
The Main Topics Of Candide

The satire *Candide*, a slightly humorous, overly optimistic story about the journey of a German man, was written by Voltaire, a renowned philosopher and author of literature who subtly critiques society and government. *Candide* was published in January of 1759 and translated by William F. Flemming. The second most important part of this text, the introduction, was written by Philip Littell. This mocking illustration provides a platform where people can find error and flaw within a society in a way that allows them to experience a sense of amusement throughout the process. As an overarching theme when studying world history, the concept of nationalism, a sense of pride for one's country, is studied in careful detail. The book of *Candide* would pair nicely with the study of history across the globe because it offers two perspectives regarding a single topic. As a useful depiction of two opposing societal views, Voltaire poses his own view; a criticism of society, through the character *Candide* who demonstrates a different ideal. These two viewpoints show the presence of bias and prejudice between two men of different origins. Though one fictional and one historical, the theme of nationalism is evident within their beliefs, both of which connect to a greater lesson, the idea that a person's upbringing often contributes to how they view the world and see others.

As a way to share his own criticism and discontent of society, Voltaire created *Candide*. In order to express his views on over optimism, bias and prejudice as a result of nationalism, and religious intolerance, he uses certain humor and irony to critique social and political issues. As a way to inform, entertain, and persuade readers, the book was intended for those who were seeking change and enlightenment; the audience during the age of enlightenment saw reason as a way to promote freedom and equality. Knowing this, Voltaire became famous for his satire, writing it as a way to liberate society from prejudice, governmental influence, and religious bigotry; his intended message was to illustrate the idea that narrow-minded upbringing leads to such ideals:

It is thus that he fulfilled the role of philosopher and that his philosophy met the needs of his times, times characterized by a break with seventeenth-century dogmatism and an intensification of the critique of the political and religious spheres aiming to bring forth a morality on the human scale, centered on the values of tolerance and respect for others.

The message being displayed here, is that Voltaire wrote *Candide* to appeal to current issues, with the intent of inspiring humanity to treat others equally. After being arrested for writing the poem *La Henriade* in 1717 where he criticized the government, he went to prison in Bastille for almost a year. Even after being released from prison, he continued to share his ill feelings about the government and society as a whole. In a biography on his life, it is said that, "He dearly wished to have access to the noble classes (which accounts for his name change), while at the same time he despised the inequality inherent in the privilege of noble birth," thus demonstrating his desire for change regarding inequality overall. Voltaire intended to use inequalities like this to make the readers critically analyze each theme in the book.

When starting off the book, the reader sees *Candide* being taught philosophical lessons by his mentor, Pangloss. Pangloss' morals wear on to *Candide* throughout the novel, especially the idea of the 'best of all possible worlds', the core topic the story returns to after each event. The

best of all possible worlds is the idea that everything in our world is created perfectly by god. What this means is, anything and everything was created for a reason. To elaborate further, any small inconvenience, every object, every life event, is the premise of yet another event to come, all of which happen for one reason or another, all planned in advance by a god of Voltaire's understanding. This theory, believed to be a fact by Pangloss, is debated by Candide continuously throughout each and every chapter of the book. Throughout his continued debate, the theme of overoptimism comes to fruition. Overoptimism is the excessive belief that the world we live in is the best of all other potential universes. To summarize, this theme is so important because Pangloss taught Candide to live his life based upon this principle. Therefore, as he continues to ask himself the question, 'is this the best of all possible worlds?' it is obvious that Voltaire brings this moment/idea up again and again to solidify the theme and foreshadow the end of the novel, which is Candide's confirmation that this world is, indeed, the best of all possible worlds. However, because this is a satire, a depiction of Voltaire's criticism, he is actually truly showing that there are so many flaws in the world due to prejudice, religious intolerance, and bias decision making as a result of poor upbringing. Candide was in love with Pangloss' sister, Cunegonde. Pangloss was against the idea and shunned him for such disrespect to love a friend's sister. After great misfortune in Westphalia Candide flees to later be encountered by the burglars, where he gets recruited to their army. He attempts to flee causing punishment of the Gauntlet, an event meant to torture the one being chased until death. Luckily the King of Burglars pardons him, allowing him to continue his journey. Candide meets multiple companions along the way to what now seemed to be a goal of reaching the new world. He meets an old lady with only one butt cheek, an Anabaptist who later is killed after saving a sailor, and Cacambo, Candide's loyal servant. Pangloss seems to die being hanged while Candide is whipped for insulting an inquisitor, who the readers find out took claim to Cunegonde with a Jew. As a way to demonstrate his hatred for organized religion, various sets of beliefs regarding how the world was made, life after death, and one's conception of god(s) or lack thereof, Voltaire creates defective characters who commit various crimes as a way to show the imperfections and flaws in each of the religious groups found in the book. The following three character examples further confirm this "author's purpose." Voltaire includes the Friar who violates his vows to the Franciscan faith by being a thief, a Jew who claimed and enslaved Cunegonde, making her perform sexual acts, and lastly, a Catholic monk that hires a prostitute in Venice. Voltaire clearly creates these characters to illustrate his ideas against organized religion. Candide was ashamed by the actions of these characters but did not connect their actions to a sense of betrayal towards their religion; he merely hated Jews without a reason. It is quite ironic that Candide found Jews to be inferior to Christians when later on, he says 'Reverend Father, all the quarterings in the world signify nothing; I rescued your sister from the arms of a Jew and of an Inquisitor; she has great obligations to me, she wishes to marry me; Master Pangloss always told me that all men are equal, and certainly I will marry her' but this contradicts the idea that all men are created equal, since he called the Jew inferior. This brings back the idea that his philosophy that was taught to him from youth goes back to your upbringing gives bias and prejudice, even through that optimism.

