

## A REFRESHED READING OF VOLTAIRE'S *CANDIDE*





*Candide* has been on the AP French literature list for quite some time. It is widely read on the French IV or AP level. Many of us have been teaching this work for many years. This paper presents ideas and activities I have found in my perpetual effort to keep the experience of reading *Candide* fresh and interesting.

From a variety of English language publications—the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Smithsonian Magazine* among others—I collect articles which use the term “panglossian” or refer to Dr. Pangloss and assume the reader knows what that signifies. I read these to the class to show them that *Candide* is so unquestionably part of the canon and has been such an influential work that “Pangloss” has become an English word signifying blind optimism. I also have some ads that refer to “the best of all possible worlds.” I point out that the person who won the national spelling bee last year won by spelling the word “pocourant”—now an English word signifying nonchalance, indifference. I point out this material as we begin reading *Candide* with the intent of showing them that characters and ideas in *Candide* are so well known that they have entered our language as clichés and to point out that anyone who has not read *Candide* will not fully understand the word or the references. My students are always impressed and their interest piqued when they become aware of how important *Candide* must be. If one is alert and reads material pitched to an educated audience, one will find these references to *Candide* oneself.

On least four occasions while reading *Candide*, I show excerpts from Leonard Bernstein’s opera *Candide* that coincide with the chapter read. (It can be found on-line.) I recommend the scene in the opera where Candide is expelled from the earthly paradise of Tonder-ten-tronck and starts off on his journey. The particular aria in this scene alternates between a major and minor key, reflecting the ups and downs of Candide’s journey. The opera is in English, of course. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the book has been adapted to a different medium. The opera is quite long and deviates in important ways from the story, so I am selective in the excerpts I show.

After reading Chapter 4, the students should begin to get a sense of the structure of the story—alternating fortunate and unfortunate experiences. To help them realize how the story is structured, I ask them to

select which of the following designs best represents the story line and to justify their response.

- a.  b. 
- c.  d. 

e. autre

This leads to a good discussion where the students will recap the story and use good vocabulary. I accept all answers as long as they are well justified although in the end, I help them see that choice C is the most appropriate.

After Chapter 6, I divide the class into news teams—CNN, BBC, TV5, RFI, Chaîne Europe—and assign each a different event to “cover.” There is an anchorperson, a reporter, and some witnesses. They can choose to do their report on video or live. I have five different news events, one for each team. They are the war between the Bulgars and the Abares, the events befalling the family of the Baron and Tonder-ten-tronck. the *nauffrage*, the *tremblement de terre* and the *auto-da-fe*. The final team has a program like *Face the Nation* where a moderator interviews three guests—l’orateur, Jacques l’antibaptiste, and Pangloss—in Holland, on their views of religion, society, and man today. (This is the most challenging topic). They are graded on the richness of their vocabulary, a thorough presentation of the events, ease of speaking, and a few bonus points for creativity. This activity provides a break from the straightforward class discussion and is an equally effective way to test how closely they have read the text. In addition it helps develop their speaking skills.

In Chapter 10, there is the contest between Cunegonde and *la vieille* as to who has suffered most in life. Taking as the point of departure the quote, “Hélas! Vous n’avez pas éprouvé des infortunes telles que les miennes,” I give the students four similar phrases to complete: (1) Vous n’avez jamais éprouvé du bonheur tel que le mien. Ha! Écoute...; (2) Vous n’avez jamais éprouvé des malheurs tels que les miens! Ha! Écoute...; (3) Vous n’avez jamais éprouvé des fardeaux tels que les miens. Ha! Écoute...; and (4) Vous n’avez jamais éprouvé des aventures telles que les miennes! Ha! Écoute...The students must finish the quotes and, in a contest with their

classmates, like that between *la vieille* and Cunegonde, the class decides who has had the most happiness, misfortune, the most burdens, the most adventures. It is quite amusing. Students pick the winner. This could be a written or oral activity.

After reading the two El Dorado chapters, I have them imagine their own idea of utopia. I read them mine as a model. I say things like, “Dans mon utopie, toutes les classes sont aussi charmantes que celle-ci; ce n’est pas un catastrophe si deux femmes portent la même robe à une soirée;” etc. to make it a listening comprehension activity, and hopefully they will grasp the humor. There are ways to expand on this. Have the students create a visual to represent their ideas. Have classmates guess which visual belongs to which student.

We read *Candide* in French IV and spend a whole semester on it. Because it represents an important chunk of work, the final evaluation is comprehensive. It includes three required assignments and one optional one. The students still write the traditional essay, choosing from a list of topics, but they must also write an in-class essay. I do this to insure I am getting a sample of their own work with no outside assistance (Internet, older students) For the in-class essay, I give them the first paragraph of Chapter 30 and ask them to discuss “le fond et la forme.” This paragraph is particularly rich in material to talk about. The third required evaluation takes place in the language lab. Students have a list of characters from the book and, upon hearing a quote from the book, they have to identify who said it. This listening comprehension test is a way to see how much of the reading they did in French. If they did most of the reading in English, they will fail this test miserably. I let them know this on day one to encourage them to read the work in French as much as possible, no matter how stressed and pressed they get for time. As an optional extra-credit activity, they are invited to create “un jeu de société” based on the story or to write a TV-type quiz show. I have received some wonderful work that I can use with other classes.

There are good reasons why *Candide* remains on the AP reading list, but because it is such a classic, our handling of it needs refreshing from time to time. I offer these ideas in the hope that they may be useful and may provoke others’ creative juices.

Ann Miller  
The Pembroke Hill School (MO)