



Voltaire's Candide

A Tale of Philosophical Ideas

Neoclassical Period: 1660-1785

- Voltaire is one of the most important writers of the later part of this time period. He wrote many genres of literature.
- Often he wrote attacks on the French government and the Catholic church.
- As a result, he was often in trouble with or a target of the authorities. He moved around a lot.
- He was a hero of the French Revolution, which occurred after his death. They reburied his body and dubbed him a hero.

Candide, Or Optimism

- Optimism was a popular 18th century philosophy coming from the German philosopher Leibniz.
- Leibniz's philosophy was simplified into the statement: "This is the best of all possible worlds."
- This translates into the idea that since God created the world, all evils are necessary to maintain the greater good.

Voltaire—An Optimist?

- Early on, Voltaire *was* an optimist. It fit in with the popular view of Deism. This view sees God as a cosmic watchmaker who “winds up” the world and lets it run according to its own natural laws.
- As Voltaire got older, he found it harder to explain evil in the world and to think it led to good. The Lisbon earthquake, which killed 30,000- 40,000 people, made it hard to believe this massive, painful death was good.

Candide: What Genre is It?

- *Candide* is not really a novel. It's a book of ideas with a storyline. It's not altogether fictional. Many, if not all, of the events in the book are real and have happened to people in the past.
- What makes the book implausible is that these events happen to one group of people and that these people survive.
- Can be seen as a “picaresque” story. This genre of story has a protagonist traveling from place to place, getting in and out of scrapes—some that he causes himself.

Satire in *Candide*

- *Candide* is a satire about understanding life in the universe.
- The philosopher Dr. Pangloss, the text's greatest optimist, is Candide's tutor. Pangloss translates to "all talk."
- "Candide" translates into innocent or naïve.
- Martin, the scholar, is a pessimist who believes that evil always triumphs.

Structured Book

- The book has 30 chapters. The first 10 chapters are set in Old World. The next 10 chapters are set in New World. The last 10 chapters are back in Old World.
- About halfway through the book, Candide encounters a Utopia, in Eldorado.
- By the end of the story, the theory of optimism is pretty much destroyed.

The Last Chapter of *Candide*

- The end of *Candide* generates much discussion. What is Voltaire's point? Possibilities include:
- One—our speculations on the nature of good and evil are foolish.
- Two—work can keep us from boredom, vice and poverty.
- Three—"We must cultivate our garden."
- Yet, we are left questioning how we create suffering for each other—how man makes others suffer.

We are left to question human nature.

- Has a hostile society created a cruel, competitive man? Would a more benign society create a better human nature?
- Are we what we are regardless of where we live? Can we change human nature or is it fixed?
- Whose fault is it if we cause other humans to suffer? If we cultivate our gardens, can we change?