The Unbearable Lightness of Being Study Guide

The Unbearable Lightness of Being by Milan Kundera

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Introduction

First published in 1984 in both Paris and New York, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a rich and complicated novel that is at once a love story, a metaphysical treatise, a political commentary, a psychological study, a lesson on kitsch, a musical composition in words, an aesthetic exploration, and a meditation on human existence. As an expatriate Czechoslovakian writer, Kundera draws upon his firsthand experience of the 1968 Prague Spring and subsequent Soviet occupation of his country to provide the backdrop for the story of four people whose lives are inextricably enmeshed. Because the work is so complex, there are many themes that intertwine throughout the novel, just as a theme in a musical composition will be introduced only to reappear later in a different key. Indeed there are several critics who focus their entire analysis on the way Kundera uses musical structure to put together his novel. At its most fundamental level, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is about the ambiguity and paradoxes of human existence, as each person teeters between lightness and weight; between the belief that all is eternal return and Nietzsche's concept that life is an ever-disappearing phenomenon; and between dream and reality.

Author Biography

Milan Kundera was born April 1,1929,in Brno, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), the son of Ludvik and Milada Kundera. He studied music with Paul Haas and Vaclav Kapral and attended Charles University in Prague. He studied film at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Prague, where he later held a position as assistant professor from 1958 to 1969. He was a member of the central committee of the Czechoslovak Writers Union from 1963 to 1969.

In 1962 Kundera began writing his first novel, *The Joke*. The book caused problems with the national censors, and consequently it was not published until 1967 (the English edition was first published in 1969). Kundera's frustration with the censors climaxed with a speech he gave at the Fourth Czechoslovak Writers Congress. However, Kundera and others who followed his lead were subjected to even more oppression.

For a brief period in 1968 known as the "Prague Spring," the government eased restrictions on its writers and citizens. The Soviet Bloc countries, led by the Soviet Union, were nervous about the relaxation of the regime in Czechoslovakia, and in August 1968, Russian tanks and Soviet Bloc soldiers took control of Prague. The Soviets deposed Czech leader Alexander Dubcek and put Gustav Husak in his place, instituting a repressive regime that lasted for twenty-one years. During this time, Kundera's books and plays were banned, and his works could not be sold in bookstores or read in libraries.Kundera was forbidden to publish in Czechoslovakia,and he lost his teaching position.

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In 1975 Kundera received permission to immigrate to France, where he became a professor. His 1979 novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (first published in English in 1980) led the Czech government to revoke his citizenship. In 1981 Kundera became a French citizen.

Although by 1984 Kundera was internationally respected as a writer, his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* secured his place in world literature. Since that time, Kundera has published widely, including the novels *Immortality*, published in French in 1990 and English in 1991; *Slowness: A Novel*, published in French in 1995, and English in 1996; *Identity: A Novel*, published in French in 1997 and in English in 1998; and *Ignorance*, published in English in 2002. Kundera's work has been well-received by critics and readers alike, and he has been awarded many prizes, including the Czechoslovak Writers Union prize in 1968 for *The Joke*; the Commonwealth Award for distinguished service in literature in 1981; a 1984 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; and the Academie Francaise critics prize in 1987.

Plot Summary

Part 1: Lightness and Weight

The novel opens with a meditation on philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return, contrasted with the notion of *einmal ist keinmal*; that is, "what happens but once . . . might as well not have happened at all." According to Nietzsche, eternal return is the "heaviest of burdens." The absence of this burden, however, renders life inconsequential. The binary opposition of weight and lightness continues throughout the book.

Kundera next introduces Tomas, a surgeon who has fallen in love with a young woman named Tereza. Tomas has many mistresses, engaging in what he terms "erotic friendships." When Tereza discovers Tomas's many mistresses, she is distraught. It is this contrast between the weight of Tereza's love and the lightness of Tomas's love that provides much of the material for the book.

Eventually Tomas marries Tereza. He also buys Tereza a puppy they name Karenin. Although married, Tomas does not give up his mistresses. Notable among them is Sabina, an artist. Sabina clearly understands Tomas and even becomes a close friend of Tereza's.

In 1968 the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia begins. Sabina immigrates to Switzerland, and Tomas begins receiving calls from a Swiss doctor who wants him to immigrate to Switzerland as well. Tomas and Tereza do well in Zurich for six or seven months, until Tereza learns that Tomas is once again seeing Sabina. Tereza returns to Prague, and within days Tomas follows her.

Part 2: Soul and Body

The story returns to the beginning, this time from Tereza's point of view. This section allows the reader to understand the family background and psychology that drive Tereza. Her father was a political prisoner who died in jail, and her mother is an abusive, vulgar woman who takes great delight in humiliating Tereza. Kundera reiterates Tereza's meeting with Tomas and her decision to go to Prague. Also in this section the reader learns of Tereza's troubling dreams, which often involve Tomas. Finally, the friendship between Sabina and Tereza grows; it is Sabina who has secured a position for Tereza at the magazine where Sabina works. In one particularly intense scene, Sabina and Tereza photograph each other nude at Sabina's studio.

Part 3: Words Misunderstood

In this section the reader meets Franz, a university professor in Geneva who is having an affair with Sabina. Franz is married to a woman named Marie-Claude, whom he does

not love. Throughout this section, there are brief chapters of "misunderstood words" that illustrate the differences between Sabina and Franz. For example, in a section titled "Music," Franz tries to explain his love of music to Sabina. Kundera writes, "For Franz music was the art that comes closest to Dionysian beauty in the sense of intoxication." For Sabina, however, music is noise. Her early years at the Academy of Arts ruined her feelings for music, as the school played loud, cheerful music on speakers from early morning until night. While for Franz music is a liberating force, for Sabina music is an unpleasant reminder of her life in the totalitarian state. Likewise, in a short section titled "Light and Dark," the reader discovers that Franz is drawn to darkness and that he closes his eyes when he makes love to Sabina. For Sabina, however, "living . . . meant seeing." the very thing Sabina does not want to happen. Consequently, Sabina leaves Franz and Switzerland, settling first in Paris and later in the United States. She receives a letter while in Paris from Tomas's son, informing her that Tomas and Tereza have been killed in a car accident. Franz becomes involved with a student and begins taking an active role in political dissension.

Part 4: Body and Soul

Given the distance between the two lovers in their understanding of reality, it is not surprising that Franz chooses to tell his wife of their affair, Tomas is working as a window washer in this section, having lost his position at the hospital. Tereza tends bar. Their schedules are very different from each other, and, by the time Tereza returns home from work each night, Tomas is asleep. When she crawls into bed beside him, she is aware of an odor coming from his hair, an odor she finally identifies as coming from the genitals of another woman. This weighs heavily on her, and she eventually has a sexual encounter with an engineer she meets at the bar. Only later does she realize that the engineer is probably a spy for the state. The atmosphere of this section is sad and heavy throughout, and the pressure of living in a totalitarian state, where there is little or no privacy, permeates the events. Perhaps the most moving part of this section is a dream Tereza has in which Tomas instructs her to go up Petrin Hill, which she does, only to find men with rifles killing those who want to die. It must be their choice, the men tell Tereza. At the last minute she says that being killed is not her choice. Although this is how the dream ends, it seems that Tereza truly does want to die.

Part 5: Lightness and Weight

In this section, the reader discovers why Tomas has been let go from his job at the hospital. It seems that he wrote a letter to an editor of a journal during the brief Prague Spring. Now, with the reinstatement of a more oppressive regime, he is called upon to recant. He refuses to do so and must consequently resign from his job. His friends and family think he is protesting the new regime. Thus, he is approached by his son Simon and the editor of the journal who published his letter. They want him to sign a petition demanding the release of Czech political prisoners. He refuses to sign this document. Finally, to get away from the intrigue and anxieties of the city, Tomas and Tereza move to a collective farm in the country, believing that this move will put them so far down on

the social ladder that the state will no longer be concerned with them, since they have little else to lose.

Part 6: The Grand March

In this section Kundera explores the notion of kitsch, particularly communist kitsch. The story also returns to Franz, who decides to go to Thailand with a group of intellectuals to protest human-rights violations in Cambodia. While there, he is senselessly mugged by some street thugs and ends up dying in a hospital shortly after his return to Switzerland.

Part 7: Karenin's Smile

In this final section, the reader learns more about Tomas and Tereza's life on the farm. Their dog Karenin is very old and dying of cancer. This death affects both of them deeply. At the collective, Tomas has finally given up womanizing, and Tereza asks for forgiveness for her role in his unhappiness in life. Tomas replies that he has been happy these last years at the farm. Thus in the hours before their deaths, Tomas and Tereza are happy together.

Part 1, Chapters 1-5

Part 1, Chapters 1-5 Summary

The Unbearable Lightness of Being follows the stories of four main characters: Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz. Through the characters' interaction and reflections on their own lives, they come to significant conclusions and revelations about life and themselves.

Milan Kundera begins *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by discussing Nietzsche's idea of eternal return. This idea states, "Everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum!" Conversely, a life that disappears, not to return, is meaningless and without weight. Kundera uses a war between two African kingdoms and the French Revolution to illuminate his point that because we do not live by the idea of eternal return. These horrific events lose the immediate emotional impact and power, because they become "mere words, stories, and discussions." Kundera contends that because the world abides by the notion that there is a nonexistence of return "everything is pardoned in advance and therefore cynically permitted."

Kundera further conditions the story by explaining his theory of lightness versus weight. Lightness, it would seem, is the most enviable, as it is without burden. However, Kundera points out that "the woman longs to be weighted down by man's body," and that the weight of life's burdens is what grounds one and makes life meaningful.

By Chapter 3, Kundera begins to introduce the characters. He first starts with Tomas, introducing him as an old friend, creating a relationship between the narrator and the main character. Kundera discusses how Tomas and Tereza met. Their relationship happens in an instant. They meet an hour before Tomas boards a train. Ten days later, Tereza visits, they make love, and she comes down with the flu. Tomas falls in love with Tereza, as he nurses her to health. He also begins to question himself about his emotions for this girl, who is virtually a stranger to him. Tomas is a womanizer and goes to great lengths to keep his life unattached. However, he is overcome with emotion for Tereza and struggles with the decision to be free of her, or to embrace her into his life. Tomas's query has no answer in this world, as there is no eternal return. Kundera explains, "There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison."

In Chapter 4, we find out that Tomas is a doctor. He receives a phone call from Tereza between surgeries. She has come to Prague uninvited and is waiting at the train station for him. Tereza arrives with a small handbag dangling from her shoulder and the book *Anna Karenina* under her arms. After making love, she informs Tomas that her suitcase is at the train station, and she is awaiting the invitation to bring it with her.

Tomas recalls his wife and son, and the divorce that has led him to his current lifestyle. He analyzes his idea of 'erotic friendship' and the rules he created to ensure he keeps

to his unattached bachelor life. Tomas introduces Sabina, his favorite mistress, and asks her to help Tereza get a job in the darkroom at an illustrated weekly.

Part 1, Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Tomas, the central character of the story, is struggling with whether to continue to embrace the lightness of his carefree bachelordom or embrace the weight of the burden of love and all of its rewards and troubles. Tereza is a simple young waitress, however, she unwittingly holds immense power over Tomas. Tomas feels the weight of caring for another, when he watches over Tereza while she is sick. For Tomas, this is not caring in the clinical sense, but rather a deep and meaningful care for another person that makes him question his lifestyle and threatens his carefree bachelor lifestyle. There is much symbolism in the first part of the novel. Tomas views Tereza as "a child someone had put in a bulrush basket...sent downstream for Tomas to fetch." Kundera also compares the weight of one's life and the responsibility to another person by equating it with the enormous and heavy suitcase Tereza brings with her to live with Tomas. Sabina gets Tereza a job in a darkroom, which represents the darkness of Tomas's infidelities that she cannot see. Kundera conditions the reader to keep thinking about the ideas of lightness and weight with the philosophical theories he puts forth in this early part of the story.

Part 1, Chapters 6-10

Part 1, Chapters 6-10 Summary

Tomas begins breaking his own rules of bachelorhood by sharing the bed with Tereza in sleep. This makes him conclude that one may desire many women sexually, but there are few that a man can simply share sleep with. Tomas is beginning to grow true feelings for Tereza. One night, Tereza has a nightmare from reading Sabina's erotic letter to Tomas. Tereza realizes that she is not the only woman in Tomas's life, and it haunts her. Tomas tries to reconcile his infidelity and assure himself that he can keep both his bachelor life and Tereza. His napvety is further shown, when he hypocritically demands fidelity from Tereza. Tereza continues having vivid nightmares about Tomas's sexual exploits and feels victimized during each episode.

In Chapter 9, Kundera goes back to instruction and gives the etymological difference between the Latin word for compassion and the Czech equivalent. Compassion in Latin is associated with pity, or to feel superior to the one you regard with empathy. They are a victim, and you are above them. However, in Tomas's case, he feels the Czech idea of compassion, which is to endure the same pain as the person who is suffering. Tomas suffers along side Tereza, while she broods over Tomas's infidelity. Tomas is overcome with empathy, as he sees the torment Tereza feels because of his cheating. Although Tereza broke his trust by reading his letters, Tomas is more sympathetic to her pain caused by the letters than angry about the broken trust.

Tomas struggles to keep both Tereza and his bachelorhood going. He cannot give up his cheating, despite the tremendous guilt he feels about it. To cope with his nagging conscience, Tomas drinks to dull his senses and carry out the affairs. The pinnacle of this internal battle presents itself when he is with Sabina. He cannot take his eyes off of his watch, as they make love. To get even, Sabina hides his sock and makes Tomas wear one of her stockings home. He is humiliated by his mistress, and exposed as a weak and corrupted man.

