Function of the narrative form in voltaire’s candide

Environment, Air

In a study of Voltaire's Candide, the central critical discussion revolves around the final chapter. Candide's epic journey finds its conclusion in a garden, where Candide and his companions are reunited and choose to spend the rest of their days working the land, a practical resolution to a novel that is filled with idealism. The majority of critics agree that this work is a satire of Enlightenment Optimism, with Candide's one-time mentor, Pangloss, as the butt of the joke. Pangloss insists, despite increasingly tragic events that occur throughout the novel, that everything is as it should be, and critics take Candide's resolution to work in the final chapter as his revelation that Enlightenment Optimism is an impractical philosophy. In his controversial article, " Gull in the Garden?", Roy S. Wolper completely omits any criticism of Leibnitz's ideas and prefers the conclusion that it is Candide, not Pangloss who is the object of satire in this novel, as he doesn't mature at the end of the novel, but simply gives in to the banalities of everyday life. He asserts that readers should not see Candide as a representative of Voltaire's thoughts and ideals, but that Candide should be read critically as a work independent of outside philosophies or historical movements.

I am in the minority when I state that I agree with Professor Wolper's argument; Candide doesn't learn a lesson at the end of this novel, and in fact, the moral at the end of the story, or the lack thereof, is less important than the meaning that can be derived from the structure of the novel itself. The prevailing theme is that of the story-teller and the listener. A series of narrators compete against one another to tell the most tragic tale, and Candide, like the reader, derives a sort of pleasure from hearing about the misfortunes of others. The end of the novel is not a happy ending or a

resolution, but simply a lack of desire to tell stories or to listen to them. Each character’s story reaches a brilliantly climactic level of pain and tragedy, only to fall flat in a purgatory-like existence in the final garden. No one is truly happy unless they can compare their pain to the pain of others, and when there are no stories to tell or to hear, life becomes mundane and one much turn to physical work to stave off boredom. In this sense, the “ meaning” of the Candide – that pleasure can be derived from the pain of others – is echoed in the narrative form of the novel.

Candide is structured as a frame narrative, with a fictitious master narrator telling Candide’s story, who in turn serves as listener for the many other characters he encounters along the way who tell their own stories. The title page informs readers that the novel was “ Translated from the German of Doctor Ralph, with the additions found in the Doctor’s pocket when he died at Minden” (Voltaire 1). This “ Doctor Ralph,” who is never mentioned again throughout Candide, serves as an anonymous buffer between Voltaire and his work. Ostensibly, this was to prevent his persecution for what he knew would be a controversial work, but it also adds another layer of narrative to the novel, preparing the reader for a series of stories that will, “ like a Russian doll” encapsulate “ stories within stories,” each of which are “ strikingly similar to Candide itself” (Wootton xxi). This story-within-a-story structure allows the veracity of the events that unfold to become more and more unreliable, as each tale is filtered through the memory of the storyteller, through Candide’s recounting of it to Doctor Ralph, and yet again through the Doctor’s translation. Even though he has an esteemed title, this Doctor, as English Showalter notes, “ died at Minden, the site of a notorious

battle; he thus shared the vulnerability of the characters and perhaps their fallibility" (25). Like Harry Bailey in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, Candide seeks out these stories from his companions and from strangers as a means of entertainment along his journey, and often persuades others to tell their tales as part of a contest; in The Canterbury Tales, the contest was meant to determine who was the best story-teller, but in Candide, our protagonist wants to know whose story is the most miserable. Oddly enough, in a novel full of characters who love to tell their own tales of misfortune, Candide doesn't have much of a voice. What we know of Candide's journey is told through the narration of Doctor Ralph, and much of Candide's dialogue is spent either parroting his mentor, Pangloss, debating with Martin the Scholar, or pining for his lost love, Cunégonde. While Candide's story is the central one to the novel named for him, it is not told in first-person the way the others are told, and primarily serves as the glue that holds all the other tales together.

