**Final - Essay Questions**

**QUESTION 1**

*Explain some of the diverse ways in which Renaissance humanists explored the human condition; which are more successful in their aims, in your view?*

**THESIS** - Renaissance humanists explored the human condition in two main ways.

* 1. Examining Life itself (its benefits, problems, and many old texts, many of which were religious in nature) through a secular and non-pious lens.
  2. Questioning authority and knowledge and starting to realize that as an individual you have just as much right to make claims about unseen truths as much as any ruler or lord. Just because the ruler is in charge that doesn’t make him right.

The Human Condition is one topic that every human has contemplated at some point in their life. What is the point of all of this? Where do we, as humans, belong in relation to other animals, other humans, and the divine? What is our purpose and meaning? People all over the world have very different views concerning this idea of “the Human Condition.” Some are religious based and optimistic, and others take a darker more doubtful state. To quote C3PO from Star Wars: A New Hope “It seems we were made to suffer. It is our lot in life.” Renaissance Humanists had all of these same questions, but explored potential answers in very different ways. **They did this by looking at the world through a physical and non-pious lens**. Renaissance Humanists began to focus on the physical rather than the non-physical, things you can see and observe as opposed to the unseen. **They also learned to question authority and the nature of truth and justice.** Many Renaissance authors and other people of the time started to question these rulers, lords, kings, and priests that made all the rules and were seen as being morally right just because they were in power.

A great example of a renaissance’s author’s view on the moral justness of the rich and powerful can be seen in Thomas More’s *Utopia*. In Utopia, a man is relaying what Utopian culture looks like (Utopia being the perfect island – True Paradise) and the following is a quote concerning what the utopians believe about money, since they had a moneyless economy. “They [Utopians] do not understand why a dunderhead with no more brains than a post, and who is as depraved as he is foolish, should command a great many wise and good men simply because he happens to have a great pile of gold.” (Utopia – Norton pp.2168) It is clearly seen here that Thomas More was against the idea of rich people getting power just because they are rich. Thomas also makes the distinction that Power and Wisdom are two very different things. Just because the king is “Royalty” and has the power to do what he wants, doesn’t mean that he is necessarily smart, wise, or morally sound. In fact, in this passage More seems to think that the rich and powerful are dumb and slow.

Another great renaissance author that speaks about power, ruling, and definitely focuses more on the seen world than the unseen is Niccolo Machiavielli. In his book *The Prince*. Machiavelli expresses the importance of when a ruler has power, he must do everything in his power to keep that power and halt lady fortune (in other words – his inevitable fate and doom), because nothing else matters. Machiavelli is a true renaissance realist in the sense that he cares little to nothing for thoughts of the divine or the afterlife. His entire focus is on the life before us now and making it as good as possible. The following is an excerpt from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. “. . . anyone who determines to act in all circumstances the part of a good man must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence, if a prince wishes to maintain himself, he must learn how to be not good, and to use that ability or not a s is required.” (The Prince, Chapter 15 – Norton pp. 2113) This quote is very powerful because here Machiavelli is actually saying ‘Hey, since no one is really all good, it’s ok to be cruel and not good if it means you stay in power, just use discretion.’ This is an incredibly different idea than the ones that preceded it, which were centered on piety, righteousness, the afterlife, and the will of the divine. Yes, in some texts such as Thomas More’s Utopia and Paradise Lost there is clear spiritual and religious influence, but even so both of these texts and many others from this time period were written in a context that focuses on what we can see versus what we cannot see and making our life on this earth as comfortable as possible (maybe not so much paradise lost in this sense). If nothing else one thing is certain of Renaissance authors, they were not afraid to pose questions, give their interpretations and opinions, and challenge the status quo.

**QUESTION 2**

*How have attitudes to the ideas of the corruption of man and the nature of evil changed between Dante’s Inferno and Milton’s Paradise Lost?*

**THESIS** - The biggest switch in attitudes about the corruption of man and the nature of evil that is seen in Dante’s Inferno and in Milton’s Paradise lost, and ultimately life before and after the reformation, is that, for the first time, **God’s Ultimate Justice is called into question**.

