

Petrarch, Montaigne and More: The Significance of Humanism in the Creation of Literary Genres and Literature.

In her chapter on ‘Humanism and Literature’, Miriam Strube argues that ‘humanism and literature are *intrinsically* linked from the outset’.¹ In discussing three pivotal humanists, this essay will explore this intrinsic link through the significance of humanism on literature and the creation and popularisation of literary genres. Literature is no exception to the various cultural branches which were revolutionised as a result of renaissance humanism.² In addition to the transformation of scholastic medicine, and emergence of revolutionary thought in political and religious affairs, literature was revolutionised during this ‘rebirth’ as humanist figures took up their pens to seek expression and self-exploration, resulting in the creation of new genres and forms. Firstly, this essay will discuss Petrarch’s popularisation of the sonnet, establishment of Italian rhyme scheme and exploration of romance and the self in poetry. Further, Michel de Montaigne and his invention of the unprecedented genre, the essay, will be explored, and its wider literary development. Finally, Thomas More and the creation of utopian narrative will be discussed; including a reflection on the humanist thought which exists within his work and the utopian texts which followed. Their contribution and significance will be explored in relation to their renaissance humanist context.

Heralded the ‘Father of Humanism’, Petrarch is essentially synonymous with humanism; considered a founder due to his ‘influential philosophical attitudes’ found in numerous personal letters, discovery of classical texts and ‘belief that secular literature and

¹ Miriam Strube, ‘Humanism and Literature’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Humanism*, ed. by Anthony B. Pinn (Oxford University Press, 2021), doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190921538.013.23.

² *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. by Margaret L. King (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2014), p. 1.

philosophy could enlighten all men'.^{3 4} Of note is his connection to literature, and his enthusiasm for it. Although he partook in numerous epistolary and literary pursuits and discovered the familiar letter, introducing what was a new genre to him and his successors, it is Petrarch's sonnets which will be discussed in this essay, due to their continual emulation and influence on centuries of love poetry.^{5 6} Most memorable and influential on literature is his *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, or *Il Canzoniere*. Complete with evocative songs and sonnets to his idolised muse Laura, *Il Canzoniere* persists as the undisputed prototype for the love lyric throughout Europe.⁷ Thus, in creating this longstanding and widely emulated prototype, Petrarch established a literary genre in developing the European love lyric.⁸ Petrarch's poignant exploration of love and loss has resonated with centuries of readers, inviting contemplation on human existence and establishing foundational poetic themes which have persisted in popularity and been continually explored in literature.⁹ His use of the sonnet to explore and express profound feelings has influenced numerous European poets, making him 'a significant figure in Western literature'.¹⁰ Notably, Petrarch's literature found success in his lifetime, with him receiving invitations from Paris and Rome to be crowned a poet, 'the greatest tribute that could be bestowed on a living poet' in antiquity.¹¹

³ '16.4: Reading: Humanist Thought', Chemistry LibreTexts, 8 August 2020

<[https://chem.libretexts.org/Courses/Lumen_Learning/Book%3A_Western_Civilization_I_\(Lumen\)/16%3A_Week_14%3A_Italian_City-states_and_Renaissance/16.4%3A_Reading%3A_Humanist_Thought](https://chem.libretexts.org/Courses/Lumen_Learning/Book%3A_Western_Civilization_I_(Lumen)/16%3A_Week_14%3A_Italian_City-states_and_Renaissance/16.4%3A_Reading%3A_Humanist_Thought)> [accessed 24 February 2026].

⁴ 'Petrarch and the Birth of Humanism', Hungarian Conservative, 8 June 2022

<<https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/philosophy/petrarch-and-the-birth-of-humanism/>> [accessed 24 February 2026].

⁵ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 3.

⁶ Camilla Caporicci, 'The Transition to Modern Poetry: Petrarch's Canzoniere', in *The Song of Songs and Its Tradition in Renaissance Love Lyric*, ed. by Camilla Caporicci (Oxford University Press, 2024), doi:10.1093/oso/9780192848833.003.0003.

