Christmas.

**EXECUTIONS**

In Tudor England, executions for treason—which sometimes meant professing a religion that was out of favor—were not uncommon. According to a recent study, Henry VIII executed 308 people for treason between 1532 and 1540. Mary I, Henry’s Catholic daughter, executed 132 for that crime during her five-year reign. Later, Elizabeth I, Henry’s Protestant daughter, executed 183 traitors during her long reign.

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**LONDON’S POPULATION**

During this period, plague frequently swept through the city of London. Epidemics occurred in 1498, 1535, 1543, 1563, 1589, 1593 (over 10,000 deaths), 1603 (over 25,000 deaths), 1625 (over 26,000 deaths), and 1636. Despite these deaths, the population of London grew steadily. In 1500 approximately 50,000 people lived in London; a century later, approximately four times as many inhabitants lived there.

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**EARNING POWER**

During Shakespeare’s time, approximately 2 percent of the population controlled most of the nation’s land and wealth. The incomes for some members of this upper class reached nearly $94,000 a year. Yeomen—free, land-owning farmers—earned from $94 to $188 a year. A teacher earned about $28.80 a year; a laborer, a shilling, or about 9 cents, a day.

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**THEATER PRICES**

The Globe and other outdoor playhouses held approximately 3,000 spectators. The “groundlings,” who stood in the large central courtyard, paid a penny to enter—roughly equivalent to the price of a movie ticket today; those who wished to sit in the covered galleries paid from two pennies to a shilling.
**Being There**

By the early 1600s, England, Scotland, and Wales were politically united under King James I. London, the hub of the nation’s economy, was now one of the great capitals of Europe with a population exceeding 100,000. Tudor and Stuart monarchs lived in gorgeous palaces in or near London. Many writers spent their entire lives working in London or its suburbs.

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**Reading Check**

**Analyzing Graphic Information:**

1. In 1588, what percentage of the ships in the Spanish Armada were lost?

2. At the Globe Theatre, how many times more was the highest price of admission than the lowest one?

3. About how many miles from London is Shakespeare’s birthplace, Stratford-upon-Avon?
Historical, Social, and Cultural Forces

Tudor England

When Henry VII, a Tudor, became king of England in 1485, he was starting a new royal line. His defeat of Richard III and his marriage to a member of the House of York had ended the thirty-year civil war known as the Wars of the Roses. Under the Tudor monarchs—Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I—broad changes swept through England. Religious and political conflicts divided the country. But by the late 1500s, a burst of creative energy brought a golden age to England.

The Renaissance

As England became an economic and naval power, it was also influenced by a cultural movement known as the Renaissance. Beginning in Italy in the fourteenth century, the Renaissance ("rebirth" in French) later swept into France, Holland, and the other nations of Western Europe, including England. This period marked the transition between the Middle Ages and the modern world and was characterized by a renewed interest in science, art, and all learning that had flourished in ancient Greece and Rome.

Throughout the Middle Ages, many pre-Christian literary masterpieces gathered dust in monastery libraries, and their cultural value went largely unnoticed. In the early Renaissance, however, scholars such as the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (pe’trärk) rediscovered those classical works. Dazzled by what he had found, Petrarch was angry at earlier generations who had “permitted the fruit of other minds, and the writings that their ancestors had produced by toil and application, to perish through insufferable neglect.”

Humanism

An era of intellectual inquiry and artistic activity, the Renaissance produced a new movement called humanism. Proclaiming the unlimited potential of human beings to accomplish great feats in this world, humanism fostered remarkable achievements in the arts and sciences. This emphasis on humanity’s, rather than God’s, importance also threatened the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, thereby laying the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation.

In general, humanists relished new ideas and shared a lively interest in the affairs of this world, not the afterlife. Political and scientific questions intrigued...
them as did philosophical and religious ones. People painted, sculpted, and composed music as never before. The act of reading classical works emphasized the ability of the individual to think independently without guidance from higher authorities.

The French writer Michel de Montaigne (mon tän’) exemplified the new humanistic ideal. In 1571 he retired from public life to devote himself to reading and reflection on subjects that piqued his curiosity. Modeling his skeptical, independent quest for truth on that of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, Montaigne took as his mantra the question, “Que sais-je?” (“What do I know?”). To explore that question, he wrote brief prose discussions, which he called essais, meaning “attempts.”

Beginning in the late 1300s with Geoffrey Chaucer, English writers who traveled abroad brought back to England not only new books but new ideas. Foreign works were translated into English, and humanistic values and methods of inquiry took root. Printing presses such as William Caxton’s disseminated ideas far more quickly, widely, and inexpensively than had the hand-copied manuscripts of the medieval monasteries. By the late 1540s, when the eminent schoolmaster Roger Ascham became the tutor of the future Queen Elizabeth, it had become important to write, as he put it, “English matter in the English tongue for English men.” The stage was set for a magnificent flowering of literary creativity.