Candide is widely referred to as a conte, the French for " tale" and the origin of " fairy tale," or contes des feés (Brown 201). In fact, Candide contains many traits of a fairy tale, as defined in the Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature: " Fairy tales are episodic: the main character is separated from, or otherwise in trouble with, his or her family. He or she encounters severe or supernatural challenges and difficulties until, finally, all ends happily. Within this framework are set one or more extraordinary […] motifs, such as a character's ability […] to come back from the dead […]" (Brown 201). The novel opens with the line, " Once upon a time in Westphalia," (Voltaire 3) a very common opener for a fairy tale, and surely this was meant to set the

tone of the novel, as Philip Stewart notes, though he concedes that “ it does not truly answer to that description either” (129). In this sense, Candide is a parody of a fairy tale, mimicking its style and format while omitting certain details and turning others on their heads. For example, a novel with so familiar an opening line would be expected to end with “ happily ever after,” and whether this was the outcome or not is the topic of much debate. The bulk of the novel, as it follows Candide on his grand quest to seek out his true love and find happiness, contains many elements of the romance genre as well, but the opening line and the frequent inclusion of first-hand stories within the novel more closely identify it as a fairy tale, considering that “ oral tradition has long provided material for literary fairy tales, and the dynamics of oral transmission have affected the fairy tale’s artistic construction” (Brown 202). Much like a fairy tale, the events that occur in Candide are far too preposterous in scale to be believable, but it is the message behind the fairy tale that Voltaire wants his readers to seek out.

A study of the individual narratives within Candide is crucial to finding the meaning that has been embedded in the novel. As Braun explains, “ in Candide meaning is inextricably intertwined with the very fabric of the narrative itself, and cannot be separated from it” (572). The main stories, told by Cunégonde and the old woman, the six kings, and Pangloss and the Baron, do not stand alone, but hold more meaning when compared with their counterparts. Cunégonde’s tale of being orphaned, raped, stabbed, taken prisoner, sold into servitude, and made to watch her tutor and her lover be hanged and flogged, respectively, at first seems tragic beyond belief. But not long after Cunégonde tells her tale, the old woman scoffs at her and asserts

that not only was she far more beautiful and noble than Cunégonde in her youth, but suffered a great deal more than her in every aspect. Her mother's throat was not simply slit, as in Cunégonde's case, but she was viciously ripped to pieces in front of her very eyes (Voltaire 27). She was not sold into servitude, but outright slavery, several times over. She survived not a mere earthquake, but actually contracted the plague and survived. And as if her tale could not get more comically grotesque, she was relieved of one of her buttocks which was then cannibalized by her captors. Her story so directly parallels and outdoes Cunégonde's story, and outdoes it in terms of scale and horror, that it becomes comical, and she even seems to relish the notion that she has bested young Cunégonde by telling a more tragic tale. As Showalter notes, " The old woman tells her story only to prove that she is unhappier than Cunégonde," (24) fitting with the theme of story-telling as a contest to be won by the least fortunate narrator.

The brief yet tragic stories of the six deposed kings whom Candide meets in Venice are told in rapid succession and with no emotion whatsoever. The final line told by each king, " I have come to spend Carnival in Venice" (Voltaire 81) is repeated almost verbatim, forming a refrain that lightens the mood of the stories, making them almost like a nursery-rhyme with which the reader can gleefully chime in. After leaving, Candide seems more excited at the adventure of having dined with kings than sympathetic to their stories of loss. That Candide gave the final and most unhappy king " a present of a diamond worth two thousand sequins" (Voltaire 82) is reminiscent of the prize that Martin received as " winner" of Candide's story-telling contest earlier in the novel. Just as the old woman's tale mirror's Cunégonde's and

the kings' stories are all very similar, Pangloss' tale at the end of the novel is so similar to the Baron's that it seems uncanny. Both were presumed to be dead, both recovered from their wounds, and both were sent to the galley for committing a lewd act that each of them deemed to be totally innocent in nature. This set of stories fits the model set by Cunégonde and the old woman: Cunégonde and her brother tell the first story in each set, with notable lack of emotion and sparse details, and when it's time for the old woman and Pangloss to tell their own stories, they tell virtually the same tale as their predecessor, only with much more description and a sense of amplified tragedy. Both the old woman and Pangloss " win" their contest by making use of parallelisms and exaggeration. The kings' stories fit nicely between these two sets of tales because they are so similar to each other that they form a refrain, or a bridge, between the women and the men.

