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Honors 203 (H03)

Candide Book Analysis

As life goes on and people have a greater variety of experiences, their philosophical outlook on life changes. Youthful optimism can be replaced by a more cautious and realistic view as people experience the horrors of this world. Voltaire experienced this; his youthful optimism based on Leibniz was shattered as personal misfortunes, the Lisbon earthquake, and the Seven Years War led him to believe that this is not necessarily “the best of all possible worlds” (Voltaire, *Candide*, xvii). This is an analysis and exploration of the ideas put forth within Voltaire’s *Candide*. *Candide* is useful for historians as it provides the viewpoint of a philosophe on the time period of the Enlightenment (which was characterized by the philosophes and their writings), and it rejects Leibnizian optimism in favor of a work-ethic centered philosophy.

The purpose that Voltaire had in mind while writing *Candide* was, in his own words, “to bring amusement to a small number of men of wit.” The Enlightenment is considered to be “The Age of Criticism” and Voltaire lived up to that well. Religion, war, the romance novel (Voltaire, *Candide*, 134), man’s love of gold, and many other topics were ridiculed to great effect. The main way that Voltaire achieved this purpose was a full on attack on the philosophy of optimism. He did this in several ways. First of all, he constructed the plot such that the characters encountered nothing but misfortune, giving them many chances to reflect on and (for Candide) to slowly reject optimism. Also, he made the characters unrealistically puppet-like, every character fit some sort of stereotype and every character had some sort of purpose

and some sort of idea to be a mockery of. Finally, while having a fantastical chain of events happen, the evils were all based on historical events. The executed admiral was to represent John Byng, a British admiral who Voltaire felt was unjustly executed (Voltaire, *Candide*, 136). The earthquake in Lisbon was real, and was an influential part of Voltaire's dissatisfaction with optimism (Voltaire, *Candide*, 133).

Candide is very useful to any study of the Enlightenment. As it was written during the time of the Enlightenment by one of the most famous philosophes, *Candide* is a prime example of the kinds of works that were produced during the time period. The Enlightenment scholar must keep in mind though that the philosophes were always in disagreement about the best ways to go about a different issue. Some opinions may have been the standard school of thought, and some may have earned scornful laughter from the other philosophes. Voltaire came from the middle class, and had to work hard (and charm many wealthy ladies) to get where he was. This led him to feel a slight tinge of disgust for the hereditary nobility who sat around and gossiped over card games, as evidenced by Chapter XXII (Voltaire, *Candide*, 86-98). Other philosophes came from different social levels, and so had radically different opinions. Montesquieu came from the hereditary nobility, and his famous work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was heavily influenced by the rise of absolutism and how that meant the nobility had less power. Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the other hand came from the lower class, and never became wealthy. His famous work, *The Social Contract*, put forth the idea that all member of society should have a say, which was radically against what most everyone else, including Voltaire, believed in. The point is that to make a proper study of the Enlightenment and the writings produced during the time, one must read works by many of the influential people of the time,

one of which includes Voltaire's *Candide* for its insight into his stances on the myriad of issues facing the philosophes.

Candide is quite obviously a work of the Enlightenment, as it followed many of the core values shared by the philosophes. It was heavily critical of many subjects and no subject was spared. Women were a relatively insignificant part of the novel. Out of the two women in *Candide*, one was merely a romantic interest for Candide who turns ugly after being exposed to the real world and the other was a tool to further Candide's disillusionment with optimism. As the held belief was that women were too emotional to be able to participate in science or deserve equality, this is fitting. Criticism of organized religion was blatant. From encouraging people to "eat a Jesuit" (Voltaire, *Candide*, 63) to having monks fraternizing with prostitutes, religion was portrayed in a very negative light. As most of the philosophes were deists who felt reason and science were the tools to human progress, this also fits. The society of El Dorado is a philosophes' paradise: there are no priests, people are rational, and the head of state is the model philosopher king. The conclusion that Voltaire makes, that the best course for the individual is to "cultivate our garden" (Voltaire, *Candide*, 130), has a parallel to the philosophy behind making Encyclopédie, that is taking it upon the self to work hard and bring about change. While *Candide* disagrees with individual feelings about topics that were commonly held, most notably optimism, in general it follows the core ideas of criticism and rational discourse that were at the heart of the Enlightenment.

Candide rejects the philosophy of optimism, and suggests the alternative of “cultivating our garden” or working to inspire growth and progress in the world around us. It is a case study into the mind of a famous philosophe, Voltaire, and therefore an essential read for anyone studying the Enlightenment. The works of the philosophes helped inspire social change throughout the Western world, leading to the American Revolution and the French Revolution. These changes were inspired by desire for, among many other things, the freedom to think and discuss ideas. This was at the core of the Enlightenment, and *Candide* displays this masterfully.