Upon first reading *Candide*, one's initial reaction might be rather confused due to the unfamiliar dialect and informal language only commonly known to those living during this time period. Throughout the second reading, a sense of deeper understanding is acquired. The themes of the novel come to light after analyzing the events in greater detail; overoptimism, nationalism, bias, and prejudice, all of which are a result of one's upbringing. During the second runthrough, the reader is able to look back and immediately recognize that this idea is demonstrated on the second page of the book through Pangloss' teachings to Candide. It is clear that a second read

is necessary to recognize this very important theme right from the very beginning. Pangloss tells Candide,

Observe that noses were made to wear spectacles; and so we have spectacles. Legs were visibly instituted to be breeched, and we have breeches. Stones were formed to be quarried and to build castles; and My Lord has a very noble castle; the greatest Baron in the province should have the best house; and as pigs were made to be eaten, we eat pork all year round; consequently, those who have asserted all is well talk nonsense; they ought to have said that all is for the best.

Overoptimism is expressed here through the idea that various human like features were created by god to serve a purpose for certain objects, thus making it seem as if god created these features knowing that humans would invent objects. One would think that god invented features first, and man later made objects to serve the needs of such features. However, the opposite idea is depicted to show that humans were created perfectly by god, hence the above saying “the best of all possible worlds.”

Voltaire proved his purpose 300 years ago, and today the same themes can be applied, but through different messages. With that said, the most interesting element of Candide is its satirical nature itself coupled with Voltaire’s decision to push his beliefs onto society through the journey of an overly optimistic man, one who was traveling the globe in an attempt to seek a great life. On the other hand, Voltaire utilizes this character’s journey to subtly point out flaws in society, thus proving the major differences between Voltaire and Candide; an extremely intriguing element when looking at the text through an analytical lens. On the contrary, when looking at the text 300 years in the future, one may only find this text to be worthwhile if the reader particularly enjoys having to pick apart a text repeatedly to gain a decent understanding.

Candide may have had a large impact on the readers of his time period. However, as a literary work selected to enhance a students’ knowledge on world history, it is clearly not the best option to do so. This book would be better received in a literary study of satire and common novel themes. While the historical connection is relevant due to the setting and time period, the novel looks more into fiction rather than reality. The opportunity to study a satire enhances a scholar’s overall literary knowledge as it requires students to understand criticism of other views and perspectives through sarcasm and comedy. It is highly probable that students would not recommend this book to one another due to its unappealing language and lack of direct themes and messages. Looking into events in the book, the only historically accurate occurrence was the Lisbon earthquake, which seemed to cause an inconvenience in the life of the character and did not disclose any deeper meaning regarding the devastation that the earthquake truly caused. Therefore, one’s perception of events in the novel would not be enhanced nor altered.

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