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Candide: A Satirical Criticism of Optimism

Two radically different philosophies figure prominently in Voltaire's *Candide*. Dr. Pangloss believes in optimism and determinism, that "there is no effect without a cause ... all things are necessarily connected and arranged for the best" (26), whereas Martin holds the cynical view that "man's origin is evil" (92). The novel's naive protagonist, Candide, initially agrees with the philosophy of his teacher Pangloss, but he encounters so much suffering, greed, and cruelty on his travels that he is forced to question his views. Voltaire creates a world with so much misfortune in order to satirize Pangloss's philosophy and express his own viewpoint on the folly of such optimistic beliefs.

Dr. Pangloss initially serves as Candide's childhood teacher at Thunder-ten-tronckh, and "young Candide listened to his teaching with that unhesitating faith which marked his age and character" (20). As a result, Candide is greatly influenced by Pangloss's philosophy. His opinion is that whatever events might transpire are ultimately arranged for the best; this view is both optimistic and fatalistic. He is said to have "proved uncontestably" that this is so, and both he and Candide are initially convinced, but his logic has an unreasonable quality: "Observe: our noses were made to carry spectacles, so we wear spectacles. Legs were clearly intended for breeches, and we wear them. ... since pigs were made to be eaten, we eat pork all the year round. It follows that those who maintain that all is right talk nonsense; they ought to say that all is for the best." (20). Through this bizarre logic, Voltaire introduces Pangloss's beliefs in such a nonsensical way that the reader is forced to immediately begin questioning whether it is possible for them to have any validity. Even when Pangloss meets with unfortunate circumstances, he maintains that he still

holds true to his original views in spite of his suffering. When Candide next meets him after leaving the Baron's town, Pangloss is by now reduced to "a beggar covered with sores" with "lifeless" eyes, a mouth "all askew," a "sepulchral" voice, and a "violent cough" (27). He is dying from a sexually transmitted disease obtained from the servant Paquette, and it has rendered him so disfigured that Candide has difficulty recognizing him. Even so, he still professes optimism. He ascribes a distinguished genealogy to his disease, claiming that he has received it "in direct line from one of the companions of Christopher Columbus," and claims that it is "a necessary ingredient," "indispensable in this best of all worlds" (30). He continues to assert that misfortunes such as his disease and the storm and volcanic eruption at Lisbon are all parts of a larger design for the world that is somehow for the best. "Private misfortunes contribute to the general good," he claims, "so that the more private misfortunes there are, the more we find that all is well" (31).

However, the world Voltaire depicts in this story is one filled with misery and suffering. As a result, one is forced to question whether it is indeed Pangloss's "best of all possible worlds." Candide, who is initially a follower of Pangloss, begins to find the philosophy of optimism at odds with the reality he experiences. Nearly every character in *Candide* suffers some sort of tragic fate; the novel reads almost like a catalog of horrors. Candide is tortured nearly to death by the Bulgar army, and again by the Inquisition. Pangloss is disfigured by his disease, then is healed only to be flogged and hung for his beliefs in an auto-da-fé. The Baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh and the Lady Cunégonde are ravished and disemboweled, and their manor destroyed. The Anabaptist James, one of the few characters who act with honesty and charity, is drowned in a storm. These events cause Candide's optimism to falter. When he learns of his love Cunégonde's death, he faints and exclaims "Oh, what has become of the best of worlds?" (29). As the story progresses, Candide continues to encounter similar misfortunes, and he struggles to reconcile them with Pangloss's view of the world. When he sees a ship sunk in a naval battle near France, Candide notes that the defeated ship was that of a pirate had who earlier robbed him and tries to claim that this was the pirate's

inevitable fate in a just world: “crime is sometimes punished . . . that rogue of a Dutch captain has had the fate he deserved” (93). However, this claim is flawed, for as Candide’s companion Martin points out, the ship also contained hundreds of innocent passengers who were also killed. Candide comes to realize that “whatever Professor Pangloss might say, I often noticed that all went badly in Westphalia” (77). Indeed, even Pangloss has the same realization, though he clings more strongly to his views. When he returns at the end of the story, having survived his hanging only to be enslaved, he tells Candide that he “still hold[s his] original views,” but only because “I am a philosopher [and] it would not be proper for me to recant” (136). Indeed, though he continues to halfheartedly express it, he no longer remains convinced of his original philosophy: “he still maintained [that everything would turn out right in some marvelous way], however little he believed it” (140). By depicting a world so full of evil and misfortune that not only Candide but even Pangloss must lose faith in optimism, Voltaire powerfully expresses his opinion that Panglossian optimism is foolish and unrealistic.

