

Humanism in dante and milton



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Humanism had a profound impact on European society during the Renaissance. This movement transformed the thinking processes of many Europeans, altering the way these people viewed themselves, their lives, and their place in the world. Literature written around the time of the Renaissance displays humanism's influence on the European social order. Dante Alighieri, a prominent Florentine writer, completed his *Inferno* around 1314. Although Dante lived before the widespread proliferation of humanism and humanistic writings, his style exhibits many precursors, if not aspects, of later humanistic thought. The aftereffects of humanism are apparent in the writings of John Milton, an English writer whose works were greatly influenced by the tumultuous political climate of seventeenth century England. Whereas Dante's *Inferno* displays many qualities to be emphasized by humanism, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, demonstrates the culmination of the effect humanism has had on his society. The writings of both men are products of the respective times in which they were written; Milton wrote almost three and a half centuries after Dante, and he lived in a different society in which Dante lived. Despite these differences, both the *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* display aspects found in humanism, although they may convey these aspects to the reader very differently. In order to understand how humanism pervades the themes and descriptions found within the *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost*, one must first grasp the concept of humanism. Humanism, literally "the study of man", can be defined as an awakening of the self. Humanism emphasized both the study of the classics and the "liberating arts", arts that liberate the mind. The study of moral philosophy, history, grammar, rhetoric, and poetry allowed humanists to broaden their minds, become more worldly, and more individualized.

Whereas before the Renaissance, Europeans had defined themselves as part of the collective, humanists began to define themselves as individuals.

Whereas the Medieval thinkers had embraced the teachings of the Church, humanists distanced themselves from the Church by their intense study of the classics and the liberal arts. As a result, humanists concentrated their efforts towards improving their life on earth as well as improving their position in the afterlife. The liberation of one's mind through studying, coupled with the humanist's precedence of life over afterlife, allowed for the humanist to take control of his own life, rather than to submit to the pre-Renaissance view that one is a pawn in the hands of more powerful forces.

Both Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* display most of these aspects of humanism in some form and at some point during their progression. Throughout the *Inferno*, Dante meets a wide range of characters, all with different personalities. Many of these characters are those with whom Dante's was once acquainted. Dante's decision to put his contemporaries in Hell reflects humanism, since he respects both his friends and enemies as individuals. All of these characters have their own distinct personalities, and Dante makes them stand out from the collective group of their fellow sinners. Dante isolates characters such as Capaneus, Ser Brunetto Latino, and Bertrand De Born. Dante describes the powerful figure Farinata Degli Uberti as if " he seemed to hold all of Hell in disrespect," (*Inferno* X, line 36). Dante could have easily walked through Hell, simply describing the punishments of each specified group of sinners. Dante's choice to isolate members of a specific group as individuals displays his humanistic process of thinking. In the *Inferno*, Dante introduces many characters; in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, Milton only introduces a

handful of characters. Dante briefly and concisely fleshes his characters out, while Milton illustrates his characters with great detail, paying close attention to their particular traits and attributes which identify them as individuals. Milton identifies many of the main characters as part of one singular group, the fallen angels, similar to the way Dante identifies the individual sinners he meets with their respective sins. However, Milton places a much greater emphasis on the individual, and how each individual character differs. The use of contrast to individualize characters is most easily recognized during the speeches of Moloch and Belial in Book II of *Paradise Lost*. Moloch appears extremely rash and reckless, advocating for open war against Heaven. Immediately following Moloch's speech, Belial tries to persuade the fallen angels not to recommence the war with Heaven. Moloch's speech is rather short and filled with emotion; Belial's speech is long, calm, devious, and persuasive. The speeches of these characters offer the reader a very detailed view of these two individual characters. Milton's juxtaposition of these completely different characters further identifies each of them as individuals, rather than as members of the fallen angel collective. Although both the *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* display humanism in the form of individualism, each work is a product of the period in which it was produced. Milton's *Paradise Lost* was written during the Baroque period, a movement of extremes, so Milton fleshes out his characters with great, almost extreme detail. The late medieval era and early Renaissance shaped Dante's *Inferno*; the *Inferno* was written before humanism had its momentous impact on the vast majority of intellectuals. As a result of this, Dante does not describe his characters in as great detail as Milton describes his characters, but Dante still individualizes his characters by isolating them from the rest of the

sinners. Not only did humanism emphasize individualism, but humanism also emphasized the importance and esteem of Classical Civilization and literature. Both the *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* can be considered humanist works simply because they attempt to mimic the epic style of the great Greek and Roman poets. The invocation of a Muse, a distinct characteristic of classical epics, is present in both the *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost*. Milton invokes the “Heav’only Muse” (*Paradise Lost*, Book I, line 6) in his opening sentence, while Dante buries his invocation, “O Muses! O High Genius! Be my aid! / O Memory, recorder of the vision, / here shall your true nobility be displayed,” in lines 7-9 of Book II. Both Dante and Milton anticipated their works to become modern epics in the style of Homer and Vergil; Dante hoped his *Divine Comedy* would be considered the greatest Italian epic, whereas Milton intended for his *Paradise Lost* to become the greatest English epic. One distinct difference between the *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* occurs in the role of Classical characters and allusions present. In the *Inferno*, many characters in Classical mythology play significant roles in the progression of the story. Such characters include Minos, Charon, the Harpies, and Geryon. No characters in Greek or Roman mythology play a significant role in Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*. Milton may have chosen to forsake such characters primarily because *Paradise Lost* is a story about “Man’s First Disobedience” (Book I, line 1). According to Christianity, no characters found in Classical myths play any part in the corruption of mankind; thus, Milton has no need to include any prominent characters of Classical myths in his epic. One can easily misinterpret Milton’s neglect to include any characters of Classical mythology in his epic as a sign that humanism is not present in *Paradise Lost*. However, it should be noted that even though the characters in

Paradise Lost may not be of a Classical origin, the individualism that these characters display reflects the effect humanism has had on Milton. Strangely enough, both the *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* were not written in Latin. If these two compositions were written in Latin, this overt mimicry of the Classical epic would ooze humanism. However, both works were written in the vernacular. This can be explained by the fact that the *Inferno* was written just prior to the humanistic movement, and that *Paradise Lost* was written during the Baroque period, considerably after the high-tide of the humanistic movement. If both works had been written during the middle of the fifteenth century, at the pinnacle of humanism's influence, they may well have been written in Latin. Both Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* exhibit many aspects of humanism. The most recognizable of these aspects include the emphasis Dante and Milton give to selected individuals, rather than to a collective group. Throughout the *Inferno*, Dante briefly isolates several characters, giving them individual traits and attributes. Throughout Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*, Milton fleshes out in great detail a small number of characters. Milton individualizes and describes characters in greater detail than Dante because Milton writes much later than Dante, and humanism has had over two hundred years to pervade Milton's society. Whereas Dante's *Inferno* anticipates humanism, Milton's *Paradise Lost* displays the effect humanism has had on European culture.