

## Renaissance Humanism in Shakespeare's plays

Dr. Sunita Nimavat

Assistant Professor of English  
N.P.College of Computer & Mgt.,  
Kadi (North Gujarat).

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### ABSTRACT

*The term 'humanism' is complex but enlightening. It was first employed by German philosophers for the Renaissance emphasizes on classical studies of Greek philosophy and literature. It included the study of poetry, rhetoric, history and moral philosophy. The Latin Word 'humanitas' denoted the development of human virtues to their fullest extent. These virtues were understanding, benevolence, compassion, mercy, prudence, fortitude, eloquence and even love for honor. In this paper, I will start with the source of the word Humanism. Then I will focus on views of different people and eras on Humanism e.g. Renaissance influenced literature, politics, education, scientific and rational outlook while Greeks glorified human body, human nature and human virtues influencing literature, politics, education, scientific and rational outlook in sixteenth century. Then I have focused on the outcomes of Humanism and its effect seen on different ages. Then I have focused on the contribution and expression of Humanism in the works of various writers and Shakespeare in Particular. Many scholars, thinkers and writers began to explore the untrodden territory of knowledge. Plato, Petrarch, Aristotle, Dante, Machiavelli, Cicero and other thinkers became the guiding angels for many thinkers who have been referred to in my paper. I have referred to various works where we find humanism e.g. Montaigne's essays Spenser's Faerie Queene, Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia, Sir Thomas More's work titled Utopia, Shakespeare's The Tempest, The Hamlet, King Lear, As You Like It etc. Thus, I have focused my paper on the reflection of Humanism in Renaissance and different works of Shakespeare.*

**Key words:** Humanism, Renaissance, Nature, Nurture, Humanitas.

The history of the term 'humanism' is complex but enlightening. It was first employed by German philosophers for the Renaissance emphasizes on classical studies of Greek philosophy and literature. It included the study of poetry, rhetoric, history and moral philosophy. The Latin Word 'humanitas' denoted the development of human virtues to their fullest extent. These virtues were understanding, benevolence, compassion, mercy, prudence, fortitude, eloquence and even love for honor.

The source of 'humanitas' was classical literature and Greek and Roman view of life. These Pagan thinking emphasized the welfare of mankind and dignity of man. The Greeks glorified human body, human nature and human virtues instead of godly strength and omnipotence. They accepted human fallibility and the ability of man's rise and struggle. Renaissance took place in Italy and in sixteenth century, it spread in England influencing literature, politics, education, scientific and

rational outlook. The words of Francis Bacon epitomizes the Renaissance humanism when he said he took all areas of knowledge his province. Humanism was thus applied to classicism, modern concepts of humanities and human-centeredness.

Humanism gave rise to modern social science which became a practical instrument of social inquiry. Direct experience was prioritized over traditional wisdom. Renaissance realism also involved the unblinking examination of human uncertainty, folly and immorality. Boccaccio, for example depicted human vices and disorders in encyclopedic manner. Humanistic realism encouraged critical attitude.

Personal autonomy and individualism characterized humanism leading to critical scrutiny and self-inquiry. Some thinkers were aware of the darker sides of individualism but the experience of individual took on a heroic tone and

parallel to individualism arose humanistic theme, the dignity of man.

The goal of learning was the basic principle of individualism. Many scholars, thinkers and writers began to explore the untrodden territory of knowledge. Plato Petrarch, Aristotle, Dante, Machiavelli, Cicero and other thinkers became the guiding angels for many thinkers. These great luminaries influenced political thinking of the world.

Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of independence* has been amply influenced by Renaissance Humanism and enlightenment. Petrarch promoted the recovery and transcription of classical texts.

In England, Humanism sprang from Italian sources. Petrarch influenced Sir Philip Sidney and other sonneteers. Erasmus (1466-1536) was the only humanist whose fame can be compared to Petrarch's. He contributed to Christian philosophy, justifying earthly pleasures form a religious perspective. Montaigne's *essays* are a great milestone in the humanistic project of self inquiry. His essays are personal in nature and recommend a mature acceptance of life with all its contradictions. Sir Thomas More (1438-1535) wrote a book titled *Utopia* whose focus is on human welfare and human dignity. He eschews the rigorous cultivation of virtue and enjoys moderate pleasures. He did not see contraction between earthly pleasures and religious piety. Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* exhibits humanistic synthesis of classical philosophy, Christian doctrine, psychological realism and practical politics. Spenser's *Faerie Queen* depicts ideal, chivalric hero with laudable human virtues.

During the Elizabethan Age, George Chapman, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare upheld human dignity. Among these great playwrights, Shakespeare stands out as poet who held mirror up to nature. His plays reflect an inquiry into human character with emphasis on human dignity and human emotions. In *Hamlet*, the Protagonist eulogizes the dignity and beauty of human life. He says,

What a piece of work is man!