Part 1, Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Tereza is living with Tomas. He can actually see the consequences of his womanizing that he was blind to before. Tomas, who appeared as a strong, virile, independent man, is becoming increasingly indecisive and weak. He turns to alcohol to tolerate his self-hate during his times of infidelity, and yet he cannot bring himself to give up these women. Tereza constantly agonizes over Tomas's cheating, and her love for him is slowly dying. Tomas loses more of himself to the point where he can neither fulfill his wife, nor his mistress. The narrator seems his only friend, acknowledging his compassion for Tereza and describing his great struggle within. He points out, "in his mistress' eyes he bore the stigma of his love for Tereza; in Tereza's eyes, the stigma of his exploits with his mistress." While these women see something less desirable about

Tomas, the reader is given intuition into the complexity of Tomas and his situation, which elicits compassion on the reader's part.

Part 1, Chapters 11-17

Part 1, Chapters 11-17 Summary

Tomas marries Tereza to ease her suffering and assure her of his love for her. He also buys her a puppy, which they name Karenin after a character in *Anna Karenina*. The puppy immediately takes to Tereza, and Tomas is relieved that another being is there to give affection to Tereza to take some of that burden from himself. While Prague is overrun by Russian tanks, a colleague of Tomas's calls to offer him a job in Zurich. Tomas rejects the offer, because he feels that Tereza is happy in Prague.

During the occupation, Tereza photographs the tanks and the soldiers. She is arrested, but this only excites her more. She is beginning to become independent herself and enjoys the new adventure. However, her fascination with the war wears off, and they decide to leave Prague for Geneva at Tereza's prodding. Sabina also lives in Geneva and has become a very successful artist. Tomas returns to cheating with Sabina. Tereza realizes Tomas will never stop cheating, and she blames herself for forcing herself into Tomas's life. Tereza takes Karenin and leaves Tomas to move back to Prague, apologizing for not being able to "bolster Tomas up."

While Tomas is at first devastated by the idea that he cannot get Tereza back, he eventually begins to reconcile her leaving to himself. "One day Tereza came to him uninvited. One day she left the same way." Tomas begins to feel free, a lightness of being without the responsibility of his relationship with Tereza. He is uplifted and anxious to begin his life, as he had started it before Tereza, as a free and unattached bachelor. This feeling does not last very long, he quickly returns to thinking of Tereza. The weight of this melancholy is stronger than the flippant freedom he thought he coveted.

Tomas quits his job and returns back to Prague and Tereza. He repeats a line from a Beethoven movement "Es muss sein (It must be)." As he is on his way back to Prague, he begins to think about whether this really must be. He wonders if he had let the torturous melancholy pass, maybe he could return to the lightness of being that he first felt when Tereza was gone. However, as Kundera has already instructed, one cannot act on this, because there has been no precedent for it. As Tomas lay next to the sleeping Tereza, he remembers Tereza telling him that, if she had not met Tomas, she would have fallen in love with his friend Z. Tomas begins to think that maybe she could be happy with someone else. He questions his thought "Es muss sein." He thinks that maybe this is all circumstantial, and he lies next to her awake in despair and with pressure in his stomach.

Part 1, Chapters 11-17 Analysis

Buying the puppy is symbolic. It represents one of Tereza's dreams, where women are killed, because Tomas does not choose them. Similarly, those puppies that Tomas does not choose are put to sleep. The analogy of the Russian occupation as that of Tomas's occupation of Tereza is apparent in Chapter eleven. Tereza is excited by the occupation at first. It is an adventure for her, and she is passionate about it. However, eventually she comes to feel "The carnival was over. Workaday humiliation had begun." She feels this same notion about her relationship with Tomas. The line from Beethoven's song shows the difference perspective can make. "Es muss sein," (it must be) has a very light triumphant tone when Tomas is relating it to the Director of the hospital, as he is quitting his job and chasing after Tereza.

However, the tone of it changes dramatically once he begins to feel the weight of his decision to come back to Tereza and give up his job, Sabina, and his bachelor life. He feels the finality of his decision and the heavy weight of being trapped in a situation. This motif repeats itself to Tomas throughout his life. Tomas also continually thinks about the six improbable fortuities that have led him to Tereza. He questions whether it is destiny or chance that he and Tereza have come together.

Part 2, Chapters 1-6

Part 2, Chapters 1-6 Summary

Kundera relates the origins of the characters of Tomas and Tereza. "Tomas was born of the saying 'Einmal ist keinmal,'" what happens once might as well not have happened at all. "Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach." He describes how Tereza could not stop her stomach from rumbling when she got to Tomas's flat the first time, and was mortified until Tomas comforted her. Kundera relates this incident to the "irreconcilable duality of body and soul." Kundera discusses how scientific progress has explained bodily functions. However, when it comes to love, there is no comfort or peace of mind, when your stomach is growling in front of your lover.

Kundera begins to uncover Tereza's background. Tereza looks in the mirror and tries to see her soul. She does not look at her body in a scientific way, only as a vessel containing her soul that periodically shows through to her amazement and jubilation. Tereza is as beautiful as her mother once was. Tereza's mother had many suitors, but ultimately married the man who impregnated her with Tereza. As Tereza's mother gets older, she rejects Tereza and her own aging body. She leaves Tereza and her husband for a contemptible man. Tereza's father dies from his misery, and Tereza goes to live with her mother, the swindler and three children. Tereza's mother blames Tereza for the terrible state her life has become, and Tereza accepts the guilt as sacrifice to her mother.

Tereza does not understand that it is her mother's decisions that have led to this undesirable life. Tereza's father was not careful when making love to her mother, and she became pregnant with Tereza. Tereza's mother blames this event, and Tereza, for the downfall of her life. Tereza feels tremendous guilt and does anything she can to make up for it. Her mother takes her out of school, and Tereza becomes a waitress. She gives all of her earnings to her mother. Tereza's life with her mother and stepfather exposes her to ugliness and depravity. Tereza's mother prances around naked with no shame, while her stepfather watches her take baths. Tereza's mother mocks her for her modesty about herself and her mother's indecent behavior.

Part 2, Chapters 1-6 Analysis

Kundera prefaces the chapter by explaining where he came up with the characters Tomas and Tereza. Tomas is in a constant struggle between 'Enmal ist keinmal' (what happens once might as well never have happened at all) and 'Es muss sein' (it must be). The first saying suggests that all is fleeting and one should live life with lightness. The latter is an acceptance of the conditions of a decision of weight. Kundera created Tereza of 'the rumbling of a stomach,' so everything she does is done out of base necessity. Kundera points out the difference between the physical science of the body and the soul within the body. Tereza discounts the physical science. She is concerned

with seeing the soul within her physical form. Kundera quickly recounts the destruction of the hopes and dreams of Tereza's mother. Tereza's mother feels betrayed by life, so she sabotages her looks and her life.

While Tereza is an extension of her mother in appearance, she is the polar opposite regarding her feelings about herself and the human body. Tereza yearns to be free and explore her soul and the beauty of possibilities. Tereza's mother constantly reminds her that she is to blame for her mother's dismal circumstances. Tereza's stepfather purposely enters the bathroom, when Tereza is bathing. Tereza's mother admonishes her for being vain, rather than rebuking her second husband for sexual advances. She clearly shows a strong hatred of Tereza. Her mother's deplorable antics become more outrageous and emotionally abusive toward Tereza. This rejection of the physical form fuels Tereza's insecurities and shapes her timorous manor.

Part 2, Chapters 7-12

Part 2, Chapters 7-12 Summary

Tereza's mother becomes increasingly grotesque in appearance and behavior. She discards any remnant of beauty or refinement. She has divided her life between her time as a youthful beauty, and her life now as an ugly spectacle. Tereza is captive in this revolting world, waiting for her opportunity to escape. At the restaurant where Tereza works, old drunken men constantly harass her. One day, Tomas comes into the restaurant and reads a book. He is the opposite of the banality and repulsiveness that pervades her life. He does not know the awful things that are said and done to her. Tereza also recognizes his book as a weapon that she has in common with him. Tereza considers books the symbol of a 'secret brotherhood' of those who are different from her mother and the old drunks.

Kundera jumps forward in time to Tomas and Tereza in Prague. Tomas analyzes his decision to return to Tereza in Prague from Zurich. He, again, thinks about the six improbable fortuities that have brought him to her. Tereza's thinks back to an encounter with a quartet who played Beethoven that has become her beacon for "something higher." She knows that she must somehow escape her depressing surroundings. Tereza interprets signs that lead her to Tomas: Beethoven playing when she serves Tomas in the restaurant, the number six on his bill and her room, reading, and Tomas sitting on her favorite park bench.

Kundera ruminates about the ideas of fortuity and coincidence. He applies these thoughts to Tereza's encounter with Tomas. Kundera also compares the meeting of Tomas and Tereza to Anna and Vronsky from the book *Anna Karenina* that Tereza has tucked under her arm when she visits Tomas. Kundera contends that it is important for man to recognize the coincidences that occur in daily life and understand the motifs that are created by them.

Tereza interprets all of these signs as destiny and leaves home for Prague. When she arrives at Tomas's place, her stomach is rumbling. She imagines the stomach rumbling is her mother trying to ruin this moment for her. She is relieved, when Tomas ignores her stomach rumbling and takes her into his arms. She immediately becomes ill with fever after they make love. She stays in bed, as Tomas takes care of her. Tereza comes back to Prague the second time with her fortuities, a heavy suitcase, and a copy of *Anna Karenina* under her arm, which she feels is her security pass into Tomas's life.

Part 2, Chapters 7-12 Analysis

Tereza is surrounded by drunken men at the restaurant and the abhorrent behavior of her mother. For Tereza, books and culture represent the opposite of this life. Kundera remarks that books are her weapon. When Tereza listens to the quartet play Beethoven,

she realizes this is what her life should be and looks for any way to escape to it. Tomas is the embodiment of this ideal. When he is in the restaurant, he is reading a book, orders an expensive drink, and Beethoven is playing in the background. This is Tereza's ticket out of town. The act of Tomas ignoring her rumbling stomach validates, to Tereza, the signs she has interpreted as destiny.

While there are many signs for both Tereza and Tomas to act, it is ultimately their decision to make such drastic changes to their lives. For Tereza this is her only way out, and she aggressively follows the signs. Tomas reservedly admits to 'Es muss sein' and simply accepts his fate. The difference between how they come to their decisions creates great tension throughout the novel.

Part 2, Chapters 13-17

Part 2, Chapters 13-17 Summary

During lovemaking, Tereza lets out primal screams. She falls asleep clutching onto Tomas's hand, just as she clutched her own as a child dreaming of the day that she would meet her future love.

Tereza tries to adjust to her new life in Prague. While she has much more life experience and is better read than many of the college students in Prague, she feels that she is a fraud and waits to be found out. Tereza feels Tomas is her only link to this life, and she is terrified to lose it. Tereza becomes bored with her job at the weekly and looks to do more than work in the darkroom, where Sabina has gotten her work. She wants to take pictures, and Sabina helps facilitate that dream. Tereza becomes successful as a photographer, and gets some pictures published in the illustrated weekly. During a celebration of her promotion to photographer, she dances with other men. Tomas becomes jealous. Tomas now understands how Tereza must feel about his infidelities. Kundera asserts Tomas will bare this heavy burden to the end of his life.

Kundera returns to Tereza's dream, where she is in a long line of naked women parading around a pool in unison. He analyzes the dream further, pointing out that the women singing and rejoicing in the sameness of their bodies is just as horrific as Tereza being shot for falling out of line. This sameness is what Tereza is trying to overcome. Tereza wants to look in the mirror and see someone of significance and uniqueness. Tereza realizes that this nightmare relates to her feelings of being home with her mother and feeling unexceptional. Tomas's womanizing is reducing her to a face in the crowd.

Tereza cannot escape her dreams. She struggles to reconcile her strong love for Tomas and the fear of her dreams at night. Kundera explains that vertigo is not simply the fear of high places, but the feeling that you are being sucked in, that your soul wishes to jump.

Part 2, Chapters 13-17 Analysis

The primal screaming Tereza lets out during their first lovemaking is really an exorcism of her past life and of all the suffering that she has endured from her mother and hometown. She clings to Tomas, as a child clings to its parent. Tomas perpetuates this idea, when he views her as a child come to him in a basket down the river. They have simultaneously defined and accepted the roles of guardian and dependant. However, because they are in a love relationship, these roles become confused. Tereza does not only want to be taken care of, but also for Tomas to be faithful. Tomas is a doctor, so he can give care in the clinical sense. However, he finds it impossible to accept the responsibility of giving up his womanizing. Both characters are struggling with their new life. Tereza feels that she is a fraud, because her only entrances to this life were Tomas

and the book under her arm. She feels that she can be ripped away from the scene, at any moment. Tomas is torn between his strong feelings for Tereza and living his calculated life as a bachelor. Tereza's dream makes it clear that she has vertigo. She feels something in her soul that wants her to jump and join the women, who sing and dance around the pool for Tomas in her dreams. Part of Tereza wants to submit wholly to Tomas and give up her body and soul to him.

Part 2, Chapters 18-22

Part 2, Chapters 18-22 Summary

Tereza keeps in contact with her mother. Her mother blames her for all of the bad things in her life, but also claims that Tereza is the only person left to care for her. She eventually tells Tereza that she has cancer. Tereza is overcome with anger toward Tomas's infidelities, as she feels she has forsaken her mother for this philandering man. Tomas has his hospital find out that Tereza's mother does not have cancer, so Tereza does not go to visit her. Tereza is emotionally exhausted and falls in the street, hurting her ankle, so that physically, she is in a constant state of vertigo.

