

The experiences of men and women and their differing



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Francoise – Marie Arouet, known by the pen name, Voltaire is one of the greatest writers and thinkers France has produced. Renowned for his brilliant wit, biting sarcasm and delicious satire, Voltaire has produced many remarkable works. He was scathing in his criticism of religion, despotism, violence, injustice and the many evils perpetuated on society by the intolerance and depravity of its men and women. Through his writings, he sought to bring about awareness, enlightenment and social reform.

Candide tells the tale of a young man of the same name and his quest for love, success and happiness. Against this engaging backdrop, Voltaire explores the shortcomings entrenched in society and the foibles inherent in human nature that serve to prevent people from leading satisfying, fulfilling lives. His study of the tragicomedy that is life has led him to conclude that there is no escaping the misery that is an integral component of human existence and that happiness will always remain elusive.

By examining the varying experiences of men and women in Candide and analyzing their reactions, one gains an insight into the perversity that characterizes both sexes and consequently it is possible to fully comprehend the nature of the many evils that has taken root in society and the hopelessness of the pursuit of happiness. The Experiences of Candide and Cunegonde Candide and Cunegonde are the lovers who are separated by fate, and subjected to its infinite cruelty before their ultimate reunion.

Their experiences in the real world are largely different though united by the common threads of cruelty and misery. Candide's love for Cunegonde results in his expulsion from the only home he has ever known and following this

event he has a number of adventures. He gets a taste of the cruelty that is the result of fanaticism, when he is made to run the gauntlet during his brief stint with the army of the Bulgars. The horrors of war make a deep impression on him and he escapes at the first opportunity. The minions of the inquisition hang his beloved mentor and have him flogged.

Despite these traumatic events, Candide remains optimistic and upholds the philosophical ideals of his tutor Pangloss who believed that, "... as all things have been created for some end, they must necessarily be created for the best end" (Voltaire, 2003, p. 12). In the course of his travels, Candide loses associates to death, is robbed and witnesses human suffering first hand. Consequently his belief system is thoroughly shaken, though Candide himself does not change much. He continues to blunder through life, trying hard to learn its lessons.

Cunegonde's experiences are different from those of Candide. Like him she witnesses senseless violence first hand, and is robbed of her possessions. However unlike him she is subjected to the humiliation and exploitation that is the lot of her sex. Men see her as an object to be bartered or used. Cunegund tends to pity herself for the plight that has befallen her and she is rather disillusioned with Pangloss's teachings. And yet despite the idealism and naivete that hover on the surface of her personality, she succeeds in honing her survival instinct and learns to use her sexuality as a weapon.

This is apparent in two instances -when she chooses to marry the governor instead of Candide and when she laments on being robbed of her jewels, "Where shall I find Inquisitors and Jews who can give me more?" (Voltaire,

2003, p. 39). The Mentors of Candide and Cunegonde Pangloss and the old woman are the mentors of Candide and Cunegonde and the two characters are in sharp contrast to each other as is seen by their experiences in life and their starkly differing reactions to them.

Pangloss is the eternal optimist and he stubbornly clings to his principles even when his life turns out to be a relentless saga of suffering. He contracts syphilis, is hanged by the Inquisitors, flogged and dissected during the course of his unfortunate wanderings. Yet he insists that everything happens for the best, persists in ignoring the evil that is on rampage all around him and prefers to remain indifferent instead of fighting for social redress.

As he says to Candide, “ I am a philosopher, and it would not become me to retract my sentiments; especially as Leibnitz could not be in the wrong: and that pre – established harmony is the finest thing in the world” (Voltaire, 2003, p. 123). The old woman, like the other characters experiences unspeakable horrors. She is the daughter of Pope Urban X and a princess. Her sufferings are manifold – she experiences the loss of her fiance prior to the wedding, endures capture and rape at the hands of the Moors, watches her mother and companions die, and becomes the victim of slavery and abuse.

Despite all the hardships that blight her existence on account of her sex, she chooses to take everything in her stride and refuses to pity herself. The old woman’s wisdom, canniness and knowledge gleaned from a lifetime of hard lessons are invaluable to Cunegonde. While her experiences and reactions to them are completely different from Pangloss, whose optimism is juxtaposed

against her cynicism, the old woman also clings to hope in a manner that is far more poignant than the latter's.

She expresses herself very pithily when she says, " I have been a hundred times upon the point of killing myself, but still I was fond of life" (Voltaire, 2003, p. 50). Lessons on Evil and Happiness The experiences of the women reveal that their sex makes them vulnerable to exploitation. When they are young and beautiful they are the playthings of men and have to suffer all kinds of indignities, but as they grow older the situation becomes increasingly precarious and their sufferings are likely to multiply.

Men are not exempt from suffering but it is largely of their own making. From the characters of Cunegonde and the old woman it is evident that women are shrewd and often manage to use their weakness to their advantage. While depicting the trials and tribulations of the men and women, Voltaire plumbs the depths of evil that human beings are capable of sinking to. None of the characters are exempt from the horrors that have been spawned by voracious greed, religious fanaticism, power and intolerance that have society in a vice - like grip.

The responses of the characters to their experiences showcase the different ways by which people handle adversity. Candide's idealism is wasted as it does not help him or his fellow men. Pangloss's excessive optimism, dogmatic ideals and resultant inactivity may be criticized for its escapism. The responses of the women are a tribute to the endurance of the human spirit but their actions are tinged with selfishness. Ultimately none of the

characters find the answers for dealing with evil and therefore none find true happiness.

This is evident when all the characters settle down on a farm and find that happiness is still not within their grasp. Ultimately they realize that useful labor is most likely to ensure them a peaceful existence. Conclusion By portraying the experiences of men and women in *Candide* and showing how they differ in character as well as response Voltaire succeeds in weaving a colorful tapestry on human nature. The reader is given a glimpse of the nature of evil and the hidden flaws in men and women that interfere with their pursuit of happiness.