

Invitation to World Literature: Candide Video Transcript

Ramis:

It's just one tragedy after another, one injustice after another, one abominable cruelty after another with jokes.

Cusset:

It's like an American modern movie. It's action. It's war. It's killing.

Chenoweth:

Death, disease, heartbreak, famine

LeClerc:

If you want to read a masterpiece that's brief, funny, serious at the same time, and drives home some very, very important points, with a famous tagline at the end, read Candide.

GRAPHIC: CANDIDE

Ramis:

I remember seeing Candide in my family's bookshelf when I was about thirteen years old. And the first thing I think I remember, was the story about the pirates attacking the ship and the ladies hiding their jewelry in their pudenda as we say.

Wood:

I first read Candide in high school, it was assigned reading, and I don't remember looking forward to it, but certainly once I'd got into it, I really connected with it. Just the story of this poor, blundering, naive, guy staggering across the world of disasters is something I really connected with for some reason.

Ware:

I can credit both of my high school English teachers with changing my life. They both asked me to read books, which did change my life. This changed my life too because it was the first sophisticated satire that I was introduced to.

Chenoweth:

The very first time I remember hearing Candide, I was in college. I went to Oklahoma City University and my vocal professor, my mentor Florence (inaudible) said there is a role that you're born to play, it's called Cunegonde in Candide. And I remember thinking, stepped in what?

LeClerc:

This is an amazing story about this book because it's lasted as a living kind of text, for a quarter of a millennium. It's been in print continuously since 1759. In every language imaginable, including Esperanto. The irony in all of this as far as Voltaire is concerned is that he was if not the most prolific, certainly one of the most prolific authors ever. This is

a man that wrote hundreds of thousands of pages, and he never ever would have guessed that of all the thousands of titles that he wrote, that what would remain relevant to readers, 250 years after it's publication, was this one. But it has.

GRAPHIC: A NAÏVE GUY

Wood:

Candide is a guy, he's a naïve guy; he's living in a farm in Europe, things are going pretty good and he gets kicked out and he gets drafted into the army and ends up, I mean do you want a blow by blow?

Ramis:

Candide's living in a provincial part of Germany and thinks it's the best of all possible worlds because that's what his teacher has told him. And what could be more beautiful than the castle he lives in and...who could be more excellent than the people around him.

GRAPHIC: ...AND HIS TUTOR

Dobie:

Pangloss is Candide's tutor in the Baron's castle in Westphalia. And he teaches a form of philosophy that sometimes boils down to the idea of optimism. There is a benevolent God and that means that because there is a benevolent God all is for the best. And we live in the best of all possible worlds.

Tyler:

Candide he, he idolizes Pangloss and Pangloss is such a dummy. And he's such a blind idiotic dunderhead.

Damrosch:

Pangloss is convinced this is best of all possible worlds. They can explain anything this way. For example the spread of syphilis, which comes from Columbus' shipmates through Jesuits and monks down to a serving girl who has given him syphilis. He describes this to Candide who describes in horror,

(Reading): "Oh, Pangloss, cried Candide. What a strange genealogy is this. Surely the devil is its source. Not in the least, replied that great man. It is the indispensable feature of the best of all possible worlds, a necessary ingredient for if Columbus on an island off the Americas had not contracted this disease which poisons the source of all procreation and often even prevents procreation, contrary to the (inaudible) of nature's great law, we would not have chocolate!"

GRAPHIC: A PHILOSOPHICAL TALE

LeClerc:

Candide is a philosophical tale. More specifically Candide is a deliberate refutation of the notion of optimism. If this is the perfect world, if it's the best of all possible worlds, then whatever happens to me, is kind of okay because it fits into a broad scheme of things, that I can't understand but I just have to say, alright, this is my destiny it's for the best. And this whole notion of everything being for the best, was really a very, very strong seductive, powerful, point of view in Europe, in the 18th century.

Spivak:

Leibniz is the German philosopher who produces this theory, the theory of the world being organized around very simple principles. This was it, the best of all possible worlds.

Wood:

Voltaire was outraged by that attitude, by the passiveness of optimism. By the sense that if everything is for the best, then you can't improve things.

GRAHPIC: LISBON 1755

Dobie:

An important point of origin for Candide was the Lisbon earthquake, of 1755. It was a terrible cataclysm. We think now that maybe 60,000 people were killed. The entire city was decimated. And the Lisbon earthquake generated a lot of responses of a theological nature. Some writers tried to claim that Catholics were being punished or that Jesuits were being punished, and that it was a sign of divine intervention against a certain group.

Wood:

There's a real like call to action in Candide and a kind of, demand that people acknowledge the problems in front of them. You look at an event like that, on that scale, it's hard to say those people deserved it.

