

HUMANISM

*Useful for B.A. Part I English (Hons.) students
Paper- I*

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Humanism as a distinct phenomenon did not appear in England until the late 15th century. The wave of humanism first spread over northern Italy, the European continent and then it hit the English shore with an overwhelming force. Since then it has left an indelible impression on intellectual and cultural life of England. Renaissance Humanism is a broad educational, literary and cultural movement rooted in the "recovery, imitation and interpretation of Greek and Roman texts". Revival of classical learning changed the entire perspective of the contemporary world at the time. The origin of the term 'humanism' can be traced back to Latin '*humanitas*' as referred by Cicero which stood for a quality education that promotes cultural value. Humanistic studies known as *Studia humanitatis* covered a wide range of studies such as language, grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history and moral philosophy. It added cultural and intellectual values to life and society. In the broader sense, *Humanitas* (liberal education) puts emphasis on the development of human virtue. Humanism broadened the views about life. In the 14th century Italy, Petrarch advocated the inclusion of *studia humanitatis* in the University curriculum. One can say that it was Petrarch who laid the foundation of humanist study of classical manuscripts. However, one must not think that medieval scholars were not familiar with classical learning. What distinguishes Renaissance humanism from medieval scholastic philosophy is that humanists were more concerned with the philosophy of man. They read the ancient writers in their full context taking into considerations their social political concern. Renaissance humanism propagates that we should exercise individual powers of reason rather than accepting or adopting the scriptures with a blind faith. The humanists focused more on the secular contents of thought and literature. The movement is also responsible for bringing academia out into the national scene. Study of classics influenced and inspired the renaissance humanists and helped them develop a new rhetoric and new learning. Renaissance humanists are religious but are not blind followers; they have registered their protests against the abuses of Church. It is from the

Renaissance that modern secularism has grown. One must understand that English humanism grew in two significant phases: one, as an academic movement rooted in the 15th century finding its best voice in the works of Sir Thomas More, Sir Thomas Elyot and Roger Ascham; and second, a literary/poetic movement led by Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare. The Oxford scholar William Grocyn and his pupil Thomas Lincare have encouraged classical studies that opened new discourse in English intellectual society. At Oxford, they formed a group joined by young scholars such as William Lyly and John Colet. The humanistic contribution of the Oxford group hovered around philology. Grocyn lectured on Greek and theology. Lincare worked extensively on English grammar. He is also responsible for the foundation of the Royal College of Physicians. Colet laid the foundation of St Paul's school and in collaboration with Lyly and Erasmus wrote the constitution of the school. Another significant contribution of these three scholars is the production of Latin Grammar which for decades remained a part and parcel of English education. On the literary side, Sir Thomas More's famous book *Utopia* (1516) offers a satirical view of traditional institutions but alternately presents an imaginary model society based on reason and nature. More's book emphasises that "Nature herself prescribes a life of joy (that is pleasure)". He sees no conflict between earthly enjoyment and religious beliefs. Sir Thomas More's clear humanistic approach is evident in *Utopia* as he claims politics begins and ends with humanity. Roger Ascham's famous manual, *The Scholemaster* (1570) offers a complete programme of humanistic education. Humanism in England works thus in all spheres ranging from political and philosophical discourse, education and to different kinds of literary enterprises. In the realm of poetry, prose and drama, the impact of humanism became more evident. Sir Philip Sidney's works '*Astrophel and Stella*' and particularly, '*The Defence of Poesie*' reasserts the views of Petrarch and Boccaccio. *The Defence...* is a typical humanistic synthesis of classical philosophy, Christian theology, psychological realism and practical politics. The spread of humanism and its impact on English drama opened new possibilities for the literary world. A sudden burst of literary activity was happening around 1590s, so we see great dramatists and poets writing almost simultaneously. Talented native writers found an opportunity to gain respectability and recognition in the literary and professional world. Native and the classical tradition joined hands to create a hybrid style in drama and poetry. The plays of Christopher Marlowe or Shakespeare are poignant document of conflicting values: action versus contemplation, monarchy versus republic, human dignity versus human depravity, good against evil, and so on. Shakespeare, the master craftsman with his spirit of humanistic inquiry, keen insight, linguistic excellence and a love for humanity, paved the

way for the poets and playwrights of future generations. The Elizabethan dramatists beginning from Marlowe, Shakespeare and other playwrights such as Ben Jonson delineate characters with love compassion imagination and wonderful craft. They contributed immensely to a humanistic tradition. Since humanism is a vast concept, it's not easy to discuss it all in a limited space. But before concluding one can sum up in simple words that humanism is a way of viewing things that contribute to the idea of human freedom and progress. It's a human-centred philosophy that keeps changing with passing years, but the basic concept as a Bengali poet of 14th century claims - "Man and only man is the truth, rest is nothing." - remains the same.

Thankyou