Martin is the proponent of an entirely different philosophy. A man who has suffered much, he believes that the state of the world can be explained by his belief “that man was created by the forces of evil and not by the forces of good” (92). This, he claims, is the reason such cruelty exists, why he has “scarcely seen a town which does not seek the ruin of a neighbouring town, nor a family that does not wish to exterminate some other family” (92). Unlike Pangloss’s theory, Martin’s is consistent with what Candide and Martin experience on their travels. In many of the countries they travel to, barbaric wars are being fought. When Candide is conscripted into the Bulgar army, he sees the “beauty and brilliance” of uncountable thousands of soldiers being killed on the battlefield; by satirically glorifying this “heroic butchery,” Voltaire is not only commenting on the savagery of war but noting that such brutality has become commonplace and accepted. In England, the situation is even more extreme: Candide and Martin witness the public execution of a

British admiral “because he had not enough dead men to his credit” (111). In Paraguay, Candide encounters an example of humans acting as animals not only figuratively but quite literally, when he finds the “two girls fondly embracing the two monkeys” that were their lovers (69). These examples reflect Martin’s philosophy that humans are generally cruel and evil. Similarly, Martin describes Paris as “chaos, a mob of people all out for pleasure ... [a] whole warren of intrigue and fanaticism,” and this is essentially what he and Candide find when they arrive in the city (94). As soon as they set foot in the city, they are besieged by crowds who attempt to steal his wealth through card games and impersonation of Lady Cunégonde. In Paris, everyone Candide meets is motivated by greed and self-interest, which also supports Martin’s views about the nature of humanity.

Voltaire is particularly critical of institutions of religion. Throughout the text, members of the clergy are responsible for a great many immoral acts. For example, both the Grand Inquisitor and the Jew, Don Issachar, have enslaved Lady Cunégonde, making “a bargain by which [she] should belong to both of them in common, to the Jew on Monday, Wednesday, and Sabbath days, and to the Inquisitor the other days of the week” (42). Of course, the auto-da-fé and execution of Pangloss are an obvious example of other immoral acts committed by the Inquisitor in the name of religion. The old woman who cares for Candide tells of being nearly killed by soldiers who will massacre soldiers, sailors, women, and everyone else, yet “will not miss one of the five daily prayers prescribed by Mahomet” even as they create “a heap of corpses” (52). Similar events are found elsewhere in *Candide*. While Voltaire’s indictment of the immorality prevalent in the religious system is an important theme in its own right, it also furthers Martin’s view about the evils of human behavior, for it is the religious leaders who are expected to be the epitome of morality yet are responsible for equally cruel and inhuman acts.

The country of Eldorado proves particularly significant as it stands in such sharp contrast to

the rest of the world of *Candide*. In Eldorado, gold and jewels, “the least of which would have been the grandest ornament in the Mogul throne” are so commonplace that they are treated as garbage, and exquisite luxuries are available freely (75). There are neither courts nor prisons nor formal institutions of religion, and it is a fundamental Eldoradan belief that “all men are free” (83). Even the King of Eldorado treats Candide and his servant Cacambo with equality and respect. In short, Eldorado is a utopia. This would seem to lend credence to Pangloss’s philosophy, for if there is a best of all possible worlds, it must be this utopia; Candide observes that “everything is so different from what we are used to. It is probably the country where all goes well” (77). However, Eldorado is an insular community, isolated by giant mountains from the rest of the world. Candide and Cacambo find that, before long, they must leave, both so they can rescue Cunégonde, and because “they were anxious, also, to show their friends how rich they had grown and to boast about what they had seen” (82). They are struck by the enormous riches available to them, but they realize that in Eldorado this confers upon them no special status, because everyone else has access to the same wealth. Thus, it is their greed that forces them to leave. In essence, Voltaire uses the setting of Eldorado not merely to discredit the existence of a Panglossian “best of all possible worlds” but to claim that it is not possible for ordinary humans such as Candide and Cacambo to be a part of this perfect world because they suffer — as Martin would say — from the human faults of greed.

Candide is largely a criticism of the philosophy advocated by Pangloss, that everything must be arranged in some grand design that will ultimately be for the best, which is a simplification of certain actual philosophies common in Voltaire’s time, such as that of Leibniz. Rather than argue directly against it, Voltaire instead chooses to present Pangloss’s philosophy then proceed to discredit it entirely by demonstrating that it cannot possibly apply in a world filled with such cruelty and misfortune. This is made especially effective through the author’s use of satire; the reader must find Pangloss’s ideas practically laughable because so many events seem to contradict them. Voltaire then introduces a new philosophy, Martin’s notion that humans are more evil than

they are good, and proves that in the world of *Candide* it is an infinitely more credible theory than Pangloss's optimism. By presenting his argument in the form of a story, Voltaire is able to apply exaggeration to emphasize his points. The tragedies he depicts are all based on historical events: for example, the destruction of Lisbon, the Inquisition, and similar wars all took place. None of the events in *Candide* are implausible, though it would certainly seem unlikely that one individual would encounter each of them. Voltaire has depicted a great deal of evil and tragedy in the world he creates, perhaps disproportionately so, and this negativity contributes to his argument. He intends for the reader, like the naive Candide, to come to realize that the world cannot be explained by Panglossian optimism.