

A life on a page



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Subjective novelists tend to use personal attitudes to shape their characters. Whether it be an interjection of opinion here, or an allusion to personal experience there, the beauty of a story lies in the clever disclosure of the author's personality. Charlotte Bronte and Voltaire are no exceptions. Their most notable leading characters, Jane Eyre and Candide, represent direct expressions of the respective author's emotions and impressions. In their stories, Bronte and Voltaire create fictional settings and imaginary scenes. However, through the psyche of their leading protagonists, Bronte and Voltaire genuinely portray their own inner world – they are their own subjects. While the novels Jane Eyre and Candide are in no manner outright autobiographies, they are extremely similar in that the experiences and beliefs of Bronte and Voltaire serve to characterize Jane and Candide. A careful examination of both works reveals that Jane and Candide evince the contrasting ideals of Bronte and Voltaire in various spheres. As individuals, Voltaire and Charlotte Bronte could not have been any more different. They lived in opposing eras, had unlike backgrounds, and espoused divergent philosophies. While Candide, which some consider the epitome of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, uses satire to achieve its goals, Jane Eyre uses extensive descriptions to take the reader on a psychological roller coaster through the mind of its leading character. Analysis shows that the two authors will seldom agree on many issues. However, by the end of both novels, Jane and Candide have become very much alike. Answering the question of how this transformation occurs necessitates a breakdown of the characters and their creators in specific areas. The opposing viewpoints of Bronte and Voltaire especially manifest themselves through the author's examination of malevolence in the world. Their chief vehicles for pursuing

this analysis, spirituality and personal will, underscore the contrasting values of Jane and Candide while ultimately supplying the connecting character bond. Through Candide, Voltaire analyzes the problem of evil in the world, and depicts the woes heaped upon it in the name of religion. “ Let us crush the infamous one” was the rallying cry often used to summarize the flavor of the Voltarian movement. With this phrase, he referred to any form of religion that persecuted nonadherents or that constituted fanaticism. For Christianity, he would substitute deism, a purely rational religion which held God as a cosmic clockmaker who wound up the world, then left it to tick on its own. Candide had traveled throughout the world and encountered a tremendous amount of wrong (so much so that Voltaire made it unrealistic). Despite the advice of the optimistic Pangloss and the pessimistic Martin, Candide continued to search for answers – and Voltaire supplies them. The key passage in which he makes clear his point of view is the following:

Pangloss said to the dervish, “ Sir, we’ve come to ask you to tell us why such a strange animal as man was ever created.”” Why are you concerned about that?” said the dervish. “ Is that any of your business?”” But, Reverend Father,” said Candide, “ there is a terrible amount of evil in the world.”” What does it matter, whether there’s evil or good?” said the dervish. “ When His Highness sends a ship to Egypt, does he worry about whether the mice in it are comfortable?”” Then what ought we to do?” said Pangloss.” Keep quiet,” said the dervish. (118)Candide ascertains that the world was created imperfectly, yet he still should not blame God. The dervish hints at the remedy for unhappiness, but Candide must discover it for himself (the true cure will be explicated later). Using Candide as his instrument, Voltaire also attacks institutional religion to show that it is no cure for the world’s iniquity.

While in Holland, Candide becomes aware of the hypocrisy of Christianity. After hearing a speech about the benefits of charity, Candide approaches the orator for such assistance. After a misunderstanding (the naive Candide did not deny that the pope was the anti-Christ), Candide is told by the Christian that he “ doesn’t deserve to eat” and that he should “ never, never come near [him] again”. Candide eventually finds aid solely from the Anabaptist, a man never baptized into organized religion. Voltaire’s anti-religious satire also jabs at religious figureheads, including the Pope (who has a daughter), Brother Giroflé (the monk with a girlfriend), and the arrogant Jesuit Barron. Although Voltaire vehemently attacked religion, he still supported a system of spiritual toleration. Candide also becomes an advocate of toleration after visiting El Dorado. Initially shocked by the spiritual peace in this utopian society, Candide asked El Dorado’s king about his nation’s religion. “ We have,” he replied, “ the same religion as everyone else: we worship God, morning and night? We don’t pray. We have nothing to ask of God: He’s given us everything we need. We constantly thank him.” Here, Voltaire’s religious sentiments are manifested through other characters. Because of the lessons Candide learns, he takes his knowledge and attempts to find relief from the world’s wickedness. Likewise, Jane Eyre represents the religious aspirations of Charlotte Bronte. The childhood similarities of these two are striking. As the daughter of the Reverend Patrick Bronte, Charlotte was schooled in the Christian traditions. Bronte, like Jane, never felt a true sense of family love during her childhood ? her mother died at a very young age, leaving Bronte and her siblings to her father (Blom 14). While some researches have accused Mr. Bronte of a cold and harsh tyranny towards his children, others portray him as “ a kind and loving husband and father, kind

