Name: _____

Date: _____

THE RENAISSANCE
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Social Classes of the Italian Renaissance

The Renaissance was a time of enormous creativity, but for many people, their lives were shaped by the circumstances of their birth. Social class often determined a person's work, opportunities, and place in society. People living in the same city could experience very different worlds.

The Nobles

The nobles lived on large estates outside the city walls. In many cities of the Italian Renaissance, a wealthy elite known as nobles owned large tracts of land and wielded significant influence. Nobles often served as military officers, royal advisers, and politicians. Many noble children received tutors who taught them reading, writing, languages, history, music, and manners.

The Merchants

During the Renaissance, the merchant class became increasingly wealthy and influential in many Italian cities. Merchants included people who made money through trade, manufacturing, and banking. Some merchants owned small shops, while others became enormously wealthy through industries such as wool processing, shipbuilding, and banking.

Although merchants often possessed great wealth, many nobles looked down on them because they had not been born into noble families. Merchants sought greater prestige through government service, marriage into noble families, and patronage of the arts.

The Trade Workers

Trade workers produced goods in Renaissance cities. Some made shoes, clothing, furniture, jewelry, or tools, while others worked as painters, sculptors, and builders. Trades were often family businesses that spanned generations. It was not unusual for a son to follow his father and grandfather into the same trade.

A master craftsman might also take a boy as young as ten into his home as an apprentice. The apprentice might have been the son of a peasant family or the child of another artisan learning a different trade. Apprentices spent years learning a trade while gradually taking on greater responsibilities within the workshop. Becoming a master artisan could provide a comfortable life, but success often required years of training, hard work, and the guild's approval.

As Renaissance cities grew, skilled workers formed guilds to establish quality standards, set membership rules, and limit outside competition. Guilds controlled who could enter a profession and how workers advanced within it. Guilds protected their members and ensured quality work, but they also made it difficult for outsiders to compete.

The Clergy

The clergy included the men and women who devoted their lives to religious service and leadership. Unlike many occupations that passed from father to son, the Church sometimes offered opportunities for social advancement. Wealthy families often helped their children obtain influential positions within the Church, while poorer families sometimes viewed religious life as a path to education and advancement.

Unskilled Workers and Peasants

Many people worked as laborers, servants, dock workers, and other unskilled workers, earning low wages and living difficult lives. As hard as their lives could be, most urban workers were better off than rural peasants who worked on land owned by nobles. Peasant life was demanding, and starvation was common.

Women in the Renaissance

The Renaissance brought new ideas and opportunities to many people, but not equally to everyone. Women of every social class had far fewer rights than men, and many of their choices were limited by family expectations and social rules. Fathers and husbands often controlled decisions about marriage, property, and family life.

Social Change

The social class system became slightly less rigid as the Renaissance progressed. Merchants and skilled workers sometimes gained influence that had once belonged to nobles, but social class continued to shape people's lives throughout most of Europe long after the Renaissance ended.

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Fill in the Blanks

Social class shaped people's lives during the Renaissance, and people of different c__a__s__s living in the same city often experienced very different worlds. N__b__es owned land and held power, while mrchants gained w__a__th and i__f__u__n__e through trade, m__n__f__c__u__i__g, and b__n__i__g. Although many merchants became *w__a__t__y, they often sought *s__a__us and *p__e__t__ge through g__v__r__m__nt s__r__i__e and by becoming *p__t__o__s. Trade workers produced s__o__s, clothing, f__r__i__u__e, or j__w__l__y. Many trade remained within f__m__l__es for g__n__r__t__o__s. Apprentices trained for years to learn a trade, while g__i__ds controlled trades and limited c__m__e__i__i__n. The c__e__gy sometimes offered o__p__r__u__i__i__s for s__c__al advancement. W__m__n had fewer rights than men, as f__t__e__s and h__s__a__ds often controlled family d__c__s__o__s.

Answer in Complete Sentences

*1. According to the text, "for many people, their lives were shaped by the circumstances of their birth." Explain what this means.

2. Who were nobles?

*3. Why were many Renaissance merchants focused on status and prestige?

4. Why would a boy become an apprentice

5. Were women treated fairly during the Renaissance?

*A higher-order learning question. Any reasonable answer will be accepted.

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