How noble in reason!

How infinite in faculty!

In form and moving and how express and admirable!

How like an angel!

In apprehension how like a god!

The beauty of the world!

The paragon of animals!

Of course, Hamlet's attitude being cynical, he calls human life "the quintessence of dust". In plays, Shakespeare shows progression from tragedies to romances. The message becomes clearly humanistic in nature.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero is a metaphor of civilizing power of the artist and educator. His magical arts tame and control the tempests of human nature. He possesses noble qualities of generosity, compassion, friendship and wisdom. Shakespeare had a skeptical outlook and therefore presented human problems that result from human weaknesses. His works are dialectical in nature. Skepticism is an integral feature of Renaissance humanism. His Plays present binary oppositions such as action versus contemplation, theory versus practice, dignity versus depravity, individualism versus society and so on.

Shakespeare did not have much formal education unlike other dramatists of the period. However, his education was clearly grounded in humanism. In *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*, the principles of Renaissance humanism are clearly visible. He celebrates humanism even in his tragic plays. Hamlet, King Lear, Othello and Macbeth suffer and meet tragic death but despite their sufferings, they exhibit noble human qualities like compassion, fortitude, patience and 'milk of human kindness'.

Renaissance thinking believed that man occupied the middle position in Great Chain of Being. Human nature is in between beastly nature and divine nature. King Lear believed in essential goodness of human nature. Shakespeare held that man is neither all good nor all bad. It is a subject to change. In *Ling Lear*, Shakespeare presents the conflict between nature versus nurture (art). Shakespeare did not place art over nature.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero describes Caliban as a born devil. In *The Tempest*, learning is the major theme. Miranda is educated and cultured. For Caliban, education is not only futile but harmful. This means that Shakespeare basically emphasized the innate nature. In Indian mythology, we have many examples of negative impact of education. Ravana was a Brahmin but for him, education and knowledge became the means of destruction.

Prospero learnt art of magic at the risk of his kingdom but at the end, he decides to forsake it because he realizes that whatever he has achieved through art is quite meaningless. He says,

We are such a stuff as dreams are made

On; and our little life is rounded with a sleep.

Prospero knows that art or nurture can hardly change human nature. Shakespeare uses locations that present contradictions between nature and nurture. As Duke Senior says in *As You Like It*, in the forest of Arden, they find “tongues in trees, books in running brooks and sermons in the stones”.

Shakespeare believed that evils sprang not from nature but from the corruption of nature. Shakespeare was the product of Renaissance and enlightenment. It was gradual process from Christian dogmatism to Hellenism. Therefore we find the influence of both Hebraic culture and new secular and cultural aspects of humanism which emerged from classical study of Greek art and philosophy. In Shakespeare’s last plays, the triumph of innocence over evil is depicted. We also find Hebraic qualities like wisdom and love but also Hellenic virtues like concern for nature, fortitude, human dignity in later plays of Shakespeare.

Renaissance humanism is the rejection of the belief that man is merely a passive tool in the hands of providence. Man is the middle position in the Great Chain of Being, below him are animals and plants and above him are sky dwellers and gods. He is both spirit and flesh. He is neither heavenly nor earthly. He is the maker and shaper of his own destiny. He can go down to the level of brutes or rise to the level of the divine.

Drama represents nature and life. Greeks believed that change is inevitable, permanence is an illusion. Some believed that nothing comes out of nothing. Every thing is static and unchangeable. Those who believed in the theory of change feels that strife is inevitable when change takes place. In *King Lear*, we find that Lear is a union of sanity and insanity, love and hate, wisdom and folly order and chaos, nature and art. In the play, there is a storm inside and outside. In *Pericles Marina* says, “The world to me is a lasting storm”. Shakespeare could never detach himself from Hebraic theology. However, he remained immersed under the influence of Hellenism and humanist ideology. For Shakespeare, human nature is always pulled from opposite between conscience and desire. He envisions change as the law of life and nature.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero represents the Renaissance humanism. He embodies the Renaissance spirit of desire to learn and uphold and justice and individualism. At the end, he abjures magic that stands for power. He frees the nobleman from his magical power to show that men should control and shape their own laws. They should have free access to knowledge and learning. Renaissance humanism highlighted the idea that every individual must be responsible citizen and a leader in the community. The mistreatment of the colonized, particularly American Indians, Africans. Even Prospero’s fanaticism with magic and education make him irresponsible, heartless ruler. However, Prospero’s forgiveness and generosity symbolize Renaissance humanism and fresh idea of individual freedom and opportunity to grow.

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