

# *Candide*: Background Information Guide

## I. Introduction

*Candide* is a central text of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in Europe which flourished during the 17th and 18th centuries. It questioned, and often harshly criticized, traditional views of science, religion, and the state. Enlightenment thinkers believed in using reason and scientific experiment, rather than doctrine and custom, as a guide in the remaking and improvement of life and society. They also advocated for greater legal and social equality between men.

As a novel of the Enlightenment, *Candide* satirizes and critiques almost every powerful institution of its era. Churches, the aristocracy, and the military are viciously lampooned. Characters like the Grand Inquisitor, the Bulgarian Captain, and the haughty Young Baron showcase the prejudice and irrationality of 18th century institutions. This direct, irreverent criticism of subjects considered sacred for centuries prior is central both to the Enlightenment, and to Voltaire's work. So, too, is the faith in the power of human reason and equality between men, best represented by the garden at the end of the novel.

*Candide* is one of the most important Enlightenment novels, and one of the most memorable satires in modern literature. Satire is a technique employed by writers to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society, by using humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule. It intends to improve humanity by criticizing its follies and foibles. A writer in a satire uses fictional characters, which stand for real people, to expose and condemn their corruption. *Candide*, written by Voltaire in the 18th century, follows the adventures of the young Candide as he leaves his sheltered paradise and travels the world, learning about suffering and hardship. Throughout the work, Voltaire uses parody, hyperbole, euphemism, understatement, sarcasm, and other literary devices to create the satire. Voltaire satirizes a wide variety of subjects, from certain philosophies to human nature itself.

While *Candide* is without a doubt a farcical, humorous, and far-fetched tale, a seriousness lies beneath its satirical veneer. *Candide* is the story of an innocent young man embarking on a series of adventures during which he discovers much evil in the world. Throughout his journey Candide believes in and adheres to the philosophy of his teacher, Pangloss, that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." This philosophy was prevalent during Voltaire's day, and *Candide* is Voltaire's scathing response to what he saw as an absurd belief that for its followers, the Optimists, was an easy way to rationalize evil and

suffering. *Candide* was composed mainly as an attack on Gottfried Leibniz, the main proponent of Optimism. *Candide* was also written in opposition to Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, which espouses that "partial evil" is for the "greater good." Though he was by no means a pessimist, Voltaire refused to believe that what happens is always for the best.

Voltaire's vehement response was triggered in part by **two catastrophic events: an earthquake in Lima, Peru, in 1746, and an even more devastating earthquake in Lisbon, Spain, that killed fifty thousand people in 1755**. Incensed that the Optimists were comforting the earthquake victims by assuring them that this event had happened for "the best," Voltaire wrote *Poeme sur le desastre de Lisbonne* (1756), in which he expresses sympathy for the earthquake victims and lashes out at the Optimists. In the Introduction to the poem, Voltaire addresses their callousness by writing: "The heirs of the dead would now come into their fortunes, masons would grow rich in rebuilding the city, beasts would grow fat on corpses buried in the ruins; such is the natural effect of natural causes. So don't worry about your own particular evil; you are contributing to the general good." Voltaire again confronted the mockery of this belief in *Candide*, which he wrote three years later in 1759.

*Candide* is rooted in historical events of the time, including the Seven Years' War, the execution of Admiral Byng in 1747, and the war between England and France for Canadian territory. Furthering this time of political unrest was the beginning of the Enlightenment period during which an educated elite called the Philosophes - including Voltaire and other well-known figures such as Denis Diderot - began questioning European beliefs and institutions and speaking out against intolerance and injustice. While extremely popular with the Parisian public, his contemporaries, and even royalty, Voltaire himself was subjected to injustices (particularly his imprisonment in the Bastille for writing a satire about the Regent of France) that are believed to have influenced his writing of *Candide*.

Due to its scandalous nature, *Candide* was published clandestinely and anonymously, and its exact publication date is unknown. However, in mid-January of 1759, Voltaire's publisher sent 1,000 copies of *Candide* to Paris, and by late February Voltaire's identity was revealed. The police were ordered to seize all copies of *Candide* that could be found, but the controversy only served to further fuel the book's popularity - and by the end of the year, at least seventeen editions of the work had been published.

Religious officials, however, pronounced the book "full of dangerous principles concerning religion and tending to moral depravation." The critic Madame de Stael remarked that *Candide* was a work of "infernal gaiety" by a writer who laughs "like a demon, or like a monkey at the miseries of this human race with which he has nothing in common." Nonetheless, the reading public adored *Candide*, and the phrase "Let us eat Jesuit" was

spoken repeatedly, and since the late nineteenth century *Candide* has been recognized as a masterpiece. Even Gustave Flaubert admitted that he read *Candide* one hundred times and used it as a model in his own writing.

## A. Optimism as an Ideal

The full title of *Candide* has been translated as *Candide: or, All for the Best* and *Candide: or, The Optimist*. Candide learns the principles of optimism from his mentor, Pangloss, and one of the central tenets of his philosophy is that "since everything was made for a purpose, everything is necessarily for the best purpose." Voltaire satirizes this philosophy by showing its absurdity through hyperbole. For example, Pangloss does not allow Candide to save Jacques the Anabaptist from drowning because he believes that it is what was meant to happen. Throughout the story, things that are referred to as the "best," such as "the most magnificent and most agreeable of all possible castles," are revealed to be quite simple with only one door and two windows.

