

Voltaire's Understanding of Human Nature

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Voltaire's *Candide* is one of the most famous works of philosophical satire in European literature. Through the journey of its main character, Candide, Voltaire criticizes blind optimism, religious hypocrisy, cruelty, war, greed, and human irrationality. One of the most significant scenes that reflects Voltaire's understanding of human nature is the Lisbon earthquake scene. This scene directly refers to the real Lisbon earthquake of 1755, a catastrophic disaster that caused massive destruction and the loss of many lives. Voltaire uses this historical event not only to show physical suffering but also to expose the weaknesses of human behavior during crisis. (Voltaire)

Context of the Lisbon Earthquake Scene

Before reaching Lisbon, Candide has already experienced several misfortunes. He has been expelled from the castle where he lived, separated from Cunégonde, forced into military service, exposed to the brutality of war, and made to question the optimistic teachings of his mentor, Pangloss. Pangloss teaches Candide that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." This belief is based on the idea that everything that happens, even suffering, has a good reason behind it.

However, Candide's experiences slowly weaken this belief. Each new disaster makes it harder for him to accept Pangloss's philosophy. The Lisbon earthquake becomes one of the strongest challenges to this optimistic worldview. The earthquake is not caused by human choice or moral failure; it is a natural disaster that kills innocent people without discrimination. Through this event, Voltaire questions whether suffering can truly be explained as part of a perfect divine plan.

Analysis of the Scene

The Lisbon earthquake scene powerfully illustrates Voltaire's understanding of human nature. Instead of showing people responding to disaster with reason, compassion, and unity, Voltaire presents a society that reacts with superstition, fear, and cruelty. After the earthquake, the religious authorities decide that an auto-da-fé, or public act of punishment and penance, will prevent another disaster. This response is irrational because punishing people cannot stop earthquakes. Through this scene, Voltaire criticizes the tendency of human beings to search for scapegoats during times of crisis.

Pangloss becomes a victim because of his philosophical arguments, while Candide is punished simply because he listens and appears connected to him. Others are also executed or punished for reasons that have no logical connection to the earthquake. This shows Voltaire's belief that human beings often abandon reason when they are afraid. Instead of helping victims, rebuilding the city, or seeking practical explanations, people turn to religious rituals and violence.

Voltaire also criticizes the misuse of religious authority. In the scene, religion is not shown as a source of comfort or moral guidance. Instead, it becomes a tool of control and punishment. The authorities use public suffering to strengthen their own power and justify cruelty. Voltaire does not attack faith itself as much as he attacks religious institutions that exploit fear, ignorance, and superstition. The scene suggests that when institutions become more concerned with authority than compassion, they can make human suffering even worse.

Another important aspect of the scene is Voltaire's critique of optimism. Pangloss continues to defend the idea that everything happens for the best, even when surrounded by destruction and death. Voltaire uses this contrast to show the absurdity of extreme optimism. The earthquake proves that suffering is real, random, and often meaningless. It cannot always be explained away through philosophy. For Voltaire, human beings must face reality honestly instead of hiding behind comforting but unrealistic ideas. (Voltaire)

Voltaire's View of Human Nature

Through the Lisbon earthquake scene, Voltaire presents a critical view of human nature. He suggests that people are often unreasonable, fearful, selfish, and easily influenced by authority. During crisis, humans may fail to act with compassion and may instead look for someone to blame. This behavior reveals a darker side of society: people may prefer simple explanations and harsh punishments over truth and justice.

At the same time, Voltaire's view is not completely hopeless. By exposing irrational behavior, he encourages readers to value reason, tolerance, and humanity. His satire is meant to correct society by making its faults visible. The scene teaches that people should respond to suffering with practical help and moral responsibility, not superstition and cruelty.

Impact of the Scene on Candide

The Lisbon earthquake is a turning point in Candide's journey. Before this event, Candide still tries to believe Pangloss's optimistic philosophy, even though his experiences make it difficult. After witnessing the earthquake and the cruel response of the authorities, Candide becomes more doubtful. He begins to see that the world is not as perfect as Pangloss claims. The suffering of innocent people and the irrational punishment that follows make him question the beliefs he once accepted without hesitation.

This scene contributes to Candide's gradual transformation. He moves from innocence and blind belief toward skepticism and practical understanding. By the end of the novel, Candide no longer depends on abstract philosophical explanations. Instead, he concludes that people should "cultivate their garden," meaning they should focus on useful work, responsibility, and practical action.

Conclusion

The Lisbon earthquake scene in *Candide* is one of the clearest examples of Voltaire's understanding of human nature. Through this scene, Voltaire shows that human beings often respond to disaster with fear, superstition, scapegoating, and cruelty. He criticizes religious authorities that exploit suffering and challenges the belief that every event happens for the best. At the same time, the scene pushes Candide toward a more realistic understanding of life. Voltaire's message is that suffering should not be explained away through blind optimism. Instead, people should respond to hardship with reason, compassion, and practical action. (Voltaire)

Work Cited

Voltaire. *Candide*. 1759.