

The grotesque in voltaire's satire essay sample

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Modern culture is so saturated in satire that it is difficult to find works that pursue the authentic and the sincere. Once works like 1984 and Brave New World opened the floodgates of cynicism and skepticism that the events of the two World Wars made to seem the proper perspective. Today, works like The Onion make satire a part of the culture. Popular programs such as Saturday Night Live and Conan live off satire, which means that members of modern culture look at life with a half-satiric eye. In the time of the first modern satirists, such as Voltaire and Jonathan Swift, their voices were not part of an ongoing culture of cynicism. Instead, they were voices that struck hammer blows against the institutions of power, the adventures of their protagonists sounding like nails scratching a chalkboard, at least from the perspective of the Catholic Church (in the case of Voltaire) and the British crown (in the case of Swift). In terms of technique, Voltaire uses grotesque satire in order to criticize the tendency of human society to overlook its own shortcomings.

Voltaire's signature work of satire is his novel Candide, which takes a hard look at the forced optimism that informed the worldview of the Enlightenment and the Catholic Church in the eighteenth century. Voltaire's ability to turn humanity into a series of grotesques comes from his detachment from the necessary optimism that was a part of faith at that time. To the thinkers of the Enlightenment, one of the givens was that God existed, was perfect, and had created a perfect world. The reason why people saw flaws in the world was their failure to comprehend the grand plan of God. However, Voltaire does not have those beliefs in God. This permits him to ridicule the notion that the world has to be good through and through. It is just another step to pile satire on this notion throughout the story. As a <https://assignbuster.com/the-grotesque-in-voltaires-satire-essay-sample/>

result, grotesque after grotesque image appears in the book, showing the flaws of an insistence on a perfect world.

The first grotesque image that Candide encounters in his story is the deformed beggar whom he meets after taking shelter with Jacques, the Anabaptist in Holland. This beggar turns out to be Candide's tutor, Pangloss. Since Candide last saw Pangloss, the tutor has come down with syphilis. Candide's former love, Cunegonde, has been murdered by the Bulgars, along with her entire family. This series of events has done nothing, though, to dent Pangloss' optimistic outlook on life and the universe. The presence of the syphilis is a symbol of the sexual dysfunction that runs through the religious order of Voltaire's time. The Catholic Church taught chastity for its clergy, and yet tales were always rife about priests and nuns consorting with one another, or monasteries and cloisters atop hills that featured an orphanage in the valley between, with the children of the members of the two orders living there. Syphilis was a permanent reminder of the power of sexuality, just one potentially destructive passion that the church sought to deny.

The grotesque parade continues as the three men move on to Lisbon. Jacques dies in a storm while they are sailing, and Pangloss enters the hangman's noose for his heresy. Candide's reward is a flogging for listening to Pangloss' ideas. After his flogging, though, an old woman takes him to Cunegonde, who had not been killed but “merely” raped and then sold as a sex slave, owned by Lisbon's Grand Inquisitor (the investigative leader of the Catholic Church, seeking out heresy) and the Jew don Issachar. This status is in itself grotesque, because the Grand Inquisitor not only keeping a mistress but keeping a sex slave that he shares with someone else appears to be the <https://assignbuster.com/the-grotesque-in-voltaires-satire-essay-sample/>

complete opposite of what one would consider Christian chastity.

One grotesque element of *Candide* that many critics overlook is the casual nature with which Candide slays those who would keep him away from Cunegonde, while then returning to his happy-go-lucky, trusting nature. He kills Don Issachar, the Grand Inquisitor of Lisbon, and even the baron (Cunegonde's brother) when he tries to get in the way of Candide's happiness. The descriptions of these killings are swift and nearly identical. While it makes sense for Candide to have the necessary rage to kill the two men who took Cunegonde as a slave, for him to do that to her brother, with scant reaction even from her, is telling. One could look at this as an element of black humor, but it is also suggestive of the fact that the Catholic Church, in Voltaire's eyes, viewed human life as much less important than its teachings would claim. If you look at the methods that the Inquisition used to identify, question and then execute heretics, this makes some sense.

