

Voltaire's candide: historically- and socially-founded characters

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Voltaire, as an eighteenth century French philosopher and writer, lived in a far different society than the average American college student is accustomed to today. Though Voltaire was a champion of civil liberties, he spent most of his life in a France plagued with heavy censorship. While some of his works were applauded at the time, many others caused public outrage, even landing him in prison several times. Although the philosophical issues approached in *Candide* were timely and appropriate in eighteenth century France, the genius of Voltaire lies in the timelessness of his characters and the conclusions they force one to draw.

Voltaire's novel *Candide* is a parody in several senses of the word. First, it acts to parody the genre of the novel as a whole. Still a relatively new literary form at the time, the novel was subject to occasional criticism by romantic traditionalists. While Voltaire himself was fairly progressive, he spared no opportunity to poke fun of any available convention. In any case, the idea of genre parody was not created or even popularized solely by Voltaire. As Nelly Severin notes, "parody of literary genres was so frequently practiced by French writers throughout the eighteenth century that it can on statistical authority alone be said to have constituted a literary genre itself" (842). Voltaire specifically targeted hagiographic materials, the records and studies of saints.

Naming the main character *Candide* was by no means an accident. As explained in the introduction, the name is based upon the Latin word *candidus*, meaning white, and leading eventually to our modern candidate. One could then easily draw the symbolic conclusion of *Candide* being clean,

pure, and innocent. Beyond that, however, is an additional hagiographic allusion. Voltaire was familiar with not one, but two distinct saints who took the name *Candide*. Little is known about the first, a Roman martyr. The second, a soldier, had been attacked previously by Voltaire due to the “historical improbability” (Severin 843) of the myth surrounding his canonization.

Another character based off a saint is *Cunégonde*. The historic *Cunégonde*, similar to Voltaire's character, had ties to Westphalia through marriage. While Saint *Cunégonde* led a life of chastity, reportedly remaining a virgin even after marriage (Severin 844), her representation in *Candide* is far less pure. The novel's incarnation of *Cunégonde* is anything but chaste, serving as an additional parody of religious history. It's likely this intentional twist served to showcase Voltaire's disapproval of society's encouragement of virginity as a virtue.

Furthermore, the entirety of *Candide*'s first few chapters could be seen as religious parody. “The innocent beginning of *Candide* can also be seen as a caricature of the typical saint's life” (Severin 844). In this way, one could view all of *Candide* as a satire of traditional religion, a representation in hyperbole. It's possible to mistake this religious parody for that of romance; indeed, commonalities such as shipwrecks and pirates do exist (Severin 844). However, all of these archetypes apply even more aptly to the world of hagiography, and serve as an even more powerful rebellion, especially coming out of eighteenth-century France.

Candide was written in 1759, after Voltaire had been exiled to England and returned again to France. Originally taking up residence in Paris, he was forced to relocate to the rural outskirts of the country after publishing his highly critical letters on the topic of the French governmental system. This lifestyle probably had a direct impact on the shaping of *Candide*, the main character of this satirical piece. Much like Voltaire, *Candide* finds himself constantly relocated, generally not by choice.

It should be noted that while *Candide* explores the philosophy of optimism, and the subtitle of the novel is in fact “ or Optimism,” the word optimism can only first be found in print some 22 years earlier. In the grand scheme of philosophy, the analysis of optimism was still a very new thought at the time Voltaire wrote *Candide*. Perhaps that explains the incessant (yet delicate) mocking of Pangloss, the eternally optimistic pseudo-philosopher. Voltaire felt optimism, as it was understood at the time, was simply irrational. The school of thought required the position that life as it currently exists is as good as it gets, and any seemingly negative situation is facilitated by God and will eventually lead to some greater good.

While Voltaire's criticism of optimism may seem fairly obvious, he subtly attacks several other conjectures at the same time: “ that we can totally transcend our selfishness or provincialism; that a final accounting of the balance of good and evil in the world is achievable; that human philosophies bear some sort of direct relevance to human behavior” (Wood 192). All of these theories require optimism for validation, and yet, in *Candide*, the only shows of optimism are ridiculous and obviously satirical representations.

Another social quandary often grappled with in the eighteenth century that found its way in to *Candide* is the idea of a utopian society. Of course this representation can be found in Eldorado. A paradox is discovered when, after several months of living in this relative paradise, Candide and Cacambo decide they are not happy and will leave. But if Eldorado is a utopia, the happiest of all places that provides for its denizens all they need, how could anybody be unhappy? Voltaire seems to suggest that what Candide experienced there was not true happiness, because a happy life is a life full of risks and adventure (Wood 198).

In an extension of the question of contentment, Voltaire convinces the reader throughout *Candide* not to trust his basic descriptions of characters such as “good,” “worthy,” and “faithful.” While the story began with a number of these perfect images, the characters described in such glowing terms continually manage to disappoint. One disaster after another seems to befall poor Candide while his friends come up morally short. After he and Cacambo resolve to leave Eldorado, the reader is already well aware of Voltaire's deceptive character descriptions. So when Candide asks Cacambo to take half his wealth and search for Cunégonde, and Voltaire's narration expresses surefire faith in his abilities, it is to be expected that Cacambo will find a way to fail. Naturally the only way he could act in a manner surprising to the reader would be to follow through on his promise to find Cunégonde and bring her to Candide, and sure enough, that's exactly what he does (Wood 198).

Voltaire manages to influence the reader's beliefs several times over the course of *Candide*. In the beginning, through Candide's innocent good faith, we are likely to give optimism a chance. Of course the idea of optimism is continually whittled away throughout the story, until eventually the reader has no choice but to abandon it and expect the worst from seemingly good-natured characters. It is at that moment when Cacambo comes through, living up to all optimistic expectations. If the reader expresses disbelief at this turnaround and accomplishment, then Voltaire has succeeded. The one time that an optimistic philosophy is fulfilled, it is unbelievable. Voltaire has managed to destroy any stock the reader had put in to optimism.

While Voltaire's characters seem to make sense on their own, they take on a far deeper meaning when the history and reasoning behind them is understood. These characters are the method by which Voltaire attempts to present philosophical matters in an entertaining fashion, and end up being quite effective, especially if fully understood.

Works Cited

Severin, Nelly H. "Hagiographic Parody in *Candide*." *French Review* 50 (1977): 842-849.

Michael Wood. "Notes on *Candide*." *New England Review* 26 (2005): 192-204.