

# Candide: being human



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“ Men,” said he “ must, in some things, have deviated from their original innocence; for they were not born wolves, and yet they worry one another like those beasts of prey. God never gave them twenty- four pounders nor bayonets, and yet they have made cannon and bayonets to destroy one another” (10). Thus begins the philosophy in *Candide* by Voltaire- a subversive text published in 1759 for which the author was imprisoned at Basille. While there is some hope for the human race in *Candide*, the superficiality of love and the cruelty of human nature are revealed through depictions of material beauty, wealth, and violence to the effect of devaluing philosophical optimism.

*Candide* is ultimately pessimistic in its depiction of human nature, but the text’s defense of free will, as well as the fact that it is a satire, offer a more optimistic outlook. The idea that Voltaire’s criticism might inspire action in its readers implies the belief that humans can make the right choices; the satire is encouraging people to change the world themselves instead of blaming war and violence on predestination and religion. There is also a favorable view of humans in the resilience of the characters throughout the text, including the old woman, who confides she has thought of suicide hundred of times, but continues to “ persist in carrying a burden of which we wish to be eased?” (30). The old woman nurses Candide back to health, as does the barber for Pangloss later in the text. These acts are evidence of humans caring for each other, in contrast to the pain that has been caused by humans to each other. Finally, Voltaire presents Eldorado, a land symbolizing material wealth. Ironically, its Utopian society is peaceful and cultured, uncorrupted and not greedy (50). The fact that the protagonist, Candide,

abandons Eldorado to pursue the love of his life, Cunegonde, is significant because it shows that he is abandoning material wealth for love.

However, Candide's motives in finding Cunegonde are not purely loving. Candide falls more in love with her material beauty than her personality, beginning a theme of objectification and negative attitudes towards female characters. Cunegonde is described mostly in terms of her body, "aged seventeen, ...rosy-cheeked, fresh, plump, and tempting" (1). Later, when she is speaking to him, he "seemed to devour her with his eyes all the time" (17). He cheats on her with another, more beautiful woman. And inevitably, he resents her ugliness, her "bleary eyes, ...withered neck, wrinkled face and arms", (87), marrying her anyway because he feels morally obligated. Emphasizing material beauty to devalue Candide and Cunegonde relationship, which drives much of the plot, shows a negative outlook on human nature as well as the sincerity of love.

Material wealth is another motif used throughout the text to reveal the shallowness of human nature. Wealth changes the way people treat Candide; as a poor man he is enslaved and turned away in times of need, such as when he is turned away by the "charitable" protestant preacher. But as a wealthy man, "he soon found himself between two physicians, whom had not sent for, (and) a number of intimate friends who he had never seen" (63). Not only do many people make his acquaintance in order to get money, he is the victim of several robberies, including an elaborate staged scene in which someone pretends to be Cunegonde. Similarly, Candide is exploited by both Paquette and Friar Giroflee, neither of whom thank him for his generous gifts. As Martin points out, none of the people who Candide gives money to

get any happier. As Candide's experience illustrates, wealth and beauty, while temporary, are the primary contemplations of men.

Finally, violence is used in Candide to decry human nature and love by revealing the extent to which humans will go in order to secure their own needs. Sexual violence and rape are used to devalue the idea of love by taking an act associated with love and trust and using it instead as a weapon to enforce power. Candide is "ripped open by the Bulgarian soldiers" (8), in a scene that shows the senseless violence typical throughout the book. This violence is also used as an explicit physical manifestation of the misogynistic undercurrents and societal tensions that already exist. Cunegonde's slavery to men, including the Bulgarian Captain, the Grande Inquisitor, and the Israelite further illustrates her lack of freedom and autonomy. The men are brutish and cruel, using other humans only to serve their needs and then discarding them.

Normal violence is also essential to the theme of human cruelty in Candide. Characters repeatedly sacrifice others, such as in the "auto-da-fe" (14) where heretics are murdered to save the people from natural disasters. Candide kills the Israelite, the Grand Inquisitor, and the Cunegonde's brother in order to marry her. Likewise, the soldiers "devour the women" (29) in an act of cannibalism when they are starving. Candide finally kills the monkey lovers of two women, hoping to be forgiven for his sins. Voltaire illustrates the stupidity and cruelty of killing others in order to please God and the savagery of using others purely as tools. Perhaps it is the sailor in Candide, who "defying death in the pursuit of plunder, rushed into the midst of the ruin, where he found some money, with which he got drunk, and, after he

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had slept himself sober he purchased the favors of the first good-natured wench that came in his way, amidst the ruins of demolished houses and the groans of half-buried and expiring persons” (12) who best exemplifies Voltaire’s view of human nature. The caricatures in the text engage in senseless and meaningless violence because they believe in predestination; only by feeling remorse and thus responsibility for his actions, can Candide escape this cycle.

Material wealth and beauty, as well as violence, contribute to a negative view of human nature throughout the text, discarding philosophical optimism as a legitimate belief system by revealing the corruption and pain that humans bring upon themselves.