

Voltaire's *Candide*, a widely-translated satire of the Age of Enlightenment, represents a poignant critique of the human tendency to control and look forward with optimism. Many Enlightenment philosophers applied theories of purpose and order within the world, and Leibniz's theory of optimistic design is a point of particular focus within this seminal work. Throughout *Candide*, Voltaire argues that human nature is destructive and unhelpful in the face of a brutal and somewhat random existence, employing a matter-of-fact tone, caricatures of various representative characters and settings, and Horatian satire to note the imperfections of critical human constructs such as religious creed and basic philosophical debate.

*Candide* is a rapidly moving story, traversing thousands of miles within paragraphs, and this speed and ease with which the story is told allows for cutting and frank statements through Voltaire's witty and matter-of-fact tone. For instance, after Candide is brutally whipped by Bulgarian soldiers, "an able surgeon cures [him] in three weeks by means of emollients taught by Dioscorides. He has already a little skin, and was able to march when the King of the Bulgarians gave battle to the King of the Abares," (page 5). The frankness with which Voltaire presents such intense violence, and the dry satire with which he states that Candide "has already a little skin," makes clear the normalcy of brutality in European and Bulgarian society. Beyond sheer violence, the underlying power of human nature is satirized in its cruel view of a soldier's value as an asset, allowing any action to be placed "within the laws of war" to facilitate militaristic success. The rate at which the dismal realities of the characters' lives unfold, as well as the matter-of-fact display of these happenings, directly and openly cuts at the idea that the world is for the best — if everything were to happen for a reason and to build a more perfect existence, it would be impossible to have a world of such pure and callous violence; the lives of the characters within the story are built upon so many negative experiences and realities that it is simply impossible for these vast and commonplace horrors to combine into an optimistic sum. These claims are also an effective criticism of

the social tendency for war and conflict, analyzing the inhumanity of battle to expose people for wishing the worst upon each other. Voltaire's depiction of people fighting to kill and preserve their narrow personal interests at the expense of others conveys a world which, in reality, functions clearly for the worse.

The author also caricatures many of the novel's characters and contexts in order to demonstrate the impossibility of a world built for the best, infusing themes of religious and social order to exemplify the flaws of human nature in creating a more perfect existence. When the main character and his loyal friend Cacambo travel to El Dorado, Candide says,

...the castle where I was born is a mere nothing in comparison to the place where we now are; but still Miss Cunegonde is not here, and you yourself have doubtless some fair one in Europe for whom you sigh. If we remain here we shall only be as others are; whereas if we return to our own world with only a dozen of El Dorado sheep, loaded with the pebbles of this country, we shall be richer than all the kings in Europe; we shall no longer need to stand in awe of the Inquisitors; and we may easily recover Miss Cunegonde (page 51).

El Dorado is repeatedly caricatured as a utopia of splendor, one in which precious possessions are unimportant because everyone lives a positive and fulfilling life with the scientific and societal structures in place to ensure perfection in an isolated civilization. As Candide and Cacambo prepare to leave this magical paradise, the contrast between this narration and the caricature of Candide's as a restless man who desires control, status, and personal achievement in his life serves to renew Voltaire's attack on optimistic views of utopia and the perfection of God. It is argued that a utopia cannot exist because men will not have the patience to remain in it; their nature will propel them onto violent or traveling futures, always in search of greater fortunes.

This passage also includes a humorous critique of the religious order of Europe, constructed around the desire for distinguishment and achievement present within European society, when Cacambo asks the King of El Dorado, "What! have you no monks among you to dispute, to govern, to intrigue, and to burn people who are not of the same opinion with themselves?" (page 49). This generalizing line of questioning, possessing a mocking and almost lighthearted spirit, ultimately illuminates the European view of religion and its placement

within society as a keeper of order and enforcer of a laughably rigid view of God. This extreme and obvious inflexibility is a driving force behind Voltaire's main criticism of theology and its utility in the optimistic argument that the perfection of God's will does not allow for mistakes in the predetermined nature of the world. The author draws a contrast with the idea that everything must, by definition, be perfect, attacking the foundational claim that God's perfect intentions warrant extreme action against dissent by the church. The position he takes, through caricatured language of church-facilitated burnings and violence to persecute dissidents which is actually quite true, is that the religious order justifies violence and direct harm by claiming to be working toward the predetermined "greater good" of a world in which everything happens for the best according to God.

