Word Play: Fundamental Words in Kundera's Czech Novels

by

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To my family for providing me with the opportunity to learn, grow and pursue my dreams

To my friends for their encouragement, laughter and company

To Professor Susanne Fusso for her continual guidance, teaching and support

To those who have inspired me
“He's not writing literary criticism; he's writing the secret history of the novels of Milan Kundera and teaching us how to read them.”

-Russel Banks
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Kundera’s Key Words: An Introduction

There are few novelists to whom words and language are as important as they are to Milan Kundera. His novels are based primarily on certain essential words\(^1\) and these words serve to uncover new aspects of existence. Kundera’s texts are an exploration of life through linguistic means.

There are certain key words that Kundera consistently repeats in his novels, and through this repetition, he creates meaning. Kundera has described his novels as being “primarily built on a number of fundamental words.”\(^2\) In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, for example, “the series is the following: forgetting, laughter, angels, litost, the border. In the course of the novel these five key words are analyzed, studied, defined, redefined, and thus transformed into categories of existence.”\(^3\)

Fundamental to comprehending Kundera’s novels and what they are trying to say is understanding the layers of meaning wrapped in each novel’s key words. To discover the self in Kundera’s novels is to grasp the essence of an existential problem, an existential code. As Kundera says, “the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words.”\(^4\)

These linguistic leitmotifs are the basis of Kundera’s texts, and much deliberation goes into Kundera’s choice of them. Each one has many layers of meaning that build upon one another to create a new and interesting idea. Kundera writes in *The Art of the Novel*:

> The novel’s meditative texture is supported by the armature of a few abstract terms. If I hope to avoid falling into the slough where everyone thinks he

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1 Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 84. See “Works Consulted” for full bibliographical information.  
understands everything without understanding anything, not only must I select those terms with utter precision, but I must define and redefine them...A novel is often, it seems to me, nothing but a long quest for some elusive definitions.⁵

It is these definitions that need to be explored. Each essential word has a story and that story can be traced, discovered, and understood. In this thesis, I will focus on what I consider to be some of the most interesting of Kundera’s key words. The first chapter will discuss the novel, what it means to Kundera, and how his own novels can be thought of in light of his theories. The second chapter will focus on Kundera’s entry into the aesthetic debate on beauty so as to understand what defines something as beautiful for him. Forgetting and its effects is the theme of the third chapter, while the fourth focuses on the significance of laughter and the joke. Finally, I will explore the categories of lightness and weight and their relation to one another as well as to history, character, and existence.

Not only is it important to trace these themes through Kundera’s novels, individually, but to truly understand Kundera’s message one must discover how Kundera’s key words build upon themselves when his novels are taken holistically. As one critic writes, “Kundera’s individual style in all his novels forms a unified whole. This unity rests...upon the clarity, logic and intellectual precision of the language.”⁶ For Kundera, the spirit of the novel rests upon continuity, “Each work is an answer to the preceding one,”⁷ and thus builds upon what has previously been said. Each of my chapters, then, will examine how the aforementioned key words are used throughout Kundera’s novels and what kinds of changes occur. Only by truly

⁵ Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 127.
⁶ Chvatík, Review of Contemporary Fiction, “Milan Kundera and the Crisis of Language”, 27.
⁷ Kundera, Art of the Novel, 18.
understanding these words within the context of Kundera’s most important novels and being able to analyze them as a whole can one claim to having deciphered Kundera’s ideas and intentions.

But what are Kundera’s most important novels? The majority of critics agree that the novels Kundera wrote while still living in Czechoslovakia are significantly more interesting than those he has written since moving to France. These include *The Joke, Laughable Loves, Life is Elsewhere, Jacques and his Master, The Farewell Party, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* It is the first of these and the last three that together create a story through their linguistic similarities. These “prose writings as a whole can be seen as variations on a few related themes.”*8* His first book, *The Joke,* introduces many of the concepts that he later explores and more fully develops. His second work, *Laughable Loves,* is a disjointed set of short stories and therefore does not fit in with the novelistic oeuvre. *Life is Elsewhere,* while a novel, is also separate from the stream of discourse that one can trace through his other novels. Similarly, *Jacques and his Master* is Kundera’s tribute to one of his favorite writers: Diderot. *The Farewell Party* is the next novel to pick up on the themes that Kundera first introduces in *The Joke.* These continue to be explored and developed in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* his last Czech novel.

These four novels (*The Joke, The Farewell Party, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) can be taken holistically. It is my goal to trace the aforementioned key words throughout these works and explore how they develop. I believe that only through such an extended analysis can one really understand the meaning behind Kundera’s repeated language and thus discover

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*8* Kussi, *Dialogues With Fiction,* 972.
the new aspects of human existence that Kundera attempts to unfold. These novels are extremely tightly structured and their “patterning reveals the wider issues involved in the characters’ personal dilemmas” ⁹ and the ideas these struggles uncover.

When he emigrates to France, Kundera not only begins a new life, but also starts a new set of linguistic explorations. His later novels focus on an entirely different set of key words because the previous words came into full fruition with The Unbearable Lightness of Being and with the end of his life in Prague. These later works are therefore not relevant to my exploration and will not be discussed.

Another question one may have at first glance is how I can focus on Kundera’s language when I am reading his novels in translation. I would agree that with most foreign authors this would create a large problem, but Kundera is an exception. Because he considers language so important, particularly these key words, Kundera actually takes special precautions to make sure that they are accurately translated in his novels. He explains in The Art of the Novel:

> And yet for me, because practically speaking I no longer have the Czech audience, translations are everything. I therefore decided, a few years ago, to put some order into the foreign editions of my books. This involved a certain amount of conflict and fatigue: reading, checking, correcting my novels, old and new, in the three or four foreign languages I can read, completely took over a whole period of my life. ¹⁰

Not only did Kundera actually examine the translations of every single one of the novels that I will be discussing, but this examination is further supplemented by a dictionary of words that he created specifically for his novels. Advised by the journal Le Débat to write his own personal dictionary, Kundera created a chapter in The Art

¹⁰ Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 121-2.
of the Novel with all the words that are particularly important to him.\textsuperscript{11} These words do not have synonyms because “each word has its own meaning and is semantically irreplaceable.”\textsuperscript{12} Each of the words that I will focus on (Laughter/joke, forgetting, novel, beauty, lightness/weight) is listed in this dictionary and is therefore one whose translation Kundera has supervised. It is thus possible to analyze these words and their significance even while not reading the texts in their original Czech.

Many also think of Kundera as a politico-historical writer, one whose primary purpose is to comment on Czechoslovak history. This viewpoint is questionable because Kundera’s goal is ultimately literary. While he may refer to historical events, these occurrences are only important insofar as they contribute to his development of characters. As Kundera writes in the preface to Life is Elsewhere, “For a novelist, a given historic situation is an anthropologic laboratory in which he explores his basic question: What is human existence?”\textsuperscript{13} When Kundera chooses which historical circumstances to refer to, he keeps only those that “create a revelatory existential situation” for his characters.\textsuperscript{14}

Similarly, Kundera believes that it is not necessary to look outside the text and learn historical context in order to understand what he is saying. This, combined with my desire to examine the linguistic-conceptual rather than historic-political texture of his novels, is why I do not consider what is happening in Czechoslovakia at the time periods Kundera describes in his novels. Looking at such external situations is of limited usefulness because the texts provide such reference points internally.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 121-2.
\textsuperscript{12} Kundera, Art of the Novel, 147.
\textsuperscript{13} O’Brien, Milan Kundera: Meaning, Play, and the Role of the Author, 6.
\textsuperscript{14} Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 36.
\textsuperscript{15} O’Brien, Milan Kundera: Meaning, Play, and the Role of the Author, 6.
John O’Brien interprets Kundera’s rejection of historical context to mean that Kundera’s works “share the emphasis of text over context and do so unapologetically at the expense of meaning.” O’Brien claims that Kundera’s focus on the fictional situations within the novel rather than on the historical context that the novel is situated in, strips his works of potential significance. He asserts that if Kundera spent more time working to represent the historical events, Kundera would generate a more interesting message. What O’Brien does not realize, however, is that meaning is created through Kundera’s emphasis on text rather than on history. By referring to uncommon incidents and reframing them through a unique perspective, Kundera is able to include them in his texts in an interesting and significant way. Kundera novelistic structure prioritizes linguistic meaning over historical accounts so as to create a fictional story. He recreates history in a way that allows for a more significant exploration both of that past and of the “concrete character of life.”

O’Brien along with Maria Nemcova Banerjee and a few others are the main secondary sources that I will be citing. While these critics rarely discuss Kundera’s language and key words within the framework I present, they often have valuable ideas to contribute to any discussion on Kundera’s novelistic intentions. In *Terminal Paradox*, Banerjee’s goal is to lay out a summary of each of Kundera’s Czech novels and within that summary she deconstructs and analyzes certain scenes and aspects of each work. It is within these analytic moments that I am able to draw on Banerjee as an accompaniment to my theories on Kundera’s novels. Similarly, other critics allude to the concepts I discuss and it is useful to introduce their perspective, but ultimately,
my use of secondary sources is as a complement to my own textual analysis of
Kundera’s intentions, language, and ideas.
The Art of the Novel; An Investigation of Kundera’s Novelistic Structure

In “The Death of the Author,”18 Roland Barthes posits that the author of a text is not a sovereign figure, but rather someone through whom language and literature are being passed on. He argues against a literary system centered on the author, in which the reader is constantly trying to understand what the author is attempting to communicate. The reading of a text, Barthes explains, is not the same as listening to a person speaking, because while a speaker is present, the author is absent. What is present, instead, is the text. There is no reason, then, to privilege the value of the author or to invoke the absent author above the present text. The author and the reader become partners in finding the meaning of a text; they pursue a relationship of equality rather than one in which the author is prioritized.

Milan Kundera’s theory of the novel simultaneously works in conjunction with and against Barthes’s notions. He – or a figure representing the author – is always present in Kundera’s novels and constantly interrupts the narrative to provide his thoughts or opinions regarding a particular event. He therefore demands that the reader recognize his influence on the text and be constantly aware of it. On the other hand, Kundera believes that that the reader should have interpretive influence over the text. He argues that “the reader’s imagination [should] automatically complete the writer’s.”19 In this, Kundera breaks with the traditions of psychological realism that insist that the writer must provide extensive information about a character’s physical experience, that the writer should explain a character’s past because the past determines the present, and that the character must be completely independent from the author. Kundera believes, instead, that a character is not a living being, but a

18 Barthes, Roland, “The Death of the Author”.
19 Kundera, Art of the Novel, 34.
creation of the imagination. By not providing full detail about a character’s physical
appearance or previous history, Kundera directs the reader to create these ideas on her
own. In this way, the reader and writer narrate the story together.

Not only is Kundera persistently present in his literature as the creator of the
novel that one is reading, but he further continuously interjects himself as an ever-
present persona. He tells the reader about the form and structure of the novel, the role
and significance of various characters, and the main themes of the work. In *The Book
of Laughter and Forgetting*, for example, Kundera suddenly stops describing the
action and decides to tell the reader about his intentions:

This entire book is a novel in the form of variations.
The individual parts follow each other like individual
stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a
thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into
the distance.
It is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina is
absent, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its main
character and main audience, and all the other stories
are variations on her story and come together in her life
as in a mirror. It is a novel about laughter and
forgetting, about forgetting and Prague, about Prague
and the angels. By the way, it is not the least bit
accidental that the name of the young man sitting at the
wheel is Raphael.\(^{20}\)

Kundera makes certain that the reader realizes that the novel that she is enjoying is
something that is carefully crafted and planned out; it is not a spontaneous eruption
but a deliberate and unified whole. By reminding the reader of his presence, Kundera
follows in the tradition of Diderot, and other writers of the eighteenth century, who
created the concept of a narrator who is as much a part of his works as above them.
Kundera’s intrusion further allows the reader to understand that the focus of the novel
is Tamina and that the key words that are important to the novel, and therefore to her,

are laughter and forgetting. As one critic writes, “Kundera’s novels give voice to a powerful, intrusive author identifying himself bluntly as none other than Milan Kundera.”

The presence of Kundera is also apparent in the fact that interior monologue does not exist in his novels. The reader can never fully lose herself in the story because she can only know the characters as well as an outsider can view them. Since the author does not have access to the inner thoughts of his characters, the reader also understands them only through their actions and dialogue. Kundera explains that although he wishes to “locate myself outside the so-called psychological novel, that does not mean that I wish to deprive my characters of an inner life. It means only that there are other enigmas, other questions that my novels pursue primarily.”

One of these “other enigmas” is the creation of the novel and the flexibility available in its form and structure that allow Kundera to be present in his writing. His sporadic interjections add a feeling of play to his novels by questioning the motivations of his characters, telling tangential tales, digressing from the main plot, divulging that the characters are fictional, and other such unexpected details. This voice is what makes Kundera’s writing distinctive. As one critic writes, “take out this intrusive dynamic, and the text is far less radical because it is precisely this ‘I’ that rips away the face of verisimilitude, that questions the possibility of meaning, and that carries through a recognizable disgust for any system that refuses free play with codes.”

Moreover, Kundera’s obvious presence is in stark contrast to the stealthy sneaking of the secret police. His frequent use of the pronoun “I” indicates his

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22 Kundera, Art of the Novel, 37.
strategy and procedure within the novel and separates him from the faceless gaze of
state security.24 Because of its transparency, relativity, and questioning, the novel, in
Kundera’s conception, is incompatible with totalitarianism. As Kundera writes, “the
world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded
of entirely different substances…[Totalitarian Truth] can never accommodate what I
would call the spirit of the novel.” 25 Kundera consistently emphasizes truth and the
factual retelling of history by continually referring to the past, present and future of
each work at various points throughout the novel. In this way, he not only reminds
the reader of what he considers to be important, but also keeps the reader from
forgetting the facts. Unlike the Soviet-dominated government, Kundera wants the
reader to remember what occurred before so that she can understand what comes next.
In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, for example, Kundera continues to remind the
reader of how Tereza and Tomas met, how early in the novel Tereza clutched Anna
Karenina under her arm, how the couple’s meeting was a result of six fortuities, and
so on.

When Kundera intervenes as himself, moreover, he follows a certain set of
practices. He explains in The Art of the Novel that “Tone is crucial. From the very
first word, [my] thoughts have a tone that is playful, ironic, provocative,
experimental, or inquiring.”26 Kundera’s presence, like the creation of the novel
itself, has a purpose. He wants to inspire the reader, make her see situations from a
new perspective, probe the reader to find answers to difficult questions, and in general
challenge the reader.

24 Pichova, “The Narrator in Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being."
25 Kundera, Art of the Novel, 14.
26 Kundera, Art of the Novel, 80.
One of Kundera’s stylistic inventions is his approach to character. Never does
Kundera allow the reader to forget that what she is reading is fiction and that the
people she is invested in are characters that were born from images in Kundera’s
imagination and experience. In the second half of The Unbearable Lightness of
Being, for example, Kundera describes how he conceives of his characters:

And once more I see him [Tomas] the way he appeared
to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing at the
window and staring across the courtyard at the walls
opposite. This is the image from which he was born. As
I have pointed out before, characters are not born like
people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a
sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic
human possibility that the author thinks no one else has
discovered or said something essential about.27

Kundera then goes on to explain that Tomas was born from the stimulating phrase
“Einmal ist keinmal” and Tereza was born “of the rumbling of a stomach.”28
Kundera shares with the reader his conceptions of character, where they originated,
and how they develop. He believes that it is unrealistic to try to convince the reader
that his characters were once alive. By embracing their fictionality, Kundera is able
to infuse his characters with a new kind of significance. They go beyond any idea of
puppets created and pulled by strings of words, but have a deeper meaning that one
can trace to Kundera’s thoughts, experiences, and imagination.

For Kundera, every character in his novels represents an unrealized self – a
self that could have been but did not become because of various other reasons and
situations. This direct overlap ties the fiction of the novel with the reality of history.

In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Kundera interrupts the story of Tomas and

27 Unbearable Lightness of Being, 221.
28 Kundera, Unbearable Lightness of Being, 39.
Tereza to explain their conception as well as the conception of other characters he has created throughout his fiction:

“But isn't it true that an author can write only about himself?” Staring impotently across a courtyard, at a loss for what to do; hearing the pertinacious rumbling of one's own stomach during a moment of love; betraying, yet lacking the will to abandon the glamorous path of betrayal; raising one's fist with the crowds in the Grand March; displaying one's wit before hidden microphones—I have known all these situations, I have experienced them myself, yet none of them has given rise to the person my curriculum vitae and I represent. The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own "I" ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.  

Kundera has lived as Tomas and Tereza, Franz and Sabina, and the variety of other characters present in his novels. He has experienced the moment that defines each of them, but never before did he have the opportunity to live past that moment, to take that moment to its logical conclusion. Through his fiction, Kundera is finally able to explore fully his various destinies and understand how they define his being. It is important to remember, however, that no one of these characters defines him and that even if one were to blend together every character in Kundera’s fiction to create one coherent individual, one would not thus create Milan Kundera; his whole is more than the sum of his creations.

For Kundera, moreover, it is not only the possibilities of his fate that interest him, but what they allow him to discover about other human beings and human life.

29 Kundera, Unbearable Lightness of Being, 221.
overall. The novel is the means through which Kundera is able to lead the exploration of the self – the human self rather than his own. Each character is a study of one human possibility in a world of infinite variety. Kundera explains that throughout his novels his voice is always connected to a character; he wants to “think [the character’s] attitudes, his ways of seeing things, in his stead and more deeply than he could do it himself.” 30 Kundera thus uses his own human experience to understand, study, and interpret the possibilities of other human experiences and he does this through character in the novel. It is interesting to note that Kundera’s goal to understand human experience is one that is present not only in literature, but in many other fields such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and so on. Kundera’s contribution, along with that of similar novelists, is to add to this growing list the literary genre of the novel.

