**Candide, or Optimism**  
Concept Analysis

**Literary Text:** *Candide, or Optimism* by Voltaire (Barnes & Noble Classics)

**Summary**

Candide is a naïve and innocent character that has grown up believing the world exists in a state of “everything is best” as taught by the master philosopher Dr. Pangloss. This optimistic belief that God created a world where everything is at the pinnacle of goodness is challenged when Candide is kicked out of the castle for kissing the Baron’s beautiful daughter, Cunegonde. Candide experiences hunger for the first time and human cruelty. He stumbles into a Christian town looking for food. The Christians, while extolling their virtues, turn Candide away hungry. Candide is forced into military service where he sees firsthand the brutality of war as entire villages are destroyed. He reunites with Dr. Pangloss and travels to Lisbon, arriving in time to experience the earthquake of 1755 that killed 30,000 inhabitants. Candide travels to various cities throughout the world, including the mythical city of El Dorado, experiencing human deprivation and misery. Candide’s optimistic philosophy is challenged as he experiences and sees war, cruelty, misery, persecution, class distinction, gender inequality, religious intolerance, political intrigue, and moral abasement. Characters float in and out of Candide’s life as he travels from one location to another, some dying, some seemingly to die only to emerge later in the narrative. Candide meets a Turk whose philosophy of restricting interaction with the rest of humanity makes sense. Candide marries Cunegonde, who is now very ugly, and buys a farm where he and his friends, the optimistic philosopher Dr Pangloss, the pessimistic philosopher Martin, the prostitute Paquette, his friend and servant Cacambo, the priest turned honest man brother Giroflee, and the unnamed old woman live together cultivating their garden in relative happiness.

**The Central Question/Enduring Issue**

GOD/ EVIL

**Would a rational and well regulated world include human suffering?:** The novel *Candide* is all about debunking the philosophy of optimism regarding the human condition. The characters in the novel experience deprivation throughout the entire story. There are acts of nature that kills tens of thousands of people. The destruction caused by an earthquake pales in comparison to the cruelty suffered at the hands of humans. Humans commit acts of: genocide, Rape, slavery, colonialism, robbery, perversion, animal love, prostitution, religious intolerance, and cannibalism. Candide attempts to hold to his optimistic philosophy despite experiencing cruelty and misery at every turn. There are two competing philosophies of optimism and pessimism which are debated in a dialectical debate during the last section of the book. By the end of the story, Candide is evasive in the philosophy he embraces. Candide focuses solely upon his garden in an attempt to control his world.
Is the plight of human suffering the “best of all possible worlds,” or do we have freewill? There is the underlying theme of freewill in the storyline. The old woman predicts that every person Candide meets will tell a tale of suffering and woe. The old woman is correct as every single character, minor or major, experiences incredible suffering and cruelty in their daily lives. Candide begins to draw the conclusion that the philosophy of optimism doesn’t ring true. Near the end of the novel, Candide meets a Turk, whose philosophy is a devotion to a simple life, working a small farm with his four children, ignoring external affairs. The Turk explains that this philosophy frees them “of three great evils: boredom, vice and necessity.” These are the first people Candide meets that seem to live a happy existence. The underlying theme is that humanity has freewill to act for their benefit. Candide closes the story by observing that “we must cultivate our garden.”

Organizational Patterns

*Candide, or Optimism* is organized into episodic chapters and three basic parts. There are thirty titled chapters, ranging in length from two to thirteen pages. The chapter titles are summaries of the action contained within the chapter. Many of the chapters are dedicated to individual characters detailing their life stories of misery and hardship. The first chapter gives us an introduction to the main character Candide. We find out his philosophy, beliefs, and the understanding of his innocence and purity. This is an important aspect of the book as Candide is the blank canvas that the world paints upon. The rest of the story, excluding the conclusion, is Candide’s journey from innocence into experience. The conclusion shows Candide rejecting doctrines of philosophy and embracing the ideals of the Turk, the only truly happy person he met. The thirty chapters are broken up into three parts. Chapters I-X are set in Europe, chapters X1-XX are set in the Americas, Chapters XXI-XXX are set in Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

Issues Related to this study of Literature

**THEME**

*Poverty/Class Distinction* – This is a major theme that reoccurs throughout *Candide*. The novel begins with Candide being kicked out from his boyhood home by daring to kiss Cunegonde, a woman above his class. Even when Cunegonde is diminished to abject poverty, her brother forbids the marriage to Candide because of her title. Another theme of the novel is poverty. Candide and his companions move in and out of wealth. The novel makes it clear that wealth plays a large role in how they are perceived and valued. The individuals mired in poverty have the most external forces against them in the novel.

