

A Man for All Seasons

Actor	Character
Paul Scofield	Sir Thomas More
Wendy Hiller	Alice More
Leo McKern	Thomas Cromwell
Robert Shaw	King Henry VIII
Orson Welles	Cardinal Wolsey
Susannah York	Margaret More
Nigel Davenport	The Duke of Norfolk
John Hurt	Richard Rich
Corin Redgrave	William Roper
Colin Blakely	Matthew
Cyril Luckham	Archbishop Cranmer
Jack Gwillim	Chief Justice
Thomas Heathcote	Boatman

This film depicts the martyrdom of Sir Thomas More (1478-1525) author, judge and royal official. More was a leading figure of the Renaissance. He was beheaded by King Henry VIII because More opposed Henry's actions in taking control of the Church in England thereby separating it from the Catholic Church. In 1935 More was made a saint by the Pope.

This film shows a man sacrificing his position in society, the highest office in the land, and ultimately his life, for religious principle. It introduces Sir Thomas More, a most extraordinary man. The film also provides an introduction to the history of England in the sixteenth century.

Historical Background:

King Henry VIII (1491 -1547; reigned 1509-1547) was concerned about a renewal of civil war if he did not leave a male heir. His wife of 16 years, Catherine of Aragon, bore him a healthy daughter, but their sons were either stillborn or died shortly after birth. Entranced by the young and vivacious Anne Boleyn, and convinced that she would bear him a son, the King wanted to annul his marriage to Catherine. The Pope was under the political and military domination of Henry's enemy Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. Charles V was also Catherine's nephew. The Pope refused Henry's request for an annulment of the marriage. The King's response was to sever England's relationship with the Catholic Church and to set up a new Church of England with the King at its head. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the highest cleric of the Church in England, was now appointed by Henry. The new Archbishop promptly annulled Henry's marriage to Catherine.

All of this occurred against the background of the growing strength of the Protestant Reformation in Northern Europe and in England. More was loyal to the Catholic Church and believed that Western European Christianity should remain united. He correctly foresaw that a separate church in England would encourage Protestantism. When More refused to endorse King Henry's policies, Henry imprisoned him. When More would not relent, Henry executed him.

England at the turn of the 16th Century was a medieval society in which daily life was bound by custom, tradition, piety, and superstition. The Catholic Church was an integral part of everyday life.

However, the church was in need of reform and the abuses of the clergy rankled the populace. Many Englishmen resented the taxes assessed by Rome and the wealth and power of the monasteries. In the universities the intellectuals Scholasticism, the effort to give a rational content to faith and the dominant philosophical enterprise of the Middle Ages, was being challenged by the new secular ideas of the Renaissance. One of the proponents of the new thinking in education and literature was Thomas More. More favored the study of the ancient classical texts in their original Greek, one of the reforms of the Renaissance. He was to write one of the most enduring classics of Renaissance literature, *Utopia*, for which he became famous over all of Europe.

By 1500 England had found a new political stability provided by the Tudor Dynasty and King Henry VII. The Wars of the Roses, battles of dynastic succession between the houses of Lancaster and York that devastated England from 1455 to 1485, were over. Public service meant serving the king whose powers were growing at the expense of the Church and the nobility. In 1509 Henry VII was succeeded by his son, Henry VIII, who was to rule England for 38 years.

Sir Thomas More was a man of many apparently contradictory elements. He was a man of medieval piety but also a leading figure of Renaissance, a movement which increased the secularization of society. More wore a hair shirt and prayed extensively each day. More believed that the Catholic Church was the visible communion of Christians that was the permanent and living sign of Christ's presence. Ultimately, he gave his life for this belief. He considered his persecution of heretics to be one of his greatest achievements, requesting that it be specifically mentioned in his epitaph. But More was also a leading humanist, advocating reforms in education and creating a classic of Renaissance literature, which envisioned an ideal society that was religiously tolerant and not dominated by Christians.

More knew that the Catholic Church was in need of serious reform. Yet he respected priests and the Church, was an apologist for the Church, and ultimately gave his life for the Church. Thomas More seriously considered becoming a priest, but his desire to take a wife and have a family were strong. As reported by Erasmus, his friend and correspondent, More resolved to become a good husband rather than a bad priest.

Questions:

1. What does Sir Thomas More oppose in his initial meeting with Cardinal Wolsey?
2. What answer does Henry VIII want from Sir Thomas, when he visits More's home? If he is the king and supreme ruler of England, why does he need More's answer?
3. When More asks Roper what would happen if he destroyed all the laws to get at the devil, where would he find protection if the devil turned on him? How does this relate to the concept of suppressing evidence of an accused criminal's guilt if the police violate his constitutional rights, even if it permits that guilty man to go free?
4. Why does Richard Rich not receive a position from Sir Thomas? Why does Cromwell find him a position?
5. After More resigns his position, why does he choose to remain silent?
6. What are the principles for which Sir Thomas More gave his life?
7. Why did More say that he was King Henry's faithful servant but God's first, even when he knew that Henry would kill him? What does this tell us about the times in which Thomas More lived?
8. Why do some people call Sir Thomas More a "man for all seasons"? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.