Candide: Crash Course Literature #405

Crash Course: Literature
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Hello and welcome to Crash Course Literature. The best of all possible Crash Courses. Today we're discussing the best of all possible novels here on the best of all possible sets. I am the best of all possible John Greens, which is saying something because there are a lot of us.

Today, we are discussing *Candide* or *Optimism*, a work of fiction by the Enlightenment philosopher, Francois-Marie Arouet, who went by the name, Voltaire, because, you know, wouldn't you if you could pull off the one-name thing?

I'm feeling incredibly optimistic about today's video, so let's get started!

===== Intro (0:29) - (0:37) =====

So Voltaire was born in Paris in 1694. His dad wanted him to be a lawyer; Voltaire wanted to be a writer and not for the last time, Voltaire won the argument.

Voltaire wrote a lot. Like hundreds and hundreds of books and pamphlets. And okay, pamphlets are very short books, but even so, he wrote essays and poems and dramas, much of it very satirical.

He had a hilarious verse, for instance, accusing the King's regent of incest with his own daughter, which landed Voltaire in the Bastille prison for nearly a year.

Voltaire was big on two beliefs: empiricism and religious tolerance.

Empiricism is the argument that knowledge of the world is discovered through experience and evidence as opposed to philosophical speculation. And religious tolerance is self-explanatory, although it was not self-explanatory in 18th century France.

Voltaire himself subscribed to the religion of Deism, the belief that God is kind of a clock-maker who set the world in motion and then stood back to watch it tick.

So before we get to the philosophical context and themes of *Candide*, which was written in 1759 and published anonymously because, you know, Voltaire didn't want to go back to the Bastille, let's review the story in the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (1:45) =====

So when a book begins, Candide, a naive young man, is living an easy life on his uncle's estate with his cousin Cunégonde, whose name is sort of a dirty joke that we really can't get into. And also his tutor-doctor Pangloss who insists that Candide is enjoying the best of all possible worlds.

When Cunégonde catches her chambermaid scoodlypooping with Pangloss, she decides to kiss Candide and that gets Candide kicked off the estate, forced into military service, beaten, and nearly killed. Best of all possible worlds?

Then Candide escapes the army and is helped by a nice heretic named James. On the street, he sees a poor victim of syphilis with half his nose missing and turns out, it's Pangloss!

Pangloss tells him that the army overran the uncle's estate and killed everyone, then he and Candide and James go to Lisbon where James drowns, and then an earthquake hits.

During the ensuing devastation, Candide and Pangloss are arrested as heretics and Pangloss is hanged but Candide escapes and meets up with Cunégonde who is alive and the mistress to both a rich Jewish merchant and a Catholic Inquisitor.

Candide kills both of these men and then he and Cunégonde escape, but then they separate and Candide makes his way to Buenos Aires and eventually to El Dorado, the fabled city of gold, and then eventually he makes his way to Constantinople where he meets up with Cunégonde again, who unfortunately is now ugly.

In Voltaire's world, there is seemingly nothing worse. And everyone is pretty unhappy by this point in the best of all possible worlds, until Candide and Cunégonde realize that maybe the best thing to do is just farm the land they have. Candide says, "We must go and work in the garden." And then the weeding begins.

Thanks Thought Bubble!

===== End Thought Bubble (3:22) =====

It's a lot of plot. Voltaire -- never short on the plot. Lot's of sex and travel and murder and not murder. There are some reasons for all of this.

So *Candide* is an episodic novel, which is just like it sounds: a form based on one episode after another. It's also in some ways a picaresque novel, which is a collection of adventures undertaken by a wily hero or heroine.

Although at the same time, it's kind of an anti-picaresque novel because, as you may have noticed, *Candide* is not terribly wily and it ends not with an ongoing adventure, but with gardening.

Candide is also a version of a bildungsroman, a term we've used before, which is the novel of a young person's education, although we could debate how much Candide actually learns.

A big part of Voltaire's satire involves adopting all these different forms that he's trying to mock and then turning them inside-out. To that point, *Candide* is also an Enlightenment novel that's deeply critical of a lot of Enlightenment philosophy. It's a parody of the classic romance: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back, but now she's been disemboweled. Also they probably don't live happily ever after.

So how seriously should we take this book? Is it just a series of potty humor parodies, or is it a real intellectual inquiry? Well, I would argue it's both. Just like the Captain Underpants movie.

I mean, the book is definitely funny and extremely rude. When it was first published, it was banned in a bunch of countries because of the way it mocks politics and religion. Even people who didn't want it banned thought that its humor was too dark.

And that's certainly one justifiable way to read the book, but I think that there's more going on here than just jokes about disembowelment.

Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?

===== Open Letter (4:57) =====

An open letter to Disembowelment. Oh but first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Ah! Look at that, it's a guillotine!

Dear Disembowelment,

I've done a fair amount of reading on 18th century methods of French execution and, wow, does it seem very close to the worst of all possible worlds when it comes to criminal justice.

Torture was the rule not the exception, execution was a common punishment for all kinds of different crimes, and you were lucky if you got hanged or beheaded.

Because you could get burned alive or disemboweled or both. By comparison, the guillotine seemed humane! In fact, it was designed to be humane!

In short, Disembowelment, when it comes to you, I'm with Voltaire. I just don't think you have any role to play in the best of all possible worlds.

Worst wishes, John Green.