The Protestant Reformation
During the early 1500s, a religious revolution that had begun in central Europe was spreading across the continent. It was called the Protestant Reformation and was a protest against the powerful Roman Catholic Church that significantly influenced the social, political, and economic structure of sixteenth-century Europe. In 1517 the German monk Martin Luther helped spur on this movement by protesting against the sale of indulgences and certain other perceived abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. His protests helped trigger a widespread rejection of the pope’s authority in Europe.

By 1530 Henry VIII had reasons to align himself and England with the Protestants. He wanted his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled because she had not given him a male heir. When the pope in Rome refused, Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church, proclaiming himself the sole head of the Church of England, or the Anglican Church. This split led to bitter and long-lasting conflicts among religious factions in England that lasted until the end of the 1600s. When Henry VIII’s Catholic daughter, Mary I, became queen, she executed Protestants; later, Henry VIII’s Protestant daughter, Elizabeth I, executed Catholics. In an attempted invasion in 1588 launched by Philip II, the Catholic monarch of Spain, Elizabeth I’s navy defeated the Spanish Armada. England thus remained Protestant under Elizabeth I and her cousin, James I.
Unlike scholars in the Middle Ages, the humanists of the Renaissance focused on this world. Many of their studies—including grammar, rhetoric, and logic—reflect this shift in emphasis. For example, medieval scholars believed the form of words revealed part of the essential meaningfulness of God’s creation. Renaissance scholars, on the other hand, were curious about how human languages were related to one another.

Humanism in England
Living up to its name, humanism depended more on personal contact than on systematic instruction at schools and universities. The friendships formed by humanists—in private study with one another, in the royal courts where they served as political advisers, and in their personal correspondence—inspired many significant works in this period. Reading humanist works often seems like overhearing a conversation between friends.

“Nature herself prescribes a life of joy (that is, pleasure).”
—Thomas More, Utopia

Sir Thomas More, lord chancellor of England, and Desiderius Erasmus of Holland shared one of the most remarkable of these friendships. Whenever he visited London, Erasmus lived in More's home. There, he wrote his best-known work, The Praise of Folly, which he dedicated to his English friend. Erasmus considered More, with his cultivated intellect, sparkling wit, deep learning, and broad culture, to be the ideal humanist, calling him “omnium horarum homo,” which is usually translated as “a man for all seasons.” More's most celebrated work, his satire Utopia (1516), presents his vision of an ideal society, freed from convention and ruled by reason. More coined the title of this work from Greek words that mean “no place.”

Elizabeth I and Her Court
Queen Elizabeth I, Henry VIII’s second daughter, came to the throne in 1558. Famous for her wit and eloquence, she knew Greek, Latin, and several modern languages and loved music, dancing, and the theater. Her long reign of forty-five years was marked by religious conflicts, political intrigue, and threats of war. She turned England into a great sea power capable of defeating the feared Spanish Armada. With a nimble intelligence and strong personality, she also supported a flourishing period of cultural achievement. Elizabeth’s court served as a forum for daring displays of wit that the queen greatly admired—and in which she skillfully participated. Her favorites, privileged members of the court, exemplified the qualities she most admired. Sir Walter Raleigh, for example, combined many occupations: soldier and sailor, explorer of Virginia and Guiana, poet and scientist, possible spy. He began to write his History of the World while imprisoned in the Tower of London by Elizabeth’s successor, her cousin James I.

The Court of James I
When Elizabeth I died in 1603, the throne passed peacefully to her cousin James, king of Scotland and a member of the Stuart family that would rule England through most of the 1600s. Thus James VI of Scotland became James I of England; all of Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) was at last ruled by one monarch. Elizabeth I had been worldly and practical; James I, however, was theological and disputatious. He commissioned the translation of the Bible into English, still known as the King James Bible, a masterpiece of English prose. He wrote on a variety of subjects, including witchcraft and government, and argued for the divine right of kings. Like Elizabeth I, James I enjoyed theatrical performances. In fact, he admired one troupe of players so much that he gave it his patronage, commissioning it to give special performances at court. Formerly known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the King’s Men included William Shakespeare, whose tragedy Macbeth was first performed before the king in 1605.
In the early 1580s, Sir Philip Sidney wrote a defense of literature in response to Puritan attacks claiming that all art was immoral.

from A Defence of Poesie by Sir Philip Sidney

Now therein of all sciences (I speak still of human, and according to the humane conceits) is our poet the monarch. For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it. Nay, he doth, as if your journey should lie through a fair vineyard, at the very first give you a cluster of grapes, that, full of that taste, you may long to pass further. He beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margent with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness; but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, . . . and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue: even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste. . . . So is it in men (most of which are childish in the best things, till they be cradled in their graves): glad they will be to hear the tales of Hercules, Achilles, Cyrus, and Aeneas; and, hearing them, must needs hear the right description of wisdom, valor, and justice.