Paradoxically, while it is apparent that Kundera is responsible for the existence of his characters, it often seems as if the characters are independent from the author. The narrator rarely has access to the character’s thoughts and the “narrator openly distances himself from psychological omniscience.” 31 Instead, the narrator attempts to present the characters from an uninvolved and disinterested standpoint. The “Dictionary of Words Misunderstood” in The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a perfect example of the author’s seeming distance. A dictionary is viewed as an objective source of knowledge that is not involved with its claims. By seeming simultaneously impartial and ever-present, Kundera allows for a wider range of possibilities to exist in his novels.

30 Kundera, Art of the Novel, 79.
31 Pichova, Slavic and East European Journal, 222.
Because of the many options Kundera provides for in his fiction, his novels are able to discover previously unknown parts of human identity. To Kundera, the “sole raison d'être of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover. A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel’s only morality.”\textsuperscript{32} The knowledge that only the novel can discover, however, is not simply something new, it must discover “man’s being.”\textsuperscript{33} Characters are a medium through which the novel can meditate on the human self. It is “the great prose form by which an author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves (characters), some great themes of existence.”\textsuperscript{34}

Kundera, moreover, thinks of the novel as not merely prose, but as verbal art. He believes that the art of the novel is equivalent to the art of poetry and that the novelist “endows every word of his prose with the uniqueness of the word in a poem.”\textsuperscript{35} The novel to Kundera is like free-verse, anti-lyrical poetry.\textsuperscript{36} The novel should have polyphony, repetition, meter, and a variety of other poetic devices. Moreover, the novelist must choose every word with care because each has its own distinct meaning and, according to Kundera, synonyms do not really exist. In a 1963 interview Kundera explained that “precision of thought moves me more than precision of observation. In literature, I like unceaseless intellect, whether it manifests itself as reflection, analysis, irony or compositional playfulness.”\textsuperscript{37} The author must choose every part of the novel with utmost care and meticulousness.

One technique Kundera often uses to contemplate humanity is questions. As one critic explains, the “novel does not assert anything; [it] searches and poses

\begin{itemize}
\item Kundera, \textit{Art of the Novel}, 5-6.
\item Kundera, \textit{Art of the Novel}, 64.
\item Kundera, \textit{Art of the Novel}, 142.
\item Kundera, \textit{The Joke}, preface.
\item Kundera, \textit{Art of the Novel}, 143.
\item Kussi, 974.
\end{itemize}
questions.”38 Just looking at some of the chapter titles from The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, one is surrounded by questions. “Who is Voltaire?”39 “What is Litost?”40 “Who is Kristyna?”41 By asking questions, Kundera once again allows the reader to directly interact with the novel. The reader realizes that her goal is to try to find and understand the answers to these questions and that these answers will offer insight into the human condition. As one critic writes, “Kundera interrogates his characters, poses questions to his various narrator-personae, engages his readers and puzzles them into questioning themselves.”42 The reader is then able not only to interact with the novel, but to begin to ask the same questions of herself as she asks of the novel. The reader begins to wonder who Voltaire actually is, what the significance of Litost is in her life, and if she can think of any people in her life who remind her of Kristyna. The questions Kundera asks the reader to answer are meaningful on two levels: that of the novel and that of the self.

Another aspect of the novel that is important to Kundera is its versatility in terms of form. In one work Kundera can have one section be a dictionary, another consist mainly of dialogue, a third contain poetry, a fourth be direct narration, a fifth be the narrator’s interjection, and so on. To Kundera, “the novel form is almost boundless freedom,”43 and this freedom allows him to experiment. Each form Kundera uses allows the reader to see the characters, and thus human existence, from different perspectives. A character’s persona may differ drastically from her dialogue.

The variety of forms, furthermore, allows for the characters to experience introspection in a new way. Rather than reading Sabina’s interior monologue on how

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39 Kundera, Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 123.
40 Kundera, Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 121.
41 Kundera, Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 119.
42 Kussi, 971.
43 Kundera, Art of the Novel, 83.
Franz does not understand her, the reader learns the same facts through a dictionary of misunderstood words. By learning about Sabina and Franz’s relationship through such a variety of forms – narrative, dictionary, commentary – the reader sees the story from different angles. The approach allows the reader to understand multiple perspectives on the characters and not be locked into a single interpretation.

Perspective in Kundera’s works is not confined to form or character, but can also be seen through their structure. A useful way to examine his novels is through the Russian formulations of fabula and sjuzhet. The Fabula is the part of the story that is objective and chronological, while the sjuzhet is that part of the story which is aesthetically motivated and filled with gaps, elisions, rearrangements, repetitions and emphases that invest the story with meaning.  

In Kundera’s novels, the fabula does not truly provide the reader with a sense of the novel; it is the sjuzhet that really gives meaning to the story. Although he does not use these exact terms, it is this same two-layered structure that forms Kundera’s writing:

I’ve always constructed them [novels] on two levels: on the first, I compose the novel’s story; over that, I develop the themes. The themes are worked out steadily within and by the story. Whenever a novel abandons its themes and settles for just telling the story, it goes flat.

All of Kundera’s novels illustrate this dichotomy between story and theme, fabula and sjuzhet. Let us take The Unbearable Lightness of Being as an example. The story tells of two people, Tomas and Tereza, who meet by chance and fall in love with each other. The love is complicated by Tomas’s cheating and Tereza’s inability to cope with her husband’s infidelities. The setting of their relationship is in Prague during

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44 Lodge, After Bakhtin, 160.
45 Kundera, Art of the Novel, 83.
the Russian occupation, and the reader can observe their obviously negative reactions to this occupation. In the end of the story, Tereza’s love wins and the couple moves away from the city and into the country, where they can go dancing at rural motels and take care of the animals on the collective farm. The subplot of the novel is Sabina and Franz, the story and ultimate failure of their relationship, and Sabina’s interactions with Tomas and Tereza. The level of plot alone, therefore, is relatively mundane and unoriginal.

It is the themes that Kundera develops through the plot that tell the real story. Kundera reveals the conclusion to the novel, Tomas and Tereza’s death, many pages before the end of the book, so that rather than focusing on the *fabula*, the reader can focus on the *sjuzhet*. As one critic explains,

> by revealing the conclusion of the novel much earlier than expected, the narrator eliminates suspense and ‘lays bare’ his technique with all its complexities. When a text is dominated by a suspenseful plot, the reader can block out everything but the outcome of the novel. By eliminating suspense, the narrator points to himself and his technique and forces the reader to read beyond the plot.  

While reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the reader does not need to focus her attentions on guessing what the outcome will be between Tomas and Tereza, whether or not they will eventually separate, or if love will conquer. Kundera instead reveals in the middle of the novel that Tomas and Tereza will move to the country together, finally be happy, and then die in a truck accident. Throughout the second half of the book, then, the reader can really focus on what path leads Tomas and Tereza to this conclusion and what lessons they learn; the reader is able to understand

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and think about the aspects of human existence that Kundera describes rather than the events that create the storyline.

In creating his *suzhet*, Kundera uses many interesting and innovative techniques. One such technique is his digressive, layered approach in presenting perspective. He retells the same events from multiple viewpoints and without a direct timeline. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example, Parts I and II both describe Tomas and Tereza’s meeting and the beginning of their love story. The difference, however, is that Part I is from Tomas’s standpoint, while Part II is from Tereza’s. Similarly, parts IV and V both describe the Russian invasion and Tomas and Tereza’s move to Switzerland and their return, but once again part IV is from Tereza’s point of view and V is from Tomas’s.

This multi-layered approach allows for the novel to gain in complexity and meaning. The novel is like an onion and each new fact or perspective is akin to peeling back a layer in search for the core. As Kundera writes in *The Art of the Novel*, “the novel’s spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: ‘things are not as simple as you think.’ That is the novel’s eternal truth.”47 Kundera forces the reader to realize that there is always more than one side to every story and that objective truth is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

Kundera’s method of narration, moreover, allows the reader to experience events in a way similar to that of the characters. As one critic writes, “it throws the reader, at the outset, into much the same doubt, confusion and uncertainty about the import of the tale as the characters experience in negotiating their lives.”48 In *The Joke*, for example, Kundera first presents the reader with a series of seemingly

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disjointed life histories, which only begin to make sense and connect later in the novel. Gradually, through a series of recognitions and after the peeling of multiple layers, the reader can perceive just how many links exist. The novel is “a multiperspectival work composed of four first-person internal monologues.” The perspectives are those of Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav, and Kostka. As Ludvik, the main character, looks back on his life and tries to understand the path he followed, the reader proceeds along a similar train of thought and works alongside Ludvik to interpret his fate by analyzing not only what Ludvik thinks, but also the thoughts of the other main characters. As Lodge points out, “the reader’s activity in interpreting and making sense of the story, responding to the clues and cues provided by the text, constantly readjusting a provisional interpretation in the light of new knowledge, re-enacts the efforts of the characters to make sense of their own lives.”

Kundera’s technique of multiple narration, moreover, allows for the reader to see beyond one character’s naïveté and to understand that no person can ever fully understand the events that make up his or her life. One critic explains that Kundera’s cross-examination of “the accounts of the story furnished by four narrators…expose [s] their overlapping delusions…Kundera, the skeptic shows that each man has his own falsehood.” It is impossible for an individual to see the facts of his life objectively, and by reading numerous subjective interpretations of the same event this truth is made painfully obvious. Through the multiple layers of Kundera’s novels the reader is exposed to one truth of human existence: the deception that is inherent to man’s view of his own life.

49 Craven, Faulty Consciousnesses: Milan Kundera’s The Joke, 92.
50 Lodge, After Bakhtin, 162.
51 Kussi, 971.
Another practice that is common to all of Kundera’s fiction is repetition. Repetition is, in fact, one of the key underlying techniques in all of Kundera’s works. His multi-layered approach is one sort of repetition, and there are many other kinds as well, including thematic, linguistic, and conceptual. As Kundera writes in the Art of the Novel, “repetition is…a governing thematic concern announced at the outset of the novel.”52 Through repetition Kundera can develop the ideas that he considers essential to the novel and use these ideas to reveal the truths inherent to humanity.

The key principle of the structure of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, for example, is repetition.53 The novel begins with Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return, which discusses the possibility of repeating life ad infinitum. If eternal return were to exist, every individual would continue to relive her life just as she had previously lived it, feeling the same pains and joys, thinking the same thoughts, and experiencing the same activities. The idea of eternal return follows the reader throughout the novel, and each event and experience that occurs must be thought of in light of the lack of eternal return in human life.

Kundera further emphasizes the non-repetition of man’s existence through the phrase Einmal ist keinmal, which can be translated as, “what happens once might as well have never happened at all.” As John Barnard writes, “The repetition in the novel is “set against the ‘one-thing-after-another’ actuality of human experience, where repetition is impossible.”54 The entirety of the novel is a contrast between the repetition that is made possible by the novel and the impossibility of repetition in actual human existence.

52 Kundera, Art of the Novel.
53 Kundera, Art of the Novel.
54 Barnard, 68.
One example of recurrence in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is Sabina’s bowler hat. As it continues to return its meaning constantly changes and gathers more significance. Kundera interrupts in his narration of the story to explain this:

The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina's life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed. I might call it Heraclitus' ("You can't step twice into the same river") riverbed: the bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another semantic river: each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a parade of echoes) together with the new one. Each new experience would resound, each time enriching the harmony. The reason why Tomas and Sabina were touched by the sight of the bowler hat in a Zurich hotel and made love almost in tears was that its black presence was not merely a reminder of their love games but also a memento of Sabina's father and of her grandfather, who lived in a century without airplanes and cars.\(^5\)

The bowler hat began as a reminder of her grandfather, the mayor of a small town. Next, it was a memento of her father because when he died, Sabina’s brother appropriated all his property and as a way to show her apathy and contempt Sabina just took the bowler hat and walked away. Tomas then re-appropriated the bowler hat as a sexual object and a part of their love games. Tereza attempted to enter these love games by photographing Sabina nude except for the bowler hat. The hat, moreover, was also a symbol of Sabina’s originality, which she consciously cultivated. In Switzerland, the hat became a sentimental object that reminded her of her past and history. Finally, it became one more word in the dictionary of words misunderstood.

\(^{55}\) Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 88.
between Sabina and Franz. He could not contemplate its history or the moments it represented, while to Sabina they encompass the history of her existence.

Repetition of themes and ideas is present not only within each one of Kundera’s novels, but throughout his oeuvre. There are many themes that the reader familiar with Kundera will recognize while reading his novels and this will serve as a reminder that Kundera’s works are not separate entities, but variations on the same themes. These subjects include beauty, laughter/the joke, forgetting, vertigo, kitsch, lightness, weight, spirit, self, identity, body, soul, and so on.56 Once Kundera begins exploring a theme, he continues to investigate it until he fully engages its entire spectrum of meaning in one specific work. Following this extensive inquiry, Kundera stops addressing this concept because he feels that he has explored it fully. This can be seen with the themes of lightness and weight, for example, which are dealt with extensively in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and are then absent in Kundera’s later novels. There is, then, an overlap in the themes Kundera explores and to fully understand one of these themes, the reader must explore what came before it. However, every theme is not studied in every novel and once Kundera has fully investigated an idea, he seemingly no longer finds it interesting.

Kundera’s technique in writing his novels is filled with many layers of meaning through repetition and recurrence. Through the multiple perspectives he offers, the reader is able to learn about human existence and thus to discover what only the novel can discover. He uses many forms and structures to convey an existential code that teaches us about life.

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56 Many of these will be discussed later in this work.
Beauty, Ugliness and Kitsch: An Exploration

The debate on the characteristics of the Beautiful and the Sublime started with Pseudo Longinus in the first or third century CE and has steadily developed and continues to be discussed. Edmund Burke, the first to distinguish between these two aesthetic principles, created a list of characteristics of each in his 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Some fifty years later Immanuel Kant adapted Burke’s ideas in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. The debate on what exactly defines the beautiful as an aesthetic category is one that continues to the present day. Milan Kundera enters this debate in many of his novels as well as in his treatise, *The Art of the Novel*.

Kundera posits that in order for something to be beautiful it must have an element of the previously undiscovered. This is made obvious in Kundera’s definition of beauty in *The Art of the Novel*, in the chapter where he creates his own personal dictionary of the words he loves in his novels, words he believes cannot have a synonym and into which he wants to infuse his own meaning. Kundera writes,

> Beauty, the last triumph possible for a man who can no longer hope. Beauty in art: the suddenly kindled light of the never-before-said. [my emphasis] This light that radiates from the great novels time can never dim, for human existence is perpetually being forgotten by man, and thus the novelists’ discoveries, however old they may be, will never cease to astonish us.⁵⁷

For Kundera, the most important aspect of beauty is that it provides the viewer with something new that she had never heard of before. Such beauty can be found in any medium—architecture, writing, painting, music, or even life itself. Furthermore,  

while beauty comes into the world ‘suddenly,’ unexpectedly, it is predominantly a willful creation by the artist. The element of chance is minor, while the ingenuity of the novelist is essential. Kundera underscores the crucial role of the novelist by separating the novelist from his conception of ‘man.’ The novelist rises above the human through his creation and his ability to infuse Beauty into what would otherwise have been a hopeless world. This distinction between the novelist and the rest of mankind places significant value on both beauty as it is appears in life and on those who are able to create it.

The beauty of the novel as an artistic creation is essential to Kundera and is his focus in the Art of the Novel. He explains that the aspect of the novel that makes it beautiful is the very same aspect that defines it—the novel’s ability to discover a new way of thinking, “a hitherto unknown segment of existence.”58 The novel is then, by definition, a beautiful creation.

Moreover, beauty becomes intensified when it finds not just a new aspect of existence, but more importantly, a new aspect of human existence. Once again, this is a characteristic that Kundera equates with the novel. Every novel “offers some answer to the question: what is human existence, and wherein does its poetry lie?”59 Through his definition of beauty, Kundera basically posits that the novel exemplifies beauty by its very nature. In order for a work to be a novel, it must create a concept that the reader has never heard before regarding some aspect of human existence, and this is the same characteristic that, for Kundera, defines beauty. The novel is, moreover, the kind of beauty that will last infinitely because, as it continues to exist, it

58 Kundera, Unbearable Lightness of Being, 6.
59 Kundera, Unbearable Lightness of Being, 161.
will continue to impress its readers, and teach them what they can only learn through their reading of it.

Kundera defines beauty as a category that is not wholly devoid of other meaning, yet one that can exist purely on an aesthetic level. In *The Joke*, he explains that part of the beauty of the Ride of the Kings is that it has no significance outside of the actual tradition. He suggests that “perhaps the Ride of the Kings is beautiful to us at least partly because the message it was meant to communicate has long been lost, leaving the gestures, colors, and words to stand out all the more clearly.”\(^{60}\) Because the viewer can focus on the actions of the Ride of the Kings without needing to frame the event in terms of historical significance, it is easier to appreciate the beauty that is inherently part of the ceremony.

Similarly, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, after Tereza leaves Tomas in Geneva, he is finally able to appreciate the beauty of their love because it is no longer tied to concrete and burdensome expectations and traditions. He always recognized that “his love for Tereza was beautiful, but it was also tiring: he had constantly had to hide things from her, sham, dissemble, make amends, buck her up, calm her down, give her evidence of his feelings, play the defendant to her jealousy, her suffering, and her dreams, feel guilty, make excuses and apologies. Now what was tiring had disappeared and only the beauty remained.”\(^{61}\) Without having to be responsible for carrying out the actions that a person in love must execute, Tomas can finally recognize the beauty that exists in his relationship with Tereza. Once the burdens are lifted, it is easy to identify beauty as an aesthetic category.

\(^{60}\) Kundera, *The Joke*, 221.
Another essential characteristic of beauty is repetition. In the first pages of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the narrator invokes Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return, which concerns the possibility of repeating life ad infinitum. If eternal return were to exist, every individual would continue to relive her life just as she had previously lived it, feeling the same pains and joys, thinking the same thoughts, and experiencing the same activities. Kundera further develops this idea and suggests that without eternal return, “life disappears once and for all” and “whether [this life] was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing” (3). The life of a novel as well as of its characters, however, does experience eternal return; each time a reader lifts the book, the novel is read once more and the characters undergo the same set of experiences. The beauty of the novel, therefore, does mean something, and continues to exist each time the book is read.

