

Candide, by Voltaire

MY RADICAL INTRODUCTION

Candide is a scathing satire of everything: faith in education, politics, religion and European ‘civilization.’ Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.

Modern students are not educated by private tutors, but education is, perhaps more than ever, a world of *glossing* over everything that requires careful study, careful study of everything that deserves to be ignored, and, a healthy serving of misinformation about everything that deserves to be studied. Just as *Candide*’s tutor and privileged lifestyle led young *Candide* to think he was living in the best of all possible worlds – when he was living in Hell – so modern students in developed nations think they live in the best possible world when, in fact, they are not, and if they would study the world beyond their neighborhoods and resorts, if they looked more carefully at their own lives, they would know that they, too, live in Hell.

Voltaire’s novel has a beautiful simplicity about it. The plot is simple: the protagonist begins his life in the privileged world of a castle, spends the bulk of the story discovering the cruel reality of the world his castle is founded on, and ends with the message that the best of all worlds is one founded on gardening. I could not agree more.

A MORE CONVENTIONAL INTRO

Beginning with the expulsion of its eponymous hero from “the best of all possible castles” and the loss of his beloved Cunégonde, *Candide* takes the form of a classic journey story. *Candide* must endure a series of misfortunes and trials before he can be reunited with his beloved and regain a qualified kind of redemption. It is in the misfortunes that *Candide* and others suffer in the novel that Voltaire cuts through the pretensions, hypocrisies, and outright idiocies of the Age of Reason.

The philosopher Pangloss, *Candide*’s tutor, insists that they live in “the best of all possible worlds” and maintains that view through various sophistries, but reality tells a different story. In the course of the novel, *Candide* travels far and wide across Europe, South America (where he spends a pleasant month in the fabled land of Eldorado), and Asia in search of Cunégonde. Earthquakes, slavery, murder, floggings, hangings, the Spanish Inquisition, and other niceties of the era greet him on his way and serve to weaken his cherished optimism. He also encounters characters who view the world quite differently, most notably Martin, who asserts that he has “scarcely seen a town that did not desire the ruin of the next town, nor a family that did not wish to exterminate some other family” (p. 56). Early in the novel, while pondering the relationship between effects and causes, as he has been taught to do, *Candide* wanders into a war-ravaged village, where he sees “old men riddled with wounds . . . their wives lay dying, their throats cut, clutching their children . . . young girls in their last agonies, disemboweled after having satisfied the natural urges of various heroes . . .” (p. 8). This juxtaposition of abstract conceptualizing and real brutality underscores the gulf between human beliefs and human behaviors that runs throughout the novel, and the effect is amusing, disturbing, and deflating all at once. Man is

capable of clever philosophizing, yes, but savagery, superstition, and ignorance still rule the day. The phrase “natural urges of various heroes” is characteristic of Voltaire’s piercing irony. In Voltaire’s world, as in ours, soldiers are not always heroes, priests are not always godly, and philosophers are not always very helpful in guiding us away from human folly.

Indeed, much of the fun of reading *Candide* lies in applying Voltaire’s ironic wit to the pretensions and hypocrisies of our own age. What would Voltaire say about our current political and religious leaders? How would he view the intellectual and artistic culture of our time? In this crisp new translation by Theo Cuffe, Voltaire speaks to us more sharply and clearly than ever.