Tereza recalls the letter Sabina wrote to Tomas, asking him to come to her studio and make love. It begins to excite her, and she begins to think that maybe she can share in Tomas's infidelities. She thinks that she can be an assistant to him during his liaisons. Maybe it will not hurt as much, and the dreams will stop. Tomas refuses, but Tereza determines to try to enter this part of his world. She befriends Sabina and spends more time with her. She visits Sabina's studio to take pictures of her. However, Tereza is taken in more by Sabina's art. Sabina's art suggests, as she puts it, "On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth." All of Sabina's paintings had two distinct and opposing visual images in them.

Tereza begins to take photos of Sabina. Sabina plays with a black bowler hat, which her Grandfather left for her. Tereza eventually proposes Sabina pose nude. Sabina laughs at first, then gets some wine, and changes into a robe. She soon throws it open, exposing herself to Tereza.

Tereza enjoys using the camera to capture the nude image of her husband's lover. The camera is a weapon, but also a shield for Tereza to hide her emotions. Eventually, Sabina takes the camera, Tereza's weapon. She orders her to strip, as Tomas has so many times before. Tereza does, and Sabina snaps a few shots. While there is a palpable tension between the two women, they're frightened by the proximity of their shared secret lives. The session ends, as they both awkwardly laugh.

Part 2, Chapters 18-22 Analysis

Tereza's vulnerability is not limited to Tomas. Her mother plays with her emotions and stirs her into internal turmoil by telling her that she is dying and blaming her for the problems in her life. While Tereza and Sabina have Tomas in common, this is where the similarities end. Sabina is a confident, independent woman, who runs from commitment and rebels against all convention. Tereza is running to commitment with Tomas and wants nothing more than a stable life with him. When Tereza enters the world of Sabina, she is curious and a bit excited. However, her timid nature returns during the photography session, and she becomes frightened and awkward. While Sabina and

Tereza take off their clothes and photograph each other, they are simulating the foreplay of Tomas. They're meeting each other at an invisible line, where both women meet in the middle and see themselves in each other.

Part 2, Chapters 23-29

Part 2, Chapters 23-29 Summary

While in previous war crimes the Russian empire had operated under a shadow of anonymity, during the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, there are many photographs taken. Tereza roams the streets taking pictures of tanks, Russian soldiers, and the violence against the Czech people. The beginning of the invasion is a wild time, where young girls run up to stoic Russian soldiers and kiss them to see their astonished reactions. Tereza captures all of this on film.

Tereza tries to sell some of her photographs in Switzerland to an illustrated weekly, but they are not interested, despite the beauty of the shots. The editor accepts a portfolio of images from a nude beach from another photographer. He tells Tereza that they are "completely different from your pictures." Tereza looks at the pictures and regards the nudist beach photos as the same as her war photos. The editor and another female photographer assume Tereza is offended by the nude photography, because she comes from a communist and puritanical country. Tereza is not offended by the photos. However, the comments the editor and female photographer make remind Tereza of her mother's chiding about Tereza's modesty.

The woman photographer invites Tereza to lunch to discuss the possibility of Tereza pursuing a career in photography. However, Tereza does not want to be a photographer. Her war photos are something Tereza felt necessary to do. However, she does not feel the need to continue trying to make a career. Photography, like her *Anna Karenina* book, is just a ticket to be inside Tomas's world.

While Tereza is home in Zurich with her dog, Karenin, she empathizes with the weakness of Dubcek, the Czechoslovakian leader. While the rest of the country hates him for his compromising and weakness, Tereza recognizes the sensation of succumbing to a stronger power and longs to return to a place where there is weakness. She tells Tomas "I want you to be old." She wants him to be weak, like herself.

Karenin has not gotten used to living in Zurich, as the dog does not like change. One day when Tereza answers the phone, she hears a woman's voice, and feels her last bit of strength leave her. She confides in Karenin that she duped Tomas from the start, passing herself off as someone "higher" than who she is. She leaves a note for Tomas, telling him that she and Karenin are leaving that night.

Tereza and Karenin return to Prague, where she plans to move outside of the city and give up photography. However, she is caught up in the mundane issues of life, so she does not go. Five days later, Tomas arrives and moves back with her. While Tomas lies next to Tereza with a stomachache, Tereza recalls that the church bells chimed six o'clock when Tomas returned to her. Again, she sees this as a fortuitous event.

Part 2, Chapters 23-29 Analysis

The turmoil of the Russian invasion mimics the turmoil in Tomas and Tereza's life. There is an invasion of Tomas's life from Tereza. Tereza's marriage is invaded by the infidelity of Tomas. When Russia invades, Tereza takes photographs of the occupation. It is the first time that she does something of her own volition since she left her home for Tomas. In Zurich, Tereza is rejected once again. This time she's denied by the weekly that will not buy her photos of the occupation. In conversation with another photographer, Tereza reveals that photography is just a means to be close to Tomas's life. Photography is symbolic for Tereza, because it is taking the reflection of something in the world and recreating it. This is exactly what she has done to make herself fit into Tomas's world. She does not want to be a photographer, because she does not need an identity, other than being Tomas's wife. The war photos were born out of necessity, just as Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.

Karenin is the only being that shows Tereza the unconditional and loyal love that she has never had, and continually seeks. When she sees Karenin is unhappy in Zurich, she contemplates leaving. It takes the emotions of something that she loves to spur Tereza to action. Tereza empathizes with Dubcek, because she too is weak, and invaded just like Prague. If Zurich represents high society and strength, then Prague is the opposite, and where Tereza feels comfortable. Tomas quickly goes from the lightness of living without responsibility and Tereza, to the weight of emptiness without her. Tomas reacts emotionally, rather than analytically. He makes his decision to follow Tereza, based on the pain of missing her. Had he analyzed it like a doctor, he would understand that the pain is a temporary symptom that might pass. However, as Kundera points out, with one pass through this world, we cannot know the answer and can only use the judgment of this life. Tomas's stomachache at the end of the chapter can be symbolic of the remorse he feels for so quickly giving up his life in Zurich. It can also represent Tereza, who is born of a rumbling of the stomach. She is now the source of the stomachache.

Part 3, Chapters 1-2

Part 3, Chapters 1-2 Summary

Franz is a university professor in Geneva, who visits his mistress, Sabina, after lectures. Franz, like Tomas has rules regarding his love life. He will not go from Sabina's bed to his wife's bed within the same day. He also does not want to have sex with Sabina in Geneva. Sex is an adventure away from Geneva and his wife. Franz creates speaking engagements and invents other reasons to travel and take Sabina with him. When Sabina tells Franz that she does not want to go to Palermo, he takes it to mean that she no longer desires him sexually. Although Franz is a good looking, strong, scholarly man, he is internally weak and insecure. Sabina is the initiator in their relationship. She takes the lead in their sexual liaisons.

Sabina begins a sexual game, more with herself than with Franz, by removing her clothes and putting on the bowler hat. It's the same one she once donned, when she greeted Tomas naked at the hotel. Franz does not understand Sabina's actions, and removes the hat to end the game. He again asks her to go to Palermo, and she accepts. Franz is elated that she will go and feels the sense of adventure rushing through him.

After Franz leaves, Sabina goes back to the mirror where she had begun her sexual game with Franz and places the bowler hat back on her head. Sabina remembers when Tomas playfully put the bowler hat on her head, and how the situation went from a comical action to an exciting sexual escapade. By Tomas putting the bowler hat on her head, he had degraded her femininity. By doing this, it turned on Sabina even more. For Sabina, the bowler hat was "A vague reminder of a forgotten grandfather, second a memento of her father, thirdly a prop for her love games with Tomas, fourth it was a sign of her originality and finally it was a sentimental object." The bowler hat is a continuing motif in Sabina's life. As Franz could not recognize this, he was exempt from being her lover. Franz's misunderstanding of the semantic meaning of the bowler hat is metaphoric of what keeps him from being a man of consequence to Sabina.

Part 3, Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Franz is the opposite of Tomas in every way. He is a professor, who makes speeches and gives lectures. Tomas is a hands-on surgeon dealing with urgent, palpable situations. Sabina is the reflection by which Franz and Tomas's differences become most clear. The contrast of the two men is what causes Sabina to analyze herself. It is the tool Kundera uses to scrutinize Sabina's character. The bowler hat is a significant symbol in the novel. It is a light and otherwise insignificant object. However, with the weight of its meaning to Sabina, it becomes an emotionally charged fixation. With Tomas, it is an object, which represents his physical control over her. However, Franz does not connect with it, and the bowler hat becomes merely a prop to him.

Part 3, Chapter 3 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words"

Part 3, Chapter 3 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" Summary

Kundera breaks from the story to define certain words by Sabina and Franz. How they perceive the meanings of these words shows the great divide between Sabina and Franz, and helps define them at the same time.

Part 3, Chapter 3 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" Analysis

Woman is the first word Kundera defines. Sabina does not feel comfortable with the title of woman. She considers it a matter of fact that anatomically she is a woman, but dispels the traditional idea of what society decrees a woman to be. Franz is a traditional thinking man. By calling Sabina a "woman" during one of their first meetings, it is his way of complementing her sexual appeal. Sabina is uncomfortable, because she feels Franz's assertion makes a distinction between her and his wife, Marie-Claude. Franz marries Marie-Claude, because she threatens suicide if Franz had leaves her. Franz decides to marry her, as well as respect the "woman" in her. Franz regards the 'woman' in Marie-Claude and Sabina, as something apart from the person themselves. Kundera explains that Franz's father left him and his mother, and that Franz decided then that he loved his mother and could never hurt her. This boyish heroism is what Franz acts on with all the women in his life.

Fidelity and Betrayal are the next words Kundera defines. Franz explains to Sabina his love for his mother, because he believes this will show the strength of his fidelity, and she will admire it. However, Sabina is more intrigued by betrayal. Fidelity, to Sabina, reminds her of her small town and her father. Her father, Kundera tells us, was a puritan, who chased away the boys in her life. He made fun of Picasso, who Sabina decided to love out of rebellion. Kundera explains that she married a second-rate actor. He also relates that she felt stifled, because the Academy of Fine Art did not allow Sabina to paint like Picasso. Sabina flashes back to when she received a letter that her mother had died, and how she felt guilty for betraying her family. She then betrayed herself and left her husband.

Franz views *music* as that which replaces the need for words. As a professor, all he does is speak. Music is his chance to ride a wave of feeling, not meaning. Sabina despises noisy music, because it reminds her of all of the noise from the Russian occupation.

In terms of *Lightness and Darkness*, Franz did not distinguish values for either. Although Franz's life is immersed in lightness, he absorbed himself in the pleasure of sex with Sabina in darkness. Sabina is disgusted, because Franz closes his eyes when they make love. Therefore, she, too, closes her eyes. Sabina closes her eyes as rejection to Franz, not out of blinding passion, which Franz believes it is.

Part 3, Chapter 4

Part 3, Chapter 4 Summary

Sabina is at a gathering of fellow ymigrys and listens to their talk about the Russian invasion and their arguments against the communists. She asks why they aren't in Prague fighting, if they are so enraged. The chief speaker berates Sabina, saying that her painting did nothing to stop communism. Kundera then discusses how people assess others not by what they do as people, but by their political beliefs. Sabina further infuriates the 'distinguished ymigry,' when she tells him that he resembles Communist President Novotny. Sabina realizes that she is being unreasonable to the ymigry's and thinks to herself that she is doing so, because she lives to betray. While she empathizes with her fellow compatriots, she felt obliged to "break ranks" with them and confront them. She thinks to herself that she cannot go on with this way of living much longer. Sabina goes to Franz and wants to surrender herself to him entirely, but she simply kisses him and says, "You don't know how happy I am to be with you."

Part 3, Chapter 4 Analysis

Sabina's art is symbolic of many themes in this novel. In this chapter, it is representative of the aesthetic lie ymigry's have told each other and themselves. Sabina's paintings portray "On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth." The actions of the ymigrys is an intelligible lie. They are in Zurich discussing what should be done about the occupation, when none of them will take any action. Sabina's confrontation leads her to think about how her own life is an intelligible lie. She comes face to face with the unintelligible truth, that she betrays herself as she is betraying everyone else.

Part 3, Chapter 5 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words"

Part 3, Chapter 5 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" Summary

Kundera defines more words that further illuminate Sabina's character and the differences between her and Franz.

Part 3, Chapter 5 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" Analysis

Parades - Sabina, as a young girl, marched in the May Day parades. She remembers that she was uncomfortable marching, and she could not keep in line with the others well. Kundera explains that Franz was an excellent scholar. By living in France, he never got the opportunity to be in marches. While he was living in Paris, he took up every demonstration and march he could. Franz considers these demonstrations and marches as real life. He thinks of the doldrums of teaching as an act of necessity, not life. Sabina, on the other hand, has no passion for parades. She considers them as evil as the communists themselves.

The Beauty of New York - Both Sabina and Franz discuss how New York has a 'beauty by mistake' feel to it. To them, the beauty in Europe feels planned out and designed. While they are both intrigued by New York's beauty, Franz is frightened by it. Sabina finds it desirable.

Sabina's Country - Franz is in love with the conflict of Sabina's country. Coming from a rich European background, Franz has not had any conflict, except for argumentative debate. He contends that there are too many intellectuals and that his country is drowning in a sea of writing, philosophy and culture. This makes nothing of culture valuable, while he sees a banned book in Sabina's country as romantic and special. Sabina, however, does not see her country in the same romantic way. She only sees the ugliness of the tanks, soldiers and conflict.