Reading Check
Interpreting According to Sidney, how does poetry fulfill a moral purpose?
William Shakespeare, poet and playwright, is said to be the world’s favorite author. No other playwright’s works have been produced so often and read so widely in so many different countries. On the one hand, little is known about Shakespeare as a person. He left behind no letters or manuscripts to provide clues about his personality or the inner workings of his mind. On the other hand, Shakespeare imbued the characters in his plays with such rich humanity that they live on the page and on the stage, still inspiring readers and theater audiences more than four hundred years after their creation.

“Soul of the age! / The applause! delight! the wonder of our stage!”

—Ben Jonson

Shakespeare’s Theaters

No one knows when Shakespeare first arrived in London, but his name first appears in London theatrical records as an actor and a playwright. His career in the theater proved profitable for him. Around 1610, he had earned enough money to leave London and retire to an estate in the small country town of Stratford-upon-Avon, where he had grown up. His fortune, however, did not come directly from his plays. An astute businessman, Shakespeare was a shareholder, or part owner, in one of London’s most popular acting companies, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. In 1599 the company built the Globe Theatre, the most famous of Elizabethan theaters.

Located on the disreputable south bank of the river Thames, the Globe was designed to provide inexpensive entertainment for approximately three thousand spectators. Built roughly in the shape of an O, this playhouse was open to the air. Galleries of seats and areas for standing ringed three-quarters of the platform stage. Above the stage a sign depicted the Greek hero Hercules carrying the world on his shoulders and bore the Latin inscription “Tótus mundus agit histrionem” (“The whole world plays the actor”)—or as Shakespeare wrote in his comedy As You Like It, “All the world’s a stage.”

Shakespeare was also a shareholder in the Blackfriars Theatre, a more intimate and expensive playhouse. Closer to the center of London and attracting a wealthier audience, the Blackfriars was roofed and provided candlelight for evening performances. For this playhouse, Shakespeare wrote plays that targeted a more sophisticated audience.

Shakespeare’s Learning

Alluding to Shakespeare’s lack of higher learning, Ben Jonson wrote that Shakespeare had “small Latin and less Greek.” In fact, while there is no indication that Shakespeare knew any Greek at all, Latin works by the poet Ovid and the playwrights Plautus and Seneca, which he read at the local grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon, deeply influenced him. Shakespeare imaginatively incorporated much of what he read into his plays. For example, in one of his essays, the French writer Montaigne praises the simple culture of some Native Americans as described by early French explorers. In his play The Tempest, Shakespeare transforms Montaigne’s description into a vision of an ideal society.

Shakespeare’s Humanism

Shakespeare’s ability to absorb and transform different kinds of material—from political issues of the day to events from Roman and English history—reflects a humanistic ideal. His plays often focus on characters who seek to fulfill their potential. They are constantly probing and striving, demonstrating their wit at court, displaying their courage on the battlefield, falling in love and writing poetry, or devising plots to bring about their deepest desires, whether loving or vengeful. No other writer has seen more deeply into the many manifestations of human nature. In an uncanny way, Shakespeare understands why people behave the way they do. Young and old, women and men, good and evil, beggars and kings—all live in his plays.
The power of Shakespeare’s imagination informs his understanding of even his villains’ complexities. In the following passage from Richard III, the title character vows to become a villain because of his physical repugnance and the unhappiness it has brought him.

**from Richard III, Act 1, scene 1 by William Shakespeare**

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that loured upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruiséd arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings;
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkléd front;
And now, instead of mounting barbéed steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamped, and want love’s majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determinéd to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

**Reading Check**

**Interpreting** How does Richard’s speech reflect Shakespeare’s humanism?
Should limits be imposed on the quest for knowledge? That question was as relevant in the Renaissance as it is today. With its emphasis on investigation rather than revelation, humanism inevitably roused the concern of religious authorities. Not all humanists, however, saw a contradiction between religious faith and free inquiry. After all, had not God endowed human beings with intelligence?

