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Reading 5.1 "The Spirit of the Renaissance"

You're about to read the opening chapter of historian Dorothy Mills' book *Renaissance and Reformation Times*. It's a history book written specifically for adolescents, and it was originally published in the 1930s.

One main idea from the chapter is "*The Renaissance was a time of "rebirth" and renewal for Western Europe.*" Write down textual evidence from the reading that supports that idea.

Main Idea: *The Renaissance was a time of "rebirth" and renewal for Western Europe.*

Textual Evidence:

1
2
3



CHAPTER I

THE SPIRIT OF THE RENAISSANCE

THE MODERN WORLD as we know it, a world dominated by machinery and inspired by scientific achievements, came out of the period following the industrial and French revolutions of the eighteenth century. But this modern world is the heir of all the ages. It has as its heritage things which have come down from the distant past: from the ancient world, from Egypt and Babylonia, from Palestine, from Greece and Rome; from the far distant East; from the Middle Ages; from the Renaissance. Each civilization made its own contribution. In each age we find something that is akin to us today, and this is perhaps especially true of the period we know as the Renaissance, for it was this period that had in it ideas and attitudes of mind that created conditions sometimes not unlike those of today.

It is seldom possible to give definite dates for the beginning or the end of periods. In some countries the Renaissance had begun in the thirteenth century; it was at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and in northern Europe it continued through the sixteenth in the form of the great religious struggle known as the Reformation.

The medieval world, religious, political and social, was based on the principle of unity. The individual was always a member of some social unit and it was as a corporate member of society that he gained his importance.

The medieval philosopher did not think in terms of independent states or of conflicting religious organizations. He believed that Christendom was one great state embodying both the temporal and the spiritual sides of life. The idea of unity in government was an ancient one. Europe had inherited it first from the Roman Empire, then it had been revived by Charlemagne and finally embodied in the Holy Roman Empire. And as the Holy Roman Emperor was the temporal head of this great unity, so was the Pope, the traditional successor of St. Peter, the head of a spiritual society that bound all Christians together.

Besides the unity of the Empire, the medieval world recognized smaller units within the imperial state. A man was always part of society and important because he was a part, whether it was of the feudal system on the continent of Europe, or of the manor in England, or of the town with its highly organized merchant and craft guilds. To be outside these medieval units of society was to be an outcast indeed.

There were great scholars in the Middle Ages. There were philosophers like Abelard and Roger Bacon who were greatly daring for their time in what they believed and taught; others like St. Thomas Aquinas, whose philosophy crystallized all that was best in the medieval church into a form that was destined to live for long centuries after him. Scholars in different countries were bound together in those days by the language they used. Latin was almost universally written by all educated men; it was the language not only of the Church, but of the law and of education in general.

But at the same time that great learning existed among a few scholars, ignorance was general among the people. The Church did not encourage too much independence of thought and the spread of learning was difficult because of

its great expense. Manuscripts had to be copied, and, beautiful and artistic as they often were, the work of the copyist was a slow and laborious task, and only the rich could afford to buy many books. The medieval scribe worked often in the scriptorium of a monastery, and the manuscripts he copied were chiefly service books or the Gospels, though in some monasteries the writings of Greek and Latin authors were also copied. The parchment used by the scribe was so costly that sometimes he took some older manuscript and erased what was on it in order to use it for his own work.

Imperial unity was the medieval ideal, but there was a great contrast between the theory and the fact, and real unity had never been achieved. The Empire was a unity only in name, and within its borders there were conflicts, jealousies, intrigues, injustice. The election itself presented too often a sordid spectacle of intrigue and bribery among the rival claimants for the imperial crown. The Emperor did not keep the peace even within his own empire and he was constantly at war without. The ideal of just and honest rule was never reached, and slowly the power of the Emperor was weakened. By the end of the Middle Ages, though the prestige of the office was still great, the Emperor had little real authority outside Germany itself and not always much within.

As a result of this weakening of imperial rule, the vision of empire was giving way to the idea of smaller nationalities, to groups of people bound together by common race and language and religion, a common history, common ambitions, common dangers, and living in a land that could be clearly defined by its natural boundaries. Of these peoples, three became great Renaissance powers: England, France and Spain.

In England the Wars of the Roses, which ended in 1485, brought the Tudors to the throne. Under her Tudor rulers there came to England greater internal unity and security and an ever-increasing national consciousness, a feeling which was to culminate in the Renaissance England of Queen Elizabeth.

In France the final defeat of the English in the Hundred Years' War freed the land from foreign foes. As civil strife died down and the kings subdued the feudal barons and established their royal power, France began to be conscious of herself as a nation, to be proud of her achievements, and under such kings as Louis XI, Francis I and Henry IV she took her place as one of the great nations of Europe.