===== End Open Letter (5:41) =====

Okay, so at the heart of all this rudeness, there is a big question. How do we understand evil in the world and what are we going to do about it?

Difficult questions and also among the oldest and most important for religion and for literature. And even though Voltaire was very smart and deeply opinionated, he doesn't pretend to have an answer, but he does want to negate what he sees as bad answers.

Candide is a direct response to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's philosophical optimism, a strand of philosophy arguing that, since God is good, everything must be for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds.

And this was a very common philosophical understanding at the time, even though, you know, it seems a little bit ludicrous to us. I mean, the great thing about philosophical optimism is that it solved the problem of what scholars of religious traditions call theodicy, the problem of evil in a world that is ostensibly overseen by an all-powerful and all-knowing God.

Pangloss's teachings are straight up Leibniz. Pangloss's name, by the way, literally means "all talk." This optimistic determinism was a big problem for Voltaire, so he made it a big problem for Candide.

Quick pause for a bit of history!

So in 1755, there was an enormous earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, followed by a tsunami, followed by a fire, and the disasters killed an estimated 60,000 people, nearly a third of the city.

Voltaire, of course, used this in *Candide.* He also wrote about it in a poem called *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* because Voltaire wasn't the best at titles. He subtitled the poem, "An Inquiry Into the Axiom, 'All is Well.'"

And it's clear that for Voltaire this earthquake was great evidence that Leibniz's theory was deeply flawed. The poem reads, "'All is well,' you say, 'And all is necessary.'"

What? Do you think this universe would be worse without the pit that swallowed Lisbon? And in the novel, Candide experiences similar disillusionment, part of it in Lisbon.

But good old Pangloss, half dead from syphilis, is still arguing that his syphilis is part of this "best of all possible worlds." Christopher Columbus, after all, brought syphilis, a New World disease, back to Europe and Pangloss argues that if Columbus hadn't gone to the New World and caught this disease which poisons the source of generations, we wouldn't have chocolate, a New World food.

Now, I like chocolate. I also like lots of other New World foods like tomatoes and corn and peppers and so on, but I don't think any of that justifies the horrible parts of the Columbian Exchange, and syphilis is just one of many.

Voltaire proves this point that we don't seem to be living in the best of all possible worlds over and over in the novel, arguably too often. He probably makes it most explicit when one of the novel's few really good characters, James, drowns saving a terrible person.

And yet I don't think Voltaire's arguing for mere pessimism. Like the old woman, a companion of Cunégonde's, tells a really harrowing life story which climaxes with one of her buttocks being cut off, because of course it does, but she ends it, "I have wanted to kill myself 100 times, but somehow I am still in love with life."

Now she goes on to call this desire to live a ridiculous weakness and compares loving life to fondling a snake that devours us, but still, the novel acknowledges and embraces that humans love life.

And it also acknowledges that there is plenty to love about life! Like candied fruit and pistachio nuts, just don't get carried away thinking that you're in a full-on benevolent universe or anything.

Tangentially related, Voltaire did not believe, like the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau did, that the real source of problems is with modern society.

We know this because when Candide escapes to the New World, things are still quite non-ideal, what with all the cannibalism and syphilis. And it's worth mentioning that Voltaire is anything but enlightened when it comes to his imagining of the New World.

Voltaire's racism and misogyny might reflect his times, but his pseudo-scientific justifications for them are worth noting in our times.

So the final jab at the "best of all possible worlds" thing comes late in the novel when Voltaire takes us to El Dorado, the famed city of gold where the streets are lined with jewels, no one is hungry, no one is poor, no one is oppressed, the king is nice to everyone, the enlightened citizens just love philosophy and science, and guess what? It's extremely boring. Candide cannot wait to leave.

This novel is so dystopian that even the utopia sucks.

At the end of the book, Candide is miraculously reunited with all of his friends and together they buy a little farm, but again, they're very bored. They go visit a famous wise man in the hopes that he can explain the meaning of life to them, but he slams the door in their faces.

And then, on the way back, they meet a farmer who seems happy enough and his daughters make everyone sherbet drinks and then drinking their sherbet, Candide realizes he should go back to his farm and try to make it prosper and maybe not worry so much about philosophy!

And then comes the famous last line, "We should go and work in our garden." Or possibly, depending on your translation, "Let us go and cultivate our garden."

It's the "our garden" that's the important part. Like we should stop worrying about everyone else's garden. And I guess that seems sensible enough. A lot of people would probably feel better if, instead of worrying themselves sick about the problem of evil in

their lives and other people's live they just, like, grew some tomatoes and worked on embroidery.

But as a conclusion to this particular novel, it does seem weirdly conservative. I mean, the ending is a return to a garden. What's more Biblical than that?

And there's also the selfishness of the choice. "Our garden." I mean, there's a huge earthquake in the novel, but most of the suffering is inflicted not by a higher power but by humans upon one another.

These humans rape and kill and disembowel each other. And growing tomatoes may be a way of personally opting out of those social problems, but I'm not convinced it does much to fix them.

I guess Voltaire thinks those problems are unfixable and that people will be evil no matter what, but should we succumb to that pessimism or should we try to work to change and improve this not yet best of all possible worlds.

Is it enough to tend to your own garden or do we have a responsibility to help our neighbors tend their gardens as well?

I don't know! But I do think that we should at least share our vegetables. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

===== Credits (11:40) =====

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