Voltaire Research Paper

François-Marie Arouet, more commonly known by his pen name Voltaire, played a pivotal role in the Enlightenment movement that occur in France in the 1800s. Remembered for his fierce defiance of religious persecution, Voltaire also defended the right to freedom of speech through his literary works. Voltaire’s literary works spanned a variety of genres, including dramas, novellas, and poetry. In addition to using his writing abilities, Voltaire also levied his influence on the book market in order to deliver his message all over Europe. Strong defiance towards religious persecution, standing up to unjust authority, and literary talent defined Voltaire’s contributions to the French Enlightenment.

Unlike most pre-Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire looked down on those of religious faith and expressed these views quite often in his works. While this may at first seem strange since he was schooled by Jesuits, some of his resistance to the Church might have been personally motivated since he “claimed, he was … sexually abused by his Warders” (Wright xvi). It is possible that this abuse contributed to Voltaire having such a distain for religious institutions. However, his views were also undoubtedly influence by his philosophical skepticism and his feeling that religious leaders used organized religion and superstition to protect their own power and persecute others (Shank). Despite his dislike of religion, Voltaire was actually a deist and believed in the probable existence of a supreme being; however, he felt that in order to find it people must use reason and logic instead of pure faith. He was quite honest when expressing these views, “calling the Bible and the Quran outdated manuscripts, deeming them not as divine presents but written by mortals” ("Voltaire.").

Voltaire did more than simply talk about his dislike for religion; he included it as a recurring theme in his writings, and this would be the place where his impact was quite noticeable. The character Pangloss, from his novella *Candide,* provides an example of this. Voltaire used Pangloss as a caricature of the 18th century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Leibniz was best know for his theory of Optimism, which said that since this is the best of all worlds, what we perceive as negative is not and instead is integral to the continuation of our world since this is the best of all worlds. Voltaire criticized this way of thinking since it relied on blind faith instead of reason and logic; he used the character of Pangloss to exemplify the ridiculousness of these optimist beliefs by super imposing them on the horrible world that the characters of *Candide* inhabit. Voltaire’s bleak portrait of reality in the novel not only was a way of highlighting the ridiculousness of Leibniz’s ideas but also was a reflection of the hardships that he had endured. *Candide* was one of the first literary texts that took religious ideals to an extreme, in a space that was not dictated by the church. *Candide*’s new perspective reached almost every corner of Europe as “it literally flew off the presses at the moment of its publication in early 1759, appearing almost immediately in multiple editions in every European language, eventually selling more copies than any other eighteenth-century book” (Wright xv). The tremendous success of the novel would lead to the citizens of Europe looking at religion from a more objective stance and would propel Voltaire to the forefront of Enlightenment thought.

Voltaire’s vocal anticlericalism was linked to another philosophical stance: anti-authoritarianism. Through out his life, Voltaire struggled with staying in the good graces of those in authority, and this would lead to him promoting an anti-authoritarian message through out his works. Voltaire’s highly critical outlook was the main reason for his conflicts with those above him; in fact these conflicts would lead to him being exiled from France on two different occasions and once from Prussia after falling out with Fredrick. While in exile in England following his first expulsion from France, Voltaire was impressed by the way English society functioned in comparison to that of the French. Voltaire was so struck by the difference in the two nations that he wrote a series of letters about it titled Letters on England in 1729. After his return to France Voltaire expanded on the letters, renaming them Lettres philosophiques and having them published in France in 1734. Unfortunately for Voltaire, before he could receive royal approval for the works release, “His publisher … released the book without these approvals and without Voltaire's permission” (Shank). This unapproved release of the letter, which compared France in a negative light to England, would land Voltaire once again on the wrong side of the French authorities. But instead of calling it quits and taking his punishment, Voltaire decided to take on the identity of a rebel author in exile with pride. This was a turning point in the way that Voltaire approached his future conflicts with those in authority and it demonstrated to the people of Europe that he was an uncompromising author that should be taken seriously. But it wasn’t until twenty-one years later in 1755 when Voltaire bought his chateau in Geneva that he would be fully independent from the governments of Europe and able to fully take up the fight against the authoritarian governments of Europe. One of his ongoing legacies is that he weighted “the value of any philosophy according by [sic] its ability to effect social change” (Shank).

One case of authoritarian government unfairly imposing its rule on its subjects that Voltaire took most interest in was the execution of Jean Calas. The French government convicted Calas of murdering his son and brutally executed him in public for the offense. Voltaire found the execution profoundly disturbing since he believed that Calas’s son had committed suicide. Because of this, Voltaire took up Calas’s case after his death and “devoted three years of incessant labor clearing Calas’s name” (Wright). Voltaire’s fierce defiance of the French government’s murder of Calas indicated that he was willing to expend his blood, sweat, and tears to fight the government’s harsh and unjust rule. While Voltaire’s defense of Calas may not be remembered as his most famous deed, it marks one of the few times that he marched head on into conflict with a group in power that he considered in the wrong for their actions. Questioning authority would become an important role that Voltaire would play in the Enlightenment and its ideals.

One of the reasons that Voltaire’s philosophy had such an impact lies in the fact that he was a “man of letters” (Shank); in order to convey his message of religious tolerance and authoritarian critique, Voltaire utilized a multitude of rhetorical styles, such as poetry, satire, drama, and prose. However, Voltaire never wrote a novel since he thought it “base and trivial” (Cronk, “Voltaire”). Discussing controversial religious and political views was common in Voltaire’s works since he strongly believed in people being able to have a dialogue about difficult to discuss topics. In fact, he considered a form of both philosophical and political action. In a letter in 1767, he distinguished himself from author Jean-Jacque Rousseau, saying, “Rousseau writes for writing’s sake. I write to act” (Cronk, “Voltaire”). Instead of directly challenging the status quo during the enlightenment, Voltaire chose to leave his mark though his literary works.

Far ahead of his pears at the time, Voltaire used his literary skills and ideas to help bring the Enlightenment to all of Europe. Voltaire’s beliefs centered on ending religious persecution and helping ensure freedom of speech in Europe. In order to achieve his goals Voltaire fought the unjust rule of many European monarchs through criticism in his literary works. Despite being exiled from France twice for his works and being expelled from Prussia after angering Frederick the Great, Voltaire continued to criticize governments that he saw as unjust until his death on May 30 1778. Voltaire’s contributions to literary action against what he saw as systems of oppression on the philosophers of his time and religious practitioners were his lasting mark on the Enlightenment movement.