ABOUT VOLTAIRE

(François-Marie Arouet) was born in 1694 and educated at a Jesuit school in Paris. Determined to pursue a literary career, he won a reputation as a writer of satirical plays, poetry, philosophy, and novels that resulted in spells of imprisonment in the Bastille, some of his books being banned, and eventual exile from France for his attacks on the Regent and criticism of the French government. In addition to *Candide*, his works include [Zadig](#), [Micromégas and Other Short Fictions](#), [Letters on England](#), and [Philosophical Dictionary](#). Voltaire died in 1778, after a triumphal return to Paris.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the very first chapter *Candide* is literally kicked out of the “most beautiful and delightful of possible castles,” expelled from an “earthly paradise” (p. 5). At the end of the novel, he says “we must cultivate our garden” (p. 94). What is Voltaire suggesting by framing his story in this way and by echoing the Biblical story of the Fall? Has *Candide* lost and then regained paradise?
2. The eighteenth century is known as the Age of Reason. What are the major disconnects that Voltaire reveals between human beliefs and human behavior? What behaviors most undercut the idea that reason had finally triumphed over the superstition and savagery of previous eras? What are the main targets of Voltaire’s satiric wit?
3. Within the context of the novel, Eldorado really is the “best of all possible worlds.” Overflowing with riches, ruled by an enlightened king, it is a land with no need of courts or prisons, where the inhabitants lack nothing and live in a state of continual gratitude. Why do *Candide* and *Cacambo* decide to leave such a paradise and return to a world riddled with greed, lust, ignorance, dishonesty, and cruelty, a world where violence both savage and civilized is the norm? What aspects of human nature is Voltaire satirizing when he writes that “our two happy wanderers resolved to be happy no longer and to seek His Majesty’s permission to depart” (p. 49)?
4. Immediately upon leaving Eldorado, *Candide* and *Cacambo* encounter a slave who has had a leg and a hand cut off. He tells them, “It is the price we pay for the sugar you eat in Europe” (p. 52). What relationship is Voltaire suggesting here between happiness and suffering, between the best of all possible worlds and the worst of all possible worlds? How might Voltaire make this point if he were writing today?

5. Candide is sustained throughout his many ordeals by the hope of being reunited with Cunégonde. But when he does at last find her, she has become ugly and ill-tempered. What is Voltaire suggesting about the exaltation of romantic love?
6. The old woman tells Candide: “Imagine my situation, the daughter of a pope, only fifteen years old, who in the space of three months had been exposed to poverty and slavery, had been raped almost daily, had seen her mother torn to pieces, had endured war and famine, and was now dying of the plague in Algiers” (p. 29). What does this passage, and others like it, suggest about the reality of women’s lives during the Age of Reason?
7. In what ways does Voltaire’s satire extend beyond his own time? What would Voltaire think of our own age, for example? What aspects of our thought and behavior might he satirize most fiercely? What kinds of political, philosophical, and religious hypocrisy are most prevalent today?
8. Near the end of the book, while Pangloss was “being hanged, and dissected, and beaten, and made to row in a galley,” he still holds firm to his original views that this is the best of all possible worlds. “I am a philosopher after all. It would not do for me to recant” (p. 88). What are the dangers in holding beliefs that are impermeable to reality, that do not alter according to actual experience?
9. Martin tells Candide that Paris is “a chaos, a throng in which everyone pursues pleasure and almost no one finds it” (p. 58). In what ways is this statement also true of nearly all the people we encounter in the novel? To what degree is it true of human beings generally? What are the consequences of this pursuit of pleasure?
10. In the book’s introduction, Michael Wood tells us that Voltaire wrote, “Satires don’t correct anyone, irritate the foolish, and make them even more mean” (p. xxvi). Do you think this is true? Would a present-day Pangloss, or someone like him, change his way of thinking if he were to read *Candide*?
11. Martin believes that man is equally miserable wherever he lives and that even in cities which are free from the ravages of war, “men are more devoured by envy, cares and anxiety than all the tribulations visited upon a citadel under siege. Private griefs are crueler even than public miseries” (p. 56). Is Martin’s view more accurate than Pangloss’s, or does it simply represent the other extreme? Would you agree that “private griefs are crueler even than public miseries”?
12. At the end of the novel, Martin says, “Let us set to work and stop proving things, for that is the only way to make life bearable” (p. 93), echoing the Turkish farmer who says, “our work keeps at bay the three great evils: boredom, vice, and necessity” (p. 92). Do you think Voltaire is endorsing this view? Why would doing physical work be preferable to the life of a philosopher?