Moreover, through his technique of retelling the same story through different perspectives, Kundera causes the action to repeat. Tereza, for example, is the heroine of a story that is told twice, in Part One and again in Part Two. As one critic writes, “as a character in the novel she is made to live the time of repetition. But her being reflected in her own consciousness, has the singular beauty and density of significance.”⁶² Tereza, then, continues to recur both through the repetition of her story as well as the different ways in which the development of her personality can be seen. One can see the creation of her position in society through three different lenses: her own perception, Tomas’s description, and as Kundera’s creation. Because

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⁶² Banerjee, 214. While I will be quoting Banerjee extensively in this chapter, it is important to note that Banerjee does not at any point give a concentrated consideration to the subject of beauty in Kundera. Instead, I have picked out scattered quotes throughout her text that highlight the points that I am making.
the reader can understand the development of Tereza’s consciousness in a multitude of ways, her character holds a greater amount of beauty in Kundera’s sense.

Repetition produces beauty not only in the creation of the novel, but also within the novel. The recurrence of the number six, for example, creates a beauty that leads to love. There are six chance happenings that push Tomas and Tereza together: (1) A complex neurological case that happened to be discovered in Tereza’s town; (2) the chief surgeon of Tomas’s hospital happened to be suffering from sciatica and so Tomas was sent in his place; (3) Tomas happened to stay at the hotel where Tereza was employed rather than one of the several others in town; (4) Tomas happened to have enough free time before his train left to stop at the hotel restaurant; (5) Tereza happened to be on duty when Tomas was at the restaurant; and (6) Tereza happened to be serving Tomas’s table. The number six was also present in several other mediums: it was the number of Tomas’s hotel room; the house Tereza had lived in Prague before her parents divorced was numbered six; Tereza’s shift ended at six; and the church bells chimed six just before Tomas appeared in front of Tereza’s flat.

When Tereza realizes that the number six continues to appear, it reveals for her a significance that allows her to fall in love with Tomas. As Banerjee explains, “beauty and love are the twin communicating vessels of that moment’s alchemy, exchanging their mutual gifts – beauty issuing into love with its vital magnitude, and love passing back the intimate tenderness of its mnemonic speech.”63 Tomas, meanwhile, does not recognize this repetition and thus does not experience the beauty that Tereza perceives. He constantly asks himself what love is, and his “skeptical mind resist[s] an imagination inflamed by beauty [and] seeks to undermine his new feeling.”64

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63 Banerjee, 216.
64 Banerj33, 202.
the end of the novel, however, Tomas becomes a part of the recurring incidents that
Tereza had always valued. When the couple goes dancing and rents a room at the
country hotel, the reader can imagine the lovers entering their sleeping place: it is a
room with two beds pushed together, and when they switch on the light, a nocturnal
butterfly escapes from under the lampshade and begins circling in the air. That same
butterfly had appeared in Tereza’s dream in the previous chapter and she was already
standing inside this room. The lampshade is the same and the butterfly is still perched
precariously on outstretched wings. “The effect of the rhythmic repetition of this
image suggests the vital step of beauty about to enter, breaking through the partition
of reality that keeps it hidden.”65 As the butterfly opens its wings and encircles
Tomas and Tereza, it allows for the beauty that has always existed in their love to
escape and surround them. This love also allows Tomas to see Tereza in a brighter
light. As Kundera acknowledges in The Farewell Party, “love makes the beloved
woman more beautiful,”66 and only at the end of their life together is Tomas truly
satisfied with his relationship with Tereza.

The actions of Kundera’s characters as well as their words further exemplify
his definition of beauty. Similarly to his dictionary in The Art of the Novel, Kundera
creates a list of “words misunderstood” in the third section of The Unbearable
Lightness of Being. These are phrases that Sabina and Franz tend to interpret in vastly
different lights. One of these phrases is “The beauty of New York.” In the definition,
the reader can understand Kundera’s philosophy on beauty as well as how it is
interpreted by the characters. The significance of the passage makes it worth quoting
at length:

65 Banerjee, 251.
66 Kundera, Farewell Party, 42
The beauty of New York…[is] unintentional… [it] sparkle[s] with a sudden wondrous poetry. Sabina said…Another way of putting it might be ‘beauty by mistake.’…Franz said,… But it’s not our European beauty. It's an alien world. Didn’t they at last agree on something? No. There is a difference. Sabina was very much attracted by the alien quality of New York’s beauty. Franz found it intriguing but frightening; it made him feel homesick for Europe (101-2).

Once again, beauty is defined by its novelty. It is something that has never been seen before and, just as with the novel, this quality makes New York beautiful. Kundera, moreover, likens the architecture of New York to poetry so as to further exaggerate the parallel between his conception of the novel and his conception of architecture. His ideas on what makes the novel beautiful can be applied to all of the various arts—architecture, painting, poetry, composition, and so on. Moreover, this definition of the beautiful is the only phrase of which Sabina and Franz have a similar interpretation. While they have different reactions to the beauty of New York, they are both able to label it as beautiful, and to recognize that this beauty comes from the unfamiliar and original qualities of the city. The fact that they agree, at least, on why New York is beautiful raises the concept of beauty onto a higher plane than the other words in their dictionary of ‘words misunderstood’ and thus universalizes the definition of beauty.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera also introduces another quality of beauty that is not as predominant in *The Art of the Novel*. Beauty has a quality of chance, of unpredictability, even of accident. Beauty is no longer an intentional art crafted by the novelist, but one that occurs fortuitously. Kundera describes the beauty of New York as one that was not thoughtfully created and planned out because if it had been, it would not be as beautiful. It is necessary for Kundera to establish the beauty of chance because much of the novel is based on
coincidental circumstances, and Kundera wants the reader to see these fateful events as beautiful. He asserts that as the likelihood of an event occurring decreases, the significance and beauty of it increase. The meeting of Tomas and Tereza, for example, was the result of six improbable fortuities and is thus “more significant and noteworthy [because of] the great...number of fortuities necessary to bring it about.”

In this episode, Kundera further links beauty and chance by describing the various aspects of their meeting as beautiful. Tereza sees a “wretched” and “barren little park” as “an island of beauty” because this is where she meets Tomas after her shift is over. Tomas is sitting on the same bench as she sat on the previous day, and it is this accidental occurrence that convinces her “that this stranger was her fate.” Similarly, the coincidence that “Tomas appears in the hotel restaurant at the same time the radio is playing Beethoven” becomes important to Tereza only because of the love she feels for Tomas. This love further inflames her sense of beauty and causes her to forever link beauty with Beethoven; everything happening around her at the moment she hears the music would “take on its beauty.”

Another reason why Kundera emphasizes these seemingly chance incidents is because he believes that people become transfixed by unlikely happenings and continue to recreate them later in life. Kundera writes, “guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence...into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual’s life...without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in

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69 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 50.  
70 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 51.  
72 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 51.
times of greatest distress.”  

Beauty, then, is part of the essence of life. Kundera’s characters teach the reader that all people attempt to arrange their life in a way that makes it beautiful. When an occurrence happens for the first time, it is chance, but when it keeps recurring it is usually subconsciously planned because repetition invokes beauty. This idea goes back to the eighteenth-century aesthetic debates on the beautiful and the sublime, when Edmund Burke posited that repetition is an essential characteristic of beauty, while the sublime is typically singular but extremely large in magnitude. Similarly, the garden theory of Uvedale Price, who followed Burke, also prescribed a combination of planning and accident.

Kundera then continues to apply this concept of fortuitous circumstance to the novel through the example of Anna Karenina’s suicide in Tolstoy’s novel, *Anna Karenina*. In the novel, Anna Karenina meets her soon-to-be lover, Vronsky, at a train station, and during this first interaction a man is crushed by a train. Near the end of the novel, when Anna’s affair with Vronsky has led to many problems, Anna kills herself in the same way. Readers have criticized Tolstoy for this repetition because they thought it to be unrealistic. Kundera, on the other hand, explains that “it is wrong…to chide the novel for being fascinated by mysterious coincidences…, but it is right to chide a man for being blind to such coincidences in his daily life. For he thereby deprives his life of a dimension of beauty.”  

The novel depicts these motifs because not only do they mirror reality, but they instill yet another level of beauty into art. Kundera also criticizes those who pass judgment on the repetition of words, images, and symbols in the novel, because these people are blind to both the meaning

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73 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 52.
74 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 52.
such recurrence infuses into the story as well as the beauty of these themes in everyday existence.

Another place where beauty exists for Kundera is in the area of dreams. Like the novel, dreams create something that has never previously existed and can never exist again. Two people can never have the same dream, and this inimitability makes dreams beautiful. Moreover, if dreams were not beautiful, the dreamer would not remember them. Tereza’s dreams exemplify this beauty:

The dreams were eloquent, but they were also beautiful. That aspect seems to have escaped Freud in his theory of dreams. Dreaming is not merely an act of communication (or coded communication, if you like); it is also an aesthetic activity, a game of the imagination, a game that is a value in itself. Our dreams prove that to imagine—to dream about things that have not happened—is among mankind’s deepest needs. Herein lies the danger. If dreams were not beautiful, they would quickly be forgotten. But Tereza kept coming back to her dreams, running through them in her mind, turning them into legends. Tomas lived under the hypnotic spell cast by the excruciating beauty of Tereza's dreams.  

On one level, dreams are beautiful because they allow for events to happen without the burden of consciousness or rationality, and so the aesthetic aspect of existence is more prominent. On another level, dreams create the “never before said,” and their singularity contributes to their beauty. The reader can now see why dreams drive so much of the action in Kundera’s novels. The aesthetic motivates much of Kundera’s creation, and dreams are characterized by the beautiful.

Furthermore, Kundera asserts through his novels that nothing can exist above and beyond beauty. In The Joke, Ludvik’s relationship with Lucie attempts to transcend beauty. Lucie’s gentle manners heal Ludvik and restore in him a

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75 Kundera, Unbearable Lightness of Being, 59.
spontaneity of emotion. While they are together, there is a “brief moment of transparency that allows their souls a silent communion – ‘more than beauty more than anything / A festival of understanding.’” However, this unity of Ludvik and Lucie’s souls exists only fleetingly. Ludvik soon attempts to pressure her into consummating their ‘love,’ and when she continues to resist, they have a fight and she disappears from his life. Although they want their relationship to be “more than beauty,” the primal need for sex brings their relationship back to reality.

When Kostka makes love to Lucie, this potential for surpassing beauty can once again be seen, but it is still impossible. At the end of the winter, Lucie responds to Kostka’s gentleness and “Their lovemaking on a hilltop is a fulfillment of the pastoral promise of beauty that eluded Ludvik’s grasp.” However, immediately after Kostka and Lucie consummate their relationship, Kostka feels tremendous guilt for being “a seducer in priest’s robes,” and abandons Lucie. Once again, a relationship that surpasses beauty cannot exist, for beauty is the supreme guiding principle in Kundera’s novels.

Similarly, in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Tamina attempts to surpass beauty through memory. She is devoted to remembering her husband and “is not compelled by a desire for beauty,” but rather “by a desire for life.” However, as Banerjee points out, beauty is all that memory can provide her. The memories that continue to exist for Tamina are only the ones that are beautiful. Without an element of beauty, memories are lost.

76 Banerjee, 29.
77 Banerjee, 43.
78 Kundera, The Joke, 200.
79 Kundera, Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 86.
80 Banerjee, 149.
Likewise, Karel from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* recognizes that beauty transcends the boundaries of time. He describes how “beauty is a spark which flares up when two ages meet across the distance of time, that beauty is a clean sweep of chronology, a rebellion against time. And he was filled to the brim with that beauty and a feeling of gratitude for it.” While most relationships are subject to time’s linear motion and to the gaps chronology creates, beauty exists beyond these notions. Beauty allows Karel to create a fantasy that is chronologically impossible because time becomes insignificant in the face of beauty.

It is important to view beauty not only in terms of itself, but also through the lens of its diametrical opposite: ugliness. Although Kundera does not elaborate on ugliness the way he does on beauty, he makes the reader aware that the only purpose of ugliness is to try to undermine beauty. The older women swimming in the pool in *The Farewell Party* work to weaken the conception of feminine beauty. Kundera describes how “they yearned to torpedo the glory of feminine beauty, for they knew that in the last analysis one body is more or less like another, and ugliness revenges itself against beauty by whispering in a man’s ear: Look, this is the real truth of that feminine figure you find so bewitching.”

Similarly, Tereza’s mother in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* attempts to parody Tereza’s beauty by exposing Tereza’s nudity as well as her own. Neither Tereza’s mother nor the women in the spa succeed in undermining youthful beauty. Tereza’s belief in beauty ultimately conquers not only her mother’s confinement, but even Tomas’s resistance.

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Likewise, at the end of *The Farewell Party* even Jakub, the most resistant character, yields to the power of beauty. Jakub realizes that he had always overlooked beauty, but when he sees Klima’s wife he realizes that there is such a thing as beauty and that he has let it pass him by. Klima’s wife calls to “Jakub’s mind that realm he had never entered, the world of music and art; she seemed to merge with the burning foliage which he no longer saw as a message or symbol of fire but only as the ecstasy of beauty, awakened by the grace of her steps, the ring of her voice.”\(^{83}\) As he ponders the impact he feels from seeing her beauty, Jakub begins to wonder about the possibility that “beauty mean [s] more than truth.”\(^{84}\)

Just as ugliness is a force that attempts to despoil beauty, kitsch works towards a similar goal, but with greater success. Kitsch is an aesthetic category in its own right that cannot be explained either by the absence of beauty or as its opposite (ugliness). Kitsch is, instead, “a perversion of beauty.”\(^{85}\) It attempts to drown beauty through its overwhelming presence. As Kundera explains, “Kitsch is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling.”\(^{86}\) Kitsch can be seen in any image that is consistently repeated and recognized by the majority of the population. It can be the “heroic socialist image of a steel factory under construction [or] we may get the kitsch of American happiness represented by a big car full of kids, but the aim and effect are the same: to please the eye and heart in accordance with a conventional set of expectations.”\(^{87}\) Kitsch, then, opposes beauty because rather than discovering something new it only repeats what is already familiar. The knowledge of the novel, for example, is to discover what has not yet

\(^{83}\) Kundera, *Farewell Party*, 174-5.

\(^{84}\) Kundera, *Farewell Party*, 183.

\(^{85}\) Banerjee, 243.


\(^{87}\) Banerjee, 243. 
been revealed. This unveiling “causes surprise and the surprise aesthetic pleasure or, in other words, a sense of beauty. On the other hand, there exists yet another beauty: beauty outside knowledge. One describes what has already been described a thousand times over in a light and lovely manner. The beauty of a thousand times already told is what I deem kitsch.” Kitsch is slowly overwhelming the senses of society through noise, be it the noise of cars, music, or signs, but the novel allows for an escape from kitsch.

One may protest that it has earlier been noted that repetition is also a quality of beauty, so how can it be the main factor in creating kitsch? There is a distinction to be made regarding the kind of repetition that is present in beauty in contrast to that displayed through kitsch. The repetition inherent to beauty is one of symmetry but not exact duplication. It is a reintroduction of the same events, the same story but from a slightly different viewpoint or a new perspective. The repetition that is inherent in kitsch, on the other hand, is replication. It is showing the same scene without any change whatsoever.

Moreover, beauty is a reaction targeted to the individual. A scene is beautiful because it evokes that response in a specific person. Kitsch, conversely, is aimed at a mass audience. It is meant to cause a response in a group of people through an image that is already implanted in each person’s consciousness. Kitsch references what the audience already knows in exact detail, while beauty evokes prior knowledge but casts it in a new and original light.

Beauty is an overwhelming force in Kundera’s writing as well as in his literary philosophy. He places beauty in a category that rises above everything else, including

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89 Kitsch will be discussed further in other chapters.
ugliness and kitsch, and shapes the world with its strength. It is the originality and fortuity of beauty that make the novel as potent an art form as Kundera believes it to be. It is beauty that weaves motifs of coincidences and happenings into the lives of Kundera’s characters as well as into the lives of humanity as a whole. Beauty is the principle that man lives his life by, and even Kundera acknowledges the power it simultaneously holds over him and bestows upon him. Through his writing Kundera perpetuates the beautiful and brings it to his readers. The novelist, then, is the conveyer between the almighty spirit of the Beautiful and the rest of society, and the novel is the form through which he is able to communicate.
The Possibility of Forgetting

As we have already seen, Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return had a profound effect on Kundera’s writing and helped to structure *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. This, however, is not the only idea of Nietzsche’s that Kundera adopts and remolds. While he does not explicitly refer to Nietzsche’s *On Truth and Lying in an Extramoral Sense* (1873), it is apparent that the idea of forgetting that surrounds Nietzsche’s argument is important to Kundera. Just as eternal return is a frame for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the idea of forgetting frames both *The Joke* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

In *On Truth and Lying in an Extramoral Sense*, Nietzsche asserts that linguistic communication necessarily involves a forgetting of the fact that all language is metaphoric. In other words, because linguistic semantic systems are inherently founded on a generalizing system, users of language are always lying in an extramoral sense. Nietzsche provides the reader with the example of the word ‘leaf.’ If person A says to person B that she saw a leaf, person B believes that he understands what person A meant. However, the generalization of a leaf is significantly different from the actual leaf person A may be referring to. In the first place, there are no two leaves that are the same. Moreover, a leaf on an elm tree is distinctly different from one on a weeping willow or an oak. When person A says leaf and person B nods in understanding, both must lie in order to understand each other, and furthermore both must also forget that they are constantly lying when they are communicating. As Nietzsche writes, ‘only by forgetfulness can man ever come to believe that he has
truth.” In other words, all truth is always a forgetting of the falsity necessitated by speech.

If language necessitates forgetting, then the novel, whose only medium is linguistic, is permeated by forgetting. When one reads Kundera’s novels, she must remember that each sentence is a sort of metaphor and so what he says is transformed by the reader’s perspective. The forgetting that language necessitates is one that frames the novel. Furthermore, the leitmotif of “organized forgetting” explicitly permeates Kundera’s novels. This is most apparent in The Joke and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. Kundera portrays forgetting as something that can occur consciously or subconsciously, but the essential question one must ponder is how easy is it to forget.

