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Abstract: Chapter 2 of the book "Everyday Life: Renaissance, 2005" is presented. It talks about a new outlook on life called humanism and its followers, known as humanists. Unlike pessimists, humanists were more interested in this life than in the hereafter. They stressed the importance of the individual and praised individual achievements. Humanists also were more open-minded and more critical than the people of the Middle Ages.

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CHAPTER 2: New Ways of Thinking

Imagine it is the year 1235. Through a time machine, you have been whisked back to a manor in medieval France. After wandering around for some time, you come upon a serf working in a field. His name is Antoine. He is bent over his plow and is sweating. He looks as if the burden of the world is on his shoulders as he pushes the plow through the thick, black soil.

Antoine barely acknowledges your presence, even though you are dressed in modern clothes and stand out like a strobe light. He simply grunts when you introduce yourself and continues with his work. At length you ask him about his life on the manor and his prospects for the future. He stops for a moment, stares at you as though you've lost your mind, and speaks.

"Prospects for the future? Ha!" he hisses. "I have no prospects for the future. I will live and die on this manor and never venture more than five miles distant. I will work myself to the bone from sunrise to sunset six days a week and probably die before my thirtieth birthday. But it is just as well. The priest tells me I am a worthless sinner, and that my only hope is for a better life in heaven. He also says that the end of the world is near and that my suffering will soon end. So I labor on and live for that day. Life is so hard and miserable, you know."

Troubled by Antoine's pessimism, you re-enter your time machine and set the date 100 years ahead to 1335. This time you are spirited to Florence, in what is now the nation of Italy. You find the contrast hard to believe. You see people going about smiling and chatting away as though they don't have a care in the world. They are obviously happy and show none of the hopelessness displayed by Antoine.

"Why are people now so different from those 100 years ago?" you ask a man who identifies himself as Paolo. "Has everyone gotten away from religion?"

"Not at all," replies Paolo. "We still go to church and follow our religious beliefs, but our thoughts are not focused solely on the hereafter. We believe in the worth of the individual and in his or her right to enjoy life. We believe that people can be happy and live life to the fullest within the framework of religion. We are not obsessed with the doom and gloom of our forebears."

As you are transported back to modern times, you understand completely what Paolo was referring to. He was talking about a new outlook on life called humanism and its followers, known as humanists. Humanists were more interested in this life than in the hereafter. They stressed the importance of the individual and praised individual achievements. The humanist outlook was expressed in the words of Leon Battista Alberti, who said, "Men can do all things if they will." Humanists also were more open-minded and more critical than the people of the Middle Ages. They welcomed new ideas and poked fun at superstition and prejudice. They were very critical of the wrongdoings associated with many of the Church clergy at the time. (These wrongdoings are discussed in detail in chapter 11.)

The "Father of Humanism" was an Italian poet and scholar named Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374). He is known simply as Petrarch. Some historians refer to him as "the first modern man." Petrarch was responsible for reviving interest in the forgotten writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. He and others searched through cellars, musty libraries, and monasteries for old manuscripts that had been painstakingly hand-copied by the monks of the Middle Ages. Sometimes they were successful in their search; at other times they arrived too late to rescue priceless pages. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), Petrarch's friend and fellow author, wrote how he wept when he once came upon a collection of writings in a monastery that were too deteriorated to salvage.

Why were Petrarch and his associates interested in the literature of civilizations long past? What did the words of the Greeks and Romans hold for people who were beginning to see themselves as modern in every sense? Petrarch believed that people could learn much and find guidance for their lives if they read the classics of such ancient writers as Cicero and Virgil. He saw the Greeks and Romans as having set a standard for daily living that was worthy of imitation. In his enthusiasm, Petrarch not only read Cicero and Virgil, but he wrote imaginary dialogues between each of them and himself.

In addition to his encouraging people to study the ancient classics, Petrarch established a pattern of poetry that remained popular throughout the Renaissance period. He did this through a series of sonnets written to a woman he loved from a distance. The lady's name was Laura de Sade, the wife of another man and the mother of 11 children. The fact that she was unavailable did not prevent Petrarch from composing love poems to her. When Laura died of the plague, Petrarch wrote a love poem to her that is considered one of the greatest pieces of poetry ever written.

Humanistic thought reached other parts of Europe through students who had studied at Italian universities. As a result, influential humanists emerged in Germany, France, and other parts of northern and western Europe. Foremost among these was Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). Erasmus was a Dutch priest who believed that the Bible could be studied along with the manuscripts of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In his writings, he criticized the ignorance and superstition within the Catholic Church, as well as the wrongdoings of some of the clergy. His aim was to reform the Church and make it better. Unlike a German monk named Martin Luther who lived at the same time and about whom you will read later, Erasmus never gave any thought to breaking away from the Church completely.