The most surprising aspect of all the stories within the novel, including Candide's own story, is the unexpected lack of emotion while recounting such horrific tragedies. Even though many of the story-tellers include plenty of descriptors and detail to emphasize how painful their ordeal has been, this seems to only serve the purpose of making their story seem more tragic, more exciting, than the previous tale. As Gianni Iotti notes, " A principal source of the comic in Voltaire lies in deflating characters' extraordinary experiences into ordinary ones, reducing – always with irony – the exceptional to the banal, the unacceptable to the normal" (115). The stories are told not to evoke emotional sympathy from other characters (because none of them receive any sympathy, at least not from Candide), but only to outdo each other, to tell the best tale. Details are rattled off one after the

other about each tragic experience, with no apparent pauses for emotional response or reflection. Each tale ends with a summary in the plainest of speech that serves to both recap the story and enumerate the tragic events that occurred therein. This summary is often followed up with a deflated epigram that distances the reader from any potential emotional response they may have had to the story. For example, Cunégonde ends her tale with the aforementioned recap, then casually says to Candide, " You must be ravenous, and I have a large appetite; let us begin with supper" (Voltaire 21). Who else, when having just finished recounting the story of their rape and kidnapping, would next think of having a bite to eat? The old woman's story climaxes when she reveals that she has often thought of suicide as a means to end the tragedies of her life, but she then directs the " moral" of her tale to Cunégonde: " In short, Mademoiselle, I have lived, and I know the world" (Voltaire 31). To have survived rape, plague, slavery, and cannibalization and to simply call that " living" is certainly an understatement. When Candide prompts the villagers to tell their stories of woe, Doctor Ralph informs the reader that Candide only picks Martin as the winner because he thought he might be and amusing travel companion, and then tosses a few coins to the other story-tellers to thank them for their time. The stories seem to have no emotional effect on Candide whatsoever, and by this point the reader, like Candide, is becoming less and less emotionally concerned with the tragedies that befall the many characters. As Packard notes, " The absurd accumulation of tragedies is so incredible that humorous and intellectual appreciation are separated from the reader's emotional involvement" (244). By the time Candide reencounters Paquette, now living as a prostitute after

her horrible life, he and Martin use her as an example to settle a bet and simply leave her with the monk, never to be mentioned again. However, the story-tellers don't seem to be seeking sympathy from Candide and the others that hear their tales. For them, the act of telling the story is its own emotional reward. They experience catharsis in the act of telling, and Candide derives pleasure from hearing these miserable tales; he experiences shadenfreude from hearing stories that are more miserable than his own, evidenced by the increasing lack of emotional response to each story that he hears.

As it becomes more clear that it is the act of story-telling and the art of narrative that are more important than the actual stories that are told, the final of scene of Candide takes on a new meaning. The most notable difference between the Candide in the garden and the Candide of the rest of the novel is that the Candide of the garden is no longer interested in stories. Having found a relatively idyllic place to call home, he doesn't have the need to hear that other people's lives are more miserable than his; in fact, his story takes the same deflated ending that many of the other characters ended their tales with. As Wolper points out, Candide has fulfilled the goals of his quest: "[he] is the leader of the group, a surrogate baron Thunder-ten-tronckh; he is married to Lady Cunégonde; and he has Pangloss as a constant conversationalist" (268). However, this is a far cry from the " happily ever after" that was promised by implication of the opening line of the novel. True, Candide has gotten all the he ever wanted, but his ending is mediocre at best: he is the leader of a small group of outcasts; his one true love is old and ugly; and he no longer holds Pangloss' optimistic ideals as

true, having been won over by Martin's pessimism. As Frances K. Barasch so neatly summarizes, " true, to burlesque convention, all the friends whom Candide had supposed dead are restored to life and placed safely under his protection on a communal farm. But the ending is not meant to be happy" (4). In the concluding chapter of Candide, Doctor Ralph as narrator stays true to form by neatly summarizing Candide's adventures, as well as some of the other characters. All are reunited, and instead of the expected emotional response to Candide's journey and his sufferings, the novel " ends with a gesture of silencing" (Showalter 25). When Pangloss attempts to provoke Candide into a debate on the final outcome of things, Candide simply brushes off his statement, saying "'That is well said,' […] ' but we must cultivate our garden" (Voltaire 94). It seems odd that Candide, once so fascinated by stories and by discussing philosophy with both of his mentors, now has no appetite for conversation and would rather spend his days engaging in physical activities than intellectual ones. He doesn't argue this point with Pangloss; he simply lets the conversation fizzle out and die. It is disappointing to see Candide's lust for a good story fade out so quickly and uneventfully, probably because as a reader, we have not lost our desire to hear a story be told. For Candide, without pain, there is no pleasure, and without pleasure, there is only boredom which must be staved off through physical labor. Candide has resigned to his fate, and Doctor Ralph must have seen it fit to end Candide's story there, before his mundane lifestyle, so far removed from the previous adventures, drives his readers to boredom as well.

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