to all about him” (Gaskell qtd in Blom 15). “ Whatever the case,” remarks researcher Margaret Blom, “ he was clearly unfitted by grief and temperament to supply a fostering maternal love” (15). At the age of eight, Charlotte and her sisters were sent to The Clergy Daughter’s School, which would ultimately serve as the influence for the fictional Lowood School in Jane Eyre. The privations of charity school took hold on both Jane and Bronte, as both watched those around them perish due to epidemics. For Jane it was her friends, for Bronte it was her sisters. Both became isolated, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. After difficult childhoods, both Jane and Bronte began to pose questions as to the cause of evil in the world. Just as Bronte had searched for answers through her sister Maria, Jane found solace in the fictional Helen Burns. “ Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity, or registering wrongs,” Helen explained to Jane, “? revenge never worries my heart, degradation never too deeply disgusts me, injustice never crushes me too low: I live in calm, looking to the end” (82-83). Maria, like Helen, played a significant part in Bronte’s life by encouraging her to emulate Christ’s examples. When Maria died, her grieving father declared that “ she exhibited during her illness many symptoms of a heart under divine influence” (Gaskell qtd in Blom 17). The same can be said of Helen Burns; Jane’s spiritual growth was a direct result of her influence. If Helen Burns had tempered Jane’s restlessness over the world’s evil, the stoicism of St. John Rivers reaffirmed Helen’s creed. Ostensibly, St. John follows the precepts of Christianity ? that is, he rescues Jane from certain death, he shares his home with her, and he finds work suited for her talents. Although he dedicates his life to his religion, the reader can sense that Bronte does not consider him a whole person; he seems to possess a reluctant disposition

towards interpersonal relationships. Even though Jane rejected his futile attempts at marriage, his impact upon her was noteworthy. “ God has given us,” he once expressed, “ the power to make our own fate; and when our energies seem to demand a sustenance they cannot get ? when our will strains after a path we may not follow ? we need neither starve from inanition, nor stand still in despair” (367). St. John gave Jane the courage to rise above the peril in the world, the audacity that Bronte herself lived with. He confirms for Jane what she had suspected as a child: “ that denying the flesh does not necessarily elevate the soul” (Berg 96). And while throughout the story Jane comes across individuals who seek happiness in heaven, like Helen and St. John, Jane is determined to find hers here on earth. Similarly, Candide also strives to give meaning to his life, and to prevail over the evil in it. If his satire of religion in Candide ripped into his enemies, then his attack on unbridled optimism took it one step further. Since God did not intervene in worldly affairs, Voltaire concluded that the onus of blame for social evil should be cast upon man’s “ irrationality, intolerance, cruelty, and avarice” (Bottiglia 88). Especially vexing to Voltaire was the Leibnitzian optimism that everything was for the best, in this, the best of all possible worlds. In the midst of worldly vice, Pangloss, the personification of this ideology, continually supports his beliefs; Candide, however, seriously begins to doubt them. He asks Pangloss, “ When you had been hanged, dissected and beaten unmercifully, and while you were rowing at your bench, did you still think that everything was for the best?” (114). In challenging his teacher, Candide has clearly learned from his experiences. He was not totally pessimistic either, however. He disagreed with the negative outlooks of the philosopher Martin. Voltaire recognized that evil in the world could not exist without

some amount of good (Bottiglia 90). In this way, Candide is not entirely optimistic or pessimistic, for its true message lies somewhere in between. It embraces the belief that the world can be made better by human effort. Or, as researcher William Bottiglia puts it, “ a healthy, equilibrating meliorism”(103) which “ lends no small degree of autobiographical distinctiveness and realism to [the book’s] content” (102). Voltaire continued his condemnation of affluent society with his theory of the Noble Savage. The idea held that nature itself was benign; man should be left alone in a state of pure nature where he would turn out virtuous. While in the land of the Orellions, Candide learned that the primitive people are no better or no worse than the civilized people ? both are capable of great cruelty. Thus, it is up to an individual to follow an admirable course in life. Throughout his journey, Candide searches to find this medium. Upon meeting an old Turk on the last leg of his voyage, Candide is amazed by the man’s happiness. The key to his contentment, he says, is that his “ work keeps [him] free of the three great evils: boredom, vice, and poverty” (119). Suddenly, Candide stumbles upon what Voltaire has been leading him towards during the entire story ? that in order to find happiness in the world it is best to stop theorizing and cease complaining. He finally became convinced that man could not fully understand the evil in the world. Instead, he should use sound judgment and reason to guide his life; only then will he discover its true meaning. Overall, to find a fraction of happiness, he must cultivate his garden, both literally and symbolically. By tending to his work, he will find a greater satisfaction. On a social level, Candide’s garden involves more than just gardening ? each member of the group puts a particular talent to use. Like his companions, Candide becomes socially useful in accordance with deistic doctrine. In the