Cemetery - Sabina would escape to the cemeteries in Bohemia. They were away from the political problems and war, and offered a peaceful, tranquil environment with grass, flowers and candles. However, "for Franz a cemetery was an ugly dump of stones and bones."

Part 3, Chapter 6

Part 3, Chapter 6 Summary

Marie-Claude, Franz's wife, boasts to guests of enjoying being in a car accident, even though she actually fell into a deep depression. She continues to explain how she read many books and came to categorize them by "day books and night books." She is a pretentious woman, but she is also very influential and admired in the community. Sabina comes to the gathering to assuage any notion of her and Franz's affair. Marie-Claude, while still in the dark about Sabina and Franz, insults Sabina's necklace, just to prove her power to everyone.

Part 3, Chapter 6 Analysis

Franz is genuinely a good man. He seeks to do what is right. He sees everything in black and white. Due to this, he can have neither his wife, nor Sabina.

Part 3, Chapter 7 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words"

Part 3, Chapter 7 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" Summary

Kundera's final chapter of definitions completes the picture of Sabina and Franz's relationship. It also illustrates, unconditionally, that Sabina and Franz will never be compatible.

Part 3, Chapter 7 "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" Analysis

The Old Church in Amsterdam - Franz and Sabina visit an empty Gothic cathedral. Franz notices how empty the church is, how it is a sign of "Hercules' broom sweeping out this cathedral." To Franz this church and revelation is liberating, and he feels the need to sweep free his own life. Sabina looks upon the church and remembers a time when she had ridden her motorcycle away from school, marches and life and found this respite of church, where she saw beauty in a rejection of Communist and conformist life.

Strength - Sabina complements Franz's muscles, to which he immediately displays his physical strength to her dismay. She realizes his strength is only physical. He is unable to be strong like Tomas, who would order her to undress. Due to Franz's inability to use his strength in love against Sabina, it "disqualified him from her love life."

Living in Truth - Sabina views truth as only that which you do in private life. Once one is in the eyes of the public, one's actions become suspect, because any actions are now involuntarily influenced by the knowledge of the public's eye. Franz feels that truth is truth. While he loved his lies with Sabina, he could no longer stand for it when he heard his wife insult Sabina. Franz, in a mix of intoxicating liberation and desire for Sabina, informs his wife that he is having an affair and leaves her for Sabina.

Part 3, Chapters 8-11

Part 3, Chapters 8-11 Summary

Sabina and Franz get together, when he leaves his wife. Sabina immediately feels suffocated, as she did as a girl, and wants to be free. She realizes that she is betraying Franz, as he betrayed his wife. In her excitement to find freedom, they make love in a wild frenzy. Franz thinks it is because she is enthralled that he is now hers.

Franz returns home for his things. His conscience is bothering him, and he feels that he has hurt Marie-Claude. However, she is strong and as vital as ever. When Franz returns to Sabina's apartment, she does not answer. He returns day after day and finds that she is gone. Franz begins to live on his own and be his own man. This, in itself, is a victory for him. He creates a little place for himself and lives there with a bookish student, who adores him. Franz asks for a divorce from Marie-Claude, but she refuses.

Sabina lives in Geneva for four years, then Paris for three. She feels the emptiness of all of the people that she has rejected in her life. One day, she receives a letter from Tomas's son. He informs her that he and Tereza have died in a car accident. Sabina finds solace in a cemetery, again. However, she begins to think that a cemetery is simply another place you can never leave. She makes plans to leave Paris.

Although Franz loves the bookish girl he lives with, he always thinks of Sabina. He hopes that all of his actions will somehow reach her. When he marches against the occupation, he visualizes Sabina is in the crowd, watching.

Part 3, Chapters 8-11 Analysis

When the safety net of Franz's marriage is gone, both Sabina and Franz cannot live with the result. Franz's calculated world is destroyed, but this makes him a stronger fuller man. Sabina once again feels trapped and has to flee. While this event made Franz reflect on himself and become independent, it merely spooked Sabina. Sabina continually rejects meaning in her life and travels, not to find meaning, but to escape the weight of life. While Franz becomes a stronger character, he cannot let go of his fantasy that he creates about fighting for the oppressed. This fantasy is made more vivid by his belief that somewhere Sabina may be watching his heroic feats.

Part 4, Chapters 1-6

Part 4, Chapters 1-6 Summary

Tereza comes home from work and smells the "sex organs" of another woman in Tomas's hair. Tereza wakes up the next morning and notices Karenin waiting, as he always did. She realizes that one of her greatest joys is waking up to see Karenin. Tomas listens to a broadcast on the radio. The broadcast is of people whom the Communist government has bugged. These tapes reveal the speakers. They are high profile Czech emigrants, using vulgar language to condemn the Soviet Union's occupation of their country. One of those taped is a most beloved figure in Prague, a novelist, named Jan Prochazka. The tapes expose Prochazka and make fun of some of his friends, including Czech leader, Dubcek.

Tereza goes to the sauna on Zofin Island, which is an exclusive treat to the few very fortunate. Tereza is able to go, because of a professor friend of Tomas's. As Tereza walks to the sauna, she notices the aggressive women in the street as some of those whom she photographed at the beginning of the occupation. These women, who at one time were free-spirited and exuded their sexuality, were now bitter, older women. Tereza prepares to go to the sauna, where she will be naked. She reminisces about her mother and the torture that she felt during her childhood, as she had no privacy. At the spa, Tereza notices a woman who has a pretty face, but an enormous body. She wonders if the woman looks at herself to seek the soul inside, as Tereza does. Tereza then examines her body in the mirror and looks critically at her breasts. Her mother would mock them, because they are small. Tereza thinks about how she would be if her body were different. She reviles her physical body, because it is not the only one for Tomas. She dresses and leaves the sauna, dejected.

Part 4, Chapters 1-6 Analysis

The exposy on the radio is a foreshadowing of what will happen to Tomas later in the novel. His words will also be used against him, and his career will be destroyed by the occupation. Tereza is still in conflict about her body and soul. She still has not reconciled her feelings about the naked form. When she visits the spa, her torment from her childhood returns to haunt her. She wishes that she could detach herself from her physical body.

Part 4, Chapters 7- 15

Part 4, Chapters 7- 15 Summary

Tereza works behind a bar at a hotel in Prague, because the weekly did not forgive her for quitting when she left for Zurich. She works among a former professor of theology and an ambassador, all of whom had lost their jobs for protesting the invasion or crossing the communist party. Tereza overhears the ambassador talking to a man whose son has been imprisoned, because the communists had photograph evidence of his attacking invading tanks. Tereza is relieved when those photos are not hers.

For Tereza, flirting is a heavy, significant act. It lacks the lightness and playfulness that some women innately enjoy. When Tereza does try to flirt, it gives an air of possibility to an illicit relationship. When she backpedals away from it, men consider her a tease. Tereza is harassed by a bald man. A tall man comes to her defense. The tall man comes in the following night, and he and Tereza flirt with each other.

Tereza has a dream that Tomas tells her to go to some men, who are on Petrin Hill. The view on Petrin Hill is beautiful. The men blindfold Tereza and put her up against a tree to shoot her. When Tereza tells them it was not her idea to go there, they lower their rifles and apologize. They tell her that they cannot shoot her, because it must be her own idea to have come. Tereza yearns for the man with the rifle and is afraid of Tomas.

Part 4, Chapters 7- 15 Analysis

Tereza has become obsessed with her physical body, but not in a narcissistic way. Tereza is determined to understand the side of Tomas that cheats on her. She wants to experience what he experiences, as he cheats on her. As she puts so much emphasis on flirting and lust, she misses the light nuances of the experience. Tereza's dreams are beautifully symbolic throughout the novel. This dream expresses Tereza's desires to follow Tomas's lead and let another man take her. However, when it comes to the point of allowing the man to 'shoot' her, she confesses that it is not her idea. Even if she does cheat with another man, it will not be of her own will.

Part 4, Chapters 15-19

Part 4, Chapters 15-19 Summary

The tall man from the bar is an engineer. He continually comes into the bar and tries to get Tereza to come to his flat. Mimicking her dream, she feels that by going with the engineer that she is following Tomas's commands to play this sexual game.

Tereza goes to the engineer's flat. He disappears to get coffee for Tereza. Tereza looks around the flat and sees *Oedipus*, a book that Tomas had given her years earlier. Tereza allows the engineer to make love to her. Throughout their lovemaking, she is in conflict physically and emotionally. She finally orgasms and spits in the engineers face at the same time.

Tereza goes into the bathroom of the engineer's flat. The bathroom exposes the pipes from the toilet that carry human waste to the sewers below. Kundera uses the metaphor of the toilet to describe Tereza's feeling of despair. Feeling vulnerable, Tereza wants to go to the engineer and have him hold her. She hopes to hear a soft, deep voice from the man that would stir her soul. However, his voice is high and thin. She picks up her clothes and leaves.

Part 4, Chapters 15-19 Analysis

For Tereza, the engineer represents the shooter in her dream. She follows through with the flirting and sleeps with the engineer as though it will break some spell. However, when reality sets in, Tereza realizes that this changes nothing. She feels more vulnerable than ever, and more isolated from Tomas than before. The symbolism of the flat's bathroom exhibits the vulgar and exposed feeling that Tereza now endures.

Part 4, Chapters 20-24

Part 4, Chapters 20-24 Summary

Tereza walks home from shopping with Karenin and finds a crow that is being pelted with rocks by a couple of little kids. The crow is buried in the ground. Tereza saves the crow and brings it home and into the bathroom. She makes a bed for it. Metaphorically, Tereza feels like the crow; weak and alone. She thinks about the past events with the engineer and realizes that she cannot cheat like Tomas. She fears losing him. Tereza stays with the crow, until it is dead. After some time, Tereza begins to yearn for the engineer. She doesn't want an illicit affair, but she is aroused by the idea of her naked body next to someone other than Tomas.

In the first few weeks after her affair, she is scared the engineer will come in. When he fails to show, she is frustrated that he does not return and questions herself as to why. During one of her shifts, the bald-headed man returns and insults her again, accusing her of prostitution. The ambassador informs Tereza that the bald-headed man is with the secret police. Tereza begins to think that the engineer was a set-up by the secret police.

Part 4, Chapters 20-24 Analysis

The beaten crow is a metaphor for Tereza. She too is abused and weak, hoping for someone to save her and take care of her. The crow's death signifies mortality to Tereza. She begins to understand the permanence of death and feel the desires of the flesh, as she thinks of the engineer. However, this realization is short-lived, as she comes to think her encounter with the engineer was just a set-up by the secret police. Once again, any semblance of individual thought or focus on her own physical needs is quickly squashed.

Part 4, Chapters 25-29

Part 4, Chapters 25-29 Summary

Tereza, Tomas and Karenin leave the city limits of Prague to go to a spa they had been to six years earlier. However, all the names of the places they see have been changed from Czech names to Russian names. Tereza feels the arbitrariness of life. Tereza also thinks about how the engineer must have been a spy. Everything in her life seems to be some disguise. Underneath it all is the life that she tried to leave behind when she went to live with Tomas. Tereza thinks that the engineer must have taken pictures of them together to use as blackmail against her.

As they turn to leave the now Russian spa, an old man comes up to Tomas. The old man knows Tomas and asks him for some medical advice. Tereza becomes increasingly paranoid that the engineer and the bald-headed man will tell her secret to Tomas. Tereza has another dream. She imagines all the park benches of Prague floating down the Vlatva River. "She understood that what she saw was a farewell."

Part 4, Chapters 25-29 Analysis

Changing the names of towns during a military takeover is a normal event. It is the conquering country's way of showing ownership of the territory. What this also does is discredit the original entity. The lack of respect and value given to the old Czech names is how Tereza feels. Again, Tereza feels her body is invaluable, and she continues to think the engineer was a political ploy.

Part 5, Chapters 1-4

Part 5, Chapters 1-4 Summary

Kundera recounts the day that Tereza came to visit Tomas in Prague, and she came down with a terrible fever. He parallels the story of *Oedipus* with Tomas's taking Tereza into his home. Both Oedipus and Tomas are responsible for their misery and that of those they love.

Tomas further ruminates on the story of *Oedipus* in regards to the Communist occupation of Czechoslovakia. As Oedipus unknowingly slept with his mother, some who originally followed the Communists claim they did not know the atrocities Russia would bring. However, Tomas points out that at least Oedipus could blame himself and feel the guilt of his actions, and put his eyes out. He is disgusted that the repentant Communist followers can not do the same. Tomas writes a letter to the editor of a weekly paper with his Oedipus/Communist thesis. While Tomas's letter is edited to a point he does not like, it is printed and creates a stir in Prague.

When Tomas returns to Prague from Zurich to be with Tereza, he goes back to the hospital to continue being a surgeon. The chief surgeon informs him that, in order to keep his job at the hospital, Tomas must admit a retraction to the 'Oedipus' letter. Tomas does not care much about the letter, but his pride is at stake. He asks for a week to think it over.

The chief surgeon is rumored to retire, and Tomas will take his place. As more becomes at stake for Tomas, everyone in the hospital is waiting for his inevitable retraction. When a young, smug physician questions Tomas about his impending retraction, Tomas decides he will not write the letter out of spite for those waiting for it, and his own pride. He is dismissed from the hospital.

Part 5, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Tomas's interest in the story *Oedipus* is interesting, because it represents a main character driven by his desires, rather than critical thought. This is similar to Tomas. Tomas is forced into a corner, when he is told that he must write a retraction or lose his position with the hospital. This episode really exhibits Tomas's character. It is one thing to have pride and sacrifice in vain for his bachelorhood, because he does not want to be cornered. However, the weakness of his character is evident. He would rather lose his position with the hospital than be forced into a situation he does not like, or be held accountable to anyone else. Tomas is nothing without his freedom.

