Candid By Voltaire Essay, Research Paper

Francois-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, in his satirical masterwork Candide,

critiques both society and humanity wit little mercy. The author obviously seeks

to expose all of the human race’s self-deceptions and weaknesses, but he does so

with great humor. Voltaire gives delight with his humor while planting the

deeper message about the fallibility and corruption of humanity. This

contradiction holds the power of Voltaire’s writing. Candide provides a horrific

portrait of the human condition, but it does so with preposterous and outlandish

humor. Voltaire especially intends to criticize the popular idea of his era that

sees a rational order in the world: "Voltaire shows how the claim of a

rational universal order avoids the hard problems of living in a world where

human beings have become liars, traitors, and so on" (335). At the same

time, Voltaire is not so much the pessimist that he holds no hope for any sort

of improvement or salvation on the part of human beings. For example, after

putting his protagonist through every sort of awful predicament, Voltaire allows

Candide the positive goal of starting and cultivating a garden (402). Yes,

Voltaire is saying, there is much corruption in humanity, but there is also at

least a glimmer of hope that individual human beings can overcome that

corruption, survive their suffering, and lead some sort of productive and

responsible lives. Voltaire leaves it up to readers to decide for themselves

just how much weight they might give this optimistic conclusion, in light of the

horror upon horror which led up to that happy ending. Voltaire gives Candide and

his companions a very bumpy ride before they arrive at their relatively happy

destination. Candide is the incurable optimist, always believing the best about

human beings. Voltaire portrays him as optimistic by nature: "His features

admirably expressed his soul; he combined an honest mind with great simplicity

of heart" (336). Candide is instructed in the ways of the world by the

philosopher Pangloss, whom Voltaire clearly sees as an utter fool. The innocent

Candide sees Pangloss, on the other hand, as "the greatest philosopher . .

. in the entire world" (337). Candide is thrown out of the castle in which

he lives and must make his way through the cruel and corrupt world outside. At

every step of his introduction to the harsh reality of the world, however,

Candide struggles to maintain the positive outlook which the foolish Pangloss

planted in him. Candide is forcibly drafted into the army and told he is a hero.

He goes for a walk without permission and as a result is beaten almost to death:

"That made four thousand strokes, which laid open every muscle and nerve

from his nape to his butt" (339). However, Candide is as blessed by

unexpected benefactors as he is cursed by innocence in an evil world. The King

rescues him from certain death, and sends him to war, which he flees in order to

beg for bread on the streets. The story of Candide continues with such ordeals,

one after another, suffering piled atop suffering, but usually portrayed with

such exaggeration that it is hard to take seriously. Every brief moment of

pleasure or relief from suffering only brings greater suffering. For example,

Pangloss is reunited with Candide and tells the young man of his amorous

adventures with the maidservant of the castle: "In her arms I tasted the

delights of paradise, which directly caused these torments of hell, from which I

am now suffering" (342). Perhaps the favorite target of Voltaire is the

philosophy which holds that the world which exists is the best of all possible

worlds and the accompanying view that everything is for the best. This

philosophy is clearly nonsense to Voltaire, who uses Pangloss to express its

absurdity in the wake of an exploding volcano which has wrought tremendous

destruction: "For, said he, all this is for the best, since if there is a

volcano in Lisbon, it cannot be somewhere else, since it is unthinkable that

things should be where they are, since everything is well" (345). Of

course, Voltaire’s message is precisely that everything is not well, that

everything is far from well, and that only a fool would ever consider the

preposterous argument that the world is a reasonable place or that humanity

lives in the best of all possible worlds. To Voltaire, the only starting point

for a philosophy of truth is the acceptance that human life is for the most part

a miserable set of circumstances. This excerpt from a diatribe from the old

woman aboard ship illustrates the author’s position: Ask every passenger on this

ship to tell you his story, and if you find a single one who has not often

cursed the day of his birth, who has not often told himself that he is the most

miserable of men, then you may throw me overboard head first (357). Even the

eternal optimist Candide must struggle to maintain his positive outlook in the

face of the onslaught of suffering he and his companions face. Nevertheless,

Candide does keep his optimism, simply shifting it from this world to the next.

He continues to believe his original instruction from Pangloss–that everything

is well. if this claim does not hold true in this world, says Candide, then

certainly it will hold true in the world to come: We are destined, in the end,

for another universe, said Candide; no doubt that is the one where everything is

well. For in this once, it must be admitted, there is some reason to grieve over

our physical and moral state. . . . All will be well. . . . Surely it is the New

World which is the best of all possible worlds (352). Candide holds tight to the

philosophy of optimism even as he and Cacambo are apparently about to be cooked

and eaten by the savage Biglugs: "All is for the best, I agree; but I must

say it is hard to . . . be stuck on a spit by the Biglugs" (364). Of

course, Voltaire saves his hero again, only to throw him into another impossible

fix, and then to save him once more. Candide is faced over and over with

situations in which evil and corruption triumph, but when he finds one bad

person who seems to be meted some measure of justice, the protagonist seizes on

this single incident as if it were far more typical: "You see, said Candide

to Martin, crime is punished sometimes." In fact, Candide conveniently

ignores the fact that while the "scoundrel" was killed, an entire

boatload of innocent passengers went down to their deaths along with him (375).

Voltaire is not above holding himself up for a touch of satirical lampooning as

well. When Candide and Martin encounter the cynical Pocourante, it is clear that

Voltaire is using Pocourante as a substitute for himself and his own

"negative" attitude. Candide admires the pessimistic cynic because

"he is superior to everything he possesses." Martin, more realistic

than Candide, says, "Don’t you see . . . that he is disgusted with

everything he possesses?" Candide answers, "Isn’t there pleasure in

criticizing everything, in seeing faults where other people think they see

beauties?" (391). Perhaps Voltaire is trying here to disarm critics by

critiquing his own position. Nevertheless, Voltaire’s own role in

"criticizing everything" is certainly softened by the clearly

optimistic ending of Candide’s story. Candide is a changed man by the end of the

book, not quite so innocent, but still optimistic. His repeated claim that

"we must cultivate our garden" (402) means in part that human beings

should deal productively and responsibly with life as it is presented to them on

a daily basis. Whether life is good or evil should not be the defining standard

by which human beings act. Evil certainly exists in the world but every human

being can effectively combat it by doing good in his own personal life, by

nurturing rather than destructive behavior. Voltaire apparently agrees with the

Turk that tending one’s garden "keeps us from the three great evils,

boredom, vice, and poverty" (401).

Voltaire. Candide. The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces. Ed. Maynard

Mack. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992. 334-402.