

# SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY and the GREAT CHAIN of BEING

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## BACKGROUND

The Elizabethans viewed the universe, in its ideal state, as both orderly and interconnected. They believed that a great chain linked all beings, from God on high to the lowest beasts and plants. They also believed that universal order was based on parallels between different realms. Just as the sun ruled the heavens, for example, the king ruled in the state and the father in the family. Because everything was linked, a disturbance in one area would cause a disturbance in others. In keeping with this concept of order, a Shakespearean tragedy shows how a tragic hero's bad choices can disturb the whole universe. As *Macbeth* gets under way, notice the parallel disorders in the mind of the hero, the weather, and the kingdom.

To learn more about the role that the great chain of being played in the European Renaissance, read the following article adapted from *A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature*.

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## PART 1. 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.



## PART 2. 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 “humors,” with characteristics corresponding to the four elements. (Illness occurred when there was an imbalance or “disorder” among the humors, 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 *King Lear*, the simultaneous disorder in family relationships and in the state (child ruling parent, subject ruling king) is reflected in the disorder of Lear’s mind (the loss of reason) as well as in the disorder of nature (the raging storm). Lear even equates his loss of reason to “a tempest in my mind.”

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. Yet Renaissance writers at times showed ambivalence towards such a rigidly organized universe. For example, the Italian philosopher Pico della Mirandola, in a work entitled *On the Dignity of Man*, exalted human beings as capable of rising to the level of the angels through philosophical contemplation. Also, some Renaissance writers were fascinated by the thought of going beyond boundaries set by the chain of being. A major example was the title character of Christopher Marlowe’s play *Doctor Faustus*. Simultaneously displaying the grand spirit of human aspiration and the more questionable hunger for superhuman powers, Faustus seems in the play to be both exalted and punished. Marlowe’s drama, in fact, has often been seen as the embodiment of Renaissance ambiguity in this regard, suggesting both its fear of and its fascination with pushing beyond human limitations.

### **PART 3. Political Implications of the Chain of Being**

The fear of “disorder” was not merely philosophical--it had significant political ramifications. The proscription against trying to rise beyond one’s place was of course useful to political rulers, for it helped to reinforce their authority. The implication was that civil rebellion caused the chain to be broken, and according to the doctrine of correspondences, this would have dire consequences in other realms. It was a sin against God, at least wherever rulers claimed to rule by “Divine Right.” (And in England, the King was also the head of the Anglican Church.) In Shakespeare, it was suggested that the sin was of cosmic proportions: civil disorders were often accompanied by meteoric disturbances in the heavens. (Before Halley’s theory about periodic orbits, comets, as well as meteors, were thought to be disorderly heavenly bodies.)

The need for strong political rule was in fact very significant, for the Renaissance had brought an end for the most part to feudalism, the medieval form of political organization. The major political accomplishment of the Renaissance, perhaps, was the establishment of effective central government, not only in the north but in the south as well. Northern Europe saw the rise of national monarchies headed by kings, especially in England and France. Italy saw the rise of the territorial city-state often headed by wealthy oligarchic families. Not only did the chain of being concept provide a rationale for the authority of such rulers; it also suggested that there was ideal behavior that was appropriate to their place in the order of things. It is no wonder then that much Renaissance literature is concerned with the ideals of kingship, with the character and behavior of rulers, as in Machiavelli’s *Prince* or Shakespeare’s *Henry V*.