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Candide: Or Optimism

Voltaire · *1759 · English translation attributed to Tobias Smollett (1759)*

A gentle youth is taught that this is the best of all possible worlds, then is kicked out of a Westphalian castle into wars, earthquakes, inquisitions, and frauds. Voltaire's tale moves at a run: every new disaster tests Pangloss's optimism and Candide's good heart. The last wisdom is not a system. It is a small garden, and work without disputing.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If this is the best of possible worlds, what then are the others—and what should a good man do when systems of optimism cannot justify the suffering he has seen?

"If this is the best of possible worlds, what then are the others?"
Candide · After the Lisbon earthquake (Chapter 6 in this edition's run of the tale)

Candide keeps the question that Pangloss will not ask. After wars, the auto-da-fé, El Dorado, and a string of reunions more battered than joyful, he meets a farmer who works his twenty acres and is free of three great evils—weariness, vice, and want. Candide's conclusion is to cultivate their garden. Martin adds: let us work without disputing; it is the only way to render life tolerable.

KEY CHARACTERS

Candide
The good-hearted pupil of optimism, who learns to work instead of to explain everything

Pangloss
The tutor of metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology, who will not give up his system

Cunegonde
The baron's daughter, Candide's love, much altered by the world

Cacambo
The practical servant, often wiser than the philosophers

Martin
The Manichaean companion, whose last counsel is work without disputing

The old woman
A witness of still more misfortunes, who keeps travelling all the same

The old Turk
The gardener whose twenty acres teach the end of the book

A QUESTION AT LISBON, AND A GARDEN AT THE END

> *"If this is the best of possible worlds, what then are the others?"*
> **Candide** · Lisbon

> *"Let us work," said Martin, "without disputing; it is the only way to render life tolerable."*
> **Martin** · Final chapter

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Best of Worlds, at Thunder-ten-Tronckh
THE WESTPHALIAN OPENING
A tutor's system, a kiss, and a kick.

- Candide grows up in the castle of the Baron of Thunder-ten-Tronckh, taught by Pangloss that all is for the best
- He falls in love with Cunegonde and is driven out
- Pressed into a Bulgarian (Prussian) army, he sees the horrors of a "heroic" war
- He escapes and is soon reunited with a ruined Pangloss, who still explains every misery as necessary

02
Lisbon
THE EARTHQUAKE AND THE AUTO-DA-FÉ
A disaster that will not fit the system.

- They reach Lisbon in time for the great earthquake
- Candide, terrified, asks: if this is the best of possible worlds, what then are the others?
- A human "remedy," the auto-da-fé, is offered; Pangloss is hanged (or seems to be), and Candide is whipped
- Cunegonde is found again, living as a prize of two powerful men; there is a flight, and a death Candide did not mean to have on his hands

> *"If this is the best of possible worlds, what then are the others?"*
> **Candide** · Lisbon

03
The New World and El Dorado
THE ATLANTIC CROSSING AND ELDORADO
A paradise that cannot be a home, and a fortune that will not last.

- Candide and Cacambo come to the New World, with more betrayals and a Jesuit's household that is also a family quarrel
- They find El Dorado, a country of peace, gold, and reasonable worship, without prisons or priests of persecution
- Candide leaves it, with sheep laden with treasure, to recover Cunegonde
- The treasure is mostly stolen or swindled away on the road back

04
Reunions, and a Dervish
THE RETURN TOWARD THE PROPONTIS
The lost are found, less beautiful and no happier; a philosopher is shut out.

- Cunegonde, the old woman, Pangloss, the Baron, and others reappear, scarred, enslaved, or absurdly preserved
- Candide ransoms and gathers them; Cunegonde has grown ugly, and he will still marry her
- In Constantinople they ask a dervish the cause of evil; he tells them to hold their tongues
- A farmer nearby has no theory, and a garden

05
Cultivate Our Garden
THE LAST CHAPTER
Work, not a system, is the last word.

- The old Turk and his children cultivate twenty acres; their labour preserves them from weariness, vice, and want
- Candide says he knows also that they must cultivate their garden
- Martin says, let us work without disputing; it is the only way to render life tolerable
- Pangloss goes on explaining that the chain of events was all for the best; Candide answers, all that is very well, but let us cultivate our garden

> *"I know also," said Candide, "that we must cultivate our garden."*
> **Candide** · Final chapter

Suffering and Theodicy · False Systems · Work · Mercy · Disillusion · A Modest Peace

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is Project Gutenberg #19942, a Modern Library edition (1918) with an introduction by Philip Littell and transcriber's notes. The catalogue attributes the English to Tobias Smollett (1759). Quotes here are from the tale itself, not from the introduction.
2. Candide's Lisbon question—"If this is the best of possible worlds, what then are the others?"—is the book's turning of Pangloss's phrase.
3. The last chapter has both counsels: Candide's "we must cultivate our garden," and Martin's "Let us work without disputing." Pangloss is still talking at the end; Candide chooses the garden anyway.
4. El Dorado is not mocked. It is a measure of what a peaceful country might be, and Candide leaves it for love and for a hope that costs him.
5. The tale is a satire of easy optimism, not of hope or of work. The garden is a small, serious ending.

Quotations are verbatim from the English translation attributed to Tobias Smollett (1759), Project Gutenberg #19942, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/candide/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.