In nearly every story written throughout history, there is some sort of a battle between good and evil. It is a powerful and classic theme that is always represented. Whether it is exaggerated or minimized, every story consists of some sort of hero fighting against an evil or adverse force, and the stories and texts that we have studied in the Honors 102 course are no exception. Throughout many ancient texts, evil and good have been depicted in very specific lights – with the Divine (God, “The Gods”, God’s will, etc.) being the face of good and earthly and sinful ways (selfishness, demons, Satan, etc.) being the embodiment of evil, with a strong emphasis on Justice and fate. In the end, justice is always served and things happen as they are meant to, the way god or the divine intended them to happen. This is because ancient culture was incredibly pious in nature, especially during the 14th century, the time that Dante’s Inferno was written. But after the great protestant reformation in the 16th century, thoughts and ideas began to change concerning the nature of good, evil, and the divine. This is especially true when we look at John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, written shortly after the end of the reformation in the early 17th century. But first let’s talk about what the view of good, evil, and justice was like before the reformation. We will do this by looking at the content of Dante’s Inferno.

In Inferno, Dante writes of a man who is led through the many circles of hell, each full of different kinds of sinners getting the eternal punishment they deserve for their crimes. This story greatly expresses god’s ultimate justice and righteousness in his actions, as did many stories before it. In Inferno, even the gates of hell declared God’s justice and perfection. “. . . JUSTICE IT WAS THAT MOVED MY GREAT CREATOR; DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE CREATED ME, AND HIGHEST WISDOM JOINED WITH PRIMAL LOVE. . .” (Inferno, Canto III.3-6 – Norton, pp. 1607) But between Paradise Lost and Inferno, we see attitudes towards the corruption of man and the nature of evil change drastically. In fact, paradise lost is actually the biblical story of “The Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man” written from Satan’s point of view. This is an idea that before the reformation, would’ve been deemed heretical immediately. What are you talking about Satan’s point of view? There’s no other point of view but God’s point of view because God is always right. In Dante’s *Inferno*, God is supported in whatever he does because ultimately god is perfect and always just. In Paradise Lost, **God’s ultimate justice is called into question.** This is the single biggest difference between the two texts, and ultimately, general thought before and after the protestant reformation.

In Dante’s inferno, God is seen as so just and perfect that the main character is actually scolded by his guide through hell for having pity on the damned and tortured souls he saw in pain. “’So you are still like all the other fools? In this place piety lives when pity is dead, for who could he more wicked than that man who tries to bend divine will to his own!” (Inferno, Canto XX.27-30 – Norton pp. 1666) In other words, don’t be sorry for them, they have gotten what they deserved, and God’s will is Just. But in Paradise lost, Satan is humanized, and is seen to be almost justified in his actions. The following is an excerpt from paradise lost in which Satan is giving a lament about his eternal punishment. “This knows my punisher; therefore as far From granting he, as I from begging, peace. All hope excluded thus, behold, instead Of us outcast, exiled, his new delight, Mankind created, and for him this world! So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear, Farewell remorse! All good to me is lost;” (Paradise Lost, Book 4.103-110 – Norton, pp. 2766) This passage shows Satan experiencing a wide range of emotions including Hope, Fear, Remorse, and also hopelessness and despair when he realizes that there is nothing he can do to change his fate. This is very similar to personal experiences I’ve had when I first truly began to realize the gravity of death and the Existential Entropy of our Ephemeral Existence. For me this was a very shocking idea when I first read it, because my idea of Satan was a creature that was full of pure rage and terror, not someone that I could feel empathy for and relate to. Yes Satan is the embodiment of evil, but he only wants revenge on God because he feels that he has been unjustly punished. And in a way, it sort of makes sense to us humans.

I personally completely understand Satan’s thinking and point of view, and it causes me to question God’s ultimate justice. Especially when I pair this humanized rationalization of Satan’s motive with the idea that God is the author of sin and death, and that the fall of man is something that God specifically planned all along, which is also another theme seen in the later sections of Paradise is lost. Yes it is true that God is all-powerful and can do whatever he wants, but does that fact alone make all of god’s decisions morally right? This is a common idea that is around even today. How many times have we heard people question the ultimate righteousness of God? “If god is so good, how come he killed innocent children in the worldwide flood?” or “If god is so good, how come he let my father die of cancer?” These are incredibly, important, powerful, and warranted questions, and it all started with the change of thought that is represented by these two books – Dante’s Inferno, which calls God just, and Paradise Lost, which questions that very justice.

P.S. – Thank you very much Professor Decker for being my Honors 102 Professor. I appreciate how well you teach and I learned a lot and grew a lot being in your class. I am excited to take more classes with you in the future!

Sincerely,

-Raymond