Part 5, Chapters 5-6

Part 5, Chapters 5-6 Summary

Tomas works as a general practitioner at a country clinic. It is busy and unrewarding. He is visited by a man from the Ministry, who charms and flatters Tomas into a conversation about the 'Oedipus' letter. Tomas confides that his original letter was cut by the paper. The man from the Ministry interrogates Tomas further as to who edited the letter. Tomas describes the editor in exact opposition to his real physical traits. The man from the Ministry seems to know someone, however, that fits that description. Tomas goes along with it. The man from the Ministry tells Tomas that he will see what he can do about getting Tomas back into the hospital to work.

Two weeks later, the man from the Ministry visits Tomas, and they talk in Tomas's office. The man from the Ministry offers Tomas a written statement to sign, declaring his recanting of the 'Oedipus' letter. Tomas thinks it over and resigns from the clinic, feeling that he may finally be so low in society that they will not care what he has written. Tomas now becomes a window washer.

Part 5, Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Tomas's other weakness is exposed. He falls for the man from the Ministry's flattery, only to be pulled into his plot to find insurgents against the Russian regime. The essence of military takeover is made clear by the consequences Tomas will incur because of his letter. The conquering government will always try to erase those left, who are powerful, from the previous establishment. Tomas will be eroded by the Russian government either as a revolutionary, or as a much less glamorous intellectual turned insignificant.

Part 5, Chapters 7-9

Part 5, Chapters 7-9 Summary

Kundera reviews Tomas's move to Prague, his mantra "Es muss sein" and his decision to leave medicine. He questions Tomas's motives for leaving medicine. After all, except for Tereza, who was the product of the six coincidences, medicine was his reason for being.

Tomas meditated on the line "Es muss sein," but he did not know its origin or intention, other than it was a line from a Beethoven movement. The line came about when a Dembscher who owed Beethoven was asked to pay and said "Muss es sein?" (Must it be?) To which Beethoven replied "Es muss sein." (It must be) Kundera says the German language can be very heavy in meaning, and Beethoven turned this rather insignificant event and lines into "a serious quartet, a joke into a metaphysical truth." Kundera points out how this is an example of light going to heavy.

Tomas enjoys the banality of his new profession as a window washer. There is no "Es muss sein" to this job, and he enjoys the sense of lightness that comes with it. The citizens of Prague would celebrate the fallen intellectuals to defy the Russian government. Tomas was invited (as a window washer) to many ex-patients homes, where they would drink champagne and talk.

With his new found career, and lack of responsibility, Tomas has many hours to devote to women. He sleeps with many housewives, salesgirls, and other women during his 'window washing' hours, and the hours Tereza is at work. Kundera makes a point that Tomas is not simply trying to have sex with many women for the physical aspect, he is trying to find their "I" that which makes them unique. As Kundera puts it, it's the 'one-millionth part dissimilarity.'

Part 5, Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Tomas is in a situation now based on a line from a song and the six coincidences that have brought him to Tereza. Tomas does not let significant things, like his marriage vows, disturb his womanizing. He seems to sacrifice his career and well-being on a whim. This illustrates what Tomas truly values in life. Kundera contrasts Tomas's new job as a window washer and his career as a surgeon as another metaphor about the lightness and weight in life. Kundera tries to qualify Tomas's obsession with women and cheating as Tomas searching for the uniqueness in each woman.

Part 5, Chapters 10-12

Part 5, Chapters 10-12 Summary

Kundera defines and distinguishes between two types of womanizers. The lyrical womanizer seeks his ideal woman in all women. However, because no woman can meet this lofty standard, he is disappointed and moves on to the next woman. The other type of womanizer is the epic womanizer, and Tomas represents this one. The epic womanizer is interested in women only for themselves; he is obsessed with all women, no matter how different they are. Kundera explains that women and people in general are more accepting of the lyrical womanizer, as they have redemption by their disappointment. The epic womanizer is never disappointed, as it appears that he is without redemption or thought for his deeds. The lyrical looks for the same woman in all women, so their physical traits are always similar. The epic's interests take him through a myriad of women, who range from the banal to beautiful to bizarre in appearance and behavior.

One such woman for Tomas is a woman for whom he washes her windows. She looked "like an odd combination of giraffe, stork and sensitive young boy." They flirt with each other to the point where Tomas is touching her, and she withdraws telling him to come back another day to "finish what I kept you from starting."

Tomas returns, and as they engage in lovemaking, he orders her to strip as he always does with his women. She refuses and tells him to strip. During their sexual encounter, she does things to him that no other woman has done before. Her physical being is so different from other women that Tomas is enthralled at having conquered one more woman he had not had before.

One day, Tomas sees a girl that he made love to in a tremendous storm. The girl remembers the scene and recounts how beautiful it was. Tomas cannot remember the storm and realizes he only remembers the sexual act with women, not the story that goes with it. In this way, he is deficient and loses the beauty in those moments. He realizes that Tereza occupies the poetic memory that retains the moments he does not capture with other women.

Part 5, Chapters 10-12 Analysis

The woman who resembles a stork and a giraffe is the pinnacle of Tomas's conquests as the epic womanizer. After this point, he encounters the woman in the street who recalls the beautiful moment they shared during the storm. Tomas realizes that he is only remembering the physical acts in these relations with women. It further deteriorates his lust for erotic adventures.

Part 5, Chapters 13-16

Part 5, Chapters 13-16 Summary

Tomas remembers how upset Tereza has been with the abused crow, and being accused of prostitution by the bald-headed man. He does not want to go to work, but goes anyway, hoping not to have to be with any woman. His assignment is with two men, who turn out to be his son and the editor from the magazine. They explain to him that they are trying to thwart the Communist takeover and want him to sign a petition, along with other lost, Czech intellectuals, denouncing the poor treatment of political prisoners.

Tomas feels compelled to sign, as it is a plea from his own son. However, the more the editor and his son talk about his duty to sign and what a great thing it was that he wrote the 'Oedipus' article, Tomas begins to think about what it is that he is doing and why. He tells them it was more important for him to be a doctor and save lives than to write the 'Oedipus' letter. He regrets that. He thinks of Tereza and realizes that this may endanger her. Finally, he apologizes, but does not sign the petition.

Tomas reads about the petition in the paper and feels conflicted about whether he should have signed it or not. Kundera parallels Tomas's life and decisions with those of the history of the Czech nation. He intimates that life decisions are very difficult to get 'right' if not impossible, because we only have one chance at it with no previous knowledge. "History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow."

Several days later, Tomas thinks of a notion that maybe we are on one planet one and graduate to other planets, where we do the same things, but with the knowledge of having done it before. For Tomas, this is eternal return.

Part 5, Chapters 13-16 Analysis

When Tomas sees how upset Tereza is over the crow, the guilt of his cheating begins to affect him, and he loses his desire to womanize. Once again, Tomas is faced with a life-altering decision to sign the petition. Tomas makes his decision out of pride and his feeling of claustrophobia from pressure to perform. He will regret this decision, just as he did quitting his position and leaving Zurich.

Part 5, Chapters 17-23

Part 5, Chapters 17-23 Summary

Tomas begins to think that he may be 'on holiday' for too long. He has been window washing for three years and thinks it is time to move on. He meets a woman in the street whom he has had before, but cannot place her and realizes that he is physically and mentally tired.

During a trip to the spa, where all of the Czech names were replaced by Russian names, Tomas is asked medical advice. He thinks that it was a mistake for him to leave Zurich and come back to Prague. He is furious with Tereza. They do not speak, until Tereza has a bad dream that involves her suffering from Tomas's infidelity. He holds her, as she cries.

Tomas attends a funeral for a biologist friend. There, he sees the editor and goes to talk with him. The editor puts him off. Tomas wonders if it is because he is protecting him or dismissing him, out of spite. Later that day, Tomas is washing a window at a shoe shop, when S. the young doctor from his old hospital bumps into him. They chat awkwardly, and Tomas realizes that his so-called courageous deed not writing the retraction has run its course. The degraded intellectuals were no longer in favor.

Tomas is weary, both mentally and physically. He and Tereza discuss how they have grown tired of Prague, and she suggests a move to the country. They discuss it, as Tomas gets stomach sick and tells Tereza that they will move to the country. Tomas has several, strangely erotic dreams. He concludes that his aggressive sexual nature is endangering the only one he loves. He stares at Tereza, determined not to let his base sexual desires hurt her any longer.

Part 5, Chapters 17-23 Analysis

Tomas is emotionally broken because of his adultery. He realizes that he almost lost the only thing in his life that truly loves him unconditionally. He feels remorse for putting Tereza through so much from his cheating. Tomas's life mimics his defeated Czech homeland. The euphoria of the fighting has gone; the praise for rebellious actions has faded away. Like the village where the names of the streets have changed, Tomas is a physical shell of what once was. An old, tired window washer has replaced the once virile, lauded surgeon. They both realize their life in Prague is over and decide to move to the country.

Part 6, Chapters 1-10

Part 6, Chapters 1-10 Summary

Kundera discusses the circumstances and death of Stalin's son, Yakov. Yakov was a privileged young man, until the Germans imprisoned him. Yakov is accused of going to the bathroom in an unauthorized area. As he has gone from the height of aristocracy to a prisoner being accused of shit, he can no longer take the humility and hurls himself into an electric fence.

Kundera discusses the idea of creation and the bible, including Adam and Eve. He points out that, because we were expelled from Paradise, we were able to experience shit and its opposition blinding love. This is why it is possible for Sabina to feel so turned on when she wears the bowler hat with Tomas. Kundera also defines kitsch and Sabina's hatred of it. Sabina rejects the Communist world because of its aesthetics, that it hid the atrocities behind things like the May Day parade. Sabina eventually moves to America. One day in America, Sabina takes a ride with a senator and his children. The children playing in the grass move her.

Part 6, Chapters 1-10 Analysis

Throughout the book, Kundera has illustrated his idea of lightness and weight. He makes another parallel to this issue with Yakov Stalin. Yakov's story is a metaphor for both Tomas's life and the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia. Another concept Kundera examines is the aesthetic versus the authentic. He shows this idea in the paintings of Sabina which are in conflict, showing two opposing images connected in one painting. Kundera discusses Adam and Eve to show that life without 'shit' is meaningless, and without atrocity, lust and excitement are impossible to experience.

Part 6, Chapters 11-23

Part 6, Chapters 11-23 Summary

Sabina's artwork and life resemble truth and lies intermingled. This produces one who views it to ask questions. As kitsch does not allow for questions, it is directly opposed to Sabina's nature. During an art exhibition, she disagrees with the bio that has been written about her. She does not believe her art to be "a struggle for happiness" and explains she is not against Communism, but against kitsch. From this point on, she fabricates things about herself, so her bios are not offensive to her. Sabina now lives in the metaphorical ideal of a home. She has a space in an older family's house, where she feels like a daughter to the couple. The old man loved her paintings and offered her a space in his house to live and work.

Kundera explains that political kitsch is simply the left or the right. Europe is divided into leftist belief and right belief. There is not much difference in the process of governing, and it does not even matter much. Only that one partakes in the rituals of whichever side they have chosen. Franz partakes in all events, especially the Grand March. The kitsch of this is that, while it is meant to represent this leftist thinking, it is merely pomp and circumstance. It's a beautiful illusion that Franz would follow and feel as if he has accomplished some feat.

Franz is invited to fight injustice in Cambodia. He refuses at first, but thinks to himself that it is similar to the issues of Sabina's country. He feels connected to her through it and agrees to go. There are many countries represented at the Cambodian protest, and the French and Americans clash over who will lead the discussion. An American actress, a German poet, a pop singer and Franz are among many who board buses to protest at the Cambodian border. The doctors have come to try to help the sick and injured. A cameraman follows along documenting the march. As a photographer attempts to get in a better position to shoot the American actress, he steps on a mine and is blown to bits. His blood and guts are sprayed all over the American actress, German singer, and the flag they are holding. They hold the flag higher and with more pride than ever.

The march gets to a bridge and they call over to the Khmer to allow them to go over the bridge unharmed. They receive no response. Franz thinks, while the march is stalled and they continue to call over in vain, that it all seems pointless. He has an urge to run across the bridge through gunfire and die doing something other than standing in this futile march. However, they all leave after the third call solicits no response.

Part 6, Chapters 11-23 Analysis

Sabina is a contradiction. However, this makes her beautiful, just like her artwork. Kundera is informing the reader that it is sometimes beautiful to be a contradiction, that

the opposing forces of a contradiction can make something meaningful. What Kundera condemns is the fakeness of the show, such as the actress and the German singer. While these people are supposed to be in Cambodia to help the needy, they are more interested in the spectacle of themselves than what is truly happening in this war-torn country. Franz is one these people. However, he does redeem himself in the end, because he finally realizes this trip and the people involved are charades.

Part 6, Chapters 24-29

Part 6, Chapters 24-29 Summary

Simon, Tomas's son, hears that Tomas and his wife were killed in an automobile accident. He learns about Sabina and begins writing her long letters. Simon is attempting to try to have someone interested in his life. Over the years, Sabina stops reading the letters. She thinks about the death of Tomas and Tereza, and their bodies buried in the ground under all of that weight of the earth. She declares in her will that she wishes to be cremated and her ashes scattered in the winds. She chooses lightness as opposed to the weight that Tomas and Tereza are under.