GRAPHIC: HELLO, REAL WORLD

LeClerc:

Well Candide like Voltaire is a bastard, illegitimate. And he falls in love with, the daughter of the house, the daughter of the Baron and the Baroness. And her name is Cunegonde.

Chenoweth:

We start out we see these two innocent kids. And as in life, they go out into the world and they get bumped and bruised and broken and hurt.

Ramis:

Candide is attached to certain things. He's really strongly attached to the...this idealized love, romantic love of this woman. He's not even in love with the woman, really,

because what, does he really know about her? He just thinks she's the most perfect thing because in fact she's the only woman he's seen to that point.

LeClerc:

He makes out with her, and then a disaster ensues because they're behind a screen, they're caught, and the Baron, Cunegonde's father kicks Candide out of the house, literally, with a kick in the backside.

Ramis:

He makes a single moral lapse and he's expelled into the real world where the atrocities begin like immediately.

Dobie:

Candide has been forcibly recruited to the Bulgars in other words the Prussian Army. And went on to participate in a battle between the Bulgars and the (Avars), and Voltaire is giving us a graphic description of the battle and it's aftermath.

(Reading): "Here old men riddled with wounds or lead shot looked on as their wives lay dying. Their throats cut clutching their children to their blood stained breasts. Over there lay young girls in their last agonies, disemboweled after having satisfied the natural urges of various heroes. Others still half burned to death, cried out for someone to come and finish them off. Brains were scattered over the ground amidst severed arms and legs."

Spivak:

It's like Pulp Fiction. You know, that film?

Damrosch:

Voltaire uses violence in two very different ways at once. Partly it achieves sort of a slapstick effect sort of like the three stooges, just one more thing after another. It's this piling on of too much, too much, too much, too much violence, too much absurdity but it's also, it's deeply real. It really gets you at the heart. Even as you're laughing you feel the pain that's going on through the world.

Cusset:

(Reading): "Ah, what would Maitre Pangloss say now if he could see how men live in a state of nature. All is for the best, no doubt. But I must say it is a cruel thing to have lost Mademoiselle Cunegonde and be roasted on a spit by oreillon." So it is this constant reference of Pangloss that is particular to Voltaire's humor in the story.

Ramis:

Satire is a complicated response to...to the hypocrisy and evil we see around us because it recognizes it, but it also disarms us by making us laugh.

Chenoweth:

If Voltaire had written this as a straight work, without any sense of humor or any sense of irony, I think we would all slit our wrists and be done with it.

Damrosch:

One of the ways Voltaire attacks our ideas of an orderly universe is to disrupt the order of his own narrative. People keep dying and then they come back to life in some kind of bizarre, parody of Christian resurrection which is also a parody of the idea that a story should have a beginning, middle and an end.

Ramis:

Every time we think we've left some character dead or dismembered in some form or hanged or burned to death, they turn up again, battered and bruised but still in his life.

Tyler:

He stabbed the Baron and he killed him and then the Baron comes back. And the Baron was such a douche. I kept kind of yelling at the book, like Just kill that guy!

Wood:

The resurrection is also just kind of fun. Because the story of how I didn't actually die after I was lynched is, you know, a crack up. It's like meeting an old friend on a European vacation or something. Who you didn't expect to see.

Chenoweth:

My most fun thing to play, being in the part of Cunegonde was when she comes back and her and Candide get reunited for a moment.

Chenoweth:

Is it you? Can it be? Dearest how can this be so? You were shot and bayoneted too. You were dead you know? I just love that, and all the time I'll say, when I'm tired, I'm like (singing) you were dead, you know.

GRAHPIC: CARTOON

Ware:

I didn't want it to look realistic at all. I wanted it to be a cartoon because I feel like the book itself is a cartoon. I just draw three circles on top of each other, to represent the human body and depending on the approach, I'll either make the head really big, and the butt really small, or the other way around and it's usually funnier the latter than the former. My aim with the cover was to directly address a resistant reader, i.e., one who about the age that I was, when I didn't want to read it. I put a, a couple of maps on there. A little map of the venereal disease that Dr. Pangloss passes along and who he got it from.

GRAPHIC: AROUND THE WORLD

Ramis:

It's kind of a really horrific around the world in eighty days because he does just bounce from one awful situation to another. Travels over land to...and ends up in Lisbon for the great earthquake and then across the ocean to the Americas and then they're journeying through South America, El Dorado, and then they're back across the...the ocean and they're in London and they're in Venice and to Constantinople. He really covers the known world. And in the process you kind of see that these horrors are not specific to any particular country or any particular people.

Tyler:

Presenting the story of Candide in the form of a travelogue made it a fun ride. A lot of people who read, didn't travel during that time. And so you had these far-flung, fantastic lands, and these other cultures through which, he was able to turn a lens back on his own culture.