*Religious Intolerance* – The novel is rife with religious intolerance. Candide, starving and destitute, stumbles into a town where everyone espouses Christian values, but not one individual will lift a finger to help him. Numerous individuals are put to death or punished because of religious intolerance. Dr Pangloss is hanged while Candide is whipped to within an inch of his life in a ceremony named “auto-da-fe,” reserved for heretics. An
inquisitor shares Cunegonde with a Jewish merchant. There are numerous references to wars between the various religious sects. Every single location that Candide visits, other than El Dorado, is met with religious intolerance. The story points out the often hypocritical nature of religion and the human actions enacted in the name of religion. The perfect utopian society of El Dorado has no priests.

**War/Acts of Aggression** – Candide is thrust into a world gone made with bloodlust. Shortly after being expelled from the castle, Candide is forcibly enlisted into the military. He sees atrocities against innocent civilians justified as being a part of war. Women are raped and villages destroyed in the process of aggression. Candide manages to escape his forced service, but once again becomes a conscript in a war against the Jesuits in the Americas. Candide manages to escape yet again and eventually witnesses the execution of Admiral Byng who didn’t kill the opposing Admiral.

**Philosophy** – Voltaire is responding to a German philosopher named Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, whose theory of optimism was based upon a well organized and rational world. The 1755 Lisbon earthquake which killed 30,000 people challenged the idea of a world that was the best it could be. Dr. Pangloss is representative of Gottfried Leibniz and his philosophy of optimism. Candide begins the novel with this optimistic outlook and throughout his journey meets many individuals with varied philosophical beliefs. Candide eventually discards the various philosophies to live isolated from the external world.

**Other Themes** – Political intrigue, Slavery, Colonialism, garden motif, and the machinations of the various royal families.

**SETTING**

*Candide* takes place in Westphalia. There Candide is living in the castle of a baron who has been raising him since birth. Candide is driven from the castle after kissing the baron’s daughter. Candide makes his way from Westphalia to Holland. He sets sail to Lisbon, only to arrive at the exact moment of the 1755 earthquake that destroys much of the city. Candide’s next stop is Cadiz, where he reunites with Cunegonde. His next destination is the port at Buenos Aires in the Americas. Candide is forced to escape to Paraguay. While in the Americas, Candide stumbles upon El Dorado, a utopian society where the streets are covered with precious stones, their dirt is gold, and there are no priests. Candide leaves El Dorado in an attempt to return to Cunegonde. He travels to Suriname, located in the Americas. Candide finds a boat and travels to Venice through Bordeaux, stopping in Paris. While on this journey they approach the British coast, but turn around after witnessing the execution of Admiral John Byng. Candide learns that Cunegonde is
actually in Constantinople living as a salve. He immediately sets sail for Constantinople. Candide eventually settles in a small farm in Transylvania. It becomes apparent that Voltaire uses Candide’s travel into each of these areas to address aspects of civilization.

CONFLICT

**Internal:** Candide struggles throughout *Candide* to reconcile the world he is experiencing with his philosophical optimism. The internal strife gradually builds as he encounters one catastrophe after another. Whenever Candide seems ready to abandon his philosophy because they don’t align with his experiences, something happens that gives him hope and renews his beliefs. Candide even debates his philosophy of optimism with his friend Martin’s philosophy of pessimism. Candide, even after all the cruelty and misfortune he has suffered, debates with Martin about the world being the best it could possibly be. Candide’s internal strife becomes more pronounced as he moves through the story and he eventually rejects philosophy altogether.

**External:** Candide’s external conflicts are readily visible throughout the book. He is forced to kill the Grand inquisitor and the Jewish merchant in order to free Cunegonde. Candide believes he has killed the Baron’s son when refused the hand of Cunegonde. He thought he was saving two young naked maidens by killing the wild monkeys that were attacking them, only to find out they were the girl’s lovers. Candide conflicts with the various individuals that rob and take advantage of his goodness and innocence.