⁷ Caporicci, 'The Transition to Modern Poetry'.

⁸ Caporicci, 'The Transition to Modern Poetry'.

⁹ 'Rhymes by Francis Petrarch | Literature and Writing | Research Starters | EBSCO Research', EBSCO, [n.d.] <<https://www.ebsco.com>> [accessed 23 February 2026].

¹⁰ 'Rhymes by Francis Petrarch | Literature and Writing | Research Starters | EBSCO Research'.

¹¹ Francesco Petrarca and Mark Musa, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. x- xi.

Petrarch's musings on introspection and individual experience are importantly reminiscent of humanist pursuits.¹² Petrarch's title, *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, is illuminative of his work being written in the vernacular language, rather than Latin- the language associated with high culture and education.¹³ His use of the vernacular language could be considered significant when considering humanism's cultural impact on literature. Petrarch's linguistic decision signifies the sonnets as means of personal exploration, supposing his own vernacular tongue felt more intimate when exploring such profound emotions and poignant themes. It also seems resonant of Petrarch's inherently humanist belief that information- high art in this instance, should be accessible to all, anticipating an audience wider than scholars. Using the vernacular in renaissance humanism was important in granting wider text accessibility, as is demonstrated in vernacular Bible translations by Erasmus, Lefèvre d'Étaples and Luther.¹⁴ Use of the vernacular democratised information and facilitated the humanist belief that everyone should be able to read the bible, bearing great significance in the development of European literature, in placing the high art of literature into the grasp of those previously unable to access it; marking a form of literary revolution in itself. This demonstrates humanism's significance on literature, marrying the creation of high art forms and widespread accessibility; interlinking them as Strube suggested- in a most intricate and significant manner. Petrarch's receiving of the crown of the poet laureateship for his Latin epic, the *Africa*, rather than his Italian *Rime*, demonstrates the contextual significance of language in high art.¹⁵

¹² 'Rhymes by Francis Petrarch | Literature and Writing | Research Starters | EBSCO Research'.

¹³ 'Rhymes by Francis Petrarch | Literature and Writing | Research Starters | EBSCO Research'.

¹⁴ 'Humanism and Translations of the Bible into the Vernacular', *Musée Protestant*, [n.d.] <<https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/humanism-and-translations-of-the-bible-into-the-vernacular/>> [accessed 23 February 2026].

¹⁵ Petrarca and Musa, *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, p. xv.

Petrarch's poetry is crucial to western literature in that he refined and popularised da Lentini's sonnet form, establishing the Petrarchan Sonnet and Italian rhyme scheme later vastly employed by poets, including John Milton and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.¹⁶ Its later adaption into the Shakespearean sonnet in the Elizabethan period, popularised further by Sir William Wyatt and Shakespeare, marks the ongoing popularity and adaptation of Petrarchan sonnets.¹⁷ Petrarch's thoroughly explored themes of human emotion, love and loss, as well as introspective exploration and individual concerns characterise and define modern lyric poetry. His habitually humanist revival and further popularisation of poetic forms like the sonnet, and Arnaut Daniel's sestina, especially in the vernacular, speaks for the ongoing literary revolution which humanist thought enabled.

Interestingly, it is through suspected emulation of Dante's poetry, that Petrarch adopts themes of introspection, idealised 'beauty, love and romance', the focal gracious lady, and use of the vernacular language.¹⁸ Considered to have instigated humanism, Dante and Petrarch initiated the literary shift towards a focus on the individual, personal experience and idealisation. Petrarch's observed similarities with Dante poses a potential point of consideration surrounding literature and emulation. The act of emulating appears to have been largely adopted, from antiquity, and popularised during the renaissance- exemplified in Petrarch's emulation of Cicero's letters. Thus, it is conceivable that the emulation that steers literature today may have been incited by renaissance humanism.

