

***Candide* – Context**

François-Marie Arouet, later known as Voltaire, was born in 1694 to a middle-class family in Paris. At that time, Louis XIV was king of France, and the vast majority of people in France lived in crushing poverty. When François-Marie came of age, the French aristocracy ruled with an iron fist. At the same time, however, the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment was spreading ideas about the equality and basic rights of man and the importance of reason and scientific objectivity.

François-Marie received a Jesuit education at the college of Louis-le-Grand. Even as a child, his witty intelligence struck and sometimes outraged his teachers, setting the stage for his controversial writing career. François-Marie briefly worked as a secretary for the French Ambassador to Holland, but abandoned the position to devote himself to writing. As a writer, François-Marie soon became legendary throughout France for his sharp epigrams. His quick wit brought him fame, and with fame came a good deal of trouble. As a result of expressing his bitter, satirical wit at the expense of the French Regent, he was exiled from Paris to Sully, but through flattery he soon managed to have his exile rescinded. Shortly after returning to Paris, however, François was imprisoned in the Bastille for satirizing the government. While in prison, François assumed the pen name “Voltaire.” Not long after his release in 1718, Voltaire’s first play, *Oedipe*, was produced in Paris. At this point Voltaire was only twenty-four years old.

Voltaire moved in the circles of the rich and powerful. With his pen he alternately flattered and lambasted those around him, and this talent for biting satire earned him another stint in the Bastille in 1726. He was soon released on the condition that he move to England. Voltaire’s exile in England was far from unpleasant, however, as a crowd of English literati received him with open arms. Within a matter of months, Voltaire became fluent in English, and English philosophy and society continued to fascinate him throughout his life. After three years he was allowed to return to France.

Voltaire’s words attacked the church and the state with equal fervor, and earned him widespread repute. During his lifetime, trenchant writings attacking church or government were often attributed to him whether he had written them or not. A lifelong champion of the poor and downtrodden, he wrote against tyranny and religious persecution with unmatched audacity. Despite his relentless criticism of powerful individuals and institutions, Voltaire became good friends with King Frederick of Prussia. They often quarreled, as Voltaire inevitably quarreled with anyone in power, but the ties of their friendship were lasting.

In the 1750s, Voltaire grew increasingly appalled by the specters of injustice and inexplicable disaster that he saw around him. Many terrible events influenced his composition of *Candide*: a disastrous earthquake in

Lisbon in 1755, about which he wrote a poem; the outbreak of the horrific Seven Years’ War in the German states in 1756; and the unjust execution of the English Admiral John Byng in 1757, against which Voltaire spoke out. In 1759, Voltaire purchased Ferney, an estate near the border between France and Switzerland, so that he might easily flee across the border to escape French authorities. Ferney quickly became a retreat for important European intellectuals.

Published in 1759, *Candide* is considered Voltaire’s signature work, and it is here that he levels his sharpest criticism against nobility, philosophy, the church, and cruelty. Though often considered a representative text of the Enlightenment, the novel actually savagely satires a number of Enlightenment philosophies and demonstrates that the Enlightenment was a far from monolithic movement.

In his later life Voltaire was involved in a wide variety of campaigns for social and political justice. When he returned to Paris at the age of eighty-three the populace hailed him with a hero’s welcome. The strain of the trip was more than his failing health could support, however, and he died in May of 1778. Voltaire was buried in consecrated ground at Romilly-on-Seine, but in 1791 the National Assembly ordered his body entombed alongside René Descartes and other great French thinkers at the Panthéon in Paris. In 1814, religious fundamentalists stole the remains of Voltaire, as well as those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and dumped them in a pit full of quicklime, a “burial” reserved for individuals condemned and hated by the church. Voltaire would have appreciated the irony of this act, as he and Rousseau were bitter rivals during their lifetimes.

***Candide* and the Enlightenment**

“The Enlightenment” is the name for a movement that encompasses a wide variety of ideas and advances in the fields of philosophy, science, and medicine that began in the seventeenth century and peaked in the eighteenth century. Many historians mark the French Revolution as the crowning event of the Enlightenment era. The primary feature of Enlightenment philosophy is a profound faith in the power of reason and rational thought to lead human beings to a better social structure. The political ideology of Enlightenment philosophers is characterized by a spirit of social reform. The champions of the Enlightenment called for rebellion against superstition, fear, and prejudice. They attacked the aristocracy and the church. *Candide* reflects Voltaire’s lifelong aversion to Christian regimes of power and the arrogance of nobility, but it also criticizes certain aspects of the philosophical movement of the Enlightenment. It attacks the school of optimism that contends that rational thought can curtail the evils perpetrated by human beings.

Voltaire strongly opposed certain Enlightenment ideas about social class. Some Enlightenment thinkers promoted the idea of the

enlightened monarch as an alternative to a radical reformation of society. Instead of denying the divine right of kings, the concept of the enlightened monarch relied on the idea that rulers could use their power to ensure the protection of their subjects' rights. The reach of the monarch's power could be extended so that he or she could ensure this protection. Thus, the name of the Enlightenment could be used to legitimize despotism. Moreover, witch-hunts and organized campaigns of religious persecution continued well into the eighteenth century, and Enlightenment philosophy's propagation of reason as a social antidote did not bring a halt to the ravages of superstition and fear. *Candide* illustrates this fact in the figure of the Grand Inquisitor who orders an auto-da-fé to ward off earthquakes, among many other examples. Voltaire's work may be difficult for the present-day student to understand because it alludes to some very specific concerns of his contemporaries. To better understand his wit as well as his relevant context, readers may benefit from consulting supplementary readings such as a history of the Enlightenment, a biography of Voltaire, or the writings of other Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Leibniz.