Conscious forgetting is persistently present in The Joke. When Ludvik meets Jaroslav, his oldest friend, on the street, he purposely ignores him because he does not want to reexamine the history of their relationship. He wants to forget the memories that their friendship had once formed and move beyond them into a future where they no longer exist enough to trouble him.

Similarly, when Ludvik encounters Lucie during his return to a small provincial town in Czechoslovakia, his impression of her is characterized by the familiar blurred with the forgotten. While her face is very different, her eyes appear “just as [Ludvik] had known them.” However, when he hears Lucie speak, Ludvik begins to think that it may not really be Lucie. Ludvik describes how he “was certain that [he] didn’t recognize the voice; it sounded matter-of-fact, casual, nonchalant,

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90 Nietzsche, 248.
91 Banerjee, 144.
92 Kundera, The Joke, 8.
almost coarse; it was the voice of a stranger." 93 In reality, the voice does belong to Lucie, and the fifteen years that have passed since Ludvik last saw her make it difficult for him to recognize her features and her voice. A voice which at one point was so distinctive that it seemed as if could never be forgotten, becomes unrecognizable after a certain length of time.

Similarly, in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Mirek is busily trying to forget his past. He is ashamed of his former mistress, Zdena, because of her loyalty to the Communist Party and because her physical ugliness reminds him of the aesthetic inadequacy of his former years. 94 He is even “particularly gratified to note that he had completely forgotten their copulations, couldn’t conjure up a single second of them.” 95 Just as Ludvik believes that if he can forget Jaroslav their former friendship can stop haunting him, Mirek believes that if he forgets Zdena, then it is the same as if their relationship had never existed. It is interesting to note, however, that Mirek is never able to fully forget Zdena, and memories of their lovemaking appear to him at times. Forgetting, then, is not as easy as it seems.

While many of the characters in Kundera’s novels strive consciously to forget parts of their past, there are many bigger themes or events in his novels that are characterized by an unconscious forgetting. One such tradition is The Ride of the Kings, which Kundera depicts in The Joke. Since his childhood Kundera has been fascinated by the Ride of the Kings. In his introduction he describes it as

a singularly beautiful ceremony whose meaning has long been lost and which survives only as a string of obscure gestures. This rite frames the action of the novel; it is a frame of forgetting. Yesterday’s action is obscured by today, and the strongest link binding us to a

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93 Kundera, The Joke, 8.
94 Banerjee, 144.
95 Kundera, Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 4.
life constantly eaten away by forgetting is nostalgia. Remorseful nostalgia and remorseless skepticism are the two pans of the scales that give the novel its equilibrium.\textsuperscript{96}

The majority of the rites involved in The Ride of the Kings have become meaningless, but they continue to be repeated because of the tradition that is attached to the ceremony. The participants in the ceremony, however, never acknowledge that they do not fully understand where the rituals come from. Just as communication, according to Nietzsche, is dependent upon an unconscious forgetting, the continuation of rituals whose meaning has become lost requires a forgetting of the fact that the participants no longer remember the significance attached to the traditions. However, as Banerjee points out, The Ride of the Kings “also connotes the very opposite of the act of forgetting, a ceremony of mnemonic empowering.”\textsuperscript{97} In other words, by constantly repeating the rituals associated with the Ride of the Kings, it can never be completely forgotten. It then becomes necessary to distinguish between the remembering of actions through their repetition and the remembrance of their meaning. This dichotomy is exactly what Kundera refers to when he explains that The Joke is framed by “remorseful nostalgia and remorseless skepticism.” The repetition of the Ride of the Kings refers to the former, while the lack of understanding regarding the meaning of the ritual refers to the latter.

The Ride of the Kings is one example of the forgetting of history, a subject upon which Kundera constantly comments. New events keep overshadowing previous events and causing the former to fade from memory.

The bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of

\textsuperscript{96} Kundera, The Joke, viii.
\textsuperscript{97} Banerjee, 45.
Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai desert made people forget Allende, and the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai, and so on and so forth until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten...Nowadays, history moves at a brisk clip. A historical event, though soon forgotten, sparkles the morning after with the dew of novelty.\textsuperscript{98}

Because an event lasts only momentarily before it is replaced by a more recent occurrence, it is rare that anything has a lasting enough impact to be remembered, particularly for a significant period of time. As one critic writes in response to Kundera, “if history can be dissolved into pure difference, then the result is a massive hemorrhage of meaning: because past events only happen once they fail to take firm root and can be expunged from memory.”\textsuperscript{99}

It is interesting to note, however, that in Kundera’s novels one reads about the same events multiple times, each new description from a different perspective. These events, then, have a chance to become solidified in the reader’s memory unlike actual life occurrences. In \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being}, for example, the reader hears about how Tomas and Tereza met first from Tomas’s perspective and later from Tereza’s. Each retelling of a story not only adds an additional perspective, but also allows the reader to better understand the full picture of what actually occurred and be more likely to remember it.

In history, moreover, events constantly continue to be forgotten because history is always moving. Kundera explains that “people who have emigrated (there are a hundred and twenty thousand of them) and the people who have been silenced

\textsuperscript{98} Kundera, \textit{Book of Laughter and Forgetting}, 7-8.
and removed from their jobs (there are half a million of them) are fading like a procession moving off into the mist. They are invisible and forgotten.”

Time is not the only factor that contributes to the forgetting of events. Individuals in power often attempt to force a forgetting of cultural rituals or past incidents for their own political gain. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera describes how president Husak tries to make the Czech people disregard their past experiences:

If Franz Kafka was the prophet of a world without memory, Gustav Husak is its creator... Husak, the seventh president of my country, is known as the president of forgetting…Not since 1621 has the history of the Czech people experienced such a massacre of culture and thought. Everybody everywhere assumes that Husak simply tracked down his political opponents. In fact, however, the struggle with the political opposition was merely an excuse, a welcome opportunity the Russians took to use their intermediary for something much more substantial. I find it highly significant in this connection that Husak dismissed some hundred and forty-five Czech historians from universities and research institutes…The first step in liquidating a people…is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.

The death of Czech culture, or any culture, can happen through the forgetting of its rituals, events, and history. Without a solid past tradition that one can refer to when shaping the future, the shared memory of a people is lost. The existence of a culture is dependent upon the knowledge of its past history. Once that knowledge is liquidated, the society is no longer able to perpetuate itself.

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Although it is now apparent that forgetting is possible, and that it can certainly be used as a tool to eradicate a culture, the question still remains of how easy it is to forget. In *The Joke*, Helena feels that it is easier to forget her dreams than to pursue them, but paradoxically, she continues trying to fulfill her desires. She explains that when she saw other women acting promiscuously, she would “turn away in horror and look elsewhere, even though it would have been much simpler to forget my girlish dreams of love, forget them and cross the border into the realm of that monstrous freedom where shame, inhibitions, and morals have ceased to exist.”\(^{102}\) However, she never forgets her desire to find love and even gets involved with Ludvik’s vengeful machinations. Although Helena claims that she can easily forget her dreams, she is never actually able to do so.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Tamina faces a similar battle with memory, but rather than posit that it is easy to forget and then fail to do so, she struggles to remember. She loves her husband “too much to admit that what she thought of as unforgettable could ever be forgotten.”\(^{103}\) Slowly, all her memories of her husband begin to deteriorate and the harder she tries to hold on to them, the more easily they slip away. Kundera describes how he “picture[s] the world growing up around Tamina like a circular wall, and [he] picture[s] her as a small patch of grass down below. The only rose growing on that patch of grass is the memory of her husband.”\(^{104}\) While dwelling on memories of her husband is the only event that brings happiness to Tamina, that ability is slowly dwindling and fading. Furthermore, the metaphor of the rose suggests the “embattled, isolating and mortal

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103 Kundera, *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 84.
nature of memory.” 105 As the sequence of events of her marriage erodes from her memory, she feels perpetually more lonely and distressed. Ultimately, memory contributes to Tamina’s agony. Her struggle against forgetting keeps her from enjoying what still exists.

However, when the angel of forgetting finally comes to claim Tamina and drive her in his red sports car to the Island of Children, he tells her that “what she calls remembering is in fact something different, that in fact she is under a spell and watching herself forget.” 106 It is interesting to note that in Czech the verbal noun vzpomínání, which means the act of remembering, is very similar to its opposite zapomínání, the act of forgetting, or zapomněti, the act of forgetting as a completed process. The similarity in the roots of each of these words reveals the congruence between the two poles; remembrance turns into forgetting simply by switching the prefixes za- and vz-. 107

The Island of Children is a dream-world that is meant to allow Tamina to forget her memories so completely that she cannot feel remorse for her forgetting. In other words, Tamina escapes there so that she can “forget her forgetting.” 108 However, this supposedly idyllic island suffocates Tamina and makes her miserable. Her desire to remember is so strong that even when she cannot recall the desire itself, she innately feels unhappy. She therefore attempts to escape the island of children, but even though she swims all night she remains in the same place. Finally, she realizes that the only way for her to truly escape the predicament of forgetting is through death, and she allows herself to drown in the murky water.

105 Narrett, 7.
106 Banerjee, 175-6.
107 Banerjee, 175-6.
108 Kundera, Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 164.
Tamina’s experience shows simultaneously how easy and how difficult it can be to forget. Her memories of her husband continue to fade, even while she tries to hold on to them. When she tries to escape her memory completely, however, she is unable to unless it is through death. It is never really possible, then, to either totally forget or remember; everything lies somewhere in between vzpomínání and zapomínání.

Memory has a strong impact on desire. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, there are two major erotic scenes, one in part two, and the other in part four. In the second section “memory annihilates desire when Tamina submits her body to Hugo as the price to be paid for his promise to retrieve her notebooks and love letters from Prague.”\(^\text{109}\) She believes that if she has sex with Hugo and pretends to care for him, he will go to Prague and retrieve her husband’s letters from her family’s home. However, because she is still entirely in love with her husband and he is all she can think about, the entire time Tamina and Hugo are copulating, Tamina is only imagining her husband. She sees “a giant image of a grotesquely giant husband, a husband much larger than life, yet just what she had imagined for three years.”\(^\text{110}\) The presence of her husband’s image overwhelms Tamina to such an extent that she cannot focus on Hugo and their lovemaking. Tamina’s inability to forget her husband even while having sex with another man overwhelms her to such an extent that she sees a caricature of her memory. This image is so grotesque that she is unable to enjoy any part of having sex with Hugo, and when Hugo realizes that Tamina is distracted he is not only disappointed but also unable to fully enjoy the experience.

\(^{109}\) Banerjee, 182.
\(^{110}\) Kundera, Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 109.
In contrast, memory contributes to increasing Karel’s pleasure when he makes love to his wife, Marketa, and his mistress, Eva. Karel’s mother, earlier that evening, points out that Eva resembles one of her friends with whom Karel had been infatuated as a child. Later that evening, after Karel’s mother leaves, Karel imagines Eva to be this woman, whom he sees with his childhood eyes as the most beautiful woman he can picture. As one critic notes, “the cruel disjunction between memory and desire yields to a mutually intensifying congruence as a man (Karel) makes love to two women…on the momentum of arousal yoked to childhood recollection.”

By thinking about his childhood infatuation, Karel is able to have one of his most unforgettable orgasmic experiences, while simultaneously providing pleasure to his mistress and his wife.

For Kundera, forgetting is an essential part of life as well as a fundamental component of the novel. It frames people’s experiences of history, events, and traditions. People forget personal events in their daily life and generations forget historical events that happened in previous generations. Forgetting is one of the few things that the intimate, personal level of life has in common with the global historical level that characterizes society as a whole. What Kundera’s novels ultimately demonstrate is that everything can be characterized by a point on the line that spans from perfect remembrance and perfect forgetting, with neither extreme itself attainable.

**Kundera’s Funny Side: An Exploration of Joking and Laughter in Kundera’s Novels**

The idea of the comic is one that Kundera consistently explores throughout his writing. The premise of his first novel, *The Joke*, is how one innocent joke can

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111 Banerjee, 182.
completely change the path of an individual’s life and the impact jokes can have on reality. Later, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera again explores joking, and particularly the effect of the joke: laughter. He spends many pages discussing the origin of laughter and how it manifests itself within people and within his characters. Laughter affects people in all sorts of situations including love, death, and sex. Kundera further expresses the relationship between sex and laughter in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Kundera’s novels hinge on a balance between the comic and the serious. He believes that the novel is a serious form whose goal is to tell the reader something new, to locate a new secret of existence; but at the same time Kundera believes that extreme seriousness is a form of stupidity.\(^{112}\) He therefore needs to balance the seriousness of the form (the novel), and what it is attempting to discover, with comic situations. In his novels there is only a thin line between the horrible and the comic.\(^{113}\) In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera defines the word comic:

> Comic. By providing us with the lovely illusion of human greatness, the tragic brings us consolation. The comic is crueler: it brutally reveals the meaninglessness of everything. I suppose all things human have their comic aspect, which in certain cases is recognized, acknowledged, utilized, and in others is veiled. The real geniuses of the comic are not those who make us laugh hardest but those who reveal some *unknown realm of the comic*. History has always been considered an exclusively serious territory. But there is the undiscovered comic side to history. Just as there is the (hard-to-take) comic side to sexuality.\(^{114}\)

Good comedy in Kundera’s formulation, then, is similar to a good novel; it must discover something that has never before been said. Furthermore, the comic reveals

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\(^{112}\) Kundera, *Art of the Novel*.

\(^{113}\) Kundera, *Art of the Novel*.

\(^{114}\) Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 126.
the insignificant aspect of every event. Since there is a comic aspect to anything that happens, there is a sort of mockery of the meaning or relevance of that occurrence. Kundera shows this through putting his characters in real-life situations and exposing the comedy of each of these circumstances. He also reexamines history and instead of describing only the serious aspects of the past, he shows how one can view history through the angle of the comic. Through such a lens, meaning changes and must be reassigned.

Often this change can be thought of as demonic. Eagleton defines the demonic as “the laughter which arises from things being suddenly deprived of their familiar meanings.” Kundera constantly describes recognizable situations in a new way that imbues them with a unique significance. This is similar to Victor Shklovsky’s idea of ostranenie, or defamiliarization, which is the artistic technique of forcing the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way, in order to enhance perception of the familiar. In Kundera, it is a satirical tactic that allows for the juxtaposition of the horrible and the comic.

For example, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Kundera describes the suicide of Stalin’s son through a new perspective. Stalin’s son is imprisoned in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp. Until that point, Stalin’s son had led a privileged life where he had the ability to always get what he wanted because of his father’s power. However, once he is at the prisoner-of-war camp, he has difficulty defecating in the appropriate area. As someone who was raised to believe that he was superior to other human beings, he cannot reconcile his opinion of himself either with his new position

116 Emerson, “Estrangement Revisited.”
or with the necessity to shit. Kundera’s ability to present this distinctive angle on the
life of Stalin’s son is simultaneously comic and horrific:

Captured by the Germans during the Second World War, he [Stalin’s son] was placed in a camp together
with a group of British officers. They shared a latrine. Stalin’s son habitually left a foul mess. The British
officers resented having their latrine smeared with shit…They brought the matter to his attention…again
and again, and tried to make him clean the latrine. He raged, argued, and fought. Finally, he demanded a
hearing with the camp commander…But the arrogant German refused to talk about shit. Stalin’s son could not
stand the humiliation. Crying out to heaven in the most terrifying of Russian curses, he took a running jump
into the electrified barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. He hit the target. His body, which would
never again make a mess of the Britishers’ latrine, was pinned to the wire.117

Stalin’s son dies because he cannot handle two things. First, he is enraged by the idea
of talking about shit. But more importantly, it is the fact that the German commander
has the power to not discuss shit while Stalin’s son is forced to do so, that really
makes the situation unbearable for Stalin’s son. Essentially, Stalin’s son kills himself
because of his inability to deal with shit. This is a simultaneously funny and
frightening realization, but one that the reader familiar with Kundera will not find
surprising.

_The Joke_, Kundera’s first novel, continually walks the fine line between
humor and horror. As one critic writes, “in the world portrayed in _The Joke_, jokes are
not funny and joking speech acts are untenable in informal interactions. Humor,
laughter, love, and friendship suffer…no one laughs.”118 The action in the novel is
sparked by a note that Ludvik writes to his girlfriend Marketa while she is at a

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117 Kundera, _The Unbearable Lightness of Being_, 243.
118 Feintuch, 22.
Communist party training session. He resents the fact that she is at this session and enjoying it greatly, because he had wanted to spend those two weeks alone with her. He decides to respond to her enthusiastic letter with a joking postcard that says, “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik.”119 Marketa, however, takes this joke seriously and shows it to the Party officials, which results in Ludvik being expelled from the University and put in the military service with a black insignia.120

Ludvik explains later that the entire situation, “all goes back to my [Ludvik’s] fatal predilection for silly jokes and Marketa’s fatal inability to grasp any joke whatsoever. Marketa was the type of woman who takes everything seriously (which made her totally at one with the spirit of the age); her major gift from the fates was an aptitude for credulity.”121 First of all, it is important to realize the comment Kundera is making on someone like Marketa, someone who is too serious. She creates a situation in which something that was meant to be a joke becomes a life-altering experience and, more importantly, a negative one. Instead of the anticipated response of laughter from his girlfriend, Ludvik is forced to quit his education and perform dull, backbreaking physical labor in the mines. Her seriousness is harmful and disruptive to Ludvik personally.

Moreover, Marketa’s response is a direct statement by Kundera on the politics of the time. As one critic remarks,

Ludvik sends the postcard innocently, expecting that it will be received as a joke, thereby making it possible for him to say something not to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, Marketa is unable to accept the postcard

120 Historically, the black insignia meant that the soldiers who wore it were dangers to the state and too untrustworthy to hold weapons, so their main job was to work in the mines.
121 Kundera, The Joke, 22.
as a joke. Instead, she takes the joke literally, responding to it as a statement intended to be taken seriously. In her inability to respond traditionally to a joke— to a fundamental and ubiquitous form of expression— Marketa gives us the first indication that she and Ludvik inhabit a world in which the humane past exerts little influence on the present. Ludvik’s later defense of his actions, “but comrades, it was meant to be funny,” falls on deaf ears. His peers have forgotten how to take a joke.122

In the Communist regime, humor no longer exists, and the government does all it can to incriminate innocent people. Although Ludvik had been a good student and a model party member for many years, his past plays no role in his trial. All of his friends, even his role model, Zemanek, condemn him. They no longer care about how good he has been in the past or about the fact that he has always had a comic side to him; jokes are not a possibility and so they cruelly sentence him for his attempt at humor.

