

VOLTAIRE, FRANCOIS MARIE AROUET

The importance of Voltaire. Francois Marie Arouet (Voltaire) (1694-1778) was a French philosopher, playwright, poet, letter writer, and political activist, who left a mark on all genres of writing and thinking in 18th century France. By many he is considered the epitome of the Enlightenment and the forerunner of the French Revolution, whose ideas of liberty and equality he championed throughout his life.

The Early Life of Voltaire. Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire was born in Paris, the youngest of five children. His father was a lawyer and his mother hailed from a noble family in Poitou. The young Voltaire was educated by the Jesuits, at the renowned lycée of Louis le Grand, where Voltaire learned Latin and Greek. (He was later to add on a good working knowledge of French, English, and Spanish.) While studying and learning Voltaire spent a lot of his time—on the sly—writing poetry, although it was his father's desire that he should study law. Plans were made to send Voltaire to Caen, for law studies, but the young man rebelled, and was instead posted—by his father's arrangement—as a Secretary to the French Ambassador in the Netherlands. (There he fell in love with a French Huguenot émigrée, planned elopement with her, and was quickly sent back to his father in Paris.) In subsequent years, Voltaire continued to work and behave as an irritant to settled bourgeois society, which he thought complicit with all the oppressive forces of top downward monarchical economy. Not long after returning from the Netherlands he was found guilty of composing a satirical verse about the Monarch himself; a crime for which Voltaire paid with eleven months in the Bastille. (Where, incidentally, he wrote his first presentable play, *Oedipe*.) On release from prison he proliferated satires and a couple of light comedies; freed from prison a second time he was sent to the Bastille, and, finding himself faced with the prospect of life in prison, proposed exile to England. The proposal being accepted, Voltaire went to England, where he was to spend the next three years of his life, and to make the acquaintance of many of the influential English intelligentsia: Swift, Congreve, Young, Bolingbroke. (His lifelong respect for British social justice and freedom springs from this experience.)

Return from England. In 1734 his *Lettres philosophiques* was published, and with the frank expression of bitter criticism of his own country, he became once again an endangered species, and retreated quietly to a country house in Champagne, where he was to spend the next fifteen years—not quietly but out of sight, and writing most of his best dramas, and the first of his prose tales, *Zadig* (1747). The remainder of Voltaire's long life was spent largely in Switzerland, close to France but not dangerously so, and saw him in constant literary and cultural activity, corresponding voluminously with many of the literati and intelligentsia of his time, and in every work attempting to speak out for tolerance, freedom, good sense, and justice. Though a conservative in all matters but religion—which he considered pure bigotry—he was relentless in his Enlightenment pursuit of the kind of mature monarchical/democratic society he encountered in England.

The Legacy of Voltaire. Voltaire wrote voluminously, histories (of France in the 18th century), satires (superb satire on Leibnizian optimism in *Candide*), neo classical dramas, a couple of epic poems no longer read, 20,000 letters, and went so far as to carry out and write up a vast number of scientific experiments, especially on the nature of fire. He was, in short, a Renaissance man for the Enlightenment, and as well an activist, a foe of social or legal injustice wherever he found it, and on important legal occasions an effective defender of the innocent and weak.

Reading

Primary source reading

Candide, Voltaire, tr. Ware, 2005.

Secondary source reading

Davidson, Ian, *Voltaire, a Life*, 2010.

Further reading

Cronk, Nicholas, *Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, 2009.

Original language reading

Lilti, Antoine, *Le monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au xviii siècle*, 2005.

Suggested paper topics

Do you think Voltaire is the perfect embodiment of the Enlightenment? What did Voltaire think of the dictatorial monarchy that ruled France? How do you explain his great admiration for British culture and the British government? Did he admire the pomp and circumstance of that government?

At the end of *Candide*, Voltaire recommends the ideal of cultivating one's own garden, and keeping your nose clean. But was not Voltaire himself a lifetime activist, and a striver for justice whenever it was abused? And what about Voltaire's strenuous love life, epistolary life, and scientific experiments? Did he not belong powerfully to this world?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19942/19942-h/19942-h.htm>

Candide, driven from terrestrial paradise, walked a long while without knowing where, weeping, raising his eyes to heaven, turning them often towards the most magnificent of castles which imprisoned the purest of noble young ladies. He lay down to sleep without supper, in the middle of a field between two furrows. The snow fell in large flakes. Next day Candide, all benumbed, dragged himself towards the neighbouring town which was called Waldberghofftrarbkdikdorff, having no money, dying of hunger and fatigue, he stopped sorrowfully at the door of an inn. Two men dressed in blue observed him.

"Comrade," said one, "here is a well-built young fellow, and of proper height."

They went up to Candide and very civilly invited him to dinner.

"Gentlemen," replied Candide, with a most engaging modesty, "you do me great honour, but I have not wherewithal to pay my share."

"Oh, sir," said one of the blues to him, "people of your appearance and of your merit never pay anything: are you not five feet five inches high?"

"Yes, sir, that is my height," answered he, making a low bow.

"Come, sir, seat yourself; not only will we pay your reckoning, but we will never suffer such a man as you to want money; men are only born to assist one another."

"You are right," said Candide; "this is what I was always taught by Mr. Pangloss, and I see plainly that all is for the best."

They begged of him to accept a few crowns. He took them, and wished to give them his note; they refused; they seated themselves at table.

"Love you not deeply?"

"Oh yes," answered he; "I deeply love Miss Cunegonde."

"No," said one of the gentlemen, "we ask you if you do not deeply love the King of the Bulgarians?"

"Not at all," said he; "for I have never seen him."

"What! he is the best of kings, and we must drink his health."

"Oh! very willingly, gentlemen," and he drank.

"That is enough," they tell him. "Now you are the help, the support, the defender, the hero of the Bulgarians. Your fortune is made, and your glory is assured."

Instantly they fettered him, and carried him away to the regiment. There he was made to wheel about to the right, and to the left, to draw his rammer, to return his rammer, to present, to fire, to march, and they gave him thirty blows with a cudgel. The next day he did his exercise a little less badly, and he received but twenty blows. The day following they gave him only ten, and he was regarded by his comrades as a prodigy.