GRAHPIC: DISROBING THE CHURCH

Damrosch:

The two great subjects of 18th century satire are vanity and hypocrisy. And Voltaire finds them in their purest expression in the church.

Tyler:

All of the religious characters except for one, in Candide were very exploitative. You know? There were people who were only after their own gain, priests who had taken vows of celibacy were sleeping with prostitutes.

Ware:

It's a book that dismantles hypocrisy at every paragraph.

Cusset:

And this is exactly what's in the 18th century writers and philosophers are interested about is to show this contrast. These characters were only talking about virtue and the good and chastity. Other ones were actually abusing the penitents, which is a very contemporary scene as you know. So many discoveries have been made recently about the Catholic church.

LeClerc:

Some consider Voltaire to be the father of at least the French enlightenment, if not the general movement of the enlightenment. And what he was most troubled by was in effect the abuse of authority. We still see it today in areas in which one group of people, have all the say. That's what he was seeing on a frequent basis within France.

Spivak:

Throughout this novel which is very like I said deadpan, gallows humor, so that you are amazed that these things are just being said. The way in which women were treated is just like out there.

Damrosch:

Cunegonde, and also the old woman in the story are raped repeatedly. They suffer plague. They suffer syphilis. They go through all kinds of horrific events. Here's the old woman describing, summarizing some of her experiences.

(Reading): "Imagine, she says, my situation, the daughter of a pope, only fifteen years old who in the space of three months has been exposed to poverty and slavery, been raped almost daily, has seen her mother torn to pieces, had endured war and famine and who is now dying of the plague in Algiers. As it happens I didn't die."

Spivak:

The old woman has a major critical voice. One generally doesn't find them to be, speaking as an old woman myself, although I have two buttocks, this one had only one because one buttock was eaten.

Wood:

She has a perspective of wisdom that, that, a kind of lived experience. The street, a street knowledge. You know, I guess if you lose half of you buttocks you get some wisdom. It's kind of a trade off.

Tyler:

Candide's seen the worst things that could ever happen. And he's suffered in his life, it's so difficult and Cunegonde has suffered and her life is so difficult. And then, this old woman was like look, somebody ate one of my buttocks. You cannot top that. She definitely puts you know, you know your average bad day in perspective when you're mad 'cause the lady put too much milk in your double caf, you know what I mean? You could be walking around with half a butt.

Spivak:

A hundred times, now here's the philosophy, I have wanted to kill myself but I was still in love with life. Now this is a mature optimism. This is not the Panglossian, clearly irrational so-called Leibnizian formula repeated over and over again. Yes, I should end this life. It's so horrible. No, I love to be alive. To live in this absurdity, the philosophy of the double bind this is a much more robust philosophy than what is being criticized and I think we should notice that it's in the mouth of this decrepit old woman.

GRAPHIC: ICONOCLAST

LeClerc:

Voltaire was born in Paris in 1694. Voltaire was from a very early age incredibly bright. But incredibly iconoclastic. Voltaire was the first rock star writer. From Catherine the Great in St. Petersburg, to Jefferson in Monticello, people were reading Voltaire, they knew the stuff that was coming out, they'd have it sent to them. They'd write about it in their letters and there had never been a writer like that.

Ramis:

He was arguably the most popular writer in the world at the time. And he did it by telling the truth. But when you go on the attack you actually risk counter attack.

Damrosch:

Voltaire's satires had gotten him exiled, had gotten him put into the Bastille.

Dobie:

He was very used to this kind of cat and mouse game. Making a polite exit when things were getting too hot in France.

LeClerc:

One of the most profoundly significant trips that he made was to England. It was an eye opener for him because there was Newton, who was unraveling how the universe worked. There was John Locke who had a radically refreshing explanation of how things worked from a philosophical point of view. And there were a multiple city of religions. So he met Quakers and he met all kinds of dissident Protestants, while he was there.

Cusset:

The 18th century with the Enlightenment Century, the Century of Freedom, a believe in the power of reason, but not a belief in the dogmatic power of reason. On the contrary, it's a belief in the power to question everything.

GRAPHIC: TOO HOT TO HANDLE

Damrosch:

Voltaire was well aware that the satire in Candide was gonna be too hot for some people to handle and he published it anonymously pretending it's a translation from the German of Dr. Ralph.

LeClerc:

What he did was, what we call today going viral. He had them sent out everywhere wanting them to be pirated. Wanting them to be copied by local printers and publishers. And his tactic worked.

Damrosch:

Candide was an immediate best seller, not only over France but rapidly translated into English and into several of the European languages spreading around Europe within the year. However it was published in England as the work of Voltaire. The British publisher didn't care if he got his head cut off. He just wanted the sales.

Cusset:

Definitely the church was outraged by the publication of Candide. And actually as the book was on the list of forbidden books, because this is a book that is questioning, the dogmas of religion.