One can interpret Ludvik’s postcard as a brave rebellion against the Communist Party. One must realize, nevertheless, that this stand was neither deliberate nor did it originate in Ludvik’s reason or consciousness, but was a “spontaneous eruption of an irrepressible comic instinct.”123 Ultimately, Ludvik does not believe that his comic gesture has any real counterrevolutionary value and “finds himself in the absurd situation of a martyr of comic courage who persists in looking at himself with the humorless eyes of his executioners. He is a victim rather than a master of his laughter, a man caught in the trap of a joke.”124 While his postcard had the potential to be funny or to be transgressive, it instead becomes a cruel and humorless twist of fate. Ludvik’s situation becomes a metaphor to signify a world

122 Feintuch, 24-5.
123 Banerjee, 26.
124 Banerjee, 26.
where jokes are no longer funny and where the humane is inverted\textsuperscript{125} and mostly ceases to exist.

Another perspective on Ludvik’s actions is as a subconscious desire to leave the Communist Party rather than as an attempt to be funny. Since Trotsky was Stalin’s biggest rival, millions of Russians were condemned and killed for “Trotskyism.” As someone living in Czechoslovakia under Stalin’s hegemony and as a member of the Communist party, it is unlikely that Ludvik would not have known that any positive mention of Trotsky was dangerous. Ludvik’s note, then, is an unconscious suicide wish, a plea to get out of the Communist Party. The joke, then, is a venue through which he is able to leave the party, while still being able to feel that he holds the higher ground. Rather than being the one to betray the Party by voluntarily leaving, he is able to set up a situation where it is appears as through the Party betrayed him by not understanding his humor.

It is also possible for the reader to condemn Ludvik for his attempt at being funny. For Kundera, jokes often do not lead to a positive response and there is a dark side to humor. As one critic writes, “but that laughter, here [in The Joke], serves as a governing principle has nothing in common with frivolous humour. In The Joke we find the laughter of loss and bitterness. This laughter is activated by irony and cynicism.”\textsuperscript{126} Paradoxically, Kundera criticizes both humor and seriousness. Even Ludvik recognizes the transgression he has made through his humor. He gradually becomes reconciled to “the idea that [his] words, genuinely intended as a joke, were still a transgression of sorts, and torrents of tortured self-criticism” start “whirling through [his] head.”\textsuperscript{127} Ludvik learns that being funny is not necessarily a good

\textsuperscript{125} Feintuch, 26.
\textsuperscript{126} Hattingh, 101.
\textsuperscript{127} Kundera, The Joke, 37.
quality and that it can lead to extremely negative outcomes. Even so, Ludvik is indignant for the rest of his life at the outcome of his ‘joke’ and dedicates much of his time to trying to get revenge.

One example of this is when he returns to Prague with the goal of taking retribution on Zemanek by sleeping with his wife, Helena. Ludvik flirts with Helena and asks her to meet him at a small-town hotel. He has a “precise and deliberate plan”\textsuperscript{128} to make Helena have sex with him and then hurt Zemanek by her betrayal. He does not care about her or whether she is “particularly young, particularly nice, or particularly attractive, but purely and simply because her name was Zemanek and her husband was a man I [Ludvik] hated.”\textsuperscript{129} After Ludvik accomplishes his goal of having sex with Helena, he raises his head and looks at his face in the mirror. His face “was smiling; and the minute the smile registered, it turned into a laugh, a burst of laughter.”\textsuperscript{130} This joyous reaction is, to him, a token of his victory\textsuperscript{131} and the success of his revenge against Zemanek. Helena does not understand his laughter, but has fallen so deeply for his charms that she does not stop to think about what it means. She tells him, “laugh at me if you like, I don’t care. I’m in love. In love!”\textsuperscript{132}

Even when he says nothing in response to this outburst, she just adds that she is happy and offers him vodka.

It seems as if the revenge he thinks he has taken on Zemanek allows Ludvik to finally be able to laugh at his initial joke, the postcard he had sent to Marketa. In cuckold Zemanek, Ludvik is attempting “to overcome the emptiness created by the

\textsuperscript{128} Kundera, \textit{The Joke}, 151.
\textsuperscript{129} Kundera, \textit{The Joke}, 151.
\textsuperscript{130} Kundera, \textit{The Joke}, 172.
\textsuperscript{131} Banerjee, 39.
\textsuperscript{132} Kundera, \textit{The Joke}, 173.
ironic outcome of his joke. He will turn the irony, once directed at him, against his enemy. “133

However, the joke is once again on Ludvik. Zemanek and Helena have by this time long stopped being faithful to one another, and Zemanek does not care for Helena and is in a serious relationship with a younger, more attractive, and more intelligent woman named Miss Broz. When Ludvik runs into Zemanek and his girlfriend the next day, Zemanek congratulates Ludvik on his new relationship with Helena and instead of being hurt by Helena’s infidelity is relieved to be able to finally marry Miss Broz. Rather than Ludvik being the one to laugh at Zemanek, life and Zemanek instead laugh at Ludvik. Ludvik recognizes when he runs into Zemanek and Miss Broz that life is “having a good laugh at [his] expense, sending [him] a reminder of [his] failure in the form of the mistress of a man who only the day before [he] thought [he] had defeated in grotesque sexual combat.”134 Miss Broz serves as a reminder of his failure at taking revenge on Zemanek, as well as the unpleasant sexual encounter he forced himself to experience with Helena.

Ludvik’s misery does not end there; he must still face Helena, who is in love with him. When he tells her that he does not love her and attempts to leave her, Helena takes all of the pills in what she believes to be a bottle of analgesics in an attempt to commit suicide. When he hears about this, Ludvik panics and guiltily runs to assist her. Ironically, rather than being analgesics, the pills are laxatives; Helena moves from the realm of death to the comic realm of shit. Ludvik’s panic is unnecessary and the pill mix-up is yet another malicious joke on both Ludvik and Helena.

133 Hattingh, 103.
134 Kundera, The Joke, 232.
Throughout *The Joke*, the humor in jokes is inverted in such a way that laughter is replaced by cruelty. This can be seen initially through Ludvík’s postcard to Marketa, which rather than being humorous results in Ludvík’s expulsion from the Communist Party, and is now further made obvious when the fear of Helena’s death is replaced by shit.

In contrast, in *The Farewell Party*, the story of Jakub’s poison pill is a mockery that results in death.\(^{135}\) When Jakub leaves Ruzena with the poison pill, he mentally constructs a pseudo-Dostoevskian allegorical drama\(^ {136}\) filled with possible motives and choices. In Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov murders an old pawnbroker and her sister and spends the next 600 pages of the novel struggling with the consequent guilt he feels. Ultimately, he confesses his crime and is condemned to serve at a labour camp. In *The Farewell Party*, however, the “story of the experiment with death occupies only eighteen hours of the five-day-long farce [and] is executed under the comic sign of confusion.”\(^ {137}\) Unlike Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Jakub does not struggle with the guilt of being a potential murderer and never even thinks seriously about retrieving the poison pill. His most significant attempt is when he tries to discuss the problem with Dr. Skreta while the doctor is conducting an operation on a woman so as to impregnate her. The entire scene is permeated by the comic. Banerjee describes the scene,

> Two men in white lab coats looming above an open woman [her legs are spread and her private area is exposed], the one handling her inside out while the other discusses the technology of death, project an image that insinuates dread memories of unmentionable experiments performed not so long ago in the Central European laboratory of history. What we have here is a

\(^{135}\) See appendix for explanation of the Pill story.

\(^{136}\) Banerjee, 129.

\(^{137}\) Banerjee, 129.
No comic replay of the nightmare, without coercion and without pain, a playful parody that returns the horror as a joke. ¹³⁸

Not only does the scene parody history, but it is also a satire on Jakub’s efforts to recover the poison pill from Ruzena. He is never actually able to bring the problem up with Dr. Skreta and leaves the doctor’s office without any plan of action. Ultimately, he convinces himself that the poison pill was actually a placebo and does nothing to save Ruzena, who eventually dies when she takes the pill. In this scene, Kundera’s allusions to Dostoevsky serve to juxtapose Jakub’s farcical reaction to possible murder with Raskolnikov’s life-changing guilt so as to more fully expose the unfunny humor of the situation.

Demonic laughter and the joke are also important themes in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. In this novel, laughter and seriousness represent the crossing of a boundary between meaninglessness and death. There are two kinds of laughter in the novel, each predicated on “an opposing metaphysical presupposition.”¹³⁹ The angels of parts three and six of the novel are figures of laughter, both of a demonic and holy source.¹⁴⁰ They embody happiness, optimism, and well being as well as the fanatic laughter associated with totalitarianism or religion. Opposing the angels is the devilish, demonic laughter of nothingness “proped up by the metaphysics of nothingness…devilish laughter undercuts all seriousness.”¹⁴¹ This is the kind of laughter that impairs the gravity of death and sex through the appropriation of mechanisms of irony and absurdity and it is the kind of laughter that characterizes the entirety of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.

¹³⁸ Banerjee, 122.
¹³⁹ Hattingh, 109-10.
¹⁴⁰ Molesworth, Salmagundi, “Kundera and The Book”, 74.
¹⁴¹ Hattingh, 109-10.
For example, when Tamina is speaking with Bibi and her husband, Dede, about what percentage of their lives they have spent in orgasm, she cannot take the conversation seriously and pictures “the bald-headed old codger undergoing a continual orgasm: twisting, writhing, he grabs at his heart, within a quarter of an hour his false teeth fall out, and five minutes later he falls down dead. [Tamina] burst out laughing.”142 Sex and death mingle in Tamina’s comic conception of an older man having over six hours of continual orgasm. The very idea of such an extended period of orgasm is absurd.

The laughter that can characterize sex is on the surface juxtaposed with the seriousness of love. Petrarch explains to the student that laughter takes one away from the world and puts him in solitude and that jokes are barriers between “man and the world. A joke is an enemy of love and poetry…love can’t be laughable. Love has nothing in common with laughter.”143 This is later demonstrated when the student realizes that Kristyna would not sleep with him because she was afraid of getting pregnant rather than his initial suspicion that she was frightened by the “boundless horizons of their love.”144 At the moment of this epiphany, the student feels like “screaming with laughter – tearful, hysterical laughter.”145 When love is no longer a possibility, laughter is able to enter the scene and overwhelm the student with its demonic quality. The student’s laughter is neither happy nor joyous; he is miserable that he was not able to understand Kristyna’s dilemma earlier and thus was not able to convince her to sleep with him.

142 Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 97.
143 Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 140.
144 Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 149.
145 Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 149.
On a deeper level, however, it becomes apparent that the student’s emotions towards Kristyna did not consist of love, but were much more closely related to lust. The student was not in love with Kristyna, but rather wanted to have sex with her, and this inability to convince her to sleep with him is his major regret. Laughter, then, is once again juxtaposed with sex rather than with love. The inability to copulate results in laughter, “tearful, hysterical,” demonic laughter.

Kundera’s position towards laughter is further made obvious through his essays on laughter in part three of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, “The Angels.” He quotes a passage on laughter from a feminist text called “Woman’s Word” and then proceeds to place it in a lower aesthetic category, similar to that of kitsch. I shall quote the passage here at length:

> Laughter? Does anyone ever care about laughter? I mean real laughter – beyond joking, jeering, ridicule. Laughter – delight, unbounded, delicate delectable, delight of delights…I said to my sister or she said to me, come let’s play laughter together. We stretched out side by side on the bed and started in. At first we just made believe of course. Forced laughs. Laughable laughs. Laughs so laughable they made us laugh. Then it came – real laughter, total laughter – sweeping us off in unbounded effusion. Bursts of laughter, laughter rehashed, jostled laughter, laughter defleshed, magnificent laughter, sumptuous and wild…And we laughed to the infinity of the laughter of our laughs…O laughter! Laughter of delight, delight of laughter. Laughing deeply is living deeply.146

This poem reminds the reader of Velimir Khlebnikov’s poem “Invocation by Laughter,” in which he mostly just repeats the word “laugh” with different prefixes, suffixes and conjugations. The poem serves to linguistically express the experience of laughter through repetition and absurd phrases. It has no goal beyond invoking

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laughter. Similarly, the brief essay that Kundera quotes does not have a purpose other than to describe laughter for its own sake. The two sisters stretched out on the bed have no reason to be laughing other than the happiness the laughter itself invokes. The girls’ laughter goes “beyond joking, jeering, and ridicule.”

While Kundera at first insists that “only an imbecile could make fun of this manifesto of delight,” it is soon apparent that this statement is meant to be ironic. He compares the kind of laughter described in this essay with scenes in B movies in which

a boy and a girl are running through a spring (or summer) landscape holding hands. Running, running, running, and laughing. By laughing the lovers are telling the world, all movie audiences everywhere, ‘see how happy we are, how glad to be alive, how perfectly attuned to the great chain of being!’ It is a silly scene, a kitschy scene, but it does contain one of the most basic human situations: serious laughter, laughter beyond joking. All churches, all underwear manufacturers, all generals, all political parties have that laughter in common; they all use the image of those two laughing lovers in the publicity for their religion, their nation, their sex, their dishwashing detergent.

The scene that Kundera describes here is one that can be seen as part of the collective memory of human society. The idea of a boy and girl running and laughing together through a beautiful summer landscape has been described by poets for generations and is continuously used by movie makers to symbolize the ideal of happiness and love. Scenes that are so ingrained in the collective memory of society demonstrate, to

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147 Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 57.
149 Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 58.
Kundera, the loss of individualism. Furthermore, scenes like this one are easily able to be manipulated by various groups to propagate their mission. By juxtaposing a scene that the majority of the audience can positively relate to with a specific political party, a religious mission, a country, or even a consumer product, the person creating the image can cause the viewer to create an association that will later cause the viewer to buy into the values of the image’s producer.

Kundera further defines this notion when he describes kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera first defines Kitsch as the “denial of shit.”150 This is because kitsch divorces itself from the unpleasant and, on some level, unacceptable parts of human existence. Ironically, the feminist whose essay on laughter Kundera had quoted in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, places her definition of laughter, which Kundera has defined as kitschy, in the same category as defecation.151 Paradoxically, then, the scene she describes is simultaneously the denial of shit and comparable to shit.

The reader further learns about Kundera’s notion of Kitsch throughout the sixth section of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kitsch is the dictatorship of the heart over that of the mind and it is something that must be shared by multitudes. By its very definition, kitsch cannot be a unique or unusual situation, but must be derived from the collective memory of a society. In contemporary society, these images include the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love, and so on. Kundera describes how “Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all

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mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.”\textsuperscript{152} Kitsch, then, is simultaneously that which allows unity to exist among mankind and that which causes society to be so easily manipulated. Kundera sees this manipulation primarily being exercised by politicians. He describes how they often use kitschy scenes in order to procure the public’s attention and sympathy. Whenever a camera is present, for example, politicians “immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek”\textsuperscript{153} because this makes the politician seem like someone who loves children and is family-oriented, a societal ideal.

It is this exact idea of kitsch that Kundera refers to in the feminist essay on laughter in \textit{The Book of Laughter and Forgetting}. Kitsch is synonymous with “serious laughter, laughter beyond joking” and it is this kind of laughter, otherwise named kitsch, that Kundera despises. This can further be evidenced by Kundera’s next essay on laughter, once again in \textit{The Book of Laughter and Forgetting}. This one addresses the concept of two kinds of laughter – one that comes from the angels and the other from the devil. Unlike the traditional divide of angels as good and the devil as evil, Kundera believes that angels are of divine creation while the devil denies rational meaning to God’s world. While the domination of the world is divided between angels and demons, the former does not need to conquer the latter for there to be good. Instead, there should be an equilibrium of power, because if the angels dominate over the demons, then man collapses under the weight of too much meaning, but if the demons overshadow the angels, then the world loses all meaning and life is equally impossible. It is the transition from something dominated by

\textsuperscript{152} Kundera, \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being}, 251.
\textsuperscript{153} Kundera, \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being}, 251.
angels to something dominated by demons (a sudden loss of meaning) that causes laughter. Laughter is then, at least initially, the province of the devil.

However, Kundera then describes the first time the angel heard the devil’s laughter and the only retaliation the angel could come up with was to mimic the devil’s noise and thus endow laughter with an opposite meaning. “Whereas the Devil's laughter pointed up the meaninglessness of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good, and sensible everything on earth was.” Laughter thus has two contradictory internal meanings or attitudes, but people do not recognize this duality and language lacks the capacity to distinguish between the laughter of the devil and that of the angel.154

Furthermore, a positive aura surrounds the devil’s laughter, while the laughter of the angels contains a negative register. The laughter of the devil is the original laughter because heaven did not have a concept of laughter. Thus, heaven and the angels are only mimicking the devil’s creation. Laughter thus could not have existed in paradise before the Fall. It is a manifestation of man’s fall from grace and constantly carries with it the mark of the Devil.155 Kundera does not believe, however, that the province of the devil is problematic. On the contrary, he sides with the devil. He calls the laughing angel “infinitely laughable” and describes how the angels are the ones playing a hoax on society by attempting to steal the province of laughter from the devil and make it their own.

Kundera’s position on the side of the devil is particularly evident when two girls, Gabby and Michelle, attempt to analyze Ionesco’s play Rhinoceros in front of their class and their favorite teacher, Madame Raphael. The girls have decided that


155 Banerjee, 158.
the symbol of the rhinoceros is meant to have a comic effect and they decide to reenact this humor through wearing cardboard masks with horns during their presentation. While they are presenting, one girl in their class walks up to Gabby and Michelle, kicks them, and sits back down. As soon as they are kicked, Gabby and Michelle start crying and the rest of the class breaks into “unrestrained laughter.” Madame Raphael misinterprets the situation as a carefully prepared joke to accompany the masks and begins to laugh along with the rest of the class. Gabby and Michelle, in turn, feel betrayed and humiliated and start crying harder. Madame Raphael goes up to the girls, takes their hands, and starts dancing with them. The group of three women continues laughing, crying and dancing until they begin to float up into the air and ultimately vanish beyond the ceiling. Because the three women eventually levitate towards the sky, they are on the side of the angels. To Kundera, the laughter of Michelle and Gabrielle and their presentation is the epitome of kitsch. The laughter of the angels, serious laughter, and kitsch are all part of the same negative aesthetic category (that he also relates to fascism and totalitarianism), which exists in contrast to the laughter of the devil.

