

E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture: A Study of the Idea of Order in the Age of Shakespeare, Donne and Milton*. New York: Vintage, 1959. (Orig. 1943.)

Introduction to *The Elizabethan World Picture*

Eustace Mandeville Wetenhall Tillyard (1889-1962), a Cambridge, UK-born veteran of the First World War and faculty member of Cambridge University's Jesus College from 1945-59, wrote what remains one of the most valuable short works about the intellectual background of the Elizabethan literary and cultural scene. Tillyard saw the English Renaissance not as a sharp, secular interval between the medieval past and a strongly Protestant future but as a period that kept relative continuity with the central ideas of that past.

In *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Tillyard, taking a "history of ideas" critical approach, examines the things that Shakespeare and his contemporaries thought and believed so intrinsically that they seldom found it necessary to make them explicit.¹ In this guide, I will summarize and reflect on just a few of the vital ideas that Tillyard identifies as making up a portion of the Elizabethan world picture. I strongly suggest that readers get hold of the full work.

Chapter 4. The Chain of Being

Among educated Elizabethans, Tillyard says, the main way of representing their sense of order was to say that every class of things and beings from inanimate objects up to the highest angels in God's hierarchy, constitutes a particular link on a great chain of being (25-26).

This chain is almost unimaginably large, but basically, as Tillyard describes it, this structure runs vertically all the way from God's throne to the lowest inanimate things, like rocks and minerals (26). It runs, that is, from the *inanimate class* of things through the *vegetative class* (plants, trees, etc.), and the *sensitive class*, which itself has three gradations depending on how extensive are the sensory capacities the animal enjoys—the highest have touch, hearing, memory, and movement. We might say that these living creatures with their superb physicality are truly at home in the natural world, more so than humankind can ever be.

Above the sensitive class, says Tillyard, we find human beings. Though he doesn't use the term, we can call humans the *rational class*. We contain within ourselves all the capacities of the orders below us (inanimate, vegetative, sensitive), and add to them *reason*, which includes both the ability to understand things and to make moral

judgments. Human beings are in a sense a *microcosm* of the orders below and above us, and we link the physical and spiritual dimensions. Above us, of course, are the orders of angels, and atop (beyond, to be precise) is God.

The upshot of all this is that everything has its place in the scheme of things. The chain was conceived of as complex in its construction and connections, with what Tillyard describes as “planes” extending horizontally and a number of “correspondences” to be noted among things and beings along the chain, its links, and its planes. (83) That’s what we’ll move to now.

Chapters 6-7. The Corresponding Planes and the Correspondences

As Tillyard explains, the Elizabethans weren’t just imagining a vertical chain from bottom to top. They made room for the sheer complexity, the *plenitude*, of the creation by imagining a series of lateral planes along the chain.² They posited correspondences between the things and beings along the horizontal or lateral planes of the great chain of being. Tillyard offers his reflections on five of them, which we will briefly address below. But before we get to those correspondences, what are the individual planes themselves? Tillyard lists the following:

1. The divine and angelic. (God and the angels.)
2. The universe or macrocosm. (The stars, planets, etc.)
3. The commonwealth or body politic. (Political affairs, the state, etc.)
4. The [hu]man or the microcosm. (The typical human individual, “man the microcosm”)
5. The lower creation. (Animals, plants, minerals, etc.)

The Victorian poet G. M. Hopkins wrote that “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”³ I would suggest that to the Elizabethans, finding correspondences everywhere must have given them a similar sense that the universe and human life are positively *charged* with meaning and coherence, if you know how to look, and how to interpret.

Tillyard gives us a good sense of how the making of correspondences proceeded: he writes that the “highest” specimen in any particular class or plane induces comparison with the highest specimen on some other plane. For example, if the lion is the greatest of the animals, at some lower level where we would find, say, the best canine (Tillyard’s example), we could and should compare that best canine breed to the lion, as if it aspired to be like the lion (85).

This same propensity to assert meaning where there might seem to be only dissimilarity holds equally strongly when we are dealing not with things a little above or below one another on the chain, but with things that are very far apart. That leads us to Tillyard's discussion of key paired correspondences along different planes of existence:

(i) Celestial Powers and Other Creations

Tillyard says that this correspondence doesn't occur often, but one comes across it in, say, comparisons of God's powers with those of the sun.

(ii) Macrocosm and Body Politic

The most common instance of this correspondence, says Tillyard, is when authors compare the grandest of heavenly bodies, the sun, to an earthly monarch, someone who governs a political polity (89). As the French would say, Louis XIV was *le roi soleil*, the Sun King. And if there is *disorder* in the heavens or in the state, a correspondence can be asserted there, too (90).

(iii) Macrocosm and Microcosm

An easy example of this correspondence, writes Tillyard, is the common poetical comparison between storms or earthquakes and the raging of human passions (93). I would suggest that King Lear's raging out in the storm on the barren heath is an excellent example.⁴ The King connects the "hurricane" devastating his mind with the ferocity of the elements above him.

The individual human body and mind, writes Tillyard, were thought to mirror the structures and processes not only of the social and political order but also of the universe. Our bodies, their parts and processes, correspond to the constitution and operation of the heavenly bodies in the sky. As Tillyard points out, when Hamlet says, "What [a] piece of work is a man"⁵ to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he is invoking this notion of "man the microcosm."

(iv) Body Politic and Microcosm

Tillyard says that for explanatory utility, it's hard to improve upon the passage in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in which Brutus reflects on what it's like to contemplate performing a dreadful deed: "The genius and the mortal instruments / Are then in council, and the state of man, / Like to a little kingdom, suffers then / The nature of an insurrection" (94).⁶ Brutus metaphorizes the turbulence in his own mind and body with

what happens when a kingdom faces an attempt to overthrow it: the governors (the mind) resist it, but the state (body, people) is in a tumult.

(v) General Significance [vs. Precise Application of Correspondences]

Tillyard writes that the Elizabethans' correspondences helped them familiarize a world becoming stranger and ever more complex. This function, he says, underlies the Elizabethan habit of "hovering between equivalence and metaphor" (99-100) rather than favoring the almost mathematical approach that medieval people took toward the same correspondences. Elizabethans were content to let the more intricate details of a correspondence serve as grist for the imagination (99). I would suggest that while a person can believe deeply in angels, that same person may not care to argue about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

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Endnotes

¹ The history of ideas approach is open to criticism, as any approach is. The gist of the criticism is easily summed up by Marx's dictum in [The German Ideology](#), "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed 1/18/2025. Such a stark statement drives home the point that our ideas develop out of, and in response to, our socioeconomic circumstances. All the same, there is great value in Tillyard's efforts: they help us come closer to a strong, self-aware, at least partially historicized understanding of Shakespeare's works.

² See the image of [Didacus Valades's 1579 drawing of the Great Chain](#). Wikipedia.org. Accessed 1/27/2025. This image provides a sense of the "lateral" or "horizontal" dimensionality of the Great Chain.

³ Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "[God's Grandeur](#)." Poetryfoundation.org. Accessed 1/23/2025.

⁴ Lear's address to the storm begins, "Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow, / You cataracts and hurricanos" Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Folio with additions from the Quarto. In *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*, 3rd ed. Combined text 764-840. See 800, 3.2.1-2.

⁵ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Second Quarto with additions from the Folio. In *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*, 3rd ed. Combined text 358-447. See 388, 2.2.264-70.

⁶ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. In *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*, 3rd ed. 288-343. See 302, 2.1.66-69.