



Sample: History - Oriental Setting in Voltaire's Zadig

Why did Voltaire choose to use a Middle Eastern or Oriental setting for the story of "Zadig" instead of a European setting

Zadig, or The Book of Fate, is a philosophical novel by Voltaire, a renowned philosopher and writer of the period of Enlightenment. Zadig is the name of the novel's protagonist, a Babylonian philosopher. The Middle Eastern or Oriental setting chosen by the author for his novel enabled Voltaire to discuss the issues he found important without referring them to the French or European society of his time. For Europeans of that period, "the Islamic world was... an utterly different civilization" (Rodinson, 2002, p.8). The stereotypes Europeans readily embraced were strengthened by the image of the enemy that wanted to destroy the Christian world. Crusaders created "a comprehensive, integral, entertaining and satisfying image of the enemy's ideology" (Rodinson, 2002, p.14). Neither making any attempts to dispel the stereotypes that dominated the consciousness of his contemporaries nor trying to make his narration historically accurate, Voltaire pursued a different purpose. He wanted to present the problems Zadig is confronted with as disguised references to urgent political and social issues of his time that would be easily recognized by the reading audience. The world that could be perceived as basically different and even alien by Europeans maintained its own concepts, faith and beliefs; however, the life of a philosopher (or, probably, people in general) was fraught with many misfortunes and injustice, which characterized the Western world as well, and caused painful questions about the unfairness of the human society and its social order.

The protagonist's name means "destiny", which not only underscores the fatalistic trends prominent in the Oriental philosophy and worldview but also enables Voltaire to pose questions about the vicissitudes of human living, the role of a philosopher in society, and the creed a man of merit should pursue and remain true to. Zadig, although "endowed by Nature with an



uncommon Genius”, “immensely rich”, “remarkably handsome” and well-educated (Voltaire, chapter 1) has to go through a number of misfortunes and perils that put his life at risk. The high and mighty of the world bring injuries and injustice to good people. The betrayal may come from nearest and dearest, like Zadig’s bride. However, the philosopher gets his mind enlightened from his bitter experience and ultimately finds comfort in understanding the inevitable controversies of the world. Zadig, on various occasions, is confronted with corruption of officials that turns against him as he is an honest man. He leads the life of a scientist, which results in his imprisonment. Next, he protects the rights of women in a foreign land, Egypt, and is enslaved for killing the attacker. An important scene in the novel is Zadig’s confrontation with clerics, considering that Voltaire was indefatigable in fighting the hypocrisy of the church. The setting of the novel enabled Voltaire to incorporate some Oriental parables and legends into his novel as natural components of his narration. These are, for example, the Persian legend of the Three Princes of Serendip or the image of Angel Jesrad, the Messenger of Heaven who explains some important truths to Zadig. Jesrad’s key message is that evil is a necessary part of the world contrasted to the good and only “the everlasting Residence of the supreme Being” is the place that “no Evil can approach” (Voltaire, chapter XVII).

Voltaire’s narration is rich with both philosophical truth, social criticism, and fantastic images and all of them perfectly fit into the Oriental setting of the novel.



References

Rodinson, M. (2002). *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Voltaire (2006). *Zadig*. Project Gutenberg E-book. Retrieved from

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18972>