In Spain the Moors were driven out, and Ferdinand the Catholic of Aragon and Isabella of Castile established a united Christian kingdom. Under their successors there was a great expansion of Spanish power, especially under the rule of Charles V and Philip II. In the sixteenth century Spain was the dominating power in Europe.

With the weakening of the Empire and the growth of nationalities, other forms of society tended to break up or change. The invention of gunpowder had already made the feudal castle useless as a place of defence, and as the kings, especially in France, gained more power, feudalism was weakened until in its medieval form it almost disappeared. New methods of industry tended to weaken the guilds which in too many cases had become exclusive and narrow and unwilling to compromise with new ideas. As a result town life changed and industry expanded.

During the Middle Ages the unity of the Church had not been broken. Voices had been raised from time to time questioning this or that in the beliefs or organization of the Church, but no real breach had been made. It was not

a wholly bad thing that certain kinds of authority were unquestioned, for the civilization of Europe needed for a time the steady influence that stability of thought gave to it. But as the Middle Ages drew to a close and men became conscious that changes were taking place, a questioning spirit arose and old established ideas and organizations were challenged. Foremost among these was the power of the Church.

The Pope was not only the head of a great spiritual society; he was also a temporal ruler with secular power over the States of the Church in central Italy. As a temporal ruler he found himself often in conflict with the Emperor, he quarrelled with the kings of England and France over the question of his overlordship, and he was constantly at war with one or another of the neighbouring Italian princes and cities. All these secular affairs were costly, and papal taxation became a means of raising funds, not for the spiritual work of the Church, but for the furtherance of papal ambitions and to carry on the wars in which the Papacy was involved. When men began questioning the rightness of the temporal interests of the Papacy, they soon began thinking of its teaching and asking for a return to a Christianity free from the tangles and intrigues of worldly affairs.

Another change was taking place in the use of Latin. The Latin language was no longer the only language for educated people. Scholars were beginning to study Greek, and to read Greek literature in the original and no longer in Latin translations. The invention of printing had widened the spread of education, and many more people were able to read and to possess books. With this study of Greek literature came a new way of thinking about human life. The Greek loved life. He lived in the present and was full

of endless interest in it. He found life good, but his outlook was pagan. Into the medieval mind, haunted by superstition, and regarding this world too often as evil, with heaven or hell as reward or punishment, came the poetry of the Greek like a wind bringing with it the freshness of spring. For a time, especially in Italy, it carried men away with such enthusiasm that life became pagan and given up to pleasures that were far from the Greek virtue of moderation.

The Greek had believed in the freedom of the individual. Renaissance thinkers began rejecting the idea that thinking must follow the old accepted traditions and authority, and more and more they began thinking as individuals and not as members of a society. And with this growing sense of the importance of the individual and of the national state, men began to write more in their own languages, in English, French, Italian, Spanish.

This spirit of independent thinking made men question old scientific theories. Experiment and investigation brought a new knowledge of the heavens, knowledge which caused much heart-searching and which was very disturbing to the conservative and orthodox thinkers.

There have always been men who have loved adventure. Among the various causes of this, perhaps one has been the need of experiencing something different from the ordinary surroundings of life. Adventures have come to men in many different ways, and the Middle Ages did not lack men of imagination who went out in search of the unknown. There were adventurous travellers in the Middle Ages. Some were pilgrims; some like Marco Polo went across the far continent of Asia, whence they returned full of stories of marvels both real and imaginary. Other travellers, less scientific perhaps, but equally adventurous, set

out to find such things as the kingdom of Prester John, or the Fountain of Perpetual Youth, or the Philosopher's Stone, or the Earthly Paradise. The miraculous was a great outlet for the adventurous spirit in the Middle Ages. But with the discovery of the New World the imagination was thrilled, not only by an adventure across wide seas into the unknown, but by an adventure of which the aim could be achieved and by which ambitions could be realized. The discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought about great changes in European life and thought. Horizons were widened, new routes were found for commerce, wealth increased and the standard of living was raised.

There was no one reason for this great revival or rebirth that we call the Renaissance. All through the Middle Ages there had been thinkers and teachers who had questioned old forms of society and the beliefs and power of the Church. They were forerunners of the great age. They had never been forgotten, but other forces were needed before the time was ready for the Renaissance to come into being.

Printing was invented. In 1453 Constantinople, which for a thousand years had stood as a bulwark against invaders from the East, fell into the hands of the Turks, and scholars and artists came fleeing into western Europe, bringing with them manuscripts and a knowledge of Greek which opened up new realms of thought to the men of the west. In 1492 the New World was discovered.

The Renaissance was a period rich in every kind of creative adventure of the mind and spirit, and above all it found expression in great art. In the history of civilization there have been periods when life has abounded in vitality and the imagination has been kindled into great achievement. Of such periods, that of the Renaissance was not the least.