Preoccupation with reviving forms, and appreciation for 'human capacity and creativity' are both significant qualities of renaissance humanism which are applicable in the creation and popularisation of this literary form.¹⁹ Ultimately, the humanist habits of querying

¹⁶ 'Sonnet', The Poetry Foundation, 25 April 2016

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/education/glossary/sonnet>> [accessed 24 February 2026].

¹⁷ 'Sonnet'.

¹⁸ 'Rhymes by Francis Petrarch | Literature and Writing | Research Starters | EBSCO Research'.

¹⁹ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 35.

the human condition and self-exploration inspired the recurrently relatable and inspirational themes of unrequited love, loss and the passage of time explored by Petrarch, which remain important in literature to this day.²⁰

Like Petrarch, Michel de Montaigne engages in self-exploration, offering ‘intimate reflections on [his] own humanity and the human condition more broadly’.²¹ Self-exploration and the desire to reflect on human existence, especially executed in a personal and digressive manner, appears to be continually important in humanism, from its Petrarchan origins through to the Renaissance humanism era of Montaigne.²² It is this intrinsically humanist interest in self-exploration that could be credited responsible for the literary form of essay of which Montaigne was the ‘inventor and prodigious producer’.²³ Various aspects of Montaigne’s unprecedented genre are reminiscent of Petrarch’s work, such as an interest in the reader’s own ‘inclinations and motivations’ and the adoption of a conversational tone and direct address of their readers.²⁴ Margaret L. King relates the possibility of instances prior to Petrarch and Montaigne where authors expected readers to be ‘curious about their lives and attentive to their eccentricities’ but ultimately suggests these two are momentous in this expectation.²⁵ Thus, the earliest instance of a literary form which purposely creates a mutual connection is suggested. Montaigne’s creation of the personal essay as a literary genre is important in its expressive style, representation of humanist values and continued popularity and development as a genre.

Montaigne’s literary significance is denoted in his standing as ‘one of the most influential figures in French literature and philosophy’ due to his ‘introspective, humanist

²⁰ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 35.

²¹ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 35.

²² King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 35.

²³ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 35.

²⁴ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 35.

²⁵ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 36.

approach to writing'.²⁶ In addition to creating this new literary form, Montaigne's reflections on the self and life are considered to have 'influenced generations of writers and philosophers, shaping the way personal thought and experience are conveyed in literature'.²⁷ The engagement in self-examination in humanist philosopher René Descartes' *Discourse* is said to be 'strongly reminiscent of the work of Petrarch and Montaigne'.²⁸ The scepticism and self-reflection in his essays have additionally influenced the writings of Blaise Pascal, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.²⁹ 'His emphasis on personal thought and reflection became a cornerstone of French intellectual tradition'.³⁰

His importance and impact, as a humanist on literature, is clear in the continuation of wide studies into his essays, which are recurrently 'appreciated for their depth, wit, and exploration of the human condition'.³¹ His collection of essays, first published in 1580 and later expanded, was 'groundbreaking because of its personal, introspective style and exploration of a wide range of subjects, from philosophy and politics to daily life and human nature'.³² Inherently innovative and thus inherently humanistic, Montaigne's personal and self-reflective essays differed to the 'structured arguments and grand narratives' of other writers of his time.³³ Montaigne's 'fluid, conversational tone' and 'writing style was novel for its time and established a new literary form that continues to thrive today'.³⁴

²⁶ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?', Polyglottist Language Academy, [n.d.] <<https://www.polyglottistlanguageacademy.com/language-culture-travelling-blog/2025/2/15/who-was-michel-de-montaigne-and-why-is-he-important-for-french-culture-and-language>> [accessed 24 February 2026].

²⁷ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

²⁸ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 256.

