A Humanistic Fanfare

What driving force brings together the time periods of the Renaissance and the Restoration? The answer to this question is broad, but it can all be summed up under one central concept: Humanism. Humanism is the driving force that brings together the Renaissance and the Restoration. Webster’s dictionary defines Humanism as the “Doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interest and values; especially: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual’s dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason” (“Humanism”). The literature written during these two time periods are prominent in showing forth the ideals of Humanism in the Renaissance and Restoration. The idea of Humanism is distinctly displayed in Jonathan Swift’s “Gulliver’s Travels,” Sir Thomas More’s “Utopia,” and Christopher Marlowe’s “Dr. Faustus.” Looking at each of these tales reveals a heavy importance placed on human thinking and the diminished view of supernatural concerns.

This societal view of humanism can be first viewed in the Restoration through Jonathan Swift’s, “Gulliver’s Travels.” In his time, Swift was considered a misanthrope, meaning that he believed that human nature was deeply flawed. In concordance with this ideology, “Gulliver’s Travels” is based entirely on Swift’s desires and attempt to reform a weakened humanity. In voyage number one of “Gulliver’s Travels,” Swift writes, “I attempted to arise but was not able to stir: for as I happened to lie on my back, I found my arms and legs were strongly fastened on
each side of the ground... I felt something alive on my left leg... I perceived it to be a human creature not six inches high” (Swift 2494). There is a great deal of symbolism in this passage concerning human thinking. In this tale, Gulliver represents the ideal mind of the humanist. According to John Brooks Moore, “Gulliver possesses an easy good nature... In Gulliver lies that most precious capacity for acquiring knowledge” (Moore). Humanists were concerned with logic and experience, as was Gulliver. In this tale, the humanistic Gulliver is trapped by the tiny Lilliputians, who represent a small-minded and petty society. This shows how human logic is tied down by a narrow society, but also pinpoints the potential for reformation.

Humanists were concerned with finding ways to solve human problems and flaws, and Swift is focusing on solving the problems of human logic. Gulliver has the potential for a great mind, but it is trapped by the small-minded Lilliputians. The idea of Humanism in the Restoration as it relates to supernatural thinking is also shown in “Gulliver’s Travels.” In the voyage of the floating island, Swift writes, “Their heads were all reclined to the right, or the left; one of their eyes turned inward, and the other directly up to the zenith... They forgot several times where what they were about, and left to myself, till their memories were again roused by the flappers” (Swift 2574). According to the definition, Humanism, “stresses an individual’s dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason” (“Humanism”). It is plain to see that this passage from Swift’s tale goes directly against this definition of Humanism. Swift is making fun of those people who are always lost in their own thoughts. Humanism stresses logic and reason, and the people of Laputia cannot even remember where they are going because their minds are so lost in thought. Swift actually encourages humanism by criticizing the society on the floating island. There is no dignity found in being slapped with a bladder and aimlessly forgetting where you are. The importance of Humanism in this piece of literature does not end
there though. Swift’s tales encompass, through sarcasm, the important of human thinking and the diminished view of supernatural thinking throughout all of “Gulliver’s Travel’s.” The reader just has to be logical enough to find it.

Next, an illustration of Humanism during the Renaissance is displayed through the literature of Sir Thomas More’s “Utopia.” Through this work of literature, More was trying to reform society by creating the perfect human community. In “Utopia,” Moore writes, “However abundant goods may be, when everyone tries to get as much as he can for his own exclusive use, a handful of men end up sharing the whole pile, and the rest are left in poverty. The result generally is two sorts of people whose fortunes ought to be interchanged” (More 595-596). In this passage, we see how Moore places focus on the individual rather than the possessions of the individual. By creating equality for all members of Utopia, Swift increases everyone’s self-worth and dignity. Each member of Utopia feels just as valuable as his or her neighbor. Everyone feels value in human life when earthly possessions are not the focus and measure of human worth.

