Candide, By Voltaire Essay, Research Paper

Candide, by Voltaire Voltaire’s Candide is a novel which contains conceptual ideas and at the same time is also exaggerated. Voltaire offers sad themes disguised by jokes and witticism, and the story itself presents a distinctive outlook on life. The crucial contrast in the story deals with irrational ideas as taught to Candide about being optimistic, versus reality as viewed by the rest of the world. The main theme which is presented throughout the novel is optimism. Out of every unfortunate situation in the story, Candide, the main character, has been advised by his philosopher-teacher that everything in the world happens for the better, because “Private misfortunes contribute to the general good, so that the more private misfortunes there are, the more we find that all is well” (Voltaire, p. 31). Pangloss, the philosopher, tries to defend his theories by determining the positive from the negative situations and by showing that misfortunes bring some privileges. As Candide grows up, whenever something unfortunate happens, Pangloss would turn the situation around, bringing out the good in it. Candide learns that optimism is “The passion for maintaining that all is right when all goes wrong ” (Voltaire, p.86). According to Rene Pomeau, “Voltaire-Candide…have made him [Candide] acquainted with the bad and the good side of human existence. The moral of Candide is born out of its style; it is the art of extracting happiness from the desolate hopping-about of the human insect” (Adams; Pomeau p.137). Pomeau explains that Candide shows both sides of humanity; how both great and terrible events are standard in a human life. Also according to Pomeau, the whole point of the story is to debate between good and bad; for example, as Candide becomes more independent, he starts to doubt that only good comes out of life. Pangloss is a very hopeful character in the story because he refuses to accept bad. He is also somewhat naive and believes that he could make the world a better place by spreading his theories on optimism. When Candide had met up with Pangloss after a long period of time, Pangloss said that he was almost hanged, then dissected, then beaten. Candide asked the philosopher if he still thought that everything was for the better, and Pangloss replied that he still held his original views. No matter how little Pangloss believed in the fact that somehow everything would turn out well, he still maintained his original views. Voltaire exaggerates his point on optimism; there is nobody in reality who is positive about everything all the time, especially about something so horrible. One could conclude that Pangloss is an irrational and inane figure, and Voltaire tries to expose how incomprehensible his beliefs are which do not measure up to reality. According to Linguet, “Candide offers us the saddest of themes disguised under the merriest of jokes” (Adams; Wade p. 144). It seems as if Candide was written as a comedy; not because of humor, but because every time something bad occurs, a quick turn of events happens which bring everything back to normal. One moment Candide murders the brother of the woman he loves, the next moment he travels to a land where he sees women mating with monkeys. In instances like these, it doesn’t seem like Voltaire is serious about tragic events. During the course of Candide’s journey, an earthquake strikes, murdering thirty thousand men, women, and children. In reality, this is a horrible predicament to be involved with. In Pangloss’ world, ” It is impossible for things not to be where they are, because everything is for the best” (Voltaire, p. 35), meaning that the earthquake was necessary in the course of nature, and so there was definitely a rationale for the situation. To show contrast in the story, Voltaire introduces a character whose beliefs are completely opposite than the beliefs of Pangloss. This character is Martin, a friend and advisor of Candide who he meets on his journey. Martin is also a scholar, and a spokesman for pessimism. Martin continuously tries to prove to Candide that there is little virtue, morality, and happiness in the world. When a cheerful couple are seen walking and singing, Candide tells Martin “At least you must admit that these people are happy. Until now, I have not found in the whole inhabited earth…anything but miserable people. But this girl and this monk, I’d be willing to bet, are very happy creatures” (Voltaire, p. 58). “I’ll bet they aren’t” (Voltaire p. 58), replies Martin, and he bets Candide that the couple are, in fact, depressed, and are disguising their unhappiness. Upon talking to the couple, Martin, ironically, proved correct, strengthening his pessimistic views. Martin claims to be a pessimist because he “knows what life is ” (Voltaire, p. 117) which is why Martin concludes that man was born to suffer. Candide becomes affected by optimism in different ways throughout his life. The name Candide comes from the Latin word candidus, which means white, and symbolizes innocence. Perhaps Candide very readily believed in optimism at first because of his innocence. Candide grew up as a naive and vulnerable child in his own Eden and was only exposed to the brighter side of life and the idea that everything in the world happens for the better. He did not know what to expect in the real world and why things happened. As Candide progressed in life, though, his eyes opened and he became exposed to bad without goodness coming out of it, like when the people he cared for were harmed. Candide became more independent and learned to form his own opinions. He would look at the world and say exactly what he saw, and in every situation where Pangloss is absent, Candide would refer to Pangloss’ spirit: “What would Pangloss think?” Over time Candide realized that “Pangloss cruelly deceived [him] when he told [him] that all is for the best in this world ” (Voltaire p.43). For a long time throughout Candide’s life, he believed strongly in optimism, not because he was forced to, but because he was raised in that manner. It is possible, however, that all along, deep down inside, Candide doubted the philosophies of his teacher because of his exposure to immorality in the real world. For example, Candide witnessed the public hanging of two Portuguese Jews simply because they refused to eat bacon for dinner. It was occurrences like these which demonstrated the inhumanity that one person can do to another, leading Candide to disbelieve Pangloss’ philosophies. Voltaire himself does not necessarily agree with the views of the philosopher Pangloss, that optimism is always the best way of looking at life. Many people in the story who were presumed to be dead were found to be alive and well. Cunegonde, the object of Candide’s affections, was thought dead by Candide but she had really been raped and sold into slavery. Pangloss was also presumed dead but he reappeared in Candide’s life. Although it is good that these people did not die, this is not an example of good coming from bad, since bad (their deaths) never even happened in the first place. This does not at all prove Pangloss’ ideas. It is debatable whether Candide is a novel whose purpose is to teach a moral and be analyzed, or if it was written for entertainment purposes only. According to I.O. Wade, in the Journal Encyclopedique, the story was written for entertainment purposes and the author should have dealt more with important matters such as religion instead of focusing on story line. Most of the story is about the journeys of Candide, and Voltaire did not include significant morals upon writing the novel. In Grimm’s review, it is also thought that Candide was not meant to be a high quality piece of work, but rather as something enjoyable. It is written in bad taste, yet filled with gaiety, and the amusing parts make it entertaining. According to Georges Ascoli, “Nothing could be more lively, more witty, or more instructive than this story…Too often Voltaire, delighted with his own artistic flair…gives us amusing stories…Let us take them for what they are, not giving too much historical credit…but tasting freely of the delights of well told stories” (Adams; Ascoli p.129). Ascoli takes Candide to be a witty and lively story despite the misfortune in the characters’ lives. He, too, thinks the story was written for entertainment in which Voltaire did a good job. The readers should accept the story for its zest, and not try to find a deep hidden meaning. Candide’s learnings and the events that happened to him affected his character in many ways. He had learned to become his own person, to accept life for what it had to offer, and that not everything had to be analyzed to decide whether it was good or bad. In this way Candide can be an example for all those who read his story.