Horatian satire appears throughout *Candide* as the wittily-told and fast-progressing storyline journeys throughout the globe, from joy to despair, illustrating the flawed nature of an optimistic analysis of humanity through satirical language which reminds readers of its limitations and falsities. When Candide and Martin arrive in Portsmouth, the main character, upon asking why an admiral has been ceremoniously murdered by the brutal British military, is told that "It is because he did not kill a sufficient number of men himself. He gave battle to a French Admiral; and it has been proved that he was not near enough to him." When Candide points out, "But the French Admiral was as far from the English Admiral," he is told, "There is no doubt of it; but in this country it is found good, from time to time, to kill one Admiral to encourage the others," (pages 72-73). While this scene is intense and disturbing, the ease of conversation between Candide and the person explaining, acting as a setup for a plain joke, illustrates the ridiculous nature of the murder which just occurred. The ridicule of events in a relatively gentle manner signals to readers that they should interpret the violent construct of war in Europe as being sufficiently problematic to be funny upon examination; the stage is thus set for Voltaire's broader argument that the war-obsessed mindset of destruction, in harming others and removing common humanity across forces and boundaries, renders optimism impossible within the human race.

Arguably the main philosophy confronted throughout *Candide* is presented through the sayings of Pangloss: that "there is no effect without a cause," and that "all is for the best" in "this best of all possible worlds." This central

tenet of optimism reappears consistently as Candide journeys through an inhospitable world, with each character gradually losing their belief in these statements. As Martin continues to challenge the concept of optimism in discussing the fate of a Dutch scoundrel, Candide maintains, ““This rogue of a Dutch skipper has met with the fate he deserved.”” When Martin replies, ““...but why should the passengers be doomed also to destruction? God has punished the knave, and the devil has drowned the rest,”” (page 59), Voltaire acknowledges a balance between optimism and dualism, not fully adhering to the idea that the devil is present in everyday life but suggesting that all is not for the best because inherent injustice dominates many outcomes, seemingly separate from an omnipotent God or devil. Voltaire seems to broaden Martin’s claim that the devil works as much as God as the text progresses, instead interpreting it as a statement that events, by their nature, can happen for the worse as well as for the better. These conflicting perspectives on purposeful design are useful mechanisms which create a response to the simplistic view of optimism, recognizing a more random view of nature and arguing that bad things occur in tangible and pessimistic ways. Within the deaths of countless innocent people is Voltaire’s central idea that, while some outcomes restore justice, there are greater uncontrollable and imperfect effects of nature which lead to pain and suffering across humanity, influences which are more powerful than any “perfect” order created for the best of worlds. When Candide finally tells Pangloss, ““All that is very well, but let us cultivate our garden,”” (page 97), he states the final verdict of the work: philosophical debate on the nature of cause and effect, free will, and fairness in outcomes is not worth the time it takes to worry over the goodness of the world’s design, only taking time from any meaningful pursuits in a tangible life.

*Candide* critiques vast systems of European philosophical life, utilizing a matter-of-fact tone, caricature of various

representative elements, and Horatian satire to note the imperfections of human structures such as religious creed and

philosophical debate. Voltaire argues that human nature is brutal and destructive, and that time is better invested in

cultivating a meaningful life than in philosophical pursuits of perfection and goodness in the world. Many of the same

constructs targeted in this work have continued to be criticized and included in broader human conversations, but Candide

is a complex and valuable piece which illuminates important qualities of human nature and its implications in societal

frameworks.