
Unit 4, Voltaire, *Candide*

An Approach to Voltaire's *Candide*

Sometimes it is the book that is easy to read that is the hardest to teach. In one way *Candide* seems to glide along, deceptively engaging, flowing naturally from one point to another. Here is a book that charms the reader with humor, satire and nuance. However, here too is a book that requires the reader to be familiar with historical background, religious issues, politics, and a full range of human experience. For those who enjoy fast moving plots: beware! It is almost too fast, skipping continents in a single paragraph, leaving characters to wander the globe aimlessly, and having that annoying way of making those who have incontestably died before hundreds of witnesses in one chapter, reborn, active and vital in the following chapter.

This suite of lessons does not attempt to deal with all of the contemporary issues that irritated Voltaire (he seems to have been someone who was irritated easily), but to give a sampling of areas of interest that the contemporary student may find appealing. Of course, no set of lessons is fully complete nor has the last word on an interpretation of a novel, but this series does attempt to highlight some of the important factors in Voltaire's approach to *Candide* including allowing the student to experience satire, a rare literary device in a great book.

Skills attained in this Unit: (Students will be able to...)

- Define key concepts of satire writing.
- Understand the criticisms Voltaire makes against contemporary issues of the day, and to interpret those criticisms in light of the world we live in.
- Read, interpret and analyze a novel.
- Define basic concepts in novel writing: plot construction, character development, etc. and to understand Voltaire's use of these concepts.
- Determine the author's purpose in constructing this novel the way he did, and interpret our reaction to that purpose.

Text: Voltaire, *Candide* (Bantam edition)

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Lesson 4-1: Introduction to Satire

Day 1, Chapter 1

Objectives:

- To introduce students to satire as a literary genre.
- To compare how Dante and Voltaire both commented on human experience in different ways.

Quiz: Chapters 1-9.

Motivation:

Satire is a typical form of expression in modern literature, as well as television, the movies and newspapers. Ask students to think of things that they have seen or read that could be called satires; explain what is satirized and how.

Vocabulary:

Satire: A literary work in which people and society are ridiculed using wit, irony and parody. The satirist aims to allow the reader to laugh at a subject, thereby diminishing it.

Parody: A satiric imitation of a work, an idea, or an author's style with ridicule as the chief goal. The parodist exploits the peculiarities of an author's expression, i.e. his use of too many commas, certain favorite words, or an inclination to melodrama.

Development:

From the opening lines of *Candide* there is an element of humor and satire. Nearly every paragraph derides someone or something current in eighteenth century society. Emphasis can be placed on the following items:

- Westphalia was known as backwater with little scenicly to recommend it. Voltaire himself called the place a "vast, sad, sterile, detestable countryside." Compare this to the vision set forth in Chapter One.
- The Baron's name is a mockery of German aristocracy.
- The requirement of extensive genealogy to prove aristocracy is something many would have agreed with, although seventy-one generations would harken back 2000 years.
- Pangloss means "all tongue," and indeed he proves himself to be that over and over again.
- Cunegonde is named for a medieval saint, whose feast day, March 3rd, is around the time when the book starts. Saint Cunegonde led a virgin's life, even after marriage. When accused of infidelity, she walked barefoot across hot coals. How is Voltaire's Cunegonde a reaction to this saint and her holy behavior?
- Candide's name means "blank." He, like all of us, starts out this way in life.
- Candide's love for Cunegonde parodies the Virgin cult of medieval saints in their endless pursuit of the heavenly ideal. As a suffering knight, Candide is abused by the powers that be.

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- The world of Westphalia is presented as if it were a parody of the Garden of Eden. Review how Dante exposed human failings, and what he saw was the end result of immoral behavior. How does Voltaire address these abuses in the eighteenth century?

Homework:

Review the basic premises of the opening lesson in Activity 4:1.

Lesson 4-2: Voltaire's Lampooning of Leibniz's Theories

Day 2, Chapters 2, 3 and 4

Objectives:

- To discuss how Voltaire lampoons the critical theories of Leibniz.
- To introduce the literary devices of lampoon and satire.

Motivation:

You are a great philosopher. Is your system of philosophy based on science? Math? Experience? Religion? Knowledge? Pleasure? Explain.

Vocabulary:

Lampoon: A crude and coarse satire that holds up to shame the personal appearance or character of a person.

Farce: A light type of comedy in which highly improbable plot situations, absurd characters, and often slapstick elements are used for humorous effect.

Cosmology: A theory describing the natural phenomena of the universe.

