Open-Mindedness through Pain or Suffering

A broad pattern that I have noticed to be rather prominent throughout the readings this semester involves the notion of having an optimistic, or open-minded, outlook on life, even after periods of pain or suffering. It is known to be quite difficult for people to learn or change for the better when they are not open-minded about doing so. We learn and change by acknowledging the direct experiences we have had, lessons from mistakes we have made in life, or by listening to the opinion/word of others. Regardless of how, all of these ways require us to listen and remain aware and open-minded about new things that may be contradicting to your own thought/beliefs. Everyone experiences obstacles in life that are tough to handle, many of which cause great pain and suffering for the individual. It is extremely important to always have a positive outlook, especially when going through tough times, because it will enable you to learn and grow from your experiences effectively. Inevitably, this sort of open-mindedness is what will make you a happier person in the end.

The first reading that I believe emphasizes this theme is the story titled Candide. In this story, Candide was not always so open-minded about his views on life. At first, he stood firmly by his beliefs which Dr. Pangloss had taught him and he was not very open to potential change at all. On page 141, Candide gets into a discussion with Martin and responds to him saying, “I have seen worse; but a wise man, who had since had the misfortune to be hanged, taught me that everything was marvelously well arranged. Troubles are just the shadows in the beautiful picture.” Martin goes on to say to Candide that, “Your hanged philosopher was joking; the shadows are horrible ugly blots.” Despite hearing this new information along with Martin’s account of the horrific things he had experienced in his life, Candide appears to remain closed
off to the idea of a different belief. Instead, he firmly stands by Dr. Pangloss’ philosophical teachings, and is therefore not very open-minded.

However, the more that Candide experienced throughout his journey, the more open-minded and positive his outlook on change became. Candide experienced a number of difficult events throughout his journey that caused him pain and/or suffering. For instance, Candide experienced the horrific death of many people around him while in battle, was brutally beaten/flogged on many occasions, encountered a wild storm while at sea, was robbed for many of his goods, lost the love of his life (was eventually reunited), and heard various terrible personal accounts from people he met along the way. By the end of the story, after experiencing all of this and more, Candide is reunited with Dr. Pangloss (who was in fact not dead), and the two begin to discuss philosophy with one another again. The difference now is that Candide has become more open-minded about his life, even after his own pain and suffering, and therefore he is also a lot more open to learning and growing as a person. Dr. Pangloss, Candide and Martin have a conversation with a nearby farmer who emphasizes the importance of “cultivating your own garden.” Since Candide really listened to this advice and remained very open-minded while doing so, he soon came to the conclusion that it may be better for himself to abide by this (as opposed to Pangloss’ teachings). After hearing this sort of change in Candide’s thoughts, Dr. Pangloss goes on to ramble about his philosophical beliefs and the famous figures that agree with him. Candide cuts Dr. Pangloss off by stating on page 159 that, “I know also that we must cultivate our garden.” By stating this, I believe that Candide now recognizes the importance of being open-minded to new ideas in order to achieve true happiness. He believes that we must focus on ourselves and working to develop our own talents, skills and personal beliefs by “cultivating our garden.” This is an idea that is quite different than what Candide had originally
thought; and is derived by his willingness to be open-minded in his experiences, even after going through times of great pain and suffering.

It appeared that Candide gradually became more willing to be open minded after experiencing multiple instances of pain and suffering. The more open-minded Candide became throughout the story, the more willing he was to grow and change as a person. By being more open-minded and willing to change, Candide came closer than ever to achieving the greatest amount of happiness in his life. One thing this story teaches readers is that by being optimistic and open to change, especially after times of pain and suffering, they will also be more likely to learn and grow from their experiences in life. Inevitably, by doing this, these individuals are also likely to be much happier about themselves and their lives in the end.

The second reading that I believe emphasizes this theme, in part, is the story titled “A Simple Heart.” The main character of the story, Felicite, encounters a lot of pain and heartache throughout the entirety of the story. For example, dealing with the loss of her nephew, the death of young Virginie, the death of her beloved pet Loulou, as well as that of Mme Aubain, the woman she lived with and worked for. All of these instances are extremely stressful events that would cause great pain and heartache for any person. I would argue though that Felicite handled some of these events with a sense of open-mindedness and optimism that allowed her to continue on in life growing and thriving in the most positive way possible. She, indeed, grieved over and stressed about the loss of each loved one, which is a normal part of the healing process. After grieving though, Felicite appeared to resort to having a more positive and open-minded perspective on her life. For example, when Loulou the bird passed away, Felicite had him preserved (or stuffed) so that she could keep him with her forever. On page 803, the book states that, “Every morning when she awoke, she saw him in the light of the dawn, and then she
remembered the old days, and the smallest details of insignificant actions, not in sorrow but in absolute tranquility.” I attribute this portion as illustrating her true sense of open-mindedness and optimism in the presence of such stress and suffering. Instead of continuing to dwell in her sorrows, Felicite decides to make a positive out of the situation by getting the bird stuffed and using that as a memorial of his life. So when she looks at the deceased bird, she basks in her remembrance of him and this causes her great happiness and peacefulness. This sort of optimistic perspective she takes on is exactly what allows her to grow and change as a person effectively throughout the rest of her life.

