

CANDIDE

Voltaire

Analysis by Carlo Tirinanzi De Medici

Philosophical Novel

In Voltaire's philosophical novel *Candide* (1759), the 1755 Lisbon earthquake represents a crucial turning point in the protagonist's philosophical education. Voltaire turns the earthquake into an experimental laboratory for testing philosophical optimism against empirical reality, revealing the inadequacy of both metaphysical optimism and paralysing pessimism as responses to human suffering.

Year of Publication	1759
Publication Place	Geneva
Editor	Gabriel Cramer
Entity	Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 (Great Lisbon Earthquake)

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 (Great Lisbon Earthquake)

REAL EVENT

Time	November 1, 1755, 9:40 AM
Location	Lisbon Portugal
Coordinates	37.176168, -10.107297
Impacted Areas	Lisbon, Algarve, whole Portugal, Spain, Morocco, France, Switzerland
Seismic Fault	Azores-Gibraltar Transform Fault
Magnitude	8.5-9.0 Richter
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston

Anthropization Level

Cities

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Towns

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Agriculture Areas

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Villages

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Sea Coast

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Tsunami

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Atmospheric Changes

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Destruction Of Plants

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Destruction Of Animal Species

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Soil Changes

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Social Impacts

Deaths

Death toll estimates vary widely. Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004) estimate 20,000 deaths overall. Chester (2008) notes approximately 7% mortality rate in Lisbon (10,000 out of 150,000 population).

Injuries

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Goods/Commodities

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Dwellings

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Facilities

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Social Disruption

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Trauma

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Poverty

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Diseases

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Depopulation

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Relocation

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Recovery

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1755
Location	Portugal
Impacted Areas	Lisbon
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
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Social Impacts	Deaths	Injuries	Destruction Of Dwellings	Destruction Of Public Buildings	Trauma
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INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Pangloss			
Gender	Male			
Nationality	French			
Reactions	Rationality	Fatalism	Denial	Faith In Risk Prediction Systems

Name	Candide		
Gender	Male		
Reactions	Fear	Terror	Distress

Name	The Dutch Sailor		
Gender	Male		
Nationality	Dutch		
Reactions	Recklessness	Disregard	Carelessness

Reactions

Name	Pangloss			
Gender	Male			
Reactions	Rationality	Self-Absorption	Fatalism	Trust

Name	Candide
Gender	Male

Reactions

Fear

Helplessness

Loss Of Consciousness

Solidarity

Cooperation

Distress

Name

The Dutch Sailor

Reactions

Self-Absorption

Distrust

Euphoria

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name

The population

Reactions

Distress

Solidarity

Empathy

Name

Christian Priests

Reactions

Intervention

Prayer

Naivety

Group Attitudes

Name

Aristocrats

Reactions

Superstition

Name

Christian Priests

Reactions

Superstition

Denial

Prayer

Name

The population

Reactions

Terror

Prayer

Distress

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords

Earth Trembling

Earth Quake

Ruins

Debris

Dreadful Dwelling

Dreadful Crash

Collapse

Metaphors

whirlwinds of flames and ashes

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Apocalypse

Cruel Nature

The Downfall Of Society

Hubris

Evil

Syntax	Parataxis, Complex Verbal Phrases
Punctuation	Multiple Exl
Morphology	Preference For Verbs Adverbs

1. Introduction

In Voltaire's *Candide ou l'Optimisme* (*Candide: Or, Optimism*), a philosophical novel published by Gabriel Cramer in Geneva in 1759, the Lisbon earthquake episode (Chapters V-VI) represents a crucial turning point in the protagonist's philosophical education.

The work follows young Candide's expulsion from Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh's castle and his subsequent journey through a world of catastrophes that systematically demolish his tutor Pangloss's Leibnizian optimism. During their wanderings, Pangloss and Candide encounters war, shipwreck, earthquake, auto-da-fé, murder, rape, slavery, and disease—a series of disasters that Grobe characterizes as illustrating "the principle of discontinuity at every level of man's activity" (334).

The novel is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator, who usually prefers to stick to visible events, rarely giving us insights of the characters' feelings or internal thoughts.

The earthquake of November 1, 1755, which killed approximately 10,000 people in Lisbon alone—about 7% of the city's population of 150,000 (Chester 90), with overall death toll estimates of 20,000 (Martínez Solares and López Arroyo 275)—becomes Voltaire's experimental laboratory for testing philosophical optimism against empirical reality. As Adorno observed, "the earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz" (361).

The episode unfolds in five narrative sequences: the shipwreck killing the virtuous Anabaptist Jacques while Pangloss demonstrates "a priori" that the bay existed for his drowning; the earthquake's eruption as they reach Lisbon; Candide trapped under rubble requesting concrete aid but receiving geological theories; survivors' solidarity the next day, disrupted by theological debate leading to arrest; and the auto-da-fé in Chapter VI, followed by another tremor.