GRAPHIC: TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

Damrosch:

The highlight of Candide's South American adventure is the discovery of the lost city of El Dorado, a recurrent fantasy in European ideas about the new world. There should be some earthly paradise where the streets are paved with gold.

Wood:

The ground is littered with precious stones. The people all gloriously happy. There are no priests, there are no monks, there are no cabals, there's no inquisition. That's fairly shocking to Candide of course, for somebody who's been burned at the stake.

Ramis:

El Dorado is the paradise that everyone of his time aspired to. It just stands in for this impossible place where everything's good.

Damrosch:

El Dorado's not a real place. It's a kind of vision of an anti-world, a world that doesn't really exist. We know that Candide can't stay there and he misses Cunegonde. He needs to go off in search of her.

GRAPHIC: THE PRICE OF SUGAR

LeClerc:

A lot of people today consider Voltaire to be the father of the Human Rights Movement. He was the first major, major proponent of human rights. And in an era in which the idea was totally absent basically.

Spivak:

All the travel, it isn't an exoticizing kind of work. When he goes outside of Europe, he's clearly going to colonies.

LeClerc:

There's a very, very telling and beautiful moment when in South America Candide comes upon a person of African origin who has lost a leg and an arm. And they say, What happened to you?

Dobie:

(Reading): "Twice a year we are given a pair of blue canvas drawers. And this is our only clothing. When we work in the sugar mills and get a finger caught in the machinery they cut off the hand. But if we try to run away, they cut off a leg. I have found myself in both situations. It is the price we pay for the sugar you eat, in Europe."

Spivak:

I want to emphasize that the slave in Dutch Surinam is not a figure from the past. We don't know the whole itinerary of a shirt that we put on our body and we don't know how many people have suffered in how many ways in order for us to innocently buy this

thing. If we read this book carefully we will see Candide seems to be a text that was written almost for us.

Wood:

I did use text from the book in the adaptation. And yet I also re-imagined all the events in the book. And so, I had him begin in the Bosnian conflict, and go to New York as a refugee and live through the Staten Island Ferry accident, and the World Trade Center, and then, end up in the South, and Katrina, We still kind of struggle with the same questions and the evils that he was railing against still exist.

Cusset:

All these wars he's talking about, all this abuse and religious persecutions, when I read it it feels like it's the same world.

GRAPHIC: OH, DEAR!

Ware:

I remember when Candide finally finds Cunegonde after however many pages, or however many years, it's never really clear, how much time has passed. And how what a horrible disfigured wretch she is, and how he's still like oh yeah, hi, great to see you. And Voltaire goes into great detail describing her, her corporeal demise.

Ramis:

She's not attractive anymore. She's turning into a shrew. He's stuck with her only because he made this promise. Well now they're sitting on the farm, left with nothing to do but argue philosophy.

(Reading): "There was a famous dervish in the neighborhood who was considered the best philosopher in Turkey. They went to consult him. Pangloss was the spokesman and said master we've come to ask you why such a strange animal as man was ever created. Mind your own business said the dervish. Is this any of your concern? But Reverend Father, said Candide, the world is full of terrible evils. What difference does it make said the dervish, whether there's evil or good? When his Majesty sends a ship to Egypt does he worry whether the mice in that ship are comfortable? So what should we do said Pangloss? Shut your mouth said the dervish."

I think that's a great response to a useless philosophy.

Cusset:

(Reading): "Sometimes Pangloss would say to Candide, all events form a chain in this. The best of all possible worlds. Had you not been expelled from beautiful castle, had you not been turned over to the Inquisition, and had you not run the baron through with a fine thrust of your sword, you would not be sitting here now eating candied citron and pistachios. That is well said, replied Candide, but we must cultivate our garden."

GRAPHIC: CULTIVATE OUR GARDEN

Ramis:

The great irony then is, the real mature wisdom he comes to is wealth has not made me happy. Success, finding love, getting the girl of my dreams. The only possibility he has of happiness is being in the real world, connecting himself to the earth represented by this small farm and doing real work, simple, real work on a daily basis.

LeClerc:

The injunction that sort of the command at the end, as we all have to work, and empty philosophizing isn't going to get us anywhere.

Tyler:

'We must cultivate our own garden', I think speaks to every person who sees suffering in the world and feels overwhelmed. It feels like I can't do anything the problem is too big and the idea is if you can cultivate your own garden, you can help one other life. It's like the 18th century version of Think Globally, Act Locally.

Wood:

Its about finding a way of living in a world of chaos and disaster and evil

Cusset:

It's an incredibly funny story and it's an incredibly modern and contemporary story.

Ware:

One of the appeals to it is it keeps confronting you with the truth of life. Where you read it and you think oh yeah that's true.

Chenoweth:

You never know what you're going to be able to take and learn from it, certainly with Voltaire.

GRAPHIC: CANDIDE

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