Study Questions

1. What is the relationship between Candide’s adventures and Pangloss’s teachings?

Answer for Study Question 1 >>

Candide represents an extended criticism of the ideas of the seventeenth-century philosopher Leibniz. Voltaire casts Pangloss as a satirical representation of Leibniz. Leibniz conceptualized the world in terms of a pre-determined harmony, claiming that evil exists only to highlight good and that this world is the best possible world because God created it. Leibniz’s concept of the

world is part of a larger school of thought called theodicy, which attempts to explain the existence of evil in a world created by an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God. Voltaire criticizes this school for its undiluted optimism. If this is the best possible world, his story suggests, then why should anyone try to alleviate suffering? Pangloss is also a parody of an excessively abstract philosopher. Voltaire scorned philosophers who did not base their arguments on knowledge gathered from a study of the world. Pangloss talks about the structure of the world, but knows little about it since he has lived an idle life inside a castle. Candide believes Pangloss's philosophy without question because he has never had any direct experiences with the outside world.

Candide's adventures begin with his expulsion from the castle. The series of misfortunes that befall him serve as a re-education via direct experience with the world. His experiences in the real world directly contradict Pangloss's optimism. In reality, the world is a terrible place full of evil, cruelty and suffering. Thus, Candide and the reader are forced to reject optimism. Still, the novel does not conclude in favor of absolute pessimism either. Candide eventually finds happiness in hard work and rejects all questions of good and evil or optimism and pessimism. It is only when Candide gives up adventures in travel, love, and philosophy that he discovers happiness in tending his garden.

Close

2. Is Voltaire's portrait of Eldorado optimistic or pessimistic? Why?

Answer for Study Question 2 >>

Eldorado is a utopia—an imaginary perfect world. Candide decides that it is the “best of all possible worlds” that Pangloss has taught him to believe in. Eldorado does not suffer from religious persecution, petty squabbles, or social inequality. Thus, Voltaire is optimistically proposing that human beings are capable of creating a just, peaceful society. At the same time, the kingdom is almost inaccessible to outsiders, and its king explains that that is the only way it can remain perfect. Thus, a good society is attainable only if it excludes the vast majority of humanity. In addition, the jewels and gold that litter the streets of Eldorado activate common greed in Candide, who has displayed little lust for money prior to entering the kingdom. Rather than remain in Eldorado, where the jewels are of no value, Candide elects to return to the flawed outside world where they will make him rich. For him, the prospect of being wealthy in an imperfect society is preferable to the prospect of being an average man in a perfect society. Voltaire's portrait of Eldorado is not pessimistic; rather, he uses Eldorado to convey a pessimistic portrait of human nature.

Close

3. What is the significance of Candide's retreat to his garden at the end of the novel? Does he find a credible solution to the problems and evils he has experienced?

Answer for Study Question 3 >>

In his garden, Candide manages to find a tolerable existence through self-directed improvement and work. Practical action seems to be the only way to eliminate human suffering. Each member of Candide's household finds a skill to hone and then uses it to contribute to the

support of the household. Without any leisure from their toil in the garden, the characters have no time or energy to trade empty words about good and evil.

Candide's garden does seem to alleviate his and his friends' suffering, but the sincerity of Voltaire's endorsement of this solution is questionable. The characters have finally attained happiness, but their previous experiences remind the reader that misery still reigns in the world outside their garden. Candide and his friends are wealthy and secure—in a perfect position to try to change the world for the better. Yet, rather than engaging the world in an attempt to improve it, they withdraw from it in an attempt to escape their own petty unhappiness. Voltaire, who was himself quite active in political and social causes, might view withdrawal into a garden as a wise and viable solution for the problems arising from human weakness, but it is unlikely that he saw it as the best of all possible solutions to the misery in the world.

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Suggested Essay Topics

1. Discuss the significance of Jacques' character. How does he fit in with Voltaire's general view of human nature? What is the significance of his death?
2. The old woman has thought about suicide "a hundred times" but has refused to end her life. Why might that be?
3. Martin claims that people "live either in convulsions of misery or in the lethargy of boredom." Do the events of the novel support that statement? Is one of the two options worse than the other? If what Martin says is true, what does it imply about the value of social change and political activism?
4. How do the experiences of the women in Candide differ from those of the men? How do their reactions to those experiences differ from those of the men?
5. What does Voltaire think about European colonization of the Americas? Discuss the significance of the character of Cacambo and of Candide's encounter with the slave.
6. Does Voltaire agree with Martin's outlook on the world? Why or why not?