Four distinct responses to disaster emerge. Pangloss functions as what Henry calls "an intellectual marionette wound up with Leibnitzian terminology that he spouts forth automatically without recourse to the reality of any given situation" (168). The Inquisition institutionalizes superstition through the auto-da-fé as an "infallible secret" to prevent further earthquakes. The sailor sees only opportunity—"Il y aura quelque chose à gagner ici" 'There'll be something to pick up here' (Chapter V, 38). Against these failures, the population demonstrates pragmatic solidarity through concrete action. As Starobinski notes, "Facts take charge of Candide's education" (197), while Iotti identifies the work's purpose as "demolishing an optimistic attitude that, between naivety and hypocrisy, proves functional to the acceptance of the existing order" (65).

2. Style: Discontinuity and Irony

The earthquake episode exemplifies Candide's distinctive narrative style, what Seguin identifies as Voltaire's "play on the styles of his time" (10)—a play on contemporary styles rather than a single unified manner. This technique highlights what Grobe identifies as "the principle of discontinuity at every level of man's activity" (335), revealed through Voltaire's narrative technique. This discontinuity appears most strikingly in the temporal shifts Bonnard (35) documents: from the past definite "ils marchèrent vers Lisbonne" 'they set out for Lisbon' to the sudden present "A peine ont-ils mis le pied dans la ville [...] qu'ils sentent la terre trembler" 'Scarcely had they set foot in the town [...] when they felt the earth quake underfoot' (37-38, my trans.).

Grobe argues that "at the intrusion of the present tense the mind is shaken from its passivity by the abrupt change in temporal register" (336), noting how "Voltaire effects his aspectual transformation of the historical present by causing its textual appearances to coincide with the eruption of evil or contingency" (336). Thus "the very textual appearance of the tense serves as a stylistic rejection of Pangloss's concept of total world order" (337).

The earthquake description—"la mer s'élève en bouillonnant dans le port [...] les maisons s'écroulent, les toits sont renversés" 'the sea is lashed to a froth, bursts into the port [...] houses crumble, roofs come crushing down on foundations' (38, my transl.)—becomes what Grobe calls a "catalogue of verbs of destruction, liberated of the aspectual objectivity of the past definite and thrust into the temporal immediacy of the historical present" (338).

Voltaire's ironic sobriety reinforces this discontinuous aesthetic with an "unpicturesque" and "choppy" (Bonnard, 97) style: predominantly nouns (49%) and verbs (39.4%) with minimal adjectives (5.8%), almost without subordinate clauses. The oxymoron "bel auto-da-fé" 'nice auto-da-fe' (44) condenses Voltaire's ironic method. As Gilot observes, "Candide's text is a comic strip. The characters' speeches are speech bubbles" (97)—comic-esque is also the rapidity of narrative pace, and both deflate philosophical pretensions. This stylistic discontinuity directly correlates to the demolition of metaphysics at the core of the novel.

2. Four Responses to the Disaster

2.1 Pangloss: The Caricature of Philosophical Reason

Pangloss, as "spokesperson" of Leibniz (Duchesneau 145), embodies "an intellectual marionette wound up with Leibnitzian terminology that he spouts forth automatically without recourse to the reality of any given situation" (Henry 168). Mason regards him as "a hollow character", "doomed obstinately to plough the same furrow over and over until he dies" (80). His response to Jacques's drowning—"la rade de Lisbonne avait été formée exprès pour que cet anabaptiste s'y noyât" 'the bay of Lisbon had been formed expressly for this Anabaptist to drown in, Chapter V' (36, my trans.) – reveals what Iotti identifies as the character's tendency to "reverse the relationships between means and ends, causes and effects" (42).

This reversal becomes almost lethal during the earthquake when Candide, trapped under rubble, pleads some comfort from his master – "Hélas! procure-moi un peu de vin et d'huile; je me meurs" 'For pity's sake bring me a little wine and oil; I'm dying' – , while Pangloss only speculates about the cause of the earthquake being "une traînée de soufre sous terre depuis Lima jusqu'à Lisbonne" 'a vein of sulphur under the earth's surface reaching from Lima to Lisbon' (40, my trans.).

After Candide loses consciousness, Pangloss brings only water, "a poor substitute worthy of that impractical philosopher" (Mason, 66). As Gilot observes, Pangloss's discourse has "the only small defect" that "all this beautiful speech has not the slightest grip on reality" (94).

His tautological consolation after the earthquake – "car il est impossible que les choses ne soient pas où elles sont; car tout est bien" 'since it is unthinkable that things should not be where they are, since everything is well' (38, my trans.) – is an example of those "general formulations that, Locke says, even when true do not really advance our knowledge of things" (Iotti, 13).

2.2 The Auto-da-fé: The Superstitious Response

The University of Coimbra's decision that "le spectacle de quelques personnes brûlées à petit feu, en grande cérémonie, est un secret infailible pour empêcher la terre de trembler" 'the spectacle of several persons being roasted over a slow fire with full ceremonial rites is an infallible specific against earthquakes' (42-43, my trans.) represents institutional and religious superstition. The victims are a Jew, a person who breaks the laws about marriage, and Pangloss and Candide themselves, and their condemnation spurs only from the blind application of orthodoxy.

