

To what extent is faustus a humanist? essay sample

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Faustus' character is certainly not one-dimensional. Throughout the timeframe of twenty-four years in which the play takes place, we see Faustus in different lights, but none of them provide a cast-iron mold of what 'type' of character Faustus is. Thus we can assume he is three-dimensional; extremely complex. Marlowe likely developed Faustus in this way so as to provide the audience with questions rather than answers. However, many critics have perceived elements of humanism portrayed through Faustus. Although due to my prior explanation we cannot wholly label Faustus a humanist, we can analyse what ideas and notions he develops within the play that could imply this concept.

Religion is clearly a large theme in Doctor Faustus. Faustus is no atheist? his pact with the Devil, no matter how dubious of Hell he is, provides solid evidence of another world. Critic George Santayana stated in 1910 that " He (Faustus) is no radical unbeliever, no natural mate for the Devil? like the typical villain of Renaissance." Although you do not have to be an atheist to be a humanist, Santayana's point implies that Faustus' Christianity supports the idea that he is incapable of humanist thought.

Faustus' belief in God is proved in the text as he quarrels with himself over his decision to sell his soul to Lucifer:

Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.

To God? He loves thee not;

The god thou serv'st is thine own appetite,

Wherein is fix'd the love of Beelzebub

2. 1. 10-12

Although Faustus' faith in God's love is uncertain, his belief in both a god and a devil are determined.

Of course, the belief in a god is not simply enough to prove Faustus a humanist. Humanists that are Christians still believe in a god but believe the power of man to be stronger? they place man before God in order of power. This was implemented in the play also, by means of Mephostophilis' line: " 'Twas made for man; then he's more excellent."

Faustus shows evidence of this in his belief that he is always in control of his own destiny, believing he can simply repent or that Hell will not be as awful as he perceives it to be:

Nay, and this be hell, I'll willingly be damned;

What, sleeping, eating, walking and disputing!"

2. 1. 137-8

Petrarch was the historical figure responsible for the start of Renaissance humanism, due to his emphasis on learning in the arts and sciences. As Faustus explains during his lengthy soliloquy in Act One, Scene One, he has dabbled in many areas of education:

Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin?

? level at the end of every art,

And live and die in Aristotle's works.

1. 1. 1-5

Faustus' intelligence, interest in learning and clear reputation as a scholar has been the fuel many critics have used to support their argument of Faustus as a humanist. The revival of classical learning was one of the key factors to inspire Renaissance humanism, and the elaboration of this learning was continued by various humanist scholars ? thus perhaps exposing Faustus as one also.

Background information for the playwright himself, Marlowe, and the historical context of the time would serve to prove Faustus as a humanist also. Playwrights had to be aware of the current themes that an audience would find entertaining. Marlowe wrote Doctor Faustus in the late fifteenth century, when humanist issues were the focus of much of the learning and works of intellectuals. Thus, it would be of little surprise if Faustus was of humanist thinking.

Man's faith in himself was emphasised by humanist thought, as a result of the belief of an anthropocentric world. When Faustus becomes interested in the black arts because of its power to make any man a "demi-god", he is exposing this faith in man and apparent humanistic belief.

It is indisputable that Doctor Faustus represents several humanistic elements. Whether Marlowe implemented these aspects as entertainment for a fifteenth century audience or whether he included them as evidence of Faustus' own humanistic beliefs will forever remain a debate.

I, personally, see the religious undercurrents and the reputation of Doctor Faustus as a religious play to counteract Faustus' humanistic beliefs. If Faustus was to be of humanist thought, he would be a Christian humanist, and thus not be so intense in his Renaissance thinking as some critics would believe themselves.