The land of Eldorado is worth discussing, even though it stands out as the opposite of the grotesque. This is a utopian land that relies on its advanced knowledge of science to progress. It has no courts, no religious conflicts, and the jewels and gold that just lie around everywhere do not attract the interest of the residents. Candide and Cacambo arrive there, and at first it seems like an ideal place for them to live. Candide quickly starts to long for Cunegonde, though, and so they take a considerable amount of jewelry, load them onto some pack sheep, and head back to reality. The implication of this section is that while the scientific and rational aims of the Enlightenment make for an attractive vision, they do not provide everything that humanity needs to reach contentment. Living according to science alone does remove religious conflict from the discussion, because the aims of science and

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religion differ in so many regards. However, the innate passions of the human animal do not find full satisfaction in a life of the mind. It would, in many ways, be wonderful for humanity to be able to live without the quarrels of religion or avarice that possessions inflict. However, that only allows part of the human soul to receive its nourishment. Love and passion, which lead to quarrels, also lead to the rewarding of desires that science cannot satisfy. The fact that sex saturates so much of *Candide*, particularly sex which is violent and against the wishes of the women involved, shows that humanity is not equipped for a life of simple reason. The drives that push all of us are, unfortunately, darker and more twisted. This is why the men only last in Eldorado for a month.

The almost wacky disposition of the fortune that Candide and Cacambo pick up in Eldorado further shows the grotesque role that money plays in society. In one sense, it is external, lacking real association to the human condition. The Eldoradans ignore their wealth, perhaps because they realize that they have many fewer actual "needs" than the rest of the world believes to be so important. Whether you are carrying paper money, gold coins, or a bag of jewels, you are just carrying objects of arbitrary value. You can convert those objects into value, such as nourishment, shelter, energy, enjoyment, or other sources, but without the agreement between buyer and seller, there is no intrinsic value to those items. So when Vanderdendur swipes a great deal of Candide's fortune, Candide is depressed, not for the simple loss of the objects, but because the loss affects his ability to purchase the freedom of Cunegonde from her owner. When Candide happens upon the wreck of Vanderdendur's ship, he gets back the majority of what had been stolen from him, making him happy because of what the money can do for him. It would <https://assignbuster.com/the-grotesque-in-voltaires-satire-essay-sample/>

be improper to look at this as some sort of karma being visited upon Vanderdendur, because the incidents of this book happen so arbitrarily. Cunegonde, for example, did not deserve her status as a sexual slave, and Candide himself did not deserve the slur of being an illegitimate commoner throughout the book. These are simply arbitrary labels that were given to their states. The grotesque relationship that humanity has with wealth comes from the attribution of value to items that lack intrinsic value on their own.

The parade of sexual violence and shameless hypocrisy continues throughout the rest of the story. Pangloss actually turns up alive, on a Turkish chain gang, and he also ends up marrying Cunegonde as he had promised. However, she has turned old and ugly. The two settle into a complacent existence on a farm, but they do not find contentment until Candide meets a farmer who just works hard, leading a simple life staying away from leisure and vice. This inspires the group to begin cultivating their garden earnestly. Because all of their energy and time go into this labor, they have no time left over for speculation or deep thinking. This satisfies them in ways that no other mode of living has to this point. The point here appears to be that humans are at their happiest when their level of work keeps them from having the leisure to take part in any number of sillinesses, such as religious dispute, chasing after more wealth than they need, and even designing technology, because all of those pastimes lead to more turmoil, rather than solving the problems of humanity.

Even though the human life expectancy has increased dramatically due to the many technological and scientific breakthroughs that have emerged since the Enlightenment, one wonders how much “ progress” Voltaire would

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see in today's society. Voltaire has used the grotesque to satirize the ways in which people overlook their shortcomings. The idea that the Church promulgated the idea that the world was perfect gave the culture the optimism to pursue technology. However, the fact that people are flawed was heresy. Voltaire knew that making the admission of those flaws into grounds for excommunication, or execution, would not make those flaws go away. His grotesque images that appear in such works as *Candide* leave those flaws in sharp relief for readers, even centuries later.

Works Cited

Voltaire. *Candide*. <http://archive.org/stream/candide19942gut/19942.txt>