²⁹ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

³⁰ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

³¹ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

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³³ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

³⁴ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

Overall, Montaigne's invention of the modern essay is considered his 'most significant contribution to literature'.³⁵ Similar to Petrarch's use of the vernacular to warrant broader textual accessibility, Montaigne's uncomplicated prose 'made complex philosophical ideas accessible to a broader audience, establishing a model for elegant and expressive writing' and 'set a precedent for future French writers and intellectuals'.³⁶ Thus, Montaigne aided in and executed the humanist cause for information accessibility. 'Of central importance is that the essay, the prose form Montaigne created, is tailor-made to present what Montaigne had to say; his readers soon recognise that Montaigne probably could not have written in another way'.³⁷ Through these short prose pieces, he introduces the literary world to a new means of thinking, creating and communicating which allows more creative freedom than any preceding it.³⁸

Sir Francis Bacon famously adopted Montaigne's literary form of essay for his 1597 *Essays*. The novelist Daphne du Maurier's non-fiction studies of Bacon observed an envy for Montaigne, which may explain his less personal approach to the form.³⁹ Ultimately, Bacon's approach to essays varied significantly to their creator's, and could be considered to implicate further impact on literature in his favouring of practicality over personability. Thus, Montaigne's invented literary genre bared further literary significance as it assumed and developed adapting functions.

The symbiotic relationship created between author and reader, in speaking 'from one heart to another' in Montaigne's essays is familiar in Erasmus' recommendations of the relationship between prince and people; and Ascham's between schoolmaster and pupil.⁴⁰

³⁵ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

³⁶ 'Who Was Michel de Montaigne and Why Is He Important for French Culture and Language?'

³⁷ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 60.

³⁸ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 60.

³⁹ 'Francis Bacon, Montaigne's Rival', National Endowment for the Humanities, [n.d.] <<https://www.neh.gov/article/francis-bacon-montaignes-rival>> [accessed 24 February 2026].

⁴⁰ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 60.

Thus, it could be argued that the ideal of symbiotic connections is an inherent part of humanism: thus, arguing humanism's significant role in the creation of this particular literary genre. Potentially, the personable tone, which is so characteristic and foundational to the essays, would not have been adopted if not for the impact of humanist thought.

Similar to how Montaigne is the inventor of the personal essay; More is heralded the inventor of the utopian genre. Coining the term in his fictional work *Utopia*, More paved the way for utopian fiction and fantasy, forming a significant literary genre, with his work being 'the first of future Utopias that will join others on a select bookshelf as the Western tradition evolves'.⁴¹

Published 'at the pivotal moment of the High Renaissance', *Utopia* offered 'distinct and powerful visions of the state- at a time when the nature of the state was itself rapidly coalescing'.⁴² Thus, the context of humanism can be deemed pivotal in the creation of this literary genre, with More seeking solutions in an invented world, as appropriate in the context of the discoveries of the New World and diverse societies.⁴³ Similar to how Montaigne reflected on his personal experiences 'during a period of intellectual ferment and of religious and political disarray', More appears to respond to the corruption of Europe's social and political institutions, sketching a reimagined world where tyranny is non-existent and all live blissfully.^{44 45} This envisioned ideal remains characteristic of utopian literature today, marking the significance of a context which bred such visions.

Although much uncertainty surrounds the intent of *Utopia*, King observes that More's close association with Erasmus when writing the piece, made the work 'humorous and

⁴¹ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p.157.

⁴² King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 137.

⁴³ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 138.

⁴⁴ Michel de Montaigne and M. A. Screech, *The Complete Essays*, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books, 1993), p. xiii.