Humanism and Religion

Sir Thomas More’s humanism, for example, was grounded in the Roman Catholic religion. He never allowed public affairs, however important, to distract him from private prayer and charities dear to his heart. He ran his home as a school for his daughters, whom he educated in Christian and classical subjects. It was a matter of conscience—his opposition to Henry VIII’s intended divorce—that led to his execution for treason, ordered by the very king whom he had served so well. As he was about to be beheaded, More defined his relationship to both the sacred and secular realms: “The King’s good servant, but God’s first.”

“As thou readest therefore think that every syllable pertaineth to thine own self, and suck out the pith of the scripture, and arm thyself against all assaults.”

—William Tyndale

The Bible in English

Many Renaissance writers who did not associate with humanists such as More nonetheless were eager to wrest the control of learning from religious authorities. An important way to do so was to bring the Christian sacred writings down from the pulpit and into people’s homes. The new printing presses made translations of the Bible into modern languages relatively affordable. By 1522 Martin Luther had translated the New Testament into German. In the 1520s and 1530s, William Tyndale, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation in England, followed Luther’s example by translating the Bible into English. He sought to bring the words of scripture into the hearts and minds of individual readers.

These “assaults” were real. The penalties for translating the Bible without official approval from either the pope or—after Henry VIII took control of the Church of England—the government were often deadly. Tyndale was burned at the stake for heresy in 1536. Ironically, the scholars who later worked on the official translation of the Bible, the King James Version (see page 416), borrowed heavily from Tyndale’s work.

Metaphysical and Cavalier Poets

Growing up as a Catholic in Protestant England, the poet John Donne learned early about the dangers of religious conflict. In his youth, however, Donne wrote witty poems about romantic love. Many of his contemporaries also delighted in writing about subjects far removed from the entangled and divisive religious issues of the day. Donne was the most notable of a group of writers later referred to as the metaphysical poets (see page 428). Poets such as Donne and Andrew Marvell shared a strong sense of the contradictions inherent in life, such as that between the beauty of the sensual world and the ravages of time.

In 1625 King James I was succeeded by his son, Charles I, whose court was more pleasure-loving than his father’s had been. His courtiers were called cavaliers, after the Italian word for knight. They still aspired to the grace and elegance of Renaissance gallantry, but they cared little for its high seriousness and Christian chivalry. The Cavalier Poets (see page 452), such as Robert Herrick, Sir John Suckling, and Richard Lovelace, wrote lyrical poems of great polish, sophistication, wit, and raciness. They celebrated earthly pleasures, especially quick-blooming love, and lamented its inevitable fading.
**Batter my heart, three-personed God** by John Donne

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,

But is captivated, and proves weak or untrue,
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.
Why It Matters

The value that humanism placed on human experience has permanently altered the way people judge the world. Moreover, humanism’s emphasis on intellectual questioning and direct observation gave birth to modern scientific methods. As Sir Francis Bacon wrote, “Knowledge is power.”

The literature of the English Renaissance—particularly the plays of William Shakespeare—is one of the pinnacles of world culture. The reign of Elizabeth I also witnessed the beginning of England’s three-hundred-year transformation from a small island nation into a global empire ruling one quarter of the world. The growth of the British Empire, in turn, spread the influence of English culture to most corners of the world.

The cultural products of the Protestant Reformation including the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible, have enriched the spiritual lives and the language of countless English speakers throughout the world.

Cultural Links

Shakespeare’s plays and poems continue to enthrall audiences: on stage and on film, in adaptations into operas and hip-hop musicals, in historically faithful productions with male actors playing female parts, and in iconoclastic productions set in inner-city slums and high-rise penthouses. Biographies and novels about Shakespeare appear frequently, attesting to his undiminished appeal.

The King James Bible has profoundly influenced the development of the English language, introducing many phrases into the language that are still in use. These phrases include “fall flat on his face,” “a man after my own heart,” “to pour one’s heart out,” and “the land of the living.”

Connect to Today

Use what you have learned about the period to do one of these activities.

1. Speaking/Listening The hero of the Renaissance was a multi-talented individual skilled in many fields, from writing sonnets to fighting battles. Does this ideal still have value in the modern world? With a small group of classmates, discuss whether modern concepts of specialization and teamwork have rendered the Renaissance person obsolete.

2. Visual Literacy From paintings and drawings in her own time to films and television programs today, Elizabeth I has been one of the most widely depicted monarchs of all time. Working with a group of your classmates, create a gallery of different representations of Elizabeth I that show different facets of her personality and her public role.

Big Ideas Link to Web resources to further explore the Big Ideas at www.glencoe.com.

OBJECTIVES

- Hold a discussion.
- Create a visual display.

Study Central Visit www.glencoe.com and click on Study Central to review the English Renaissance.