Voltaire, Beaumarchais, and Rousseau: The Social Commentators of the Enlightenment

The eighteenth century was a period of brand new ideas whose ultimate goal was to transform and reform the corruptions of society. Under the moniker “the Enlightenment”, the century’s literature expressed such progressive ideals as liberty and equality, which became precursors to the French Revolution. Writers such as Voltaire, Beaumarchais, and Rousseau utilized their literary skill to offer the public suggestions for societal renovations, criticizing nobility, religion, and politics. Their ideas resonate still today, and these ideas paved the way for many social reforms to take place.

Voltaire is among the most celebrated thinkers of the eighteenth century. His satiric book *Candide*, which follows the travels of a young naïve man across the globe, is a direct criticism of the optimism of fellow philosopher Leibnitz and of society in general. For example, his depiction of El Dorado is a critique of religious intolerance. He describes this fictional land as paradise, a reason for this being that no religion is imposed on its people. Also, El Dorado follows the political model of a republic, suggesting a critique of the authoritative monarchy of France.

Beaumarchais decries high society in his play *Le Mariage de Figaro*, the story of a valet who fights to protect his lover from being seduced by a corrupt count. The plot proposes a criticism of high society - he depicts the count as a powerful man who, despite being of relatively low wit, believes he has the right to behave however he pleases with no regard for others. This belief was quite common among the nobility of the time. Also addressed in this play is the treatment of women in society. The play was written
during a time when women were obligated to being loyal and pure, while their husbands could go off and do whatever they desired. This inequality is discussed by several female characters, such as Suzanne and the countess, and the criticisms of Beaumarchais shed light on the female condition during the eighteenth century.

And perhaps most crucial to the social reforms of the enlightenment is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His treatise on education *Emile*, in which he proposes focus on the individual child (“negative education”), provides proof of the resonance of his writings, as this concept has been adopted by the modern system of education. However, his social pact also had a massive impact on society, being one of the most influential writings of the French Revolution. The social pact suggests an agreement between the people and their leaders, and criticizes the absolute power held by corrupt kings. Rather, power should lie within the hands of the people, who should have the power to make laws for themselves and the right to choose the leaders who represent them. This is an example of a constitutional monarchy, in which the king does not hold absolute power. Thus, the social pact is almost a directive for the French Revolution, and it inspired the public to combat the oppression and corruption to which they were subjected.

The literary works of the eighteenth century provided the public the opportunity to recognize the evils of society and the inspiration to change things. The enlightenment, as it came to be called, led by writers such as Voltaire, Beaumarchais, and Rousseau, posed important critiques of society, and these writers became social commentators, offering progressive solutions for change. Their ideas brought about the French Revolution, whose social upheavals allowed for a society founded on freedom and
equality to be formed.