POINT OF VIEW, NARRATIVE VOICE

The novel is a third person omniscient narrative. The narrator reports in a satirical and ironic voice. The narration paints a picture of the most extreme human depravity and cruelty like discussing trivialities like the weather. There is a light tone to the narration that prevents the reader from slipping into the deepest pits of despair over the evil presented in the story. The wit of the narration casts a remarkably humorous tone while depicting the most serious topics of death and destruction. What is happening in the story doesn’t line up with the tone of the narration. *Candide* uses irony very effectively in letting the reader know the intent of the passages. It is not difficult to identify the satire in *Candide*. Satire is used to denounce colonialism, slavery, philosophy, war, royalty, gender issues and religion. Satire is a critical component in the novel *Candide*.
Affective issues Related to the Work

Students should be able to relate to the many issues discussed in the novel, but the students will not make many connections to the characters as they are simply vehicles to deliver the overarching intent of the novel. The only potential character that students may understand would be Candide. Any student that has experienced the loss of personal belief through their interactions with the world at large will relate to Candide. Candide’s nobility in his pursuit of his true love should resonate with students.

There is some chance that students may make a connection to current world events with similar natural disasters.

There are some human rights issues that students will not be able to connect with such as colonialism, and possibly religious intolerance, although this issue has been fairly prominent in the news with California’s proposition 8. The intrigue of royal families is another issue that students may find a challenge.

Finally, there are a number of human rights issues that are still very prevalent in the modern age. Gender issues and how society views women is a topic that students should have a schema for. Race relations and the world’s history regarding slavery is another potential connection. Poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth is a very real topic in today’s economic climate. War seems to be an issue that humanity has never solved. Outside of these specific issues satirized by Candide, this story should provide a great segue into looking at current modern problems and the issues they create.

Vocabulary Issues

*Candide* is written in fairly basic language. The language is a little dated in its sentence fluency, but this shouldn’t distract from the ease of reading. There are a number of vocabulary words that will need to be addressed from the reading. These following vocabulary words should be defined prior to reading: Atrabilious, bagatelle, benefactor, cadence, chimerical, concatenation, emollient, execrate, foible, obeisance, palpitate, prelate, rapaciousness, scruple, soporific, virtuoso, principal/principle, and judgement/judgment.

Background Knowledge

Students can enjoy *Candide* with little to no background knowledge as the important themes of the novel are more topical than story driven. There are enough current human atrocities that students should be able to relate to the events occurring in the novel. Natural disasters are common enough that students should understand the devastating chaos created by earthquakes and tsunamis. The issues of slavery, race, and gender issues should not be a new topic of discussion for students.
The hero’s journey, while somewhat twisted in this story, is a genre that should be familiar to most students. The basic elements of the Hero’s quest genre are readily apparent in the novel. Candide is separated from his parental figures, cast against the world. He suffers some physical loss, the constant physical deprivations that he suffers. He is consistently helped by an older, wiser individual that provides help at an unexpected moment of need. Candide completes his quest by obtaining Cunegonde and retires in relative peace to a small farm.

Students will struggle with the characters constant movement from country to country. The movement from Europe to the Americas and back again is difficult for even mature readers to completely follow. The contrary philosophies of optimism and pessimism will be another stumbling block for students. The issue of colonialism is another potential pitfall where students may not have the background knowledge needed. There are a number of references to historical figures that died horrible deaths because of political intrigue. Another potential stumbling block could be the satirical and ironical nature of the writing depending on the maturity and age of the students. The various religious happenings, the inquisition and various atrocities directed against heretics, in the mid 18th century could be challenging.

Implications for Students of Diversity

Voltaire uses satire to address issues such as colonialism and slavery in the novel Candide. The aspect of race itself really isn’t addressed. The novel refers to Negros as slaves a handful of times. The two girls that have intimate relations with monkeys reside in South America. Some of the inhabitants of South America are Jesuit eating cannibals. South America is also the location for the mythical utopian society El Dorado. The reading of the novel addresses the inequality of wealth in general terms, pointing out the poor quality of life for individuals living in poverty.