Background:

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), a great mathematician, is also regarded as a philosopher. He explored what he called the principle of sufficient reason (i.e., that nothing occurs without a reason), and the principle of pre-established harmony (i.e., that God constructed the universe in such a way that corresponding mental and physical events occur simultaneously). Leibniz had a lifelong interest in the idea that the principles of reasoning could be reduced to a system, a mathematical thought process, in which controversies would be settled by calculations.

Development:

Have students complete Activity 5:2 to give them some background on Leibniz's life, of which they are probably unfamiliar. Explore how Pangloss is the living representation of Leibniz's philosophy. Why would Voltaire have gone to such lengths to ridicule the older philosopher? Why does Voltaire find this philosophy so repugnant? How is Pangloss exposed as being both a philosophical lightweight as well as hypocrite? Why does no one see this, even Candide?

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Discuss how Leibniz is parodied in his philosophy of “metaphysico-theologico-cosmonigology.” A disciple of Leibniz, Christian Wolff, invented the term cosmology.

How does Candide live with Pangloss’ philosophy after Pangloss has temporarily disappeared from the book? Point out phrases like “Dr. Pangloss was right when he told me that all is for the best in this world...” at the end of Chapter Three. Once adhering to a doctrine, philosophers find it difficult to dispute themselves. Why?

Explain the words lampoon and farce. How are these literary elements used in this section of the book? Point out instances.

Homework:

Explain why the Protestant will not give aid to the hapless Candide. What is the satire that is intended here?

Lesson 4-3: Lisbon Earthquake

Day 3, Chapters 5 and 6

Objective:

- To discuss the Lisbon Earthquake and its effect on eighteenth century Europe.

Motivation:

There are defining moments in world history that people remember long after they occurred: the sinking of the *Titanic*, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the events of 911, etc. These moments are transcendent because they suggest a change in the world order, a feeling that things will never be the same again. Ask students to think of other events in world history that are similarly awe-inspiring.

Vocabulary:

The Enlightenment: an eighteenth century movement, symbolized by Voltaire, which emphasized the power of reason over thought processes dominated by emotion or religious fervor. The Enlightenment felt that blind faith should be supplanted by intellectual reason.

Background:

On November 1, 1755, Lisbon, Portugal, a city of 250,000, was destroyed by a large earthquake. Lisbon was not only a major city, but the capital of the Portuguese empire. Although Portugal had been hit by quakes in the past, it had been 200 years since the last major earthquake. Buildings collapsed, burying many in their homes. The quake triggered a tsunami, a wave estimated at fifty feet high, which destroyed the city. Thousands were swept away. Lamps were overturned and fireplaces were exposed causing a blaze that burned for three days. In all more than 60,000 people died in the disaster in Lisbon alone. Thousands more died in other areas. Many people thought that the quake was a result of an angry God responding to Lisbon’s “sinful” ways. However, they were hard put to explain why one city was destroyed while others just as “sinful” were spared.

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Development:

The Lisbon earthquake was one of the galvanizing episodes in European history. Those who sought answers turned to God and philosophers for a response. Refer to Pangloss and his understanding of the disaster. How does Voltaire ridicule Pangloss' philosophy? How does "the best of all possible worlds" come into conflict with the Lisbon earthquake? Explain the behavior of the sailor who drowned the Anabaptist in light of Pangloss' philosophy. Why does Candide not rescue the Anabaptist? *Candide* is filled with disasters beyond the average human's control: earthquakes, diseases, warfare and revolution. Does this indicate that Voltaire believed in predestination? Is there any recourse against the horrors of the modern world? How can the intellectual come to grips with the terrors of the world?

At the end of Chapter 5 there is a short discussion about religion using the earthquake as a philosophical background. Use this discussion as a foundation to explore the connection to the Fall of Man, Original Sin, and the role of free will in the world. Discuss.

Homework:

Discuss how Pangloss can reconcile the effects of the Lisbon earthquake to his philosophy in Activity 4:3

Lesson 4-4: Satire on Travel Books

Day 4, Chapters 7, 8 and 9

Objective:

- To analyze how Voltaire ridicules the travel books of his day.
- To compare *Candide* to *Gulliver's Travels*.
- To discuss Cunegonde's story as an allegory.

Motivation:

Often those who go to foreign countries come back with tales of what they have witnessed abroad. Students may have been to wonderful places that they will not hesitate telling others about. Some will report on the customs of foreign countries with despair, others with a sense of satisfaction that things are done differently elsewhere. (The existence of the Travel Channel on television attests to the desire for people to get away from the ordinary and be engulfed in the unusual).

Vocabulary:

Allegory: a symbolic story, like a fable, that has a meaning based on a moral principle. Dante, symbolizing mankind, is taken by Virgil on a journey to Heaven, Hell and Purgatory in order to have him understand sin and salvation.