

Literary Reflection

This year's humanities class offered a wide variety of reading selections for students to ponder over. Included were Voltaire's *Candide* and Tracy Chevalier's *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. Both books were unique in their writing style and premise, though such uniqueness is not always a good thing.

Candide was special in an undeniably good way. It was hard to make it through a page of the book without laughing such that those around me looked at me as though I was insane. Perhaps Voltaire's satire is better suited to be read in a small, enclosed room so that the reader can cackle as much as he wishes to without attracting unwanted attention. As the reader follows Candide's adventure in Westphalia, through Eldorado and then back into Cunégonde's arms, he is constantly delighted by unexpected plot twists and interesting (yet mildly disturbing) backstories.

Girl With a Pearl Earring, on the other hand, seemed like little more than a waste of time. I enjoy reading, and so I enjoyed reading this book in the same manner that I enjoy reading any good story about an underaged girl falling for a forty-year-old painter. There are more intriguing books to read out there, though, and *Girl With a Pearl Earring* did not appear to bring anything new to the table; it was not funny, it did not teach the reader anything, and large portions of the book were a little too cliché.

It is unfair to criticize a book without providing support for my arguments. Though it is arguably still unfair to compare any author to Voltaire, I will try to explain why *Girl With a Pearl Earring* did not live up to its potential.

Griet, from *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, works as a servant for Vermeer, a painter. She falls in love with him, though he does his best to keep his distance; he is married to Catharina. Lust overtakes him and he starts to invite Griet into his personal life. In the meantime, Pieter, a butcher, falls in love with Griet and tries to win her heart.

Candide, a parentless bastard child who lives with the beautiful Cunégonde, is drafted into the military after engaging in experimental physics with Cunégonde. After the war, which ends before it seemed to have started, he discovers that Cunégonde was *raped* and *disemboweled*. After visiting a city made up of gold and diamonds, he goes back to Westphalia in search of his lover who, he believes, is dead. He finds her alive (after all, people often survive such things) as a victim of two men who take advantage of her, and, presented with no other choice, runs both of them through with a sword. Candide visits Cunégonde's brother, who has also come back to life, and has a great reunion that lasts for the whole of two minutes. When Cunégonde's brother discovers that Candide intends to marry Cunégonde, he becomes enraged and finds himself skewered with Candide's sword (don't worry, he comes back to life again later). Cunégonde grows fat in a small home in the country, and lives with Candide for the rest of their lives.

Griet doesn't end up with Vermeer, in case you were wondering.

Girl With a Pearl Earring just didn't seem *juicy* enough to me. Perhaps I've been spoiled by such fantastic literature as *Candide*, but I have never watched a movie or read another book with as much surprising (and interesting!) content as Voltaire's *Candide*. If a novel is going to be bland, there should be a point in having a humanities class read it. *Girl With a Pearl Earring* did not appear to have such a point. This is why I was so disappointed by the book.

I wasn't disappointed with *Candide*, though, in case you hadn't figured that out.