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Liberation

By: Alyssa Jimenez

“What was she wearing?” always seems to be the first question asked when inquiring into the rape of women. The follow up question always seems to be “Well was she drinking?” If either of those two questions are answered in a negative way, the victim is once again victimized by society and is blamed for her assault. More often than not, this is the brutal reality. One need only read an article on the Brock Turner v. The People case to understand the lenient rape culture within our nation. Turner received a guilty sentence yet only served 3 months in jail of his pathetic six month sentence. Worse than even this, Harvey Weinstein is only now being brought to justice after years of sexually harassing and assaulting women. In a world where we came very close to having the first female president in the United States, it’s difficult to believe these acts of men lording their power over women are still widespread and relate to a novel published in 1759. Yet, in Voltaire’s hauntingly accurate satirical novel *Candide*, depicting the plight of women in a time where the barbaric nature of men ruled over all, and the objectification of women was commonplace, he does just that. While the novel is mainly from perspective of the novel’s namesake Candide, this also illustrates the supporting roles women were expected to play. By using the characters of the Old Woman and Cunégonde, Voltaire demonstrates the abominable conditions in which women are expected to survive and flourish, when they lack a say in their lives and are constantly being hyper sexualized by the opposite sex.

Voltaire explores the lack of control women in European high society had over their fate, and how the sexualization of women during this time negatively impacted their self-worth.

Voltaire asserts that women have had their sexual power stripped from them specifically from high powered males, and is exemplified by the character Cunégonde. When Candide is banished from Westphalia, he is banned for having relations with the Baron's daughter Cunégonde. Despite Candide being the one who is banished, the real target of the Baron's anger is his daughter for choosing her own sexual partner. The satirical evidence Voltaire implements in the situation depicts a particularly nasty and under exaggerated scene where, "the Baroness boxed her ears... a general consternation was spread over this most magnificent and most agreeable of all possible castles" demonstrates that even in the most "enlightened" of places, women's sexual freedom was at best dictated by the rules put in place by her male superiors (2). While the Baroness is obviously a woman, her being the one to slap Cunégonde symbolizes how women also played into the suppression of freedom of choice by punishing other women for their choices on the basis of their husband's command, and judgements based off of a patriarchal society. An important thing to note is the sentiment that Cunégonde's home was "the most magnificent and most agreeable of all possible castles," meaning that if the possibility for the freedom of choice were to be available anywhere, it would be in a place of amenable nature (2). Later in the novel, Cunégonde is forced into being the mistress of two men after being subjected to a rape, and soon after became the sex slave of a captain who has gambled away all his money and after becoming tired of bedding

her, sells her to the Jew Don Issachar (18). By having Cunégonde repeatedly sold, shared, taken, and passed around like an old milk goat among a rural village in a third world country, Voltaire once again reiterates that fact the women's sexual power was subject to the whims of wealthy and privileged men. To really illustrate his point, once Cunégonde is reunited with her beloved Candide, she must become the mistress the Governor Don Fernando d'Ibaraa to save both herself and Candide. It is clear that Cunégonde will never have the control she both desires and deserves and the sexual freedom of men in European high society.

Voltaire expands upon the theme of the sexualization of women in society, particularly with the symbolic character of the Old Woman, or Pope's daughter, whose diction clearly illustrates her belief that her only worth was her beauty and youth. One particularly memorable part of the Old Woman's history is when she describes, "Already I inspired love. My throat was formed, and such a throat! white, firm, and shaped like that of Venus of Medici; and what eyes! what eyelids! what black eyebrows! such flames darted from my dark pupils that they eclipsed the scintillation of the stars—as I was told by the poets in our part of the world" (24). The use of parallel structure in this statement emphasizes both the Old woman's sense of superiority and her ignorance on what is valuable when it comes to the human condition. However, her sense of accomplishment and pride over the fact that she is beautiful does not solely stem from her own beliefs, but a society which only values women for their appearance. By teaching women that their only value in society is to reproduce children and or to be objects for men to manipulate, it teaches them that their opinions and ideas are unimportant. These teachings degrade their value as

human beings, and appropriate a philosophy that have spanned over generations of society.

Through the use of the Old Woman as a symbol for the perpetual suppression of women, Voltaire demonstrates the parallels between Cunegonde and the Old Woman and how the vicious cycle of oppression occurs. There is an implied comparison between that of the Old Woman's story and Cunegonde's that resonates with the reader in a horrifying sense. Both women are raped, both are forced into slavery, both become the mistresses of multiple men, and both women are valued for their beauty above all else. The Old Woman also seems to realize their similar misfortunes stating, "I am determined to share your fate, and have been much more affected with your misfortunes than with my own" to Cunegonde (29). It can be inferred that with all the atrocities both women have suffered that the Old Woman is more "affected" since she sees herself in Cunegonde and does not want her to share any more of the same struggles she was faced with. Voltaire also parallels the two women by naming the titles of their chapters respectively "The History of Cunegonde" and "History of the Old Woman." This comparison builds on the previous example by illustrating that this was not an anomaly during the 1700s, but a rather common occurrence for women. Men use and discard of these women at will without any regard as to how this affects their sense of worth. A prime example of this occurs during the telling of Cunegonde's story and how a Bulgarian captain "being grown tired of my company... sold me to a Jew," which reaffirms how dispensable women were treated in comparison to men (18). This attitude and disregard of their humanity sets up for many people to

be negatively impacted by the idea that women and men alike are not of equal importance.

The bases for the satirical novel that is *Candide* is, “that things cannot be otherwise than as they are; for all being created for an end, all is necessarily for the best end” (1). While it became abundantly clear that the world is nowhere near perfect, a perfect world is most definitely one where all have the ability to have an equal voice. In Meghan Markle’s speech during a UN Women conference in March of 2015, she delivered the powerful closing statement, “It is said that girls with dreams become women with vision. May we empower each other to carry out such vision—because it isn’t enough to simply talk about equality. One must believe it. And it isn’t enough to simply believe in it. One must work at it.” It is not enough for us to agree that women deserve the same rights as men, that they deserve to have the same sexual liberation and power of self that men are so freely given. A world where “all is necessarily for the best end” is a world that includes the thoughts, innovative ideas, and dreams of powerful women and it is the job of every person to make this a possibility. The #metoo movement demonstrates this wonderfully. Women who have had their safety, their pride, their sexuality, and their sense of comfort in the world are reclaiming their lives taking back their power as women. By admitting and talking about their trauma they have found strength in numbers and many of these women are being heard and cared for possibly the first time by the mass public. To heal our broken system we must empower those who have been ignored and put down so we can begin to move towards a brighter world. There have been magnificent strides to make our part of the world a better place, yet we must continuously work

towards making equality a priority, so let us not forget the important role we all individually have to play because we all make an impact.

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