

Four themes in voltaire's candide essay

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



Candide (1759) is a satire written by the French philosopher Voltaire. Through its lampooning of important social institutions, personalities and conventions, Candide criticized various social ills such as the hypocrisy of religion and the corrupting power of money. Not surprisingly, it was included in the Roman Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books and remained controversial until the first half of the 20th century. In 1929, United States Customs confiscated Harvard-bound copies of the book. The United States Post Office, meanwhile, demanded for its removal in a mail-order catalog in 1944 (Morgan and Peters 10).

The novella's main character, Candide, was a simple young man who was trained from an early age by his tutor, Dr. Pangloss, in Leibnizian optimism. Leibnizian optimism, also known as philosophical optimism, argued that all phenomena, whether good or bad, "happened for the best" (Cunningham and Reich 256). Candide's brush with hardship and misfortune, however, slowly led to his disillusionment with philosophical optimism. At the end of the novella, he realized that all human beings must "cultivate (their own) gardens" (Cunningham and Reich 256). Simply put, everyone must work hard towards bringing about peace and sanity in a hostile world (Cunningham and Reich 256).

I. Different Views on the Roles of Women

One of the most dominant themes in Candide is the exploitation of women. The novella's three main female characters – Cunegonde, Paquette and the old woman – were all raped and or forced into sexual slavery. Their respective ordeals were narrated in very explicit accounts. What was

surprising, however, was the women's strikingly nonchalant attitude towards their experiences with sexual abuse.

In the context of the novella, the old woman's "love of life" did not mean a genuine interest in living but a blind resignation to the hypocritical status quo that has led her to immense suffering. Sex traditionally served as a means of imposing male supremacy over women; thus, Voltaire's association between sex and violence. Although women were conventionally expected to become chaste, modest and proper, the aforementioned belief regarding sex prevented them from exemplifying these qualities. Worse, a raped woman was blamed for her misfortune – she was thought to have encouraged her attacker by engaging in immodest behavior.

As much as the old woman wanted to protest this unfair societal norm by killing herself, she opted not to. Every event, after all, happened for the best. Furthermore, people in Voltaire's time believed that suicide was punishable with eternal damnation in hell. It was pointless, therefore, to rail against injustice and oppression.

II. The Loss of Belief in Spiritual Traditions That Provided Stable Views of the World

Candide likewise reflected Voltaire's cynicism towards organized religion (Chastain 109). Voltaire cannot be blamed for this sentiment of his – corrupt and hypocritical religious leaders were very rampant during his time. Although they supposedly vowed to faithfully observe poverty, chastity and obedience, their lifestyle sharply contrasted this oath. They fathered

children, kept mistresses, sold indulgences and lived luxuriously while the rest of the population starved.

The religious leaders in *Candide* embodied the above-mentioned anomaly. The old woman, for instance, was the daughter of a pope (Voltaire 29). Cunegonde, meanwhile, became the mistress of a hard-line Catholic Inquisitor and a Jewish banker at the same time.

It is very ironic that despite his intense pro-Catholic stance, the Inquisitor went to great lengths just to obtain Cunegonde as his mistress. But what he did was nothing compared to the Franciscan friar in Chapter 10 who robbed Cunegonde of her money and jewels (Voltaire 43). His greed rendered him blind to the fact that Cunegonde, *Candide* and the old woman badly needed those for them to be able to continue on their journey to Cadiz. Other religious leaders in the novella carried out inhumane campaigns against those who disagreed with their beliefs – the Portuguese Inquisition hanged Dr. Pangloss and publicly flogged *Candide* in Chapter 6 (Voltaire 30).

III. Influence of Modern Psychology (e. g., Interest in the Unconscious or the Irrational)

Dr. Pangloss constantly taught *Candide* that “ everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds” (Chastain 109). Enlightenment thinkers such as Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz argued that because God was perfect, believing in the existence of evil meant believing that God was imperfect. The world, therefore, must be perfect – the concept of imperfection was merely fabricated by people who did not understand God’s grand plan. But

because Voltaire acknowledged neither God's existence nor his perfection, he mercilessly satirized Leibniz's belief that the world was a perfect place (Chastain 109).

Candide and Dr. Pangloss experienced numerous misfortunes throughout the novella – floggings, rapes, robberies, unjust executions, disease, an earthquake, betrayals and demoralizing world-weariness. It is very obvious that these adversities were due to the cruelty and folly of humanity, as well as the indifference of the world. Dr. Pangloss, however, stubbornly held on to the erroneous ideas of philosophical optimism.

Despite the debilitating effects of syphilis, Dr. Pangloss convinced himself to believe that his malady was “ what nature intended” (Voltaire 10). This decision of his was a clear display of false pride. In Chapter 4, Dr. Pangloss did not only suffer from syphilis – he was also reduced to a beggar. Thus, by flawed reasoning, he hoped to prove to Candide that everything he taught him still held true.

IV. The Epiphany at the End of the Modern Short Stories

The misfortunes that Candide and Dr. Pangloss experienced throughout the novella resulted in Candide's disenchantment with philosophical optimism. But neither did Candide use this as an excuse to fully embrace pessimism. Numerous events in the novella made Candide realize that occurrences that are traditionally regarded as tragedies are not necessarily as such. Death is a good example of evidence which would validate this premise (Chastain 109).

In separate instances, Candide thought that Cunegonde, Dr. Pangloss and the baron are dead, only to discover later that they were still alive. However, it eventually became clear that their survival did more harm than good.

Cunegonde is shallow and fickle, Dr. Pangloss is silly and dimwitted and the baron is snobbish and narrow-minded. It would be fair to say, therefore, that Candide's discovery that they were still alive symbolized the revival of certain negative human traits (Chastain 109).

At the end of the novella, Candide pointed out to Dr. Pangloss and Martin that human existence was never meant to be easy. But this did not mean that people had to resign themselves to evil and misfortune. It simply meant that they must learn to “take care (of their) gardens” – strive hard to bring about goodness in a sinful world.