In the end when Felicite is on her deathbed, she envisions a giant portrait of her beloved bird Loulou, which now symbolizes her optimism and happiness. On page 807, it states that, “Her lips smiled. Her heart-beats grew slower and slower… And as she breathed her last, she thought she could see, in the opening heavens, a gigantic parrot hovering above her head.” I interpret this final section as displaying the true happiness Felicite finally achieves through her optimistic perspective of a bad situation(s). Mostly because it states that while she was taking her last few breathes, she smiled and thought of the figure which makes her truly happy, Loulou. She appears to have taken a negative (Loulou’s death) and turned it into a positive aspect of her life, allowing her to be much more open-minded and positive about things. If Felicite had not been so open-minded and optimistic, I don’t believe that she would have achieved the level of happiness that she did given all that she had experienced. By making this change in thought processes, Felicite was able to better learn and grow as an individual; ultimately leading to the happiness she attains before she dies.

It appeared to me that Felicite gradually became more willing to be open minded and optimistic after experiencing many cases of great pain and suffering. The more optimistic
Felicite became throughout the story, the more willing she became to growing as a person. By being more open minded and willing to grow, I believe that Felicite was able to achieve the greatest amount of happiness that she could in her lifetime. This story teaches readers that by being optimistic and open to change, especially after times of pain and suffering, they will also be more likely to grow from their experiences in life. Inevitably, by doing this, these individuals are also likely to be much happier about themselves and their lives overall.

A final reading that emphasizes this theme is the story titled “From a Room of One’s Own.” The title of the story itself highlights freedom and the importance of being optimistic in order to be truly free and happy in life. The woman in the story lives during a time period that is quite gender segregated. Women during this time period were not granted the same liberties and freedoms that women have today. Because of this, the main character of the story (a female) experienced many difficulties which are presumed to have caused her suffering. For example, she is scolded for walking on the lawn, she is not allowed to go into libraries without a male present, and she was discouraged from reading/writing. For a woman that solely desires to write fiction and to expand her knowledge, this could be rather painful to go through. It states on page 1331 that, “All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain.” This leads me to believe that she was indeed suffering from the tensions between self-freedom/happiness and the social pressures. She also states at the very beginning of the story on page 1313 that, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” To me, this indicates that she acknowledges the difficulties/struggles for a woman in this time period and therefore chooses to be open-minded and optimistic about her future right away. Instead of dwelling on the hardships that she has to face; she focuses on a positive aspect like the essential things she would need in order to do what
she desires. By enabling herself to have this kind of positive outlook or goal in life, even while in the presence of difficulties, helps her to be the happiest that she possibly can grater the circumstances.

It appeared to me that the woman in this story had a rather optimistic and open-minded view about herself and her future, even while in the presence of gender segregation, a discouraging society, and the pain/suffering resulting from them. Because of her optimistic point of view, she was a lot more willing to grow as a person and therefore achieve the greatest possible amount of happiness given the preexisting circumstances. This story teaches its readers that by being optimistic and open-minded about changing, especially after times of pain and suffering, they will also be more likely to grow from their experiences in life. Inevitably, by doing this, these people are also likely to be much happier about themselves and their lives in the end.

Overall, the theme of optimism and open-mindedness through the presence of pain and/or suffering is a rather prominent one displayed throughout the readings we have done this semester. Although this theme is not present in every story that we have read, it was one that really stuck out to me in the readings I did notice it in. The readings titled Candide, “A Simple Heart”, and “A Room of One’s Own” all emphasize the entirety of this theme, in my opinion. It is known to be quite difficult for individuals to grow or learn to change if they are not open minded and optimistic about the process. In order to learn and grow, people tend to draw from direct experiences that they have had, lessons from mistakes they have made, or by listening to the opinions of others. All of these ways require people to listen and be open minded to the thought of new ideas. Everyone experiences obstacles in life that are stressful and difficult to handle, many of which can cause great pain and suffering for the individual. So it is extremely
important to always have a positive outlook, especially in the presence of tough times, because it will enable people to learn and grow effectively from their experiences in life. Inevitably, this sort of open-minded way of thinking is what will aid in making a person happier in the end, even when there is pain and suffering along the way.