Erasmus became so famous in the Netherlands that people applauded him in the street. Common folk sometimes bribed his servants just to peep at him through a keyhole while he slept. Even the candle stubs he threw away were fought over by admiring souvenir hunters. His fame spread elsewhere, and he received offers from universities throughout Europe to serve on their faculties. Many Renaissance writers consider him the greatest scholar of his age.

Nowhere was humanism better exemplified than in art. The contrast between the paintings and sculptures of medieval artists and those of the Renaissance is striking. During the Middle Ages, art focused on religion and was confined to images of the saints and to scenes from the Bible. Scenes in paintings were flat and two-dimensional, and humans portrayed on canvas appeared flat and two-dimensional as well. Artists were viewed more as craftspeople employed by the Church than as individuals creating life-like scenes of the real world. As such, they received no more recognition than carpenters and other artisans.

How different was the art of the Renaissance! Painters and sculptors began to imitate the styles and techniques employed by the Greeks and the Romans. They made the subjects of their paintings and sculptures more real through a variety of techniques. One technique was the use of perspective. This involves painting pictures so as to give them distance and depth.

A good example of using perspective in a picture is the way an artist would paint a railroad track. Had railroads existed in the Middle Ages, the medieval artist would have probably depicted the tracks as having the same width in the distance as in the foreground. The Renaissance artist, on the other hand, would have painted the tracks as though they came together on down the line. Renaissance artists used perspective when painting such objects as buildings and landscapes. The technique created a life-like atmosphere.

Artists also made good use of color, light, and shadows to make people in their pictures more real. Through such devices, they could show feelings and emotions that the medieval artist never attempted. They could even make wrinkles and other skin imperfections stand out on their subjects.

Sculptors also concentrated on making their statues more life-like and natural. In so doing, they leaned heavily on the techniques used by the Greeks and Romans. They sculpted the human body as it really is, with emphasis on natural shape and musculature. In contrast, statues of the Middle Ages appear stiff and unrealistic.

Humanism stressed the importance of the individual in the present world instead of the hereafter. This did not mean, as has previously been mentioned, that Renaissance people abandoned religion in favor of worldly pursuits and pleasures. They simply believed that a person should enjoy life to the fullest during his or her stay on Earth. That, in a nutshell, is what humanism was all about.

Name _____

Date _____

Solve a Humanism Puzzle

Fill in the sentences for clues to complete the puzzle about humanism.

___ H ___

___ U ___

___ M ___

___ A ___

___ N _____

___ I _____

___ S _____

___ M ___

1. Petrarch is known as the ____ of humanism.
2. Petrarch wrote many love poems to ____ de Sade.
3. Humanists admired the works of the ancient Greeks and ____.
4. ____ has been called by some "the first modern man."
5. Humanists searched monasteries and elsewhere for old ____.
6. Medieval art focused mainly on ____.
7. ____ is a technique used by artists to show distance and depth.
8. ____ was a famous Dutch humanist.

Name ____

Date ____

Point Out the Differences

On the lines provided, tell how the people of the Renaissance were different from those of the Middle Ages.

Life ____

Art ____

Religion ____

Name ____

Date ____

Name Those Synonyms and Antonyms

Asynonym is a word that has the same meaning as another word. An antonym is a word opposite in meaning to another word.

Below is a list of 20 words taken from chapter 2. Write a synonym and an antonym for each. Use a thesaurus or a dictionary, if necessary.

Synonym

Antonym

1. open-minded (adj) ____ ____

2. fame (n) — —
3. modern (adj) — —
4. worthless (adj) — —
5. abandoned (v) — —
6. praise (n) — —
7. critical (adj) — —
8. successful (adj) — —
9. arrived (v) — —
10. enthusiasm (n) — —
11. imaginary (adj) — —
12. encouraging (adj) — —
13. popular (adj) — —
14. continues (v) — —
15. applauded (v) — —
16. admiring (adj) — —
17. rigid (adj) — —
18. present (adj) — —
19. ignorance (n) — —
20. enjoy (v) — —

Name _____

Date _____

Keep a Time-Traveler Diary

At the beginning of this chapter, you took an imaginary journey back in time. In the year 1235, you found yourself on a manor in medieval France. One hundred years later, you were in Renaissance Italy marveling at how people's outlook on life had changed.

Create diary entries for each day of these respective years. Record things you might have seen or heard during your brief stopovers.

May 13, 1235

Dear Diary,

April 4, 1335

Dear Diary,

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Peasants at work on a manor.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Petrarch, known in history as the "Father of Humanism."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): A picture showing how Renaissance artists used perspective to show depth.

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