As has already been noted, there is a fine line between the horrible and the comic in Kundera, and this is further evidenced in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by the juxtaposition of the death of Kundera’s father and Passer’s funeral. During the last ten years of his life, Kundera’s father gradually loses his power of speech. Kundera describes how at first his father “simply had trouble calling up certain words or would say similar words instead and then immediately laugh at himself.”

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the doctor tells Kundera that Kundera’s father is in a coma and his brain is decomposing. Unsure of how to react, Kundera points out the window of the hospital room and exclaims about what a joke it is that Husak is being named an Honorary Pioneer. Kundera’s father responds by laughing, laughing to let Kundera know that his brain is still alive and that Kundera could go on talking and joking with him. A few hours later, however, Kundera’s father’s fever shoots up and he dies. The final laughter that Kundera and his father share is a “last flourish of gallantry” that allows father and son to passionately connect one final time159 and to share a moment of meaning, a moment dominated by the angels.

In contrast, Passer’s funeral is a ceremony of death that is wrecked by laughter. As Passer’s coffin is slowly descending into the grave and a eulogist nervously delivers a speech, a sudden gust of wind blows Papa Clevis’s hat from his head and into the grave. This causes an irresistible wave of laughter to pass over everyone gathered there and to overwhelm the words of the orator and the sobbing of Passer’s son. The effect of this laughter is an issuance from the grave to attack the living and there is “very little about it that is life-affirming. This laughter dismantles the human meaning achieved in the other instant of laughter shared by father and son in the preceding movement.”160

Similarly, Jan is often unable to enjoy sex because laughter overwhms him and keeps him from being able to make love. There is one woman who he had been making love to consistently and one day she looks up at him during intercourse and smiles at him. At this moment, he is “only a hair’s breadth away from bursting out laughing,” but he knows that “if he did they would not be able to make love.”161

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159 Banerjee, 183.
161 Kundera, Book of laughter and Forgetting, 213.
this woman, Jan is able to escape the laughter that struggles to overwhelm him and can thus continue having sex with her. When he goes to an orgy at Barbara’s house, however, he is not as fortunate. He meets another man there who shares Jan’s laughter. While both couples are kissing and fondling, Jan and the other man meet glances and Jan sees the other man shaking with laughter. As they both acknowledge that they know what the other is thinking and moreover, know that the other knows that he knows what the other is thinking, they both begin shaking uncontrollably and the bald man bursts into laughter and Jan quickly follows suit. As soon as Barbara notices this inappropriate behavior, she asks them both to leave. Laughter and sex cannot occur simultaneously; they are mutually exclusive.

This can further be seen in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. When Sabina and Tereza are naked together in Sabina’s studio while Sabina is taking pictures of Tereza, the two women are enchanted and intoxicated by this unbelievable situation. This enchantment, however, quickly becomes frightening, and in order to dispel it Sabina bursts into loud laughter and Tereza quickly follows suit.¹⁶² Laughter is the easiest way to end the attraction the two women are experiencing, since it is presented here as completely contrary to sex. Conversely, when Tomas put the bowler hat on Sabina’s head it is at first a joke. When they first look at each other in the mirror all they see at first is a comic situation, but suddenly “the comic became veiled by excitement: the bowler hat no longer signified a joke.”¹⁶³ Here, humor is able to be transformed into a sexually arousing force. By juxtaposing these two scenarios, Kundera is redefining the opposition he had created between sex and laughter in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. Just as laughter can be both the province of the

¹⁶² Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 66.
angel and the devil, of meaning andmeaninglessness, it can also simultaneously incite
and inhibit sexual behavior. Laughter is full of dualities, which are often hidden by
the lack of linguistic differentiation between them.

Laughter and the joke are constantly straddling a barrier between the serious
and the absurd. Ludvik’s initial joke is never really laughable. It represents Ludvik’s
pseudo-suicidal, subconscious desire to escape the Communist Party and disassociate
himself from the kitschiness inherent in all political movements. The negativity of
kitsch, which is akin to serious laughter, is further evidenced by the essays on laughter
as well as the experiences of Gabby and Michelle in The Book of Laughter and
Forgetting. For Kundera, laughter is a duality between the original laughter of the
devils and the imitation of laughter created by the angels. The former is positive,
while the latter is surrounded by a negative aura. It is the latter, however, that
dominates current society and which many of Kundera’s characters simultaneously
accept and try to escape. Ludvik’s joke, for example, is a desperate attempt to leave
the world of Communist Kitsch, but he is trapped in the mechanisms of communist
society and is unable to leave. Ultimately, one can see that the two kinds of laughter
have become so intertwined that the only place where they can exist separately is in
Kundera’s novels.
Lightness or Weight: A Question on Existence

“What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?” This is the central question of Kundera’s novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being. One can, however, see echoes of this question throughout many of Kundera’s previous works. The two concepts, which at first seem like polar opposites, paradoxically continue to exchange qualities in constant conversation with one another. By the end of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, it is still impossible to decide which to choose. The one intention that is obvious is Kundera’s ability to “bring together the extreme gravity of the question and the extreme lightness of the form” in a way that keeps the reader thinking and trying to make her own decision. The ideas that Kundera grapples with – existence, memory, history – are all profound subjects, but Kundera addresses them through a jocular novelistic narrative. In this way, the question of lightness versus weight manifests itself in a variety of concepts Kundera introduces including selfhood, time, heaven, and fate.

Kundera first establishes in The Unbearable Lightness of Being that society as a whole is gravitating towards lightness. He explains that as an individual’s weight is dependent upon the weight of the population and that as the population increases, each person herself becomes increasingly meaningless:

the weight of ourselves…depends on the size of the population on the planet…by that calculation, the weight of the Proustian infinity – the weight of a self, of a self’s interior life – becomes lighter and lighter. And in that race toward lightness, we have crossed a fateful boundary.

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164 Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 5.
165 Banerjee, 199.
166 Kundera, The Art of the Novel, 95.
Paradoxically, then, while the weight of the self is dependent on the whole, the self weighs more when the whole is smaller. Weight is a variable in a zero-sum equation; if one person were the only living creature, then she would bear the entirety of the world’s weight, but as the number of people grows, weight becomes more evenly distributed and the amount of weight each individual bears decreases. Since the population is growing at an exponential rate, each new generation bears a smaller amount of weight than the generation before it, and as this trend continues, the amount of weight each person is responsible for approaches zero. Ultimately, therefore, there will be such a minute amount of weight that is attached to each individual that the world will become characterized by lightness, and weight will play an extremely minimal role.

The question one must then ask is, how can people have any sort of authority if they have a negligible amount of weight? Kundera asks, “what possibilities remain for a man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight?” In other words, if lightness has become overwhelmingly predominant, how can there be any sort of personal responsibility for one’s actions? In a world of lightness, can self-determination exist? Kundera never fully answers these questions, but there is one thing that is obvious: this kind of a world is unbearable. In tracing the conversation between ideas of lightness and ideas of weight, it is never obvious which is objectively better, but Kundera shows that complete lightness is ultimately intolerable.

In The Joke, Ludvik’s perception of the world around him is jaded by experience against lightness. When he walks through town in the morning while waiting for Helena’s arrival, he notices a statue:

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There was a saint on the pedestal, a cloud on the saint, an angel on the cloud, and on that angel’s cloud another angel, the last. I took a long look at the poignant pyramid of saints, clouds, and angels masquerading in stone as heaven, then at the real heaven – a pale (morning) blue hopelessly removed from that dusty stretch of earth.\textsuperscript{169}

By perceiving the monument upside down, from down to up rather than vice-versa, Ludvik insists on the pull of gravity that binds all objects to the earth. He has transformed the angels, clouds, and saints into “mere pedestals to support the vain illusion of soaring weightlessness, which no longer holds.”\textsuperscript{170} Ludvik can no longer believe in any ancient faith or religion and this lack of faith causes him to experience a very personal loss. There is a stark contrast in the idea of heaven depicted by the statue versus what Ludvik sees in the actual sky. The statue represents an eternal lightness that comes with a belief in God, but Ludvik rejects God and weightlessness in favor of the heaviness of gravity, which will bind him to the earth.

Similarly, Kostka tells Lucie to shed the weight of her life by giving herself up to God.

\begin{quote}
I know you’ve never had anyone to give yourself to. You’ve been afraid of everybody. But there is God. Give yourself to him. You will feel lighter. To yield yourself up means to lay aside your past life. To root it out of your soul. To confess.\textsuperscript{171}
\end{quote}

After many weeks, Lucie finally agrees with Kostka and attempts to rid herself of the weightiness tying her down and to join God in his infinite lightness. However, as soon as she accepts this new position, she decides that the best way to consummate her new relationship with God is to sleep with Kostka. Kostka responds to her touch,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{169} Kundera, The Joke, 142.
\textsuperscript{170} Banerjee, 36-7.
\textsuperscript{171} Kundera, The Joke, 193.
\end{quote}
but soon after their one night together he leaves her alone yet again. Lucie’s attempt
at weightlessness is thus a failure; she attempted to reach God and lightness through
Kostka, but ultimately he left her alone surrounded by weight. Furthermore, the
lightness that Kostka advocates becomes linked to a negative connotation, such as
escapism.

In *The Farewell Party*, however, Jakub is able to reach lightness through a
deed that is typically characterized by weight. Jakub had put his poison pill (a tablet
which he had received from the doctor in order to be in control of his life at all times)
in the same container as Ruzena’s stress-relief medication when he thought she had
discarded the bottle. He was amazed at how similar his deathly pill appeared to her
everyday medicine. However, Ruzena came back and grabbed the bottle of medicine
out of Jakub’s hands before he had the chance to tell her that the poison pill was in it.
At first Jakub feels guilty and the idea that he may be responsible for Ruzena’s death
weighs on him heavily. The next day, however, he realizes that Ruzena still hasn’t
died and decides that because by probability she should have taken the pill by now,
the pill must be a placebo. Realistically, it is very possible that she just had not taken
Jakub’s pill yet and it was still lying in the bottle, but he convinces himself that the
pill must be a fake. He drives away from the town where Ruzena lives enveloped by
lightness:

Raskolnikov experienced his act of murder as a tragedy, and staggered under the weight of his deed. Jakub was
amazed to find that his deed was weightless, easy to bear, light as air. And he wondered whether there was
not more horror in this lightness than in all the dark agonies and contortions of the Russian hero.172

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In Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov spends over seven hundred pages struggling with the guilt from the murder he performs. Moreover, Raskolnikov’s victim, an old money-lending hag, is much less sympathetic than Ruzena, a young girl who is stuck in a small town in Czechoslovakia and dreams of seeing the rest of the world. Jakub does not feel any guilt for the potential murder of Ruzena because he has convinced himself that the pill is a placebo. Ironically, this lightness fills him with just as much, if not more, horror as does the weight that pulls down Raskolnikov. Although Jakub is able to reach weightlessness from a typically heavy act, this lightness is once again unbearable.

Likewise, Tamina in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* escapes to the Island of Children in her search for lightness, but living there is ultimately intolerable. The Angel of Forgetting arrives where Tamina is working and offers to take her to “a place where things are as light as the breeze, where things have no weight, where there is no remorse.”\(^173\) To escape the everyday life where she is weighed down by her struggle to remember her husband seems like a good option. “Yes,” responds Tamina in a dreamy voice, “a place where things weigh nothing at all.”\(^174\) After the initial struggle, Tamina spends a few weeks immersed in the weightlessness of the Island of Children. She does not have any worries, concerns, or fears. Everything seems infinitely simple. However, this tranquility cannot last indefinitely. While playing hopscotch, Tamina steps on a line, but her team members, the squirrels, argue that she did not step on the line while the opposing team, the canaries, claim that she did. As soon as Tamina admits that she did step on the line, “the realm where things are light as a breeze knows no peace.”\(^175\) The squirrels and the canaries gang up against her

and make her life miserable. Suddenly, the adult attributes that had made the children admire her cause them to turn against her. They throw stones at her and tie her up to kick her. Finally, they get bored with this too and leave her alone, but the lightness of their world strangles her. She watches the children dance and feels an urge to escape from the Island.

And the idiocy of the guitars keeps booming, the children keep dancing, flirtatiously undulating their little bellies. It is little things of no weight at all that are making Tamina nauseous. In fact, that hollow feeling in her stomach comes from the unbearable absence of weight. And just as one extreme may at any moment turn into its opposite, so this perfect buoyancy has become a terrifying burden of buoyancy, and Tamina knows she cannot bear it another instant. She turns and runs. 176

Living in a world without weight is ultimately intolerable. It is interesting to note, however, that Tamina acknowledges that a world consisting only of weight is equally excruciating. One cannot live in a place that leans heavily, or even completely, to one extremity. It is necessary to have a balance between lightness and weight. Tamina thus finds herself needing to escape the Island of Children and she runs to the lake and attempts to swim away. After an entire night of swimming, however, she realizes that she has not gone anywhere. There is only one way to escape this world of lightness and that is through weight, through death.

Again she inhaled water into her lungs and coughed and thrashed her arms about, feeling she could no longer keep herself afloat. Her legs were getting heavier and heavier. They dragged her down like lead weights. 177

176 Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 188.
Relegated to a place where only lightness exists, Tamina chooses death because only through this struggle can she feel any weight at all. When she allows herself to drown, her entire body feels heavier; she is finally able to go back to a place where weight exists and this feeling is worth sacrificing her life for. A world without weight is, once again, one within which it is impossible to live happily.

One aspect of existence which continually adds weight is time. The “burden of time” is everpresent. In The Joke, Kundera remarks on the bare essence of time.

> It was time laid bare, time in and of itself, time as its most basic and primal, and it forced me to call it by its true name (for now I was living pure time – pure, vacant time) so as not to forget for a moment, keep it constantly before me, and feel its weight. When music plays, we hear a melody and forget it is only one of the faces of time; when the orchestra falls silent during a rest in the score, we hear time, pure time.\(^{179}\)

There are many different facets of time, each with a weight of its own. “Pure, vacant time” is heavier than time when something is happening, when music is playing, for example. If one does nothing other than notice time, then this time is weighty, full of significance. The time that flows as one listens to a piece of music or reads a novel is lighter because it is not as present; it is filled with another object or activity.

Another characteristic of existence that Kundera attempts to quantify in terms of lightness and weight is Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return. This idea posits that a life which is not repeated is essentially meaningless. In other words,

> the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing.\(^{180}\)

\(^{178}\) Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 186
\(^{179}\) Kundera, The Joke, 44.
\(^{180}\) Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 3-6.
A life with eternal return, then, is one that is heavy, while one without it is weightless. Moreover, a life that is characterized by lightness is without significance; only a life that is filled with the weight of repetition can have actual meaning.

Kundera’s Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* thinks about the concept of eternal return. He wonders if there is a possibility of it existing and manifesting itself through the use of the solar system.

Somewhere out in space there was a planet where all people would be born again. They would be fully aware of the life they had spent on earth and of all the experience they had amassed here. And perhaps there was still another planet, where we would all be born a third time with the experience of our first two lives. And perhaps there were yet more and more planets, where mankind would be born one degree (one life) more mature.181

In a universe where eternal return existed in such a way, life would be meaningful because people could learn from their mistakes. Each event could act as a trial on whose outcome one could base her later decisions. She would have the opportunity to try making a different choice in a different life to find out which would have been better. As Kundera says, “Any schoolboy can do experiments in the physics laboratory to test various scientific hypotheses. But man, because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not.”182

It is interesting to note that Kundera expresses two separate ideas of eternal return. In the first, life without eternal return is weightless because all decisions are finite. Eternal return would imply that the same choice would have to exist in each

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182 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 34.
succeeding life and so the first choices one makes are extremely weighty. In other words, in the first life one is choosing the rest of her lives for all eternity. In the second conception of eternal return, one is able to use the experiences one has and learns from in the first life, to make new and separate decisions in the succeeding lives. One can argue that this version of eternal return is significantly lighter than the first because decisions are once again finite and, in fact, they are useful in one’s succeeding lives.

Kundera, however, first makes the assumption that eternal return is extremely weighty and earthly life is, in contrast, weightless. He explains that since “eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, [Nietzsche’s phrase] then our lives stand out against it in all their splendid lightness.”

183 This dichotomy between lightness and weight is best seen through the character of Tomas. Tomas’s key words are lightness and weight, and the leitmotifs that Kundera juxtaposes with Tomas are related to this opposition. Tomas’s existential problem is “the lightness of existence in a world where there is no eternal return.”

184 Throughout The Unbearable Lightness of Being Tomas explores this problem and his relation to lightness and weight, identifying at first with the former and ultimately with the latter.

In the beginning of the novel, Tomas’s code phrase is Einmal ist keinmal, a German phrase meaning, what only happens once may as well never have happened at all. His life at this point, then, is characterized by lightness. He engages in activities to which he attaches minimal meaning. He has divorced his wife, stopped all communication with his son, and spends his life in his work and in seeing his mistresses. He lives in a perpetual lightness of being. As Bayley explains, this

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183 Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 35.
is the normal state of consciousness, the condition in which we pass our time, a perpetual state of ‘once only,’ from which no story can develop and no identity can be shaped, no happening acquire significance. It is the state referred to by the German proverb \textit{einzmal ist keinmal} – one time is no time at all. Sexually speaking the state of lightness is a state of endless promiscuity, in which each sensation is abolished by its successor, each individual by the next one.  

This is Tomas’s philosophy to the core. Sexually, Tomas has his rule of threes: he can either sleep with a woman three times in succession or three weeks must pass between each time he sees the same woman. He never allows himself to feel any attachment towards any of the women he sees and lives a bachelor’s life, free of significance or difficulty.

