

The best of both
worlds



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Voltaire's *Candide*, the title character voyages from continent to continent in search of love and the meaning of life. On his journeys, his optimism—learned from his ever-present tutor, Pangloss—is slowly whittled away. Candide experiences corruption and deceit, particularly in the church. Most importantly, Candide realizes that one should cultivate one's own life and not leave anything to chance. Through these lessons, Candide develops from an innocent student into a wise young man. Born in Westphalia, Candide is the illegitimate son of the sister of Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh. He is therefore provided an education by the premiere philosopher in Westphalia: Pangloss. Pangloss' main philosophy is optimism. Whenever Pangloss is presented with a bad experience from another character, he simply says that it is for the best. At one point, for example, he says, “[Syphilis] is indispensable in this best of all possible worlds...for if Columbus, when visiting the West Indies, had not caught this disease...we should have neither chocolate nor cochineal” (30). With similar optimism, Candide proceeds on his journey. However, as he develops as a character, he realizes that this is not how the world operates. Although optimism suffices as an explanation of the world to a young, naïve Candide, it becomes less and less cogent as the story progresses. Candide is born into an ideal world where he is respected, educated, and provided for. Yet, when he departs, he is subject to a devastating natural disaster, a public humiliation, and the loss of the love of his life—among other difficulties. In chapter 26, for example, Candide dines with six dethroned kings. As Candide hears the sad accounts of the former rulers, he is forced to challenge whether, indeed, all things turn out for the best. The final blow to Candide's optimism occurs at the end of the novel, when Pangloss and Candide visit the Dervish, allegedly the wisest man in all

of Turkey. Pangloss tells the Dervish that “ I had been looking forward to a little discussion with you about cause and effect, the best of all possible worlds, the origin of evil, the nature of the soul, and pre-established harmony” (142). To this, the Dervish slams the door in their faces. That the wisest of men disregards Pangloss’ philosophy forces Candide to depart entirely from optimism. this action symbolizes Candide’s departure from optimism. The second lesson that Candide learns is that organized religion is vain and corrupt. Voltaire represents church figures as selfish, and organized religion as a sham. For example, Voltaire describes the origin of Pangloss’s sexually transmitted disease: “ Paquette was given this present by a learned Franciscan...” (30). Candide learns that Pangloss received the disease from a monk, who is supposed to be celibate. Thus, Candide is exposed to the deceit of the church. In addition to the non-celibate monk, Candide encounters many other figures that disparage the church and organized religion in general. One such character is the Grand Inquisitor. He is introduced when he condemns Candide and Pangloss to an auto-da-fé, in which Candide is tortured and Pangloss supposedly hanged. Later, Candide comes to know him as the forced lover of Cunégonde, who blackmails her Jewish owner into sharing her. When the Inquisitor enters and sees the Jew dead, Candide quickly impales him. As the Grand Inquisitor, a very high level church official, the character is involved in blackmail, sexual promiscuity, and heartlessness. Another example of church corruption is the duplicitous Abbé of Périgord. The Abbé pretends to be friendly with the affluent Candide. He brings Candide into his social circle, introducing him to important people. Yet he is described as sniveling, snobby, and greedy. Thus, throughout his adventures, Candide encounters various negative representations of

ecclesiastical figures. He learns that very few authority figures are entirely benevolent human beings. The final lesson for Candide is that to achieve a happy, purposeful life, he must cultivate his own character. In his soul-searching, Candide encounters three major “ checkpoints” which chronicle his emotional and philosophical development. The first is Eldorado, a city in which the streets are paved with precious gems and everyone is cordial. All aspects of this city symbolize optimism—and yet its very existence proves to Candide that optimism cannot be. If everything is for the best, then there would be no need for Eldorado to be hidden. However, as it remains hidden, Candide realizes that he can not rely on fate to make him happy. The second checkpoint is the home of Count Pococurante, a wealthy Venetian. The count has a magnificent collection of material goods, yet he is scornful of all of his belongings. He explains, “ there is a pleasure in not being pleased” (124). Candide is disgusted by this approach, and affirms that it is not material wealth that makes one happy. It is not until Candide’s experience with the third and final garden that he realizes the route to happiness and satisfaction. After speaking with the Dervish, the group comes across a Turkish farmer who invites them into his home. He then explains that he is happy being ignorant of scandals and negativity, and that he cultivates his garden with his family. On page 143, the farmer explains that the farm work “ banishes those three great evils, boredom, vice, and poverty.” It is at this final garden that Candide realizes what the goal of his life should be: self-cultivation. Candide says to Pangloss, “ We must go and work in the garden.” Finally, he opposes Pangloss’ theory that things are for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Candide officially abandons his original notion of optimism and completely denies fatalism, or the approach which leaves

everything to fate. He learns that to lead a successful life, he must cultivate himself, and work to make himself the best he can be. This is the most important lesson that Candide learns. Thus, in the course of Voltaire's Candide, Candide learns three important lessons. First, he realizes that Pangloss' doctrine of optimism is not concurrent with reality. Second, Candide encounters negatively portrayed church officials and formulates the idea that leaders, especially ecclesiastical ones, are vain and corrupt. Finally, Candide learns that he must "cultivate his life" as prescribed by the Turkish Dervish. To lead a successful life, Candide learns that he must take control of his own destiny, as things are not for the best in the best of all possible worlds. By the end of this journey, Candide has transformed from a malleable youth to an enlightened young man—and according to Voltaire, it is for the best.