Gender Issues

Candide addresses gender issues within the overall plotline. Women are viewed as objects to be possessed and disposed of once their physical beauty expires. The women in the novel are spoils of war, prostitutes, or mistresses of powerful men. Most of the women are raped at various points during the novel. Two women in the Americas are romantically linked to monkeys. Candide meets a high class woman in Paris who turns out to be just an expensive prostitute. The old woman in the novel had one of her buttocks cut off to feed some starving soldiers. Candide’s quest is the acquisition of his lovely Cunegonde; he fulfills his quest by buying her like a possession. Women do not exist in a state independent of men in this novel. The satirical nature of the novel would indicate that Voltaire is lampooning the standard viewpoint of women.
Research Issues/Project Ideas

RESEARCH IDEAS

18th Century piracy – Piracy is mentioned in the book and could be a good connection with the popularity of the Disney movies and the global issue with modern piracy.

1755 Lisbon Earthquake – This natural disaster took the lives of 30,000 people. This event really affected Voltaire. It would be interesting to see the world’s response to this disaster in the 18th century and provide a historical context.

Inquisition – Religious intolerance and ignorance is a recurring theme throughout Candide. Religion has been a strong political force throughout the history of the world. This is a natural research topic, but the student may need help in narrowing the focus due to the preponderance of information. Possibly research the Theatines, a Catholic order founded in 1524 to combat the Protestant Reformation.

The 7 Year War – The 7 year war, starting in 1756 and ending in 1763, eventually encompassed all the major European powers. Voltaire wrote Candide in 1759 on the heels of the Lisbon earthquake and in the middle of a devastating war.

The Enlightenment – Voltaire is considered one of the figures of The Enlightenment. This seems like another natural research project.

The Tragic Royal Figures – Candide has dinner with a number of deposed royal figures that make up some fun research topics. There are a number of references to historical figures that could be used as a basis for research.

Admiral John Byng – Voltaire met Admiral Byng and unsuccessfully tried to intervene on his behalf. Voltaire felt he was a fall guy to national pride.

Satire and Irony – The study of how satire and irony works.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz – Leibniz is the main target of Voltaire’s satire. A basic understanding his optimistic belief would be beneficial to add a philosophical context to the novel.

Voltaire’s Enemies – Voltaire inserts a number of references to slap at his enemies in Candide.

Voltaire – Research the man himself. It is imperative that students learn to research the author in order to better understand the novel.

Free Will/Predestination – The concept of Free will plays a significant role throughout the novel.
PROJECT IDEAS

**Tour Guided Travel** - Candide is all over the globe in this novel. First, map out the various locations of Candide’s journey. Depending on class size, students may need to work in groups. Each group will choose one of the locations Candide visited, including Britain; the groups will research their locations and write a one page sheet containing fun facts about their chosen topic. Have students create vacation posters like the ones that hang in travel shops. Students act as tour guides to extol the benefits of visiting their country.

**City of El Dorado** – Have students read the section about El Dorado again. Analyze what they know about the city and what makes it a utopia. Have the students create a collage that best represents their visualization of the city. Students should use the collage to expand on the aspects that make up a utopian community.

**Map Out Character Suffering** - Each character suffers to such an extreme that it’s difficult to keep track of what happens to each individual. Have students record the various acts of cruelty that their assigned character experiences. They can then compare and contrast each character as a class to determine who indeed suffered the most.

**Satire for Our Day** – Explain that many writers have used literature to address the social issues of their day, incorporating the societal ills into their stories. Have the students brainstorm for current social issues. Students should then do some research to have a greater understanding of their topic. Students should write their own satire about the social ills they feel passionate about. Have students write a reflection on what they gained from the experience.

**Mock News Report** - Have students identify the news worthy events that occur in *Candide*. They should write up short scripts describing the important details of each event. Students can present them in front of the class in a simulated “breaking news” report.

**Enrichment Resources**

“A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift - Swift’s satirical essay “A Modest Proposal” is an excellent short read prior to attempting the longer *Candide*.

“Gulliver’s Travels” by Jonathan Swift – There are a number of passages that could be used to compare and contrast with Voltaire’s *Candide*.