An existence filled only with lightness, as the reader has already seen in Kundera’s earlier novels, cannot last for long. Fortuitously, Tomas meets and falls in love with Tereza, who weights his life with significance. The day she meets Tomas, Tereza waits on him at the hotel restaurant, her body “sagg[ing] under the weight of the beers on the tray.”  

The reader’s first impression of Tereza is immediately associated with heaviness. When she comes to see Tomas in Prague, she brings her life with her, symbolized by her heavy suitcase.

There [at the train station] Tomas claimed the suitcase (it was large and enormously heavy) and he took it and her home…the enormously heavy suitcase stood by the bed.  

For emphasis, Kundera keeps reiterating how heavy Tereza’s suitcase is so that the reader ties the weight of the suitcase to her character, and her presence, therefore,

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186 Kundera, \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being}, 30.
immediately adds weight to Tomas’s weightless world. At first Tomas tries to protest this intrusion by renting Tereza her own apartment and artificially separating her from his everyday affairs. This method, however, is ultimately ineffective, and he allows her to move in with him.

For seven years they live in this way, and in the meanwhile they move to Switzerland to escape a Prague that has been invaded by Soviet forces. After living in Switzerland for a short while, Tereza feels as if she has filled Tomas’s life with too much weight and decides that is best for her to leave him alone and so she returns to Prague. In the wake of her decision, Tomas’s life returns to lightness and he spends a few days overjoyed at the weightlessness of everyday existence.

For seven years he had lived bound to her, his every step subject to her scrutiny. She might as well have chained iron balls to his ankles. Suddenly his step was much lighter. He soared. He had entered Parmenides’ magic field: he was enjoying the sweet lightness of being. 188

As soon as Tereza leaves, Tomas returns to his old routine full of freedom and weightlessness. He no longer has to worry about keeping her happy or chasing away her nightmares.

As before, this lightness does not last for very long. After a few days without Tereza, Tomas begins to miss her. Once he has experienced a weighty life he cannot possibly live without heaviness for more than a few days.

On Saturday and Sunday, he felt the sweet lightness of being rise up to him out of the depths of the future. On Monday, he was hit by a weight the likes of which he had never known. The tons of steel of the Russian tanks were nothing compared with it. For there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one’s own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for

188 Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 30.
someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.\textsuperscript{189}

As soon as Tomas allows himself to think about Tereza and imagine her completely alone in Prague he feels her heaviness, even from afar. He realizes that he cannot allow her to be miserable and must go help her. At this point Tomas’s motif has shifted from \textit{Einmal ist keinmal} to \textit{Es muss sein} – it must be.

The \textit{Es muss sein} motif originates from Beethoven’s last quartet, opus 135 in F major, which speaks of the gravity of irresistible fate. Beethoven apparently viewed fate as something positive. As Kundera explains,

\begin{quote}

since the German word \textit{schwer} means both difficult and heavy, Beethoven’s ‘difficult resolution’ may also be construed as a ‘heavy’ or ‘weighty’ resolution. The weighty resolution is at one with the voice of fate (\textit{Es muss sein}!); necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value.\textsuperscript{190}
\end{quote}

It is thus necessary for Tomas to return to Prague and rescue Tereza from her loneliness. It is difficult for him to give up the newly regained bachelor’s life in the safety of Switzerland and the lightness that fills its days for the Soviet-controlled, heavy Prague where Tereza is, but he is resolved that this must happen. Tereza has infinitely bound him to a life of heaviness and he cannot escape this necessity. By accepting this necessity, Tomas in a way accepts eternal return. As one critic writes, “without eternal return every moment of Dionysian existence is fortuitous. In eternal return chance is immediately transformed into necessity. Every moment is necessary.”\textsuperscript{191} Tomas believes that he must leave Switzerland and return to Prague so

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\textsuperscript{189} Kundera, \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being}, 31.  \\
\textsuperscript{190} Kundera, \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being}, 195.  \\
\textsuperscript{191} Morstein, 69.
\end{flushright}
as to be with Tereza, and so just as he had transformed *Einmal ist keinmal* into *Es muss sein*, he transforms what had been fortuity into necessity. With each change Tomas rejects lightness and accepts weight.

The question then changes from choosing between lightness and weight (Thomas has apparently made his decision) to deciding whether the greatest weight is a gain. Nietzsche calls eternal return, an inherently heavy philosophy, the heaviest of burdens. The key word here is burden; a burden is something negative, something one does not want to be forced to carry. Kundera then points out, however, that in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man’s body. This transforms ‘the heaviest of burdens’ into an image of life’s most intense fulfillment. Kundera posits that “the heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.”  

192 This implies that heaviness allows one to live life more fully and honestly, while lightness is superficial.  

Paramenides, on the other hand, believes that lightness is positive and weight is negative.  

193 Kundera never really takes an actual position on which is better, lightness or weight. The only certainty the reader is left with is that “the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious…the most ambiguous of them all.”  

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One critic remarks that the answer to the choice between lightness and weight depends upon whether a person is joyous. She writes,

The ‘you’ who responds in extreme horror to the demon’s proposal must think of the weight of eternity as a weight you have to carry on your shoulders and which must, of course, crush you. The ‘you’ who responds in extreme joy, on the other hand, must think

192 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 5.  
of the greatest weight as encompassed by your life and
every moment in it. Thus, for the joyous the greatest
weight is no load, and there is no choice between
lightness and weight. For the joyous individual the
greatest weight is neither bearable nor unbearable.\textsuperscript{195}

It is logical that if one is happy with her life, the idea of this life repeating infinitely
seems like a much more pleasant option than for a person who is miserable.

However, even if one is joyous there is still a choice between lightness and weight. A
content individual is simply more likely to choose weight and this weight is then more
bearable. There is no way, then, to eradicate the decision between a life filled with
lightness versus one characterized by weight. Instead, certain factors like joyousness
may make the decision easier to make.

By closely examining the characters in \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being},
we may come closer to interpreting Kundera’s decision between lightness and weight.
Tomas, who chooses Tereza and thus, weight, finds himself happy by the time of his
death. He and Tereza are living together, going dancing in motels and generally
enjoying each other’s company. Sabina, on the other hand, lives alone and by the end
of the novel, seems to be rather unhappy. Kundera explains that “her drama was a
drama not of heaviness, but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but
the unbearable lightness of being.” Through her betrayals and escapes from
relationships with significance, she finds herself soaring through life weightlessly.
Ultimately, however, this lightness is agonizing. The title of the novel reveals
Kundera’s position: lightness is unbearable; only through weight can one achieve
happiness.

\textsuperscript{195} Morstein, \textit{Review of Contemporary Fiction}, 69
A Conclusion on Kundera

Kundera’s categorical linguistic system can be holistically paralleled to Hegel’s dialectic. The basic tenets of Hegel’s system are applicable to Kundera’s approach to language, meaning, and the creation of the novel. Just as Hegel asserts that the whole cosmic process must be directed by a rational principle, Kundera believes that the writing of the novel is a cohesive, logical, and tightly structured process. Similarly, many of the laws of Hegel’s dialectic can be applied to the mechanism by which Kundera’s key words function.

In his dialectic, Hegel develops a system of concepts, or categories, which he refers to collectively as the ultimate reality and thereby the source of nature and through nature the mind. Similarly, Kundera creates a system of key words that, to him, comprise the essence of the novel. Hegel’s categories were of such a kind that if any of them is to be closely examined, then it will be found that each one will lead on to another. Kundera’s key words, likewise, are not isolated ideas, but intertwine to create the new ideas about human existence that Kundera so strongly values. Laughter, for example, can easily be a measure of the lightness or weight of a situation and so by thoroughly examining the meaning of laughter and the joke one will find a discussion on how laughter can bring lightness to a heavy situation, but this lightness may or may not be positive.

Hegel’s dialectic, furthermore, characterizes history not simply as a sequence of events, but as a gradual process of unfolding; “the phenomena which make up history become intelligible in proportion as they are viewed as a whole.” Similarly, the events that make up Kundera’s novels are only fully understood when viewed

196 Hunt, 39
197 Hunt, 40
198 Hunt, 42
holistically. To truly comprehend any scene in Kundera one must examine it on three
different levels: (1) the actual scene itself; (2) the place of the scene within the
particular novel; (3) the significance of the scene within Kundera’s novels as a
complete set. This thesis is the first exploration that reaches the third level and works
to analyze the most important parts of Kundera’s Czech novels not only within each
novel, but also throughout his oeuvre.

In the Law of the Transformation of Quantity into Quality, and vice versa
Hegel theorizes that change takes place “by imperceptible quantitative mutations until
there arrives a point [the node] beyond which a thing cannot vary while remaining the
same.”199 Some of Kundera’s key words undergo such a transformation. For
example, Tomas sleeps with a large variety of women in order to gain lightness, but
eventually he sleeps with so many women that it becomes its own kind of burden and
approaches heaviness. Likewise, repetition adds to the quality of beauty, but if
something is repeated too often it becomes kitschy and no longer positive in
Kundera’s eyes.

Another law of Hegel’s dialectic is the law of the unity of opposites, which
asserts that reality is essentially contradictory, but that these contradictions exist in
unity.200 Many of Kundera’s key words are defined by their diametrical opposites.
For example, a major characteristic of lightness is lack of weight. Without an idea of
heaviness, it would be impossible to describe an object or occurrence as light.
Similarly, beauty needs ugliness to help define itself. The Unbearable Lightness of
Being, for example, demonstrates the triumph of beauty since it is Tereza’s sense of
beauty that ultimately allows her and Tomas to settle down in the country and be

199 Hunt, 44
200 Hunt, 45
content together. Beauty could not enjoy such victory unless it was victorious over something and that something is its diametrical opposite—ugliness.

Hegel’s third law is the Law of the Negation of the Negation, which claims three stages of development: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Hunt explains,

the thesis breaks down by reason of its internal contradictions and gives way to the antithesis…which attempts to remove these contradictions. This also breaks down for the same reason, and a synthesis is developed which includes the valid elements of the antithesis, and thus…of the thesis also. The synthesis negates the antithesis…and is thus the negation of the negation.201

Such a developmental progression exists in Kundera’s theory of the novel. At first glance, Kundera’s thesis can be seen as defining the author as persistently present in the text at the expense of reader interpretation. Kundera constantly interjects his voice into his texts and makes his opinions easily available. This theory, however, breaks down when Kundera asserts the importance of character in the novel and explains that specific characters and their stories are what dominate the novel. In actuality, Kundera’s novels are a synthesis of these two seemingly contradictory ideas. Kundera believes that the reader’s imagination should complement the writer’s and the two can work together to create character. As such, Kundera does not provide any narrative about the physical experiences of his characters (this is to be determined by the reader), but does sculpt unique stories and philosophies for the protagonists he creates.

201 Hunt, 45
While it seems as if Kundera would expect his reader to recognize the
dialectical nature of his key words, Kundera never mentions Hegel in his novels the
way he does with Nietzsche or other thinkers. This may be because Hegel forms the
basis for a Marxist theory of history and Kundera defines himself as against Marxism.
It is more likely, however, that Kundera is playing a game with the reader and
demonstrating his seemingly paradoxical ability to appear as someone who
completely rejects Marxism, while still incorporating some of its premises into his
novelistic structure. This play forms a backbone for Kundera’s treatment of his key
words and makes the exploration of each more interesting.

As well as following Hegel’s laws, Kundera provides continuity and
conceptual development throughout his novels by linking scenes through the use of
key words. One such theme is repetition. In the novel, repetition creates layers of
meaning so that to understand a text one must continually uncover new strata of
understanding. Repetition is also an essential characteristic of beauty and one that
defines an object or an event as beautiful. The concept of eternal return teaches the
reader that what has only happened once may as well have never happened at all and
thus repetition provides an event with weight. It is this same weight of repetition that
paradoxically helps one to remember and to forget. Repetition of the same events
makes them memorable, but rituals also tend to lose significance as they get recur.
Moreover, Kundera linguistically represents laughter through repetition. All of
Kundera’s key words, then, embrace the concept of repetition, and each key word
adds an additional level of understanding to the ideas as a whole.

Similarly, Kundera creates the category of the new or original. The novel’s
worth is based upon discovering what has not previously been revealed and the comic
allows the novel to do this by balancing seriousness and laughter. Beauty, likewise, can only come from the unfamiliar and the original; it is kitsch, the antithesis of beauty, that is based on hackneyed cliché. Forgetting, moreover, is fostered by the occurrence of new events, which overshadow previous happenings and cause them to be disregarded.

By taking Kundera’s novels as a linguistic unit, one can use his key words to trace such concepts as repetition and originality. Kundera continually defines and redefines each key word so as to provide a unique perspective on an existing idea or to discover what only the novel can discover: a new aspect of existence.
The Joke: A Summary

*The Joke* opens from Ludvik’s perspective. He describes the emotions associated with his return to his Moravian hometown after being away for fifteen years. He checks into a hotel and then meets with his friend Kostka to arrange borrowing Kostka’s apartment for a reason which is at this point unknown to the reader. Kostka then recommends a barbershop to Ludvik where Ludvik recognizes his old flame, Lucie, as the girl who is shaving him. After the visit to the barbershop, Kostka notices his childhood friend Jaroslav, the first fiddle of his old folk ensemble, but avoids meeting his gaze. He telephones Kostka to confirm that the girl in the barbershop is Lucie and then sets off to wander through town.

The second part is narrated by Helena and begins with her briefly describing her life and how she fell in and out of love with her husband, Pavel, and then how she met Ludvik and is now in love with him. She is nervous about meeting Ludvik in Moravia, but is also looking forward to the event.

Part three returns to Ludvik’s perspective. At the beginning of this section he journeys into his past to describe his relationship with Marketa, her inability to understand jokes, and the story of the postcard that he sent to her, which got him expelled from the Communist Party and the University. He also elaborates on the trial he faced after the Party discovered the postcard and how his former friend Zemanek’s speech recommending that Ludvik be expelled from the Party is ultimately what led to his downfall. After the trial he was forced to join the soldiers with black insignia, the section of the army reserved for political criminals. Ludvik meets Lucie while wandering through a random neighborhood during his day off and immediately falls in love with her. Although their relationship seems perfect at first
and she makes his time in the army bearable, he becomes frustrated with her when she refuses to have sex with him. After he attempts to seduce her she asks him to wait until next time and he agrees. During this time Lucie begins visiting him at the barracks and standing outside the camp fence to see him. At no point, however, does sex leave his mind, and he arranges a dangerous plan to escape for an evening to a rented room where he can meet Lucie for a rendezvous. Although he is able to meet her without getting caught, she again refuses to sleep with him and she walks out on him after they fight over the issues.

The fourth section is from Jaroslav’s perspective and narrates a dream he has about when he was chosen for the Ride of the Kings, a folk ritual enacted every year in his and Ludvik’s hometown in Moravia. Jaroslav describes how difficult the Ride of the Kings has been to plan this year because of regulations and budget cuts and then refers to his frustration with Ludvik’s avoidance of him when they passed each other earlier. Jaroslav also portrays the struggle he has faced in persuading his son to participate in this year’s The Ride of the Kings and the honor that comes along with being chosen to ride. The reader then hears about the history of Jaroslav’s and Ludvik’s friendship and how they grew apart as Ludvik became more Communist. The section ends with Jaroslav looking forward to his son riding in The Ride of the Kings.

Part five returns once again to Ludvik’s perspective and his justification for losing touch with Lucie even after he was released from military service. Ludvik then reveals that his wooing of Helena has been part of a preconceived plan to get revenge against Zemanek, her husband. Afterwards, Ludvik and Helena finally meet, Ludvik
takes her to Kostka’s flat, and they have sex, after which Helena gets drunk and
pronounces her love for Ludvik.

The sixth section is from Kostka’s perspective and opens with his description
of his relationship with Ludvik and their relationship to Communism. It is important
to note that Kostka is a Christian. Kostka then describes how he met Lucie and their
relationship. He was the first person Lucie had opened up to and as he worked to
guide her towards God, they became involved and wound up having sex. He also tells
about how Lucie’s first sexual experience in her youth had been a gang rape, and this
explains her inability to have sex with Ludvik. Soon after Kostka and Lucie have sex,
however, he is forced to change jobs and abandon Lucie.

In the seventh and last part of the novel, the narrator changes from Ludvik to
Jaroslav to Helena. First, Ludvik reminisces about Lucie and goes to attend the Ride
of the Kings. Then it switches to Jaroslav’s perspective as he describes the Ride of
the Kings. The next chapter returns to Ludvik’s perception of the Ride of the Kings,
which is significantly more negative and jaded than that of Jaroslav. The fourth
chapter is narrated by Helena and is a soliloquy of her love for Ludvik. In chapter
five Ludvik reminisces about playing clarinet when he was younger and describes
more of the Ride. In Chapter six Jaroslav discovers that although his son was
supposed to be the king during the Ride of the Kings, his son had deceived him by
having another towns-person take his place.

In chapters seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen Ludvik meets Zemanek and
discovers that Zemanek has long stopped loving Helena, is with a beautiful young
girl, and fully supports Ludvik’s relationship with Helena. Once he makes this
discovery, Ludvik tells Helena that he does not love her and will not see her again.
Chapters eight, ten, and twelve are more of Jaroslav’s observation of The Ride of his Kings and his desperate attempt to figure out if his son is riding as the king. In the fourteenth chapter the narration switches to Helena’s perspective and she describes how hurt she is by Ludvik’s actions. In the following chapter Ludvik relates his misery at how poorly his prank turned out. In the sixteenth chapter Helena decides that she is going to kill herself by taking a bottle of tablets that she thinks will poison her. In the seventeenth chapter, told from Ludvik’s perspective, Ludvik discovers that Helena has disappeared and hurries off to look for her. He finally finds her hiding in a toilet and forces her to tell him what she took. She reveals that she took the pills that her helper, Jindra, had been carrying and learns that they are laxatives not pain killers. Helena is also humiliated by the revelation that she is not dying, but suffering from diarrhea.