end, Candide finds personal fulfillment. Nearly a half-century later, it would be up to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre to do the same. Brontë's attitudes towards her heroine's experiences come from "the fact that her heroine's internal conflicts mirror her own" (Blom 94). On the one hand, like Brontë, who was determined to prevail over the evils thrust upon her by society (94), Jane wishes to thrive in the real world, to attain independence, and to achieve the respect of others by obeying "the law of God; sanctioned by man" (Brontë 232). But on the other hand, also like Brontë, Jane is determined to accomplish it all on her own terms. Jane confirms Brontë's absolute confidence in her own inner drives and her total ability to assert her will (Blom 100). Brontë undoubtedly had artistic, as well as political, reasons for making her protagonist an orphan, a governess (which Brontë herself was at one time), and, finally, a writer (Berg 2). Jane Eyre rises above her terrible oppression through her own willpower, and she thus exemplifies Brontë's theory of "Self-Help" (2). This popular Victorian and Romantic belief held that social advancement was possible through individual resolve. Some may argue, however, that Jane is not a self-made woman. These critics point out that she suddenly gained independence via her inheritance. This could not be more far from the truth. The traits and values that shaped her character were unaltered by her unexpected social progression? she essentially remained the same person. In that era, social pressures engulfed women in Jane's position; Brontë gave them the audacity to express their discontent, she urged them to move forward. Jane Eyre is also notable for its significant "Woman Question", or Brontë's portrayal of the role of women in society. Because it was a very controversial theme during its time period, Brontë definitely used Jane to showcase her feminist manifesto (which is why she

published the novel under the pseudonym, Currer Bell). In real life, Bronte rejected the marriage proposals of two men and was rejected herself after falling in love with a married man (Blom 26-27). Perhaps, because she had experienced both sides of unrequited love, Bronte paralleled Jane's troubles with Rochester and St. John. Bronte also gave Jane her attitude. "Women feel just as men feel," Jane states (Bronte 112). She let no obstacles stand in her way; she became an "independent woman" (437), her "own mistress" (438). "It was my time to assume ascendancy," Jane affirmed, "my powers were in play" (427). Overall, Voltaire and Bronte maintained firm beliefs concerning evil and injustice in the world. Through effective literary styles, they managed to not merely put their ideas on paper, but their lives. By creating imaginary individuals to represent themselves, Bronte and Voltaire gave their ideas life and substance. By imparting wisdom, they taught their characters lessons. By giving them challenges, they made their protagonists realistic. Voltaire and Bronte saw two types of iniquity in the world. When they encountered physical evil, they turned to religion for answers. When they saw social evil, they turned to man. More than anything, they turned to their imaginations and themselves. Physical evil disturbed Jane Eyre and Candide for two specific reasons. First, it called into question the motives of a God whose general laws cause so much wretchedness for his people. Second, it gave rise to speculation about the unknown, as though it were the known, with disastrous effects on the moral motivation of mankind. Ultimately, physical evil is declared to be totally uncontrollable; individuals should strictly stick to what they can comprehend. Social evil, on the other hand, is pronounced as knowable and controllable. For Candide, the cure involves "cultivating his garden." For Jane, it is to assert her personal will. In

the end, both characters accomplished what their author's had intended ? the attainment of happiness with a simultaneous discovery of a personal identity. Jane Eyre and Candide are not only fictionalized versions of their creators, but also the very epitome of modern mankind. They look to their hostile surroundings and inside themselves to find answers to life's questions. In their struggles, we share their agony. In victory, we share their triumphs. Works Cited Berg, Maggie. Jane Eyre: A Student's Companion to the Novel. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987. Blom, Margaret. Charlotte Bronte. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977. Bottiglia, William. "Candide's Garden". Voltaire: A Collection Of Critical Essays. Ed. William Bottiglia. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968. 87-111. Bronte, Charlotte. Jane Eyre. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. Voltaire. Candide. Trans. Lowell Bair. New York: Bantam Books, 1959.