Franz comes to realize that he loves the bookish girl with the glasses and wants to leave Cambodia immediately. He is attacked and left for dead. When he wakes up, he is in a hospital in Geneva and Marie-Claude is there. Although he yearns for the bookish girl, he cannot move, speak or motion these feelings. Marie-Claude mistakes Franz's looks of hate for admiration, and Franz seeking forgiveness. She takes care of all of his funeral arrangements and exerts ownership of him once again. Kundera summarizes the lives and deaths of Tomas, Franz, and the dying population in Cambodia.

Part 6, Chapters 24-29 Analysis

Kundera concludes the main characters' lives by revealing that they all have come to great resolutions to their lives. Tomas finally understands what is true and important in his life. Tereza receives the unconditional love that she has always wanted from both Karenin and now Tomas. Sabina has become a content and successful artist, who concludes that life is a passing moment. Even though Franz's story ends abruptly and tragically, he does have a realization that these ideals and dreams he chases are empty, and that his love for the bookish girl is real.

Part 7, Chapters 1-4

Part 7, Chapters 1-4 Summary

Tomas and Tereza sell all of their belongings to live in the country in a small cottage with a garden. Tereza is happy not to have to smell women's groins in Tomas's hair, and not to be subjected to drunks at the bar. Tereza's vision of Sunday church, taverns and dances did not exist under Communist law. Tomas and Tereza are at a great advantage when they go to the country, because everyone is trying to leave the village. They become good friends with the collective farm chairman. Karenin finds a new friend in Mefisto, the chairman's pet pig.

Karenin becomes sick with cancer, and Tomas operates on him. The cancer spreads and Karenin's health declines rapidly. Tereza becomes more empathetic towards the cows and pigs she tends and Karenin. She sits under a tree, caressing Karenin's head, thinking about the nature of man and animal's relationship in the world. Kundera draws a parallel of Nietzsche and Tereza's view of mankind.

Tereza has a dream that Karenin gives birth to two rolls and a bee. Both Tereza and Tomas try to get Karenin to play and show some signs of life. They try to take Karenin for a walk, but he just limps along for a little while, then has to turn back. Tereza walks in on Tomas as he is reading a letter that he quickly folds and puts in his pocket. Tereza begins to feel the despair and jealousy that she thought they had left behind in Prague. Tereza traces a rectangle in the yard for where they will bury Karenin. The tensions of Karenin's impending death take a toll on Tomas and Tereza, and they get into an argument.

Tereza analyzes her love for Karenin versus the love in human relationships. She realizes that her love for Karenin, and Karenin's love for her, is a perfect, selfless love.

Part 7, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Kundera shows his love and admiration for Tereza, who he compares to Nietzche. Karenin was Tereza's only true love through her times in Zurich and Prague. However, now that she finally has Tomas to love her and the life she loves in the country, Karenin's mission is done.

Part 7, Chapters 5-7

Part 7, Chapters 5-7 Summary

Tomas and Tereza prepare to give Karenin the shot to euthanize him. They give Karenin the shot and bring him to the place where Tereza outlined the rectangle to bury him. She remembers her dream and thinks, "Here lies Karenin. He gave birth to two rolls and a bee" should be the epitaph.

Tereza has a horrible dream. Tomas is reading a letter, and he is forced to go to the airport and go back to Prague. Tereza insists on going with him. A man with a gun goes to shoot Tomas, who then shrinks and turns into a rabbit and runs. In the end, Tereza gets hold of the rabbit and presses it to her face.

Tereza again finds Tomas reading a letter at his desk. This time, she asks him what the letter is. Tomas explains that it is his son, Simon, who is writing to him. Tereza tells Tomas to invite Simon up for dinner.

Tereza sees Tomas trying to fix a flat tire on the old truck they own. Tomas is very poor at caring for the truck, and it is in disrepair. As Tereza watches from behind a tree, she notices how old Tomas appears to her. She realizes that she has gotten what she always wanted. She will grow old with Tomas and feel that he is finally hers.

The chairman and Tomas burst into the house in a jovial mood. Tomas had fixed a farm worker's dislocated shoulder. They all drink slivovitz and plan to go to a dance. As they dance, Tereza confides she is sorry that she made Tomas leave Zurich to come to Prague and lose his practice. Tomas tells her that he has never been happier than in the country with her. They drink and dance into the night and finally go upstairs to a room they are staying the night in.

Part 7, Chapters 5-7 Analysis

To symbolize that the country life is different from life in Prague, Kundera recreates a scene from earlier in Tomas and Tereza's life. Tomas is reading a letter, and Tereza appropriately thinks that it is from a woman. When she comes to find out it is a letter from Tomas's son, this suggests that Tomas is through with strange women and embracing family. Kundera focuses on the celebration of life in the end, rather than the tragedy that will result in Tereza and Tomas's death. In the end, Kundera is choosing lightness over weight.

Characters

Franz

Franz is a professor who lives in Geneva, Switzerland. He enters the book in the third part, where he is introduced as Sabina's lover of nine months. Franz is married to Marie Claude, a woman he does not love but whom he married because she loved him so much. He also has a daughter, Marie Anne, who is the carbon copy of her mother. For twenty-three years, Franz has been a loyal, if unhappy, husband. Now, however, he finds he is in love with Sabina. Throughout the months of their affair, he has taken trouble to separate his lover and his wife, refusing to make love to Sabina in Geneva, choosing rather to take her on trips all over the world. He is constantly unsure of Sabina, however, and always seems to expect she will leave him. As the narrator informs the reader, for Franz love "meant a longing to put himself at the mercy of his partner.... love meant the constant expectation of a blow."

Thus, although Franz is a physically strong man, he is an emotionally weak man. He places no demands on Sabina, nor does he use his strength against her. Instead he chooses to be weak. Sabina does not find this quality attractive.

A turning point in Franz's life occurs when his wife holds a gallery opening and invites Sabina, whose pictures have been shown in her gallery. When Marie-Claude insults Sabina by telling her that her pendant is ugly, Franz decides he must tell Marie-Claude about the affair in order to protect Sabina. The situation backfires: Marie-Claude throws Franz out of the house but will not grant him a divorce, and Sabina leaves him.

This turn of events underscores a fundamental quality in Franz, namely his inability to understand women—particularly Sabina. The chapters of the book that involve Franz and Sabina are written like a dictionary, with definitions of "misunderstood words." Ultimately, it becomes clear that Franz is more in love with the idea of Sabina than with Sabina herself, and, thus, her physical absence is less of a problem than one might expect. Throughout the rest of his life, Franz always imagines Sabina is watching him, although he never sees her again.

In the sixth part of the book, Franz decides to join a group of Western intellectuals who travel to Thailand to protest Cambodian human rights violations. In an utterly senseless act, he is killed by muggers in the streets of Thailand, yet another indication of Franz's fundamental misunderstanding of humankind and reality. The final irony is that "in death, Franz at last belonged to his wife. . . . Marie-Claude took care of everything: she saw to the funeral, sent out the announcements, bought the wreaths, and had a black dress made—a wedding dress, in reality. Yes, a husband's funeral is a wife's true wedding! The climax of her life's work! The reward for her suffering!" Franz's death serves to underscore the futility of his life.

Sabina is a Czech painter and one of Tomas's many lovers. The product of the Communist system of education, she is an artist who detests kitsch, noise, social realism, and music. It is through Sabina that Kundera comments on the influence of politics on art and music, as well as on the life of the political exile.

Ironically, Sabina is the character that has relationships with all of the other characters, although she is by far the most distant and distancing of all of the characters. Her affair with Tomas in Prague is a good representation of the kind of relationship she desires, one of sex and friendship without emotional commitment. When Sabina and Tomas meet in Switzerland to make love, it is their last such encounter. She wears nothing but her lingerie and a bowler hat that belonged to her grandfather, someone she never actually knew. The scene is both emotionally and sexually charged and clearly touches Sabina emotionally in a place where she does not want to be touched.

Likewise, Sabina enjoys being with Franz so long as there is little commitment. As soon as Franz tells his wife he is having an affair with Sabina, Sabina disappears from Franz's life. However, it is Sabina's scene with Tereza which is perhaps the most sexually and emotionally charged scene of the book. Tereza comes to take photographs of Sabina in her studio and suggests that she photograph Sabina nude. Sabina, for all her sexual libertinism, cannot comply immediately. Rather, Sabina first drinks three glasses of wine and talks about her grandfather's bowler hat. It is not until Tereza distances herself by picking up her camera and looking through the lens that Sabina throws open her robe. After both women take pictures of each other and find themselves enchanted by the situation, Sabina "almost frightened by the enchantment and eager to dispel it . . . burst[s] into loud laughter." Clearly the situation with Tereza is fraught with emotional content, something Sabina will not allow herself to feel.

Tereza

Tereza is a young woman from a small village who, through a whole series of coincidences, becomes Tomas's lover and later his wife. Tereza's father was a political prisoner who died in jail, leaving Tereza in the care of her vulgar, loud mother, who took great delight in embarrassing Tereza. This abuse led to Tereza's radical split between body and soul; as much as possible she rejects everything about her body. It is her soul she gives to Tomas, and thus she represents heaviness in the burden of love she places on Tomas.

Tereza loves Tomas ferociously and, although she cannot tolerate his philandering, she cannot leave him. It seems as if her role in the book is to bear suffering. Her dreams are particularly painful. In one, she must parade nude around a swimming pool with other nude women. Tomas sits on a high chair and shoots any woman who does not perform proper knee bends. Later in the book, Tereza dreams that Tomas takes her to Petrin Hill, where he has arranged for men with guns to shoot her if she so chooses. When Tereza shares these dreams with Tomas, he finds himself ever more deeply enmeshed with his wife. Although through much of the book the two of them make each other unhappy, they nonetheless are unable to part from each other.

A turning point comes for Tereza when she returns home from work one night and smells another woman on her sleeping husband. In an act of rebellion, she ends up having a one-time sexual encounter with an engineer. Later she comes to believe this engineer is really a member of the secret police sent to entrap her for prostitution. After this event, Tereza tries to persuade Tomas to move to a collective farm in the country. When Tomas asks Tereza what has been bothering her these past months, she tells him of the odor his hair has been emitting. This revelation is enough to convince Tomas they must move to the country. Tereza finally achieves what she wants—Tomas's fidelity.

Tomas

Tomas is a successful Czech surgeon who lives in Prague. In addition to being a fine surgeon, Tomas is also an inveterate womanizer. He has many affairs and has constructed a set of rules for preventing these affairs from becoming anything other than occasions for sex.

While on a conference to a small town, he meets Tereza, a barmaid. He tells Tereza to look him up if she is ever in Prague, which she does. Tomas finds himself in love with Tereza when she comes down with influenza during her visit. However, he also finds these feelings "inexplicable." He ponders the question, is this love? Or, he wonders, "[Is] it simply the hysteria of a man who, aware deep down of his inaptitude for love, [feels] the self-deluding need to simulate it?" Tomas does not have the answer to this question, but nonetheless he feels drawn to marry Tereza. Marriage, however, does not stop Tomas from pursuing affairs with a variety of women.

For Tomas, sexual intercourse and love are not necessarily connected. He discovers this when he realizes how much he loves to sleep with Tereza, something he never does with his lovers. Tomas concludes, "Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman)."

Tomas's career suffers after the Soviet occupation of Prague. When he is offered the opportunity of immigrating to Switzerland, he takes it. In Switzerland he takes up with one of his former lovers, Sabina, who has also immigrated there. However, after just a few months in Switzerland, Tereza leaves him to return to Prague. Tomas chooses to follow her after a few days, and, from the time of his return to Prague, his career goes downhill. In the repressive atmosphere of the new government, he loses his job and begins working as a window washer. Even as a window washer, however, he finds opportunities to make love to many women.

Tomas is, in many ways, an enigma. Although he loves Tereza with all his heart, he is unable to put an end to his philandering in spite of the pain it causes his wife. If he feels strongly the idea of *es muss sein* (it must be) applies to his relationship with his wife, he feels likewise about his relationship with other women. It is not until confronted with the

odor emanating from his hair that he realizes he must give up all other women. He moves to the country with Tereza.

Of all the characters in the book, Tomas is the one who undergoes the most radical change from beginning to end. Just hours before his death, he dances with Tereza and tells her that he has been happy with her in the country, a happiness that seemed to have eluded him for much of his life.

Themes

Love and Sex

For all of its other concerns, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is first an exploration of the many facets of love. In his or her own way, each of the four main characters confronts and wrestles with the notion of love. Tomas, for example, never equates sex with love. Before Tereza comes into his life, he is very happy with his "erotic friendships." Because these affairs do not pretend to be "love" affairs, he is able to move among many women without betraying any of them. When Tereza arrives at his apartment and becomes ill, he realizes that he feels compassion for her, and that compassion itself is love. In spite of his many affairs, he does not leave Tereza, nor is there any doubt he loves her deeply.

For Tereza, however, love carries a very different connotation. While she does not equate love and sex, when she offers her body to Tomas, she does so out of love. Indeed for Tereza love is an offering of everything. That Tomas does not reciprocate in kind is a source of bitter sorrow to Tereza. Her love is of the "heavy" kind, a burden for both Tomas and Tereza herself.

Sabina, like Tomas, has many affairs and refuses to commit to one person. Of all the characters in the book, she is the one who seems least able to love and connect emotionally with another human being. Kundera is connecting her emotional damage to her upbringing within the Soviet system. As a child, Sabina found herself constantly under the barrage of the state, in the form of the music that was played all day at the Academy for Fine Arts; the parades in which the students were forced to march; and the strict aesthetic rules of social realism. To be an artist in Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia required complete compliance with state doctrine. For an artist, it also required a complete dampening of the creative forces and emotional responses, creating an individual who is always wary of revealing what is under the surface.

