A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF VOLTAIRE'S "CANDIDE"

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In 1759, French philosophe Voltaire wrote a satirical essay targeting against religious and philosophical theories that he held critical viewpoints toward. This well-known work - entitled *Candide* - takes aim at excessive optimism, the teachings promoted by religious leadership, a blind obedience to the vindication of God, and much more by relating the misadventures of its main character.

This character – who is known by the name of Candide - is a young man of simple nature who had been sheltered from the reality of the world and lives in a blissful existence unaware of anything beyond his immediate environment. Brought up to believe he was born into a positive environment illustrative of the "best of all worlds"[1], he soon discovers that life is not as easy or as positive in nature as he was led to believe. Over the course of Voltaire's narrative, Candide encounters a series of negative events - many of which referenced real-world situations - which are used to symbolically illustrate the many dangers and evils faced throughout life. Over the course of the missive, Candide begins to question his beliefs, his environment, and his place within it while desperately trying to cling to the optimism of his youth.

The story is broken down into thirty (30) individual chapters which can be separated into three (3) general sections focused upon specific areas of interest or phases of Candide's life. The first section is focused upon Candide's adventures in Europe, the second on adventures in the Americas, and the last ends within the Ottoman Empire. Events that transpire within each section are meant to represent an evolution in the perceptions and thinking on the part of the main character.

[1] Voltaire. Candide: And Other Writings. (Barnes & Noble, 1995), 3.

In the first section, Voltaire describes a series of events concerning Candide meant to set up the flow and tone of the book. It begins by presenting an individual (Candide) who is extremely ignorant in many ways beyond what he has been told by those tasked with his education. He then begins to become exposed to many new things as a series of misfortunes transpire around and to him. These events plant the seed of doubt in his mind regarding the perceptions and truths he has been taught to accept, and the reader can view Candide becoming more inquisitive in nature as he navigates through these items.

The second section illustrates Candide continuing to question things around him and openly explore learning new concepts and ideas. His inquisitive nature grows as he is exposed to more and more situations. The reader can also view a change beginning with Candide's character with his involvement in the deaths of multiple creatures and individuals – a shift away from his usually mild demeanor. This section is where it becomes apparent that Voltaire truly (albeit subtly) inserts his own criticisms and viewpoints regarding many of the items mentioned above in the opening paragraph. In one such instance, his views on the negative aspects of the Church can be alluded via an episode revolving around the Incan civilization and their hatred of missionaries. Another instance (as viewed with Candide's stay in El Dorado) can be seen as an allegory to the benefits of reason versus the pitfalls of ideological philosophes practiced elsewhere.

And finally, the third section presents the rejection of the views Candide had been taught in his earliest days. His experiences have colored his attitude and thinking causing him to quote "we must cultivate our garden".[2] This phrase implies that Candide has realized that experience

[2] Ibid., 95.

can affect your outlook as well as the importance of thinking for oneself. By cultivating new concepts and ideas, an individual can live a better life. However, the story ends without Voltaire presenting any clear indication or definitive process of how this is to be achieved. Rather, it is left up for the reader to make up their own mind on what path to follow – thus further strengthening the ideas promoted throughout the narrative regarding an individual's right to question and think upon his own terms.

Voltaire has composed a story which touches upon some of the more predominant thoughts of the Enlightenment era. Throughout the journey of Candide, he deftly challenges the authority of the Church and promotes a need for a proper and realistic education, thinking for oneself, and the benefits of travel (among other things). Despite all the terrible things Candide has gone through, his character can be seen to evolve via the many civilizations and cultural differences he comes into contact with as well as the sights and sounds he observes in the places he visits. Many of these experiences contradict the outlook he was taught at an early age, and we can see him transform from an innocent into an individual somewhat soured by life experience who openly questions his environment as well as his place in it.

Voltaire also manages to comment upon many of the philosophical viewpoints of the period using environmental settings meant to illustrate differing lines of thinking and philosophical concepts. In one such setting (described in chapters 17 and 18), Candide finds himself in the land of El Dorado where the inhabitants have rejected material possessions and live in communion with their creator in a land of reason. Although initially happy in this locale, Candide eventually yearns to return to the "real world" and takes with him many pounds of gold

and jewels. This could be Voltaire possibly alluding to the writings of Denis Diderot (and others) who promoted materialism.[3]

Another example can be found in chapter 22, where Voltaire describes conversations overheard by Candide as related to literature and plays found in the theater. In these conversations, the participants lament the lack of quality found within most offerings and how they provide little to the benefit of society.[4] In addition, they criticize the self-importance displayed by many of the authors of these items. Once again, we can see possible criticism on the part of Voltaire toward some of his colleagues and their ideologies. For example, Voltaire may have been leveling criticism toward Jean-Jacques Rousseau who felt that frivolous pleasures such as the theater isolated people away from one another and were a detriment to society.

There are other examples of this type of hidden meaning found throughout the book and research indicates that *Candide* was met with considerable controversy upon its release. However, since that time, it has become one of the most frequently taught pieces of literature within the academic arena across the globe.

On a personal level, it was my first reading of Voltaire's masterpiece and I found it quite entertaining and thoroughly enjoyable. By writing in a story-like structure, Voltaire was able to have me consider concepts and ideas in an easy-to-understand manner without getting bogged down in overly expressive and technical philosophical terminology as was common in the writings of his time. His writing style ran more like a story rather than a philosophical essay thereby enamoring itself to me in a simpler and more entertaining way.

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[3] Ibid., 42-50.

[4] Ibid., 59-69.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Voltaire. *Candide: And Other Writings*. Barnes & Noble, First Edition, 1 January 1995.