The value of human interests is also established through the religion of Utopia. In “Utopia,” Swift writes, “Utopus decreed that everyone could cultivate the religion of his choice, and strenuously proselytize for it too, provided he did so quietly, modestly, rationally, and without bitterness towards others” (More 636). By telling the members of Utopia to worship “quietly” and “modestly,” the reader can easily see the diminished view of supernatural religion. Again Utopus is focusing on human interest and complying to those interests by allowing everyone to worship whichever god they choose. This establishes the humanistic idea of individual dignity. All members of Utopia are equally right in their own eyes. Through these few individual passages, the fact is proven that Sir Thomas Moore’s “Utopia” is intertwined with
Humanistic principles from the least to the greatest problems of society. The ultimate proof lies in Moore’s fundamental belief that there should be equal value for and interest in all human life.

Finally, the belief in Humanism is displayed throughout Christopher Marlowe’s literary work “Dr. Faustus.” Marlowe’s drama portrays humanistic ideas right from the very opening of the story. In some of the very first lines spoken in the drama, Marlowe write, “Soon he profits in divinity,/ The fruitful plot of scholarism graced,/ That shortly he was graced with doctor’s name,/ excelling all whose sweet delight disputes/ In heavenly matters of theology./ Till, swollen with cunning, of self-conceit” (Marlowe 1128). Humanism during this time period was heavily preoccupied with the appeals to logic, science, education, and reasoning. This idea is imbedded in the opening lines of “Dr. Faustus.” The reader can easily see that Faustus has learned everything there is to know concerning education because the story tells us that Faustus has received his doctorates degree. This is what earns him the title “Dr.” Faustus is an extremely educated man, and this education enhances his own worth and dignity. Humanism is also embedded in the fact that Faustus desires to know everything that there is to know. Rather than accepting certain principles by faith, which is the opposite of Humanism, Faustus tries to find logical reasoning through experience in the matters he has yet to conquer. There is also an undertone of Humanism in Marlowe’s tale when Faustus plays tricks on the pope. In this section of the story, Marlowe writes, “What, are you the crossing of your self? Well, use that rick no more, I would advise you... Well there’s the second time; aware the third! I give you fair warning” (Marlowe 1150). In this passage, Faustus has decided to box the pope on the ear. The pope is a symbol of Christian beliefs. The fact that Faustus boxes the pope on the ear places human dominion over Christian beliefs. This shows that humans are greater than Christianity and faith in God. Humanism is wrapped around the idea of the importance of humans above all else,
even faith in God. Just these few passages prove that there is a great deal of importance placed on human thinking through Marlowe’s “Dr. Faustus.” These concepts show the importance on Humanism in the Renaissance society during this time period.

Through looking at just three pieces of literature during the Restoration and the Renaissance, we can see the important role Humanism played in these societies. Humanism is the idea that brings together these two time periods, and this is seen through the literature of the time. Whether looking at Jonathan Swift’s “Gulliver’s Travels,” Sir Thomas More’s “Utopia,” or Christopher Marlowe’s “Dr. Faustus,” it is plain to see that there is a great deal of importance placed on human logic and thinking, and there is a heavily diminished view on faith in supernatural thinking or God. According to Abugu Benjamin in an article entitled about the role of literature in society, “literature is a reflection of the society is a fact that has been widely acknowledged. Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills” (Benjamin). Therefore, by studying literature, we as readers, can also study the society from the time when the literature was written. Each of these stories brings to life Webster’s definition of Humanism in their own individual way. Swift reveals Humanism through the comical journey of an ideal member of society. Moore reveals Humanism through the logic found in creating a perfect society where all humans feel worth and dignity. Then Marlowe reveals Humanism through the dramatic play of the well-educated Dr. Faustus. What more can be said about the preoccupations of the Restoration and Renaissance societies? Through this literature we know that both time periods were infiltrated with Humanism.
Works Cited