Franz too is emotionally incompetent and unable to engage in a loving relationship, although he believes himself to be in love with Sabina. As the book continues, it becomes clear that Franz loves his idea of Sabina, not Sabina herself. Tellingly, Franz closes his eyes as he makes love to Sabina, effectively erasing the woman in bed with him and substituting his own idea of Sabina in her place. In addition, when Franz misguidedly chooses to tell his wife about his affair with Sabina, he demonstrates how poorly he knows either woman. His wife does not respond at all as he imagines she will. Even worse, Sabina leaves him. After Sabina's departure, Franz in many ways is happier than when she was present. Because his idea of Sabina is somehow stronger in her absence, Franz no longer needs to square his idea of Sabina with the physical reality of Sabina.

Politics and Government

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a political novel. It not only describes politics within the Soviet bloc, it takes as its subject political and governmental oppression. None of the characters in the book can escape from the tentacles of totalitarianism that threaten to strangle each one. When Tomas, for example, during the brief Prague Spring writes an essay critical of the Communist Party, he opens himself to a series of damaging responses. After the Soviet invasion and the reinstitution of a repressive regime, Tomas is asked to recant his statement in order to keep his job as a surgeon. Tomas refuses, a stance that signals to his countrymen that he is a dissident himself. Tomas chooses to resign from the hospital and take a job as a window washer, thinking that in this way he can escape from governmental observation. However, when his son and the editor of the journal that published his essay ask him to sign a petition calling for the release of political prisoners, Tomas refuses. What both the government and the dissidents miss about Tomas is that he is largely apolitical; that is, he is someone who wants to carry on his life as a doctor without the intrusion of either government or politics. Such a stance is completely untenable, however. As a public figure, the government uses its strength to attack Tomas in the public sphere, by not allowing him to pursue the one thing at which he excels—practicing surgery.

In contrast,Tereza is a very private person,and the claustrophobia of totalitarianism affects her in a very private way. She finds herself working as a barmaid as the result of Tomas's published essay. The bar is both seedy and disreputable; even so, there are patrons who try to bring the power of the state down on Tereza. Most notably, when she has a brief affair with an engineer, she does not consider until later that, in all likelihood, the engineer is really a member of the secret police. For Tereza, the worst kind of governmental intrusion would be into her sexual life. She imagines that photographs have been taken of her with the engineer and that these pictures will later be used against her. Thus, for the private Tereza, the invasion of her personal space signifies the ultimate victory of the state over the person.

Just as the state intrudes on Tomas's public work life and Tereza's private sex life, the state intrudes on Sabina in her most vulnerable area—her art. In response to the Soviet invasion, Sabina leaves Czechoslovakia. She has already experienced what the state can do to art and has no desire to experience it again. Ironically, the tentacles of the state follow her into exile. She finds herself uncomfortably lumped together with all exiled Czech intellectuals; her work receives notice and praise not for the work itself but for her status as a dissident. Even within the émigré community, she finds herself surrounded with politics that will destroy her by forcing her to conform to some ideal other than her own. As Sabina wanders farther and farther away from her homeland, the political situation she left behind continues to shape her.

Kitsch

Kundera spends considerable energy to define, describe, and investigate the role of kitsch in communist society. "Kitsch" is a German word that loosely means inferior, sentimental, and/or vulgar art. Although kitsch claims to have an aesthetic purpose, it tends to simplify complicated ideas and thoughts into stereotypical and easily marketable forms. Kitsch appeals to the masses and to the lowest common denominator. It is the world of greeting-card poetry and velvet Elvis. For kitsch to be kitsch, it must be able to evoke an emotional response that according to the book "the multitudes can share."

Kitsch then is essential for the emotional and intellectual control of a populace in a totalitarian culture. In a system that requires all people to feel the same way about a particular event or state of being, kitsch works its magic. As Kundera writes, "Those of us who live in a society where various political tendencies exist side by side and competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the kitsch inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality; the artists can create unusual works. But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of *totalitarian kitsch*." Kitsch, according to Kundera, is devoid of irony, since "in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously."

Understanding kitsch brings the reader to an understanding of Sabina: it is not communism that repels her; it is communist kitsch such as the May Day parades and the art of social realism. And those who criticize kitsch, or for that matter call it kitsch, must be banned for life because it is the expression of individualism that poses the greatest threat to the totalitarian regime. Kundera concludes, "In this light, we can regard the gulag as a septic tank used by totalitarian kitsch to dispose of its refuse."

Style

Narrator

One of the most interesting devices that Kundera uses in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is his creation of a narrator. When the book opens, the reader encounters a meditation on the ideas of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and classical Greek philosopher Parmenides. What soon becomes clear is that there is a narrative voice undertaking this meditation, a voice that is creating and participating in the story while remaining somehow outside the story: "Not long ago, I caught myself experiencing a most incredible sensation. Leafing through a book on Hitler, I was touched by some of his portraits: they reminded me of my childhood. I grew up during the war; several members of my family perished in Hitler's concentration camps; but what were their deaths compared with the memories of a lost period in my life, a period that would never return?" Many readers will conclude the narrator is Kundera himself. Later in the story, the narrator tells the reader he has "been thinking about Tomas for many years," implying it is the author-as-narrator who has given Tomas his fictional existence. Likewise, the narrator tells the reader that Tereza began as a rumbling in his stomach.

However, while it may be easy to make the assumption that the "I" in the story is Kundera, it also does not take much of a stretch to consider the narrator as yet another character in the story itself, somehow a part of Kundera yet also separate from him. This technique is not new; Geoffrey Chaucer uses it in *The Canterbury Tales*, the famous fourteenth-century classic, when he creates a persona for himself as one of the pilgrims.

Why would a writer do such a thing? Kundera's narrator serves the function of setting up the philosophical structure of the novel. Because he is separate from the story, he is able to comment on each of the characters outside the knowledge of the characters themselves. This distance allows the reader to share privileged knowledge with the narrator that is hidden from the characters. It also leads the reader to trust that the narrator is reliable.

A second reason Kundera may choose to create a narrator is as a device to continually remind the reader that what he or she is reading is fiction, not reality. Authorial intrusions such as those made by the narrator serve to place the story in the realm of fiction, while making the author seem more present to the reader. It seems that the author is speaking directly to the reader in a kind of conversation.

However, a closer examination of this second purpose complicates the role of the narrator even further. While it may *seem* that the author is engaging the reader in conversation, what is *really* happening is that the reader is looking at black marks on paper, black marks the writer set down a number of years ago. The words on the page, no matter how much they recall the spoken voice, remain carefully crafted traces of some human creator. When the reader is forced to confront the essential artificiality of

fiction itself, the narrator out of necessity becomes a character himself. While the words revealing his thoughts about the characters and about human existence may indeed coincide with Kundera's own thoughts, once Kundera has chosen to write himself into the book, he has created a fictional persona who will tell the story as best he is able.

Setting

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is set during the 1960s in Czechoslovakia. The fact that Kundera himself experienced the Prague Spring as well as the Soviet takeover lends special poignancy to the story. Kundera uses his setting for several important purposes. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a love story and juxtaposing the love affairs of the four main characters with the upheaval of the Russian invasion throws the issues of love into sharp contrast with the issues of hate. In addition, it is the setting that allows Kundera to use his novel as a vehicle for a consideration of the effects of the totalitarian regime on the creation of art and, by extension, on the creation of life itself.

Historical Context

The History of Czechoslovakia

The land that became Czechoslovakia was actually separate regions within the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of World War I. The Czech people made their homes in Bohemia and Moravia, parts of Austria, while the Slovaks resided in Slovakia, part of Hungary. While quite different in their interests, concerns, and industrialization, after World War I the two regions declared independence as the Republic of Czechoslovakia. They were briefly democratic in the years between the two world wars; however, in 1938 Adolph Hitler invaded the new nation, occupying Prague.

After the defeat of the Germans, Czechoslovakia was reestablished; however, the Soviet Union exerted its influence on the young nation, and in 1948 the Communists seized power, establishing a government much like Joseph Stalin's in the Soviet Union. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Communist Party ruled all areas of life, including the government, art, education, and culture.

The Prague Spring, 1968

In the 1960s, leaders such as Alexander Dubcek attempted to introduce modest political reforms. In this atmosphere of lessening repression, writers and artists came forward and asked for even more reforms to be quickly undertaken. In June 1967 Kundera himself addressed the Fourth Czechoslovak Writers Congress and called for open discussion and an end to repression and censorship. Many who spoke up at this meeting were punished.

This punishment did not put a stop to the push for reform. In January 1968, Dubcek became secretary of the party and attempted to make Czechoslovakian socialism more humane. The movement did not sit well with the Warsaw Pact nations, particularly the Soviet Union, which did not want any of its satellite nations to shift their orbits significantly.

The Soviet Invasion, August 1968

Consequently, in August 1968, troops from the U.S.S.R. and other Eastern Bloc nations invaded Czechoslovakia. The occupation resulted in Dubcek's removal and the end of the reform movement. The Soviets instituted a new Czechoslovakian regime that was both harsh and repressive. Writers such as Kundera lost their jobs and were prohibited from speaking publicly or publishing their works. For some seven years, Kundera was not allowed to travel to the West.

Conditions in Czechoslovakia remained largely the same until 1989, in spite of the growing reform movement in the Soviet Union inspired by President Mikhail Gorbachev.

However, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 opened the floodgates in Czechoslovakia as well. Ultimately, democracy was restored in Czechoslovakia but not without trouble. In the early 1990s, Slovakia, the eastern part of the country, wanted greater autonomy. Many Slovakians called for complete independence. At the same time, Czech nationalists also wanted their own country. Although President Havel strongly opposed the split, the people of the country voted in 1992 for candidates in favor of dividing the country. Consequently, in January 1993, Czechoslovakia became two independent nations, now known as the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Critical Overview

When *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* appeared in 1984, it immediately became an international bestseller, garnering awards throughout the world, including a *Los Angeles Times* Book Award. Contemporary reviews of the novel were largely positive. Paul Gray, in a *Time* review, calls *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* "a triumph of wisdom over bitterness, hope over despair." Maureen Howard in the *Yale Review* writes, "*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is the most rewarding new novel I've read in years." Thomas DePietro in *Commonweal* hones in on the heart of the book. He observes that *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a book of "burning compassion, extraordinary intelligence, and dazzling artistry." DePietro also notes the book "leaves us with many questions, questions about love and death, about love and transcendence. These are our burdens, the existential questions that never change but need to be asked anew."

Not all reviewers were enchanted with the book, however. Christopher Hawtree, in a *Spectator* review, faults Kundera for a "most off-putting" title and finds irksome the "elliptical structure" of the work. With faint praise, however, he acknowledges the novel is "a self-referential whole that manages not to alienate the reader." Wendy Lesser in the *Hudson Review* is even blunter, calling *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* "a bad novel." She particularly finds fault with Kundera's characterizations:

The mistake Kundera makes is to treat his characters like pets. He thinks what he feels for them is love, whereas it's merely an excess of self. If it were really love, we would be able to push aside that gigantic authorial face that looms out of the pages of Kundera's novel . . . and find behind it the tiny, human, flawed faces of real novelistic characters. But they aren't there. Behind that leering, all-obliterating mask is nothing.

Scholarly interest in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* continues unabated. Literary critics have found a variety of ways to read the novel. For example, John O'Brien in his book *Milan Kundera and Feminism* focuses on Kundera's representation of woman. He most notably studies the relationship between Tereza and Sabina, suggesting that Tereza represents "weight" and Sabina represents "lightness." O'Brien next demonstrates how Kundera undermines such an easy dichotomy. Finally, he argues that it is in Sabina's painting that Kundera reveals his true focal point.

In *Terminal Paradox*, scholar Maria Nemcová Banerjee takes another tact, reading the novel as if it were a piece of music. Just as Tereza introduces Tomas to Beethoven's quartets, and thus to the seminal phrase *Es muss sein*, Kundera introduces the reader to a quartet of characters: "The four leading characters perform their parts in concert, like instruments in a musical quartet, each playing his or her existential code in strict relation to those of the others, often spatially separated but never imaginatively isolated in the reader's mind."

Finally, Kamila Kinyon in *Critique* uses the French critical theory of Michel Foucault and the notion of the "panopticon" to analyze the book. Panopticon literally means "all-seeing," and it suggests a kind of surveillance mechanism. As Kinyon argues, "Within

Kundera's novel, in a system of totalitarian Marxism where 'God is dead,' [the terrifying mystery] of God's gaze is replaced by [the terrifying mystery] of the panopticon camera, which may be directed at the individual at any time and which thus controls behavior even at those times when it is physically absent."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is a professor of English literature and composition who writes widely for educational and reference publishers. In this essay, Henningfeld argues that Sabina's paintings and Tereza's photographs call into question the "truth" of representational art.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a novel that functions on many different levels and consequently offers the scholar a host of literary theoretical positions to argue. The sheer number of ways the book has been read indicates this complexity. There are those who see it primarily as an exploration into the notion of love. Others see it as a dramatic account of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. It is also possible to read the novel as a philosophical study, starting with Kundera's fascination with Fredriech Nietzsche and Parmenides. Still other literary critics focus on the novel's structure in that it emulates a musical composition such as a fugue or symphony, with its introduction and reintroduction of themes and events. Finally, many scholars find the oppositions in the novel worthy of close attention.

In his book *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections*, John O'Brien chooses to develop yet another reading, one asserting that

Sabina's painting offers a clear alternative to oppositional thinking, and in this respect I believe Kundera presents Sabina's theory and practice of painting not only as a focal point of this novel, but also as a paradigm for understanding his work in general. Instead of reproducing surfaces that insist on a totalizing "intelligible lie," Kundera's novels, like Sabina's paintings, turn our attention to the deeper paradoxes, but . . . at the expense of the surface representations. In this insistence on and dramatization/staging of double vision, Kundera's novels do not just invite a deconstructionist perspective, but incorporate deconstructionist theory at the level of content.