## B. Organized Religion

*Candide* takes on all forms of organized religion in its satire. This criticism is closely tied to the criticism of optimism in the story. Many religions believe that God always has a higher purpose to explain why bad things happen. However, Candide sees the worst in the world through his travels, showing that it is foolish to believe that God makes sure everything happens for the best. Religious satire is also used in showing the hypocrisy of religious officials and making them look foolish. A friar steals, a monk buys a prostitute, and a Jew buys a woman for a sex slave.

## C. Politics and Power

Religion is just one of the many tools of power that Voltaire satirizes in *Candide*. The satire shows the inconsistencies in politics and the hypocrisy and ineptitude of rulers. The governor of Buenos Aires is given multiple names and titles, such as Don Fernando d'Ibaraa, y Figueora, y Mascarenes, y Lampourdos and y Souza, to show the governor's vanity and pride. The suffering of the people whom Candide meets also underscores the pettiness of the leaders. This pettiness is illustrated when Candide talks to Martin, and they discuss who is more to be pitied, and Martin says, "I can only hope presume that there are millions of people on this earth who are many times more to be pitied than King Charles Edward, or Emperor Ivan, or Sultan Achmed."

## D. Class Hierarchies

Any kind of formal social system -- whether it's religion, politics or class -- is satirized in *Candide*. Titles and physical descriptions are used throughout to mock the aristocracy. Understatement is used in the satire of the Baron of Westphalia: "The Baron was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia, for his castle had not only a gate, but windows." Throughout the story, the contrast between the foibles of the upper classes and the suffering of those *Candide* meets along the way also reinforces the satire.

## II. About Voltaire

From his birth (born Francois-Marie Arouet) in Paris in 1694, Voltaire's life was filled with turmoil. He was never on good terms with his father, Francois, or his elder brother, Armand. He believed his real father was an officer and songwriter named Rochebrune. His mother died when he was seven, and after her death he rebelled against his family and began a close relationship with his godfather, the Abbe de Chateauneuf, a freethinker and Epicurean. Voltaire attended the Jesuit college of Louis-le-Grand in Paris, where he grew to love literature and the theater.

At the age of twenty-two, Voltaire was exiled to Sully-sur-Loire for seven months for writing a satire of the Duke of Orleans, the ruling Regent of France. The next year he wrote another satire that resulted in his imprisonment in the Bastille for eleven months. In 1718, he began using the name Voltaire, rejecting the family name he had long detested. That same year his first play, *Oedipe*, was staged, and his epic poem *La Ligue* was published in 1723 to great popularity. Voltaire spent several years as a member of the royal court of Louis XV at Versailles during which time he was also at the height of his success in Paris.

In 1726, his life changed dramatically when he quarreled with the Chevalier Rohan, a member of one of France's leading families. Voltaire, who was beaten by the Chevalier's servants, contemplated calling the Chevalier out for a duel, but he was again imprisoned in the Bastille for being a threat to public order. He was released after a month on the condition that he leave Paris, and he spent the next three years in England.

Upon the publication of *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), Voltaire was condemned by the Parliament of Paris as offensive to politics and religion. A warrant was soon issued for his arrest. He went into hiding at Cirey where his mistress, Madame du Chatelet, lived.

When the War of the Austrian Succession broke out in 1742, Voltaire was sent on a secret mission to rally the King of Prussia to the French cause. This act restored his favor with Louis XV, and he was appointed court biographer at Versailles. His period of favor at Louis'

court ended in 1747 amid indiscretions of his affair with Mme du Chatelet, and the two were forced to flee.

Voltaire wrote two major historical studies, *Le siecle de Louis XIV* (1751) and *Essai sur les moeurs* (1755), which traced the history of the world from the end of the Roman Empire and was designed to show how humanity was slowly heading beyond barbarism. In 1755, the devastating earthquake struck Lisbon, and the next year he published *Poeme sur le desastre de Lisbonne*. *Candide* followed in January or February of 1759.

In 1764, the widely read *Dictionnaire philosophique* was published. Voltaire considered founding a colony for philosophes in Frederick's Prussia, but his fellow writers were unwilling to leave Paris. That same year *Le Philosophe ignorant* was published. *L'Ingenu* (1767), an attack on religious intolerance and persecution in France, is still considered, along with *Zadig* (1747), to be Voltaire's most important work after *Candide*.

Voltaire spent the last twenty years of his life in Geneva at his estate where he wrote essays, participated in politics, and corresponded with royalty, philosophes, and actors. Voltaire's fame was worldwide: He was called the "Innkeeper of Europe" and welcomed at Ferney such literary figures as Giovanni Casanova, Edward Gibbon, and the Prince de Ligne. Appalled by the barbarism of the French authorities, Voltaire devoted the rest of his life to defending the miscarriages of justice.

In 1774, Louis XVI came to the throne, and Voltaire returned to Paris in 1778 to a triumphant welcome. Three months later, Voltaire became seriously ill with uremia and died on May 30. He was unable to be buried in consecrated ground in Paris since he had not made a religious end to his life, and his body was smuggled out of the city and interred at Scellieres in Champagne. In 1791, his remains were brought back to Paris and placed in the Pantheon after a solemn but magnificent procession.