|  |
| --- |
| **General Characteristics of the Renaissance**        "Renaissance" literally means "rebirth." It refers especially to the rebirth of learning that began in Italy in the fourteenth century, spread to the north, including England, by the sixteenth century, and ended in the north in the mid-seventeenth century (earlier in Italy). During this period, there was an enormous renewal of interest in and study of classical antiquity.        Yet the Renaissance was more than a "rebirth." It was also an age of new discoveries, both geographical (exploration of the New World) and intellectual. Both kinds of discovery resulted in changes of tremendous import for Western civilization. In science, for example, Copernicus (1473-1543) attempted to prove that the sun rather than the earth was at the center of the planetary system, thus radically altering the cosmic world view that had dominated antiquity and the Middle Ages. In religion, Martin Luther (1483-1546) challenged and ultimately caused the division of one of the major institutions that had united Europe throughout the Middle Ages--the Church. In fact, Renaissance thinkers often thought of themselves as ushering in the modern age, as distinct from the ancient and medieval eras.        Study of the Renaissance might well center on five interrelated issues. First, although Renaissance thinkers often tried to associate themselves with classical antiquity and to dissociate themselves from the Middle Ages, important continuities with their recent past, such as belief in the Great Chain of Being, were still much in evidence. Second, during this period, certain significant political changes were taking place. Third, some of the noblest ideals of the period were best expressed by the movement known as Humanism. Fourth, and connected to Humanist ideals, was the literary doctrine of "imitation," important for its ideas about how literary works should be created. Finally, what later probably became an even more far-reaching influence, both on literary creation and on modern life in general, was the religious movement known as the Reformation.        Renaissance thinkers strongly associated themselves with the values of classical antiquity, particularly as expressed in the newly rediscovered classics of literature, history, and moral philosophy. Conversely, they tended to dissociate themselves from works written in the Middle Ages, a historical period they looked upon rather negatively. According to them, the Middle Ages were set in the "middle" of two much more valuable historical periods, antiquity and their own. Nevertheless, as modern scholars have noted, extremely important continuities with the previous age still existed. |

|  |
| --- |
| **The Great Chain of Being**              Among the most important of the continuities with the Classical period was the concept of the Great Chain of Being. Its major premise was that every existing thing in the universe had its "place" in a divinely planned hierarchical order, which was pictured as a chain vertically extended. ("Hierarchical" refers to an order based on a series of higher and lower, strictly ranked gradations.) An object's "place" depended on the relative proportion of "spirit" and "matter" it contained--the less "spirit" and the more "matter," the lower down it stood. At the bottom, for example, stood various types of inanimate objects, such as metals, stones, and the four elements (earth, water, air, fire). Higher up were various members of the vegetative class, like trees and flowers. Then came animals; then humans; and then angels. At the very top was God. Then within each of these large groups, there were other hierarchies. For example, among metals, gold was the noblest and stood highest; lead had less "spirit" and more matter and so stood lower. (Alchemy was based on the belief that lead could be changed to gold through an infusion of "spirit.") The various species of plants, animals, humans, and angels were similarly ranked from low to high within their respective segments. Finally, it was believed that between the segments themselves, there was continuity (shellfish were lowest among animals and shaded into the vegetative class, for example, because without locomotion, they most resembled plants).        Besides universal orderliness, there was universal interdependence. This was implicit in the doctrine of "correspondences," which held that different segments of the chain reflected other segments. For example, Renaissance thinkers viewed a human being as a microcosm (literally, a "little world") that reflected the structure of the world as a whole, the macrocosm; just as the world was composed of four "elements" (earth, water, air, fire), so too was the human body composed of four substances called "humours," with characteristics corresponding to the four elements. (Illness occurred when there was an imbalance or "disorder" among the humours, that is, when they did not exist in proper proportion to each other.) "Correspondences" existed everywhere, on many levels. Thus the hierarchical organization of the mental faculties was also thought of as reflecting the hierarchical order within the family, the state, and the forces of nature. When things were properly ordered, reason ruled the emotions, just as a king ruled his subjects, the parent ruled the child, and the sun governed the planets. But when disorder was present in one realm, it was correspondingly reflected in other realms. For example, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the murder of the King Duncan causes a disturbance in the chain which subsequently brings about a disturbance in the State of Scotland (war), the Kingdom, as well as in the weather (storms, witches and unnatural events taking place in nature), the state of Macbeth’s mind (apparitions and obsession of the mind) and in the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. Macbeth’s *obsession of the mind* (and his need to hold onto the crown forever), leads him to take actions that ultimately bring forth his tragic end.        Though Renaissance writers seemed to be quite on the side of "order," the theme of "disorder" is much in evidence, suggesting that the age may have been experiencing some growing discomfort with traditional hierarchies. According to the chain of being concept, all existing things have their precise place and function in the universe, and to depart from one's proper place was to betray one's nature. Human beings, for example, were pictured as placed between the beasts and the angels. To act against human nature by not allowing reason to rule the emotions--was to descend to the level of the beasts. In the other direction, to attempt to go above one's proper place, as Eve did when she was tempted by Satan, was to court disaster. |

GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

God  
Angels  
Kings/Queens  
Archbishops  
Dukes/Duchesses  
Bishops  
Marquises/Marchionesses  
Earls/Countesses  
Viscounts/Viscountesses  
Barons/Baronesses  
Abbots/Deacons  
Knights/Local Officials  
Ladies-in-Waiting  
Priests/Monks  
Squires  
Pages  
Messengers  
Merchants/Shopkeepers  
Tradesmen  
Yeomen Farmers  
Soldiers/Town Watch  
Household Servants  
Tennant Farmers  
Shephards/Herders  
Beggars  
Actors  
Thieves/Pirates  
Gypsies  
Animals  
Birds  
Worms  
Plants  
Rocks