The ceremony combines aesthetic beauty with moral horror (Candide is flogged "en cadence" 'in cadence to the music', 46, my trans.), hinting at the futility of both, as certifies the new earthquake,

which immediately follows the executions. The second tremor demonstrates that earthquakes follow physical laws indifferent to religious ceremonies.

2.3 The Sailor: Cynical Opportunism

The sailor represents pure predatory cynicism: "Il y aura quelque chose à gagner ici" 'There'll be something to pick up here' (37, my trans.), he says "en sifflant et en jurant" 'whistling through his teeth, and with an oath' (38, my trans.). His actions form a crescendo of depravity: the sailor

[...] court incontinent au milieu des débris, affronte la mort pour trouver de l'argent, en trouve, s'en empare, s'enivre, et, ayant cuvé son vin, achète les faveurs de la première fille de bonne volonté qu'il rencontre sur les ruines des maisons détruites. (38-39)

runs immediately through the debris, fights the death to find some money, he finds it, lays violent hands on it, gets drunk, and, having slept off his wine, buys the favors of the first streetwalker he can find amid the ruins of smashed houses. (my trans.)

His response to Pangloss's moral objection – "je suis matelot et né à Batavia; j'ai marché quatre fois sur le Crucifix dans quatre voyages au Japon" 'I'm a sailor, born in Batavia; I've been four times to Japan and stamped four times on the crucifix' (38) – underlines his readiness to abandon principles for profit. The sailor's survival while the virtuous Jacques drowns suggests an amoral universe where, as Bonnard notes, the distribution of suffering and survival follows no moral logic (33).

2.4 The Common People: Human Solidarity and experience against the philosophical systems

Against these three failed responses, Voltaire places the unnamed survivors whose solidarity manifests through action: "Le lendemain, ayant trouvé quelques provisions de bouche en se glissant à travers des décombres, ils réparèrent un peu leurs forces. Ensuite ils travaillèrent comme les autres à soulager les habitants échappés à la mort" 'Next day, as they wandered amid the ruins, they found a little food which restored some of their strength. Then they fell to work like the others, bringing relief to those of the inhabitants who had escaped death' (41, my trans.).

The dinner common people offers to Candide and Pangloss, defined as "un aussi bon dîner qu'on le pouvait" 'a dinner as good as was possible' (41, my trans.), captures a resilient pragmatism that acknowledges limitation while affirming life.

As Sareil observes, Voltaire "decides to expose to broad daylight the ridiculousness of metaphysical systems, when they are taken out of the obscurity of small chapels and insider jargon, to confront them with everyday experience" (347). The survivors' actions– finding provisions, restoring strength, helping others – constitute a pragmatic response which does not concentrate on causes (as Pangloss or the decision to put up an auto da fé), but deals with consequences in a productive manner (opposed to the Dutch sailor's actions).

3. The earthquake as a challenge to optimism and theodicy

The earthquake marks a decisive moment in Candide's philosophical education. His question after the auto-da-fé – "Si c'est ici le meilleur des mondes possibles, que sont donc les autres?" 'If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?' (46-47, my trans.) – represents the first irreparable crack in the optimistic system taught by Pangloss. The episode where Candide begs for concrete aid while Pangloss loses himself in a speculation highlights the indifference of abstract philosophy toward human suffering. Mason emphasizes how Pangloss brings only water after Candide loses consciousness, "a poor substitute worthy of that impractical philosopher" (66).

The episode functions as an empirical test of Leibnizian theodicy. The random distribution of survival and death – virtuous Jacques drowns, the corrupt sailor prospers – refutes any claim to providential justice. The failure of the three institutional responses to disaster demonstrates the inadequacy of every interpretive system when confronted with concrete catastrophe. After the earthquake Voltaire accepts that "the dichotomy between subjects and reality, between progress and existence is accepted" (Brunetti, 201): the gap between philosophical systems and empirical reality becomes unbridgeable.

Voltaire's rejection of the "chain of beings" and "laws of necessity" marks the definitive abandonment of consolatory metaphysics. Rousseau, in a letter of June 12, 1759, recognizes that *Candide* constitutes the definitive response to his attempt to defend Providence: "It is the book [...] the response that he [Voltaire] seems to have intended for me" (Rousseau, *Correspondance* VII. 140). The earthquake episode demonstrates that neither metaphysical optimism nor paralyzing pessimism offers adequate responses to human suffering. The final lesson is not theoretical but practical: faced with cosmic indifference and the inadequacy of philosophical systems, only limited but concrete human action remains, thus anticipating the novel's conclusion that privileges pragmatic work ("il faut cultiver notre jardin", 'one must cultivate his garden') over abstract speculation.

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