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Els 140 (Introduction to Drama)

Discuss the relationship between medieval and renaissance drama?

It is amazing how significantly various aspects of society can and will change over a prolonged period of time. Between the time periods of the Medieval era and the Renaissance, one can note numerous significant changes, mainly those pertaining to art and religion. In general, ideals and subjects during the Renaissance became more secular.

In Medieval times, people seemed to focus mainly on the church, God, and the afterlife; whereas during the Renaissance, the focus was more secular: humans and life on earth. And this is evident in drama.

During medieval period, drama was largely under the control of the church, thereby plays central to the themes of the Bible are prevalent. Such plays as miracle plays, mystery plays and morality plays dominate the dramatic sphere. And also, plays then, largely make use of allegorical characters.

By the second half of the sixteenth century, the early Renaissance, groups of wandering actors were producing highly demanding and sophisticated plays, and writers such as Shakespeare were able to join them and make a living. When these professionals secured their own theaters, they had no problems filling them with good drama, with actors, and with an audience. Dramatic techniques developed in the medieval period were put to good use in the Renaissance theater. For example, the colorful and dramatic devil characters that stalked the mystery plays were transformed into sophisticated villains in Elizabethan drama. The devil Mephistopheles (Mephistophilis) behaves like a smooth Tudor lawyer in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*; Iago in *Othello* is suspected of having cloven hooves. Perhaps one important difference is that the Elizabethan devil-villains are truly frightening, since they are so recognizably human in their villainy.

It is notable that, the drama of the medieval period was what was developed and improved on, in the renaissance period.

Renaissance period is also known as the reformation era.

During and after the Reformation, the drama began to change. Genres like tragedy, comedy and satire replaced the mystery and morality plays of the middle ages. Playwrights experimented with forms borrowed from classical authors, studying the tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Terence and Plautus. Plots and characters were taken from a range of

sources. Shakespeare, for example, read medieval chronicles, classical drama and poetry, narratives of travel and the colonisation of the New World, and the romances and legends of earlier centuries, mining them for material he could recycle into dramatic form. In this period, the identity of the individual playwright became important, and dramatists like Kyd, Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson were developing their own distinctive writing styles.

New themes appeared as well. Love between men and women was a theme adaptable either to comedy, or to tragedies such as *Othello* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. History and politics were also of great interest in an age of strong rulers, Elizabeth I and James VI and I. Ideas about the power of monarchs and the burdens and dangers of kingship were explored in history plays, or in tragedies like *King Lear*. Jacobean revenge drama examined not only the ethics but also the psychology of revenge and aggression. The shift in focus from religious to humanist values led to the creation of the flawed hero, embodied in characters like Hamlet, Lear and Othello, and the Machiavellian villain, as for example Iago or Edmund.

As it expanded and gained prominence, the drama required spaces of its own.