Chapter eighteen returns to Jaroslav’s point of view when he confronts his wife regarding his son’s participation in the Ride of the Kings. She admits that rather than acting as king, their son went to the motorcycle races with his friend. Jaroslav smashes the dishes and leaves the house. While walking outside, Jaroslav hears Ludvik call his name and Ludvik asks Jaroslav to play with the ensemble that afternoon. The nineteenth chapter is from Ludvik’s perspective and describes his encounter with Jaroslav and his request to play with the ensemble. Ludvik then describes the restaurant where the performance is to take place and the catharsis he experiences while performing. During a break in the set, Ludvik notices that Jaroslav is extremely pale and calls a doctor over to examine Jaroslav, who is having a heart attack. Ludvik at this point realizes that although Jaroslav probably will not die, his
destiny has come to end. Ludvik holds Jaroslav in his arms until the ambulance arrives and the novel closes with Ludvik leading Jaroslav outside to the ambulance.
The Farewell Party: A Summary

Kundera’s *The Farewell Party* takes place over a span of five days, with a section of the novel depicting each day. The first day begins with Ruzena, a nurse in a small-town health resort, calling Klima, a famous trumpeter in Prague who had recently visited the resort, to tell him she is pregnant and asking him to come see her. The news alarms Klima and he decides that he needs to persuade Ruzena to have an abortion. The reader then learns about Klima’s wife, Kamila, and how she is an extremely beautiful but sickly and insecure woman. Klima has long stopped being faithful to Kamila but he still loves her deeply and believes that his indiscretion is in some way a sign of his love.

On the second day Klima goes to the town where Ruzena lives and starts the day by visiting Mr. Bartleff, an eccentric and wealthy American. The two chat for a while and Klima tells Bartleff about Ruzena and asks his help in getting permission from the hospital authorities for her to have an abortion. Klima then phones Ruzena and they agree to meet at 4pm that day in the largest tavern in town. After this phone conversation, Bartleff takes Klima to meet Dr. Skreta, where Klima learns that Ruzena actually is pregnant (he had been afraid she was lying to him) and convinces Dr. Skreta to get Ruzena permission for the abortion in exchange for playing with Klima at a local concert.

Afterwards, Klima and Ruzena meet at the tavern and after Ruzena repeatedly mentions that she would never allow anyone to take her baby away, Klima invites her for a drive. After a long, exhausting discussion about abortion, Klima, in his exhaustion, hugs Ruzena and she agrees to have the abortion. He has convinced her
that he loves her and that the child would be in their way. Overjoyed, Klima takes
Ruzena home and then relays the news to Bartleff.

At the beginning of the third day, Dr. Skreta’s childhood friend Jakub arrives
to visit, say goodbye to Dr. Skreta since he is leaving the country, and return to Dr.
Skreta a poison pill that Skreta had given him so that Jakub could feel as if he always
had the power to die if he so chose. Jakub also needs to bid farewell to Olga, a girl he
had semi-adopted because her father had been executed by the government. While
Jakub spends time with Olga, Ruzena tells her colleagues that she agreed to an
abortion and they say that such a decision would be stupid and that Klima has tricked
her. Later that day, Jakub and Dr. Skreta go to visit Bartleff and then Olga meets
Bartleff and they spend time drinking and talking.

On the fourth day Klima tells his wife that he must leave Prague to go play a
concert. She feels jealous and suspicious that he has a mistress and decides to go to
the town where the concert is supposed to be to see if he is telling her the truth. Later
that day, Klima meets with Ruzena and she declares that she has changed her mind
about the abortion. Klima decides to leave the restaurant and as they leave Ruzena
forgets her bottle of anti-anxiety pills on the table. After they depart, Jakub sits down
at the same table, sees the medicine bottle, and notices that Ruzena’s pills are a
remarkably similar shade of blue to his poison pill. While he is examining this
strange similarity, Olga walks into the tavern and he puts his pill in the same bottle
with Ruzena’s medication. Shortly afterwards, Ruzena walks in, sees Jakub holding
her pill bottle, and makes him return the bottle to her without allowing him to explain
that he had put his pill inside. Later that day, Kamila arrives in town and sees some
of her film friends, who inform her that Klima actually is playing in a concert that
night and invite her to drink with them. At the same time, Jakub is spending time
with Olga, but he is preoccupied with the fact that he may have given Ruzena a
poison pill. After spending some more time with Klima, Ruzena is still confused
about whether to have an abortion and as she is walking home the film people Kamila
is drinking with invite Ruzena to join them and she does so. As the three men and
two women are flirting gaily, Bartleff decides to join them. The men are at first
unhappy with this, but he buys them fine wine and then invites Ruzena to leave with
him, which she agrees to. While Bartleff and Ruzena spend time together in
Bartleff’s apartment, Klima’s concert takes place. That night Bartleff and Ruzena
make love, Olga seduces Jakub, and Klima spends the night with Kamila, his wife.

The fifth day begins with Klima waking up early to go find Ruzena and
Ruzena waking up in Bartleff’s apartment feeling happy and independent from Klima.
At her apartment door, Ruzena sees Klima waiting for her and agrees to the abortion
because she has fallen in love with Bartleff. That morning Jakub calls the spa to find
out whether Ruzena is still alive and since she is he decides that the pill Dr. Skreta
had given him was a placebo, and he is no longer concerned about Ruzena being
poisoned. Later that morning, Ruzena has the abortion and Jakub says goodbye to
Olga and Bartleff. He also runs into Kamila and is overwhelmed by her beauty and
this leaves a strong impression on him. After the abortion, Ruzena returns to work
but drops dead in the middle of performing her duties because she has taken the
poison pill. At the same time, Jakub bids farewell to Dr. Skreta and finally leaves the
village to go abroad. The police inspector is convinced that Ruzena intentionally
committed suicide, and although Bartleff tries to convince him otherwise, there is no
logical reason to believe him. Later in the day Klima goes to Dr. Skreta’s office to
thank him for his help in obtaining the abortion and learns that Ruzena is dead. He
then leaves town with his wife. The novel ends with the arrival of Bartleff’s wife and
child from America and a seemingly happy celebration between the Bartelffs and Dr.
Skreta.
**The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: A Summary**

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is a set of seemingly unrelated plots that are all linked by the themes of laughter and forgetting. Part I of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, titled “Lost Letters,” opens by introducing the reader to the character of Mirek and his desire to forget the affair he had with Zdena 25 years prior. Mirek drives to visit her in an attempt to retrieve some letters he had written her many years ago, but fails. During the drive, Mirek notices that he is being followed and eventually he is forced to talk to his pursuer (the secret police), is put on trial a year later, and sentenced to six years in prison.

Part II, titled “Mother,” switches to the story of Marketa and Karel and begins by describing the couple’s relationship with Karel’s mother. Mother has come to visit the couple and then later that afternoon, Marketa picks up their friend Eva from the airport. After they think mother has gone to bed, the girls change into their nighties, but mother returns to say a few things and embarrasses the girls since they are nearly naked. Mother describes how Eva reminds her of her friend Nora from her youth. Karel had always been infatuated by Nora and draws on this resemblance after Mother returns to bed and Karel, Eva, and Marketa engage in sexual activity. The next morning Karel brings his mother to the train station and says good-bye to her.

Part III, “The Angels,” describes the play *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco and how two American girls, Gabrielle and Michelle, are assigned by their favorite teacher, Madame Raphael, to do a presentation on the play. Kundera then digresses to give two essays on laughter, one from a book called “Woman’s Word” and one on two kinds of laughter. Later, Gabrielle and Michelle present their findings while wearing rhinoceros noses and one girl who is annoyed by them gets up in the middle
of their presentation, kicks each of them, and sits back down. The entire class begins
laughing and their teacher interprets this to be planned and joins in the laughter. The
two girls begin crying at this betrayal by their teacher, but then she puts her arms
around both of them and the three start stamping their feet on the ground until
eventually they rise into the air, above the ceiling, and vanish.

Part IV, “Lost Letters,” tells the story of Tamina, a woman who was born in
Prague, but emigrated to France illegally with her husband, who soon died. She
currently works as a waitress in a small café and spends most of her time trying to
remember her time with her husband and finding a way to obtain the letters he had
written her, which she had left at home in Prague. Her friend Bibi is supposed to
cancel her trip and decides to travel to Prague and get the letters for Tamina, but she
wants to write a novel. Tamina then starts dating a man named Hugo in the hope
that he will go to Prague, but he realizes that Tamina does not

Part V, “Litost,” begins with the story of Kristyna, a small-town woman who
has an affair with a student who is visiting the town for a year. She will not, however,
have sex with him but agrees to go visit him in Prague. Kundera then spends some
time defining the Czech word litost (which Kundera defines as a state of torment
created by the sudden sight of one’s own misery) before telling the reader about a
professor, named Voltaire, who is close with the student and invites him to a meeting
at the Writer’s Club with a few great poets on the same evening that Kristyna is
visiting. The student decides he cannot miss the meeting and tells Kristyna that he
will get them to sign a book for her in exchange and will come home to her
afterwards. The meeting consists of conversation about love between the student, and

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writers nicknamed Voltaire, Petrarch, Goethe, and Lermontov. Afterwards, the
student comes home, gives Kristyna a book with Goethe’s signature, and then tries to
coerce Kristyna into having sex with him. She refuses and the next morning the
student realizes that it was not because she did not love him, but because she was
afraid of pregnancy.

In Part VI, “The Angels,” Kundera discusses how his father lost the power of
speech and later how he passed away. Then there is a scene where Tamina complains
to Bibi about some children who are making a racket at the restaurant and Bibi takes
offense and asks Tamina why she dislikes children. The next morning Tamina does
not show up at the restaurant and there is no explanation. We later learn that what
happened that day is that a young man walked into the restaurant and asked her to go
with him to a place where she can forget her forgetting. She agrees to go and he takes
her to a lake that a boy rows her across and she arrives at the Island of Children. At
first she is indignant to be there since she is not a child, but eventually she realizes
that the children are fascinated by her womanly body and that she can help them win
at childhood games because she is bigger. However, after a game of hopscotch where
she admits to having stepped on a line and made her team lose, the children begin to
torture her and she tries to escape by jumping into the lake and swimming away.
After some time swimming, she realizes that she cannot make any progress and
resigns herself to her fate and disappears under the water.

Part VII, “The Border,” begins the story of Edwige and Jan with Jan
commenting on how he can never tell what Edwige is thinking during sex. Jan then
visits the actress Jeanne, who is extremely beautiful, and they discuss the health of
their friend Passer. Jan, Edwige, and some friends have a discussion about rape and
whether women can enjoy the idea of being tied up. Later in the section, Passer dies and during the funeral a man named Clevis is giving a speech and while he is speaking, his hat flies off and lands inside the freshly dug grave. This sends a wave of silent laughter across the assembly. In the next chapter, Jan’s friend Barbara is giving an orgiastic party, but Jan and another man realize the absurdity of the party and struggle to contain their laughter, but ultimately fail at this endeavor and are asked to leave. In the last chapter we learn that Jan and Edwige plan to leave for America and before doing so they go to an abandoned island. They go to the beach naked and recall the story of Daphnis and Chloe, which makes them decide to nickname the island Daphnis Island. The novel ends with them sitting on the sand, naked, discussing Judeo-Christian ideas.
The Unbearable Lightness of Being: A Summary

Kundera opens part I of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “Lightness and Weight,” by portraying Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return. He then introduces the character of Tomas as Tomas recalls how he met Tereza and the time when she came to visit him in Prague. We also learn that Tomas was once married, but divorced his wife, who then kept him away from his son in retaliation and so Tomas was basically living alone when he met Tereza. Kundera then narrates Tereza’s first nightmare, in which she is in an indoor swimming pool with a multitude of naked women and Tomas is shooting them one by one while those not being shot are laughing. The reader further begins to understand that Tomas loves Tereza and thus allows her to move in with him, marry him, and be an obvious part of his life, but at no point can he stay sexually faithful to her. Tomas also buys Tereza a dog so that she has a constant companion and they name the dog Karenin, even though the dog is a female, because Tereza was carrying a copy of *Anna Karenina* when she came to Tomas. Kundera then describes the Russian invasion of Prague in 1968, and how a Swiss doctor offers Tomas a job in Zurich, but Tomas rejects the offer at first because he thinks Tereza would not want to leave Prague. Tereza, however, tells him that she is wrong and they move to Zurich. After six to seven months in Zurich, the reader learns that Tomas came home one day to find a letter on the table from Tereza in which she explains that she lacked the strength to live abroad and has left to return to Prague. For a few days Tomas feels relieved, but this does not last long and he follows Tereza back to Prague.

The second part of the novel, “Body and Soul,” retells much of the same events as the first part, but from Tereza’s perspective. Kundera tells us that Tereza
was born of the irreconcilable duality of body and soul and how throughout her childhood she tried to see herself through her body, but was unable to. We also learn about how her mother tried to expose Tereza’s body and embarrass her as much as possible and that Tereza longed to leave the small town in which she was born and lived until she met Tomas. Kundera tells us the story of how Tereza was working as a waitress at a small hotel and that she met Tomas during one of her shifts. The day she met Tomas she noticed a series of coincidences and recurrences of the number six that led her to believe that she and Tomas were fated for one another. We then hear more about the first dream that Tereza had and the horror she experienced during it.

Kundera also describes how Tereza went to visit Sabina in her studio to take pictures of her and the two have a quasi-sexual nude photographing session. We then return to the takeover of Prague and how Tereza spent a week blissfully happy taking pictures, but these pictures later turned out to incriminate the Czechs and once she realized this, she decided she wanted to leave Prague with Tomas. Tereza then tries to sell these pictures to a magazine in Zurich, but the editor says they are outdated and suggests she take pictures of gardens, which she refuses to do. As Tereza is settling down in Zurich, she receives a phone while at home one day and it is a woman speaking German and asking for Tomas. When she says that Tomas is not there, the woman starts laughing and hangs up without saying good-bye. After this incident, Tereza feels as if she has lost the last bit of her strength and decides to return to Prague. Once back in Czechoslovakia, she contemplates moving to the country, but she does not go because she is subconsciously waiting for Tomas to return. On the fifth day he does return and that night she hears the bells in the church belfry strike
six times, which reminds her of the importance of that number on the day she met him and is once again filled with the beauty of fortuity.

In Part III, “Words Misunderstood,” we learn about Sabina’s relationship with Franz, a man who is unhappily married and wholly in love with Sabina. At one point Franz’s wife invites Sabina, not knowing about the affair, to a gallery opening and says something insulting about Sabina’s pendant as a way to demonstrate her superiority. This bothers Franz enough for him to tell his wife about the affair and leave her. On their way to Rome, he tells Sabina that he has come clean with his wife and they can now be together, and they make passionate love that evening, but Sabina decides that now that their relationship is out in the open she can no longer see Franz. He goes to see her at her studio and realizes that she has left and does not want him to know her new address. Franz begins dating a student of his and they settle in together happily. Dispersed throughout this story is a dictionary of words that Sabina and Franz define differently and what each word means to each of them. The reader realizes that their language is so different that neither of them can understand what the other means when he or she speaks.

Part IV, “Soul and Body,” begins with Tereza sniffing Tomas’s hair and finding the smell of other women’s genitals on it. We learn that Tereza is now working at a bar and is now considering flirting with the men there in order to better relate to Tomas’s distinction between physical sex and the emotions he has towards her. She meets a tall man, goes to his apartment, and winds up having sex with him. Afterwards, she longs to cry and have him put his arms around her, but she realizes that this would make her fall in love with him and when she hears his voice, divorced
from his body, it is extremely high pitched and it is this image that allows her to leave
him and never see him again.

Part V, “Lightness and Weight,” describes Tomas’s letter to the editor, which
compares the responsibility of former Czech communists to Sophocles Oedipus;
Tomas opines that even though these former Party members may not have known the
results of their actions, they are still, as Oedipus was, responsible for their actions and
should take an action that is analogous to Oedipus’s act of gouging out his eyes. Soon
afterwards, the chief at the hospital that Tomas works at pulls Tomas aside and tells
him that he needs to write a formal apology and rescind the statements he made in the
editorial or else he may lose his job as a surgeon. Tomas refuses to do this and goes
to work at a country clinic 50 miles outside of Prague. While he is at this job, a man
representing the Ministry of the Interior visits him and begins questioning Tomas
about the same editorial. The man then asks him to sign a statement of allegiance to
the Communist Party and says he would then reinstate him as a surgeon. Tomas asks
to thinks about it, decides that he will not do it, and takes a job as window washer so
that he can never be contacted or manipulated by the government again. Tomas
enjoys this job because he has a high reputation around Prague and often rich people
request that he come over to “wash windows” when in reality they just want him to
have coffee or drinks with them. He also meets many women this way whom he can
have sex with and some would even invite him back several times. One of these
“clients” winds up being Tomas’s son, asking him to sign a petition demanding the
release of political prisoners, but eventually Tomas refuses to do so. As time goes on
Tomas and Tereza realize that Prague has deteriorated and decide to move to the
country and Tereza finally tells Tomas that his hair has been bothering her because of the smell of female genitals.

Part VI, “The Grand March,” opens with a story about Stalin’s son and then transitions to a philosophical discussion regarding shit and kitsch. We learn about Sabina’s hatred for kitsch, particularly communist kitsch. Then Kundera narrates Franz’s decision to march to Cambodia and demand the amnesty of political prisoners. The march fails and as the party is on the streets of Bangkok at night when several men approach Franz and asks for his money. Franz tries to use his martial arts on the gang, but one of the men hits him on the head and the next thing Franz realizes he is in the hospital back in Geneva. Franz dies in the hospital and Kundera makes some comments regarding the engravings on gravestones and how the people who die have no control over what phrase commemorates them eternally.

Part VII, “Karenin’s Smile,” describes Tomas and Tereza’s peaceful life in the country together. In this section, Tomas and Tereza’s dog, Karenin, dies. Tomas also receives a letter from his son and the two begin to communicate more frequently. In the country, Tomas and Tereza’s relationship becomes better because Tomas is no longer sleeping with other women and the two start going to a hotel a few towns over and dancing. The novel ends with Tomas and Tereza going to sleep happy at the hotel after spending the evening dancing along with the chairman of their collective farm, but the reader already knows that they are eventually going to die in a truck accident.
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