⁴⁵ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 138.

satirical at the same time that it is idealistic and quite serious'.⁴⁶ Its infusion with fictive elements including the fictional Raphael Hythloday could be interpreted as significant. The fictional Hythloday being the sole character to visit the equally fictitious island may explore the unlikeliness of a place like Utopia coming to be, furthered by the meaning of 'utopia' being 'no-place'.⁴⁷

Utopia's significance as a literary genre may be marked in the immediate emulation which followed this suggestive publication, with Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* published seven years later, followed by Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* five years after that. The continuation of utopian fiction proceeded smoothly onwards, standing firmly as an established popular literary genre. Strong emulation surrounding setting and character preoccupations occur in these early utopian fictions: Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) similarly presents an advancement-focussed society and an island setting.⁴⁸ Comparably, Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668) shares the same island setting of *Utopia*, demonstrating early nuances of the genre. These similarities, though not a definitive aspect of utopian literature, convey the humanist aspirations of striving for an improved society and justice system. They are reminders that the utopian genre was in its formation stages- as many great cultural and societal changes were in this context. It is reminiscent of the earliest printers creating fonts resembling medieval manuscripts in the face of the (highly literature-significant) new movable type printing- it was the result of familiarity, and existing in an era of change and innovation. Similarly, specific references to Amerigo Vespucci's travels in

⁴⁶ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 158.

⁴⁷ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 157.

⁴⁸ 'FBRT | New Atlantis: Francis Bacon's Prophetic Utopia', *Francis Bacon Research Trust*, [n.d.] <<https://www.fbrt.org.uk/hermes/new-atlantis/>> [accessed 23 February 2026].

Utopia demonstrate the contextual relevance of exploration and discovery of new lands on its setting.⁴⁹

Naturally then, humanism plays a significant role in the utopian genre and its characteristics. Conceivably inspired by Plato's *Republic*, More- in true humanist fashion- engages with the classical texts of antiquity. His active response to the often-considered totalitarian Platonist text is resonant of the humanist habit of responding to classical texts, as Petrarch did with Cicero's letters.⁵⁰ Further, the theme of exploration and discovery, as enacted by More's *Hythloday*, speaks of the contextual age of discovery occurring in the background of this text's production, echoing the humanist desire to attain knowledge. The utopian genre, upon creation, was immanently humanistic in its desire to explore and comment on social injustices. To some extent, it is still classically humanistic in this sense today, thus demonstrating longstanding literary importance. Further to the continuous works created in this literary genre, from it sprouts the direct branch of dystopian literature, marking the continual importance of this literary form.

Overall, the utopian genre, or at least the initial products of it, has Renaissance humanism embedded in its being. The recurring setting of these first utopian texts are significant in showing geographical exploration as influential in creating the genre, and as an initial trope of it. Similarly, the 'balmy atmosphere of communal well-being' *Utopia* presents heavily differed to the one More lived in, perhaps demonstrating the desire to explore this fictional alternative.⁵¹ King comments on the way in which More, Erasmus and Machiavelli desperately and mightily strive 'with their pens to ward off the impending catastrophe of

⁴⁹ Thomas More's *Utopia and the Early Modern Travel Narrative* – *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*, [n.d.] <<https://jnr2.hcommons.org/2019/5757/>> [accessed 24 February 2026].

⁵⁰ Eric Brown, 'Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/plato-ethics-politics/>> [accessed 25 February 2026].

⁵¹ King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 158.

corrupt, illicit, and ineffective rule', speaking to the humanist drive for an improved society behind their work.⁵²

In conclusion, the context and ideals of renaissance humanism were highly significant in the creation of these literary forms: the shift from medieval traditions, and embrace of antiquity, arguably led to literature as a vessel for introspection and personal exploration. Out of humanism, and its patrons, forms like the personal essay, romantic Petrarchan sonnet, and utopian literature were created and established, inaugurating the continuation and success of these forms, inspiring generations of authors and literatures to reproduce these forms and genres. Petrarch's significance lies in his passion to revive and perfect forms and explore poignant themes of humanity; Montaigne's lies in his need to delve within to make sense of the world, intentionally creating a new form entirely for this humanism-infused purpose; and More's comes from a burning desire to confront European societies' injustices, exploring a serious subject satirically by creating a foundational literary genre. Ultimately, their literary creations are products of their time: from the revival of, and response to, classical texts, the creation of genres influenced by their surroundings, and revolutionised thought, humanists made a longstanding impact on literature.

⁵² King, *Renaissance Humanism*, p. 138.

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