Such a statement requires some unpacking. O'Brien's critical approach is to see Sabina's painting as metaphor for the entire structure of the novel. In so doing, he asserts that the novel is essentially "deconstructionist." Deconstruction is a critical theory that closely reads texts in order to demonstrate that texts do not generally mean what they appear to mean. In fact, deconstruction would argue that it is the nature of written language to both present and undermine "truth." Deconstructive writing often uses the device of meta fiction (or fiction about fiction itself) to call attention to itself as a piece of writing, as opposed to reality. While these concepts may seem complicated, looking carefully at how Kundera uses Sabina's paintings as a metaphor may shed light on both the novel and the theory.

Sabina finds her characteristic style by accident. As an artist in a socialist country, she is both expected and required to embody social realism in her work. As the narrator notes, "art that was not realistic was said to sap the foundations of socialism . . . she had painted in a style concealing the brush strokes and closely resembling color photography." One day, Sabina spills red paint on a picture of a building site. She tells Tereza,

At first I was terribly upset, but then I started enjoying it. The trickle looked like a crack; it turned the building site into a battered old backdrop, a backdrop with a building site painted on it. I began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it.... On the surface, there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract.

Sabina thus accidentally discovers the world behind the apparent world. While her paintings look superficially realistic, and appear to be of building sites and steelworks, they are really about the life hidden behind this realistic facade.

Eva Le Grand, in *Kundera: Or the Memory of Desire*, offers an idea that may prove useful in this exploration. She suggests that Kundera follows an "esthetic of the palimpsest." The word "palimpsest" is particularly apt. In the Middle Ages, because writing materials were so scarce, scribes would often wash the writing off a piece of parchment and use the parchment again and again. With new techniques of reading, contemporary scholars are able to read each level of the manuscript. Thus, while a manuscript will appear to be of a particular text, in reality there are many texts hidden behind the apparent one. Sabina's paintings then call to mind the notion of the palimpsest, the idea that there are other meanings hiding behind the apparent ones.

What Sabina accidentally discovers points to the essential problem of realistic representative art. It is dishonest in an insidious way. "Realistic" painting is not real; rather, it covers, hides, tricks the viewer through artifice to believe that what he or she sees is truth. For example, an artist will use the idea of perspective to create what seems to be a three-dimensional world. Thus, one object might appear to be farther away from the viewer than another object. In reality, both objects are exactly the same distance from the viewer. Modernist painters rebelled against realistic art for just this reason. In a very famous painting (*The Treason of Pictures*), the artist Rene Magritte painted a picture of a pipe with the words below it, "This is not a pipe." At first, this seems silly to the viewer: of course it is a pipe! Anyone would recognize it as such. At second thought, however, the viewer must admit that, no, what he or she is seeing is a picture, not a pipe at all. Thus, even the most realistic of paintings hides a host of other possible meanings behind its surface.

If painting is unable to depict the truth, what then of photography? Does it not faithfully capture the moment, preserving what really happened in the past? Kundera also explores this question in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, using Tereza's photography of the 1968 Soviet invasion as his example. He seems to be telling his reader that photographs *do* offer a way of revealing the truth of a situation. He writes,

All previous crimes of the Russian Empire had been committed under the cover of a discreet shadow. The deportation of a million Lithuanians, the murder of hundreds of thousands of Poles. . . . remain in our memory, but no photographic documentation exists; sooner or later they will therefore be proclaimed as fabrications. Not so the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, of which both stills and motion pictures are stored in archives throughout the world.

Kundera continues by describing the bravery of the Czech photographers, and their awareness of their responsibility of preserving this moment for the future. Nevertheless, later in the book Kundera reveals that even photographs are much more complicated than they might first appear. They serve to cover complexity rather than reveal it. Many chapters after the invasion, Tereza realizes that photographs of the invasion are being used by the new repressive regime to identify the dissidents and thus provide evidence for their punishment. What this reveals is the irrelevance of intention in the creation of an image. The truth the Czech photographers intend to preserve is not the same truth the government derives from the photos. All the good intentions in the world cannot change the fact that these same photographs become the primary means through which people are betrayed.

How then should a reader approach *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*? Sabina's paintings and Tereza's photographs reveal that Kundera's intentions for his novel are probably irrelevant. They also suggest that the smooth surface of the love story hides and distorts what happens beneath that story. Like a drip of red paint, Kundera's authorial intrusions constantly remind readers that the book in front of them is a book, not reality.

It would be comforting to stop here, to simply acknowledge that Kundera is warning his audience to look past the superficial kitsch of culture to ask the essential questions of existence. Deconstruction is not a comfortable theory, however, in that it reveals that all representation is just representation, not truth. In the case of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera provides so many levels that the reader thinks he or she must finally have arrived at meaning, if nowhere else than in the authorial intrusion, in which Kundera speaks directly to the reader. But is this Kundera speaking to the reader? Or is it yet just another representation, a representation of Kundera written by Kundera nearly two decades ago? And what of Sabina's paintings? Certainly the reader believes that the world revealed in the crack is the truth. But again, even the world behind the surface of Sabina's paintings is still more representation. Even more unsettling is this: Sabina's paintings do not exist in reality, no matter how clearly the reader envisions them. The surface painting and the painting below the surface are not paintings at all but black ink on white paper, words on the page, just as Magritte's pipe is not a pipe and Sabina's bowler hat is not a bowler hat. Kundera playfully reminds his reader with this enigmatic symbol that all representation is just representation, and, as it attempts to reveal, it necessarily conceals.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in Novels for Students, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, C ulik examines Kundera's work in the context of his life.

Milan Kundera is a major contemporary French/Czech writer who has succeeded in communicating the East European experience of life under totalitarian communism to a wide international public. Most recently, he has used his experience of life both in the East and in the West for commenting on contemporary Western civilization. Milan Kundera's knowledge of life in Czechoslovakia under Soviet rule has led him to important insights regarding the human condition of people living both in the East and in the West. Since Kundera moved to France in 1975, he has become an author of considerable international renown.

In Czechoslovakia after World War II, Kundera was a member of the young, idealist communist generation who were trying to bring about a "paradise on Earth," a communist utopia. It was not until their middle age that they realised that the communist regime had abused their idealism and that they had brought their nation into subjugation. This realisation resulted in a feeling of guilt which Milan Kundera has been trying to exorcise by his literary work in which, especially after leaving for the West, he has been able, by contrasting the Western and the East European experience, to elucidate important aspects of contemporary human existence. Kundera's mature work serves as a warning: the author argues that human perception is flawed and that human beings fall prey to false interpretations of reality. The primary impulse for this cognitive scepticism is undoubtedly Kundera's traumatic experience of his younger years when he uncritically supported communist ideology.

While he lived in Czechoslovakia, Kundera was always in the forefront of indigenous public debate on cultural issues. In the 1950s, he published lyrical poetry which while conforming to the demands of official communist literary style of "socialist realism" highlighted the importance of individual personal experience. Later, Kundera came to abhor lyricism and sentimentality.

In his own words, he "found himself" as a writer when, in the mid-1960s, he wrote short stories, later gathered in *Laughable Loves*. These are miniature dramas of intimate human relationships. Most of these short stories are based on bittersweet anecdotes which deal with sexual relations of two or three characters. Kundera believes that looking at people through the prism of erotic relationships reveals much about human nature. Sex and love-making is an important instrument for Kundera which enables him to delve into the minds of his characters in all his mature works.

Many Czech critics regard Kundera's first novel, *Z ert* (*The Joke*) as his finest achievement. Here Kundera develops for the first time his most important theme: the warning that it is impossible to understand and control reality. The novel is a story of a young communist student, Ludvík Jahn, who, out of frustration that he cannot get a female-fellow student into bed, sends her a postcard in which he mocks her political beliefs. The postcard is intercepted and Ludvík is punished by being expelled from

university and sent to work in the mines. Throughout his later life, Ludvík bears a grudge against all his former fellow students who voted for his expulsion. He plans an intricate revenge. However, it is impossible to enter the same river twice and Ludvík's plan misfires: although he prides himself on his intellectual capacity, his perception of reality is just as flawed as the perception of the "emotional" and "lyrical" women whom he despises. The structure of the novel is pluralist and polyphonic: the author compares and contrasts the testimonies of a number of different protagonists, thus forcing the reader to come to the conclusion that reality is unknowable. Most Western critics saw *The Joke* primarily as a criticism of Stalinist communism, yet Kundera rightly rejected such a simplistic interpretation.

Kundera further developed his writing style particularly in his novels *Kniha smíchu a zapomne ní* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*) and *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), which made his name in the West in the 1980s. He argues that he has invented a new method of writing a novel. His major works written since the 1980s consist of a series of texts which are bound together by a number of salient themes rather than by the narrative itself. These themes are examined and analysed by means of variations, like in a musical composition.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, a major theme when analysing people's insufficiences in perceiving reality, is forgetting. One of the main characters of the novel, Czech emigré Tamina, who leads a meaningless and isolated existence in France, is trying desperately and unsuccessfully to reconstruct her life in Czechoslovakia with her now dead husband. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a work which was hailed in the West as a masterpiece, Kundera's preoccupations with insufficiencies of perception, lyricism, privacy and misunderstanding are re-examined in a polyphonic structure with a more traditional narrative line. It is a story of two Czech emigrés, Tomá and Tereza who return to communist Czechoslovakia on an impulse and suffer the consequences.

In his later works,Kundera deals with various frustrating features of human behaviour,and again returns to the themes of privacy,individuality,perception and herd behaviour.Immortality ,"a novel of debate," is—among other things—a strong criticism of contemporary, superficial, Western civilisation in which commercial media and advertising images rule supreme and reduce everything to manipulated, meaningless drivel. Kundera here stands in awe over the mystery and authenticity of life and protests with all his might against its trite, consumerist simplification.

Source: Jan C ulik, "Kundera, Milan," in *Reference Guide to World Literature*, 3d ed., edited by Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast, Vol. 1, St. James Press, 2003, pp. 572-74.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Day gives an overview of Kundera's work.

In his later works, Kundera deals with various frustrating features of human behaviour, and again returns to the themes of privacy, individuality, perception and herd behaviour. *Immortality*, "a novel

Milan Kundera's development as a writer has been strongly influenced by historical events. During World War II and in the brief, dynamic years which followed he was committed to the Communist cause; he later justified his enthusiasm with the explanation, "Communism enthralled me in much the way Stravinsky, Picasso and Surrealism had. It promised a great, miraculous metamorphosis, a totally new and different world" (New York Times Book Review). But in the 1960s, while still a member of the Communist Party, he became uneasy about its actual practice, including the policy concerning censorship. Kundera was one of a number of writers who refused to make changes in the articles they wrote and so ran the risk of remaining unpublished, but who eventually won greater freedom in the material which they did succeed in publishing.

The predominant theme in Kundera's writing is that of identity: not simply the identity of the inner self, but with whom and with what a person identifies his or her self. In the work Kundera completed while living in Czechoslovakia this theme has three strands: identification with (or commitment to) an ideology; identification with (or desire for) an idealised self-image; and identification with a history and a tradition.

In the mid-1950s Kundera was known to the Czech reading public as a poet, author of three collections: *C love k zahrada irá* (Man: A Broad Garden), *Poslední máj* (The Last May), and *Monology* (Monologues). *Poslední máj* is particularly remarkable as an apparent sanctification of the Communist journalist Julius Fuc ík, who was executed by the Nazis.

Kundera's first published fiction, the short stories *Sme né lásky* (*Laughable Loves*), deal with the idealised self-image. The characters in the stories pride themselves on being able to manipulate the world around them and live out their self-images. In reality, however, they have no control over their lives; they can be humiliated by a simple chain of events or by another victim of chance. These hedonists are very different from the subject of Kundera's first full-scale work, *Ume ní románu: cesta Vladislava Vanc ury za velkou epikou* (The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Vanc ura's Road in Search of the Great Epic). (This is a different book from his 1987 work, *L'Art du roman*). Vanc ura had been a member of the prewar avant-garde, a writer and a Communist, who was executed by the Nazis at the end of the war. Kundera placed Vanc ura's work in the context of the world novel: of Henry Fielding, Sir Walter Scott, Leo Tolstoy, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Anatole France. Vanc ura, both in his commitment to Communism and his place in European culture, represented the antithesis of the ephemeral subjects of *Laughable Loves*.

Kundera's first play, *Majitelé klic ç* (The Owners of the Keys), also presents a contrast between material comfort and a commitment to history. The setting is a provincial town during the German occupation; the (positive) hero has to decide whether he will rejoin the (Communist) resistance—a decision which will mean the betrayal of his wife and her petit bourgeois parents to the Nazis. However, although the play was effective in dramatic terms, its content was conventional Socialist Realism. More significant was Kundera's first novel, *Z ert* (*The Joke*), which tells the story of Communism in Czechoslovakia between the years 1948 and 1965. Through the experiences of its characters it traces the loss of idealism, the hopeless reliance on hollow images. Paradoxically, the character who remains inwardly most loyal to Communist ideals also values the folk traditions of the country's past.

Before August 1968, the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague had commissioned a play from Kundera which was produced there in May 1969. *Ptákovina* (Cock-a-Doodle-Do) is set in a school staffed by cringing or sadistic teachers; the action is triggered by a crude practical joke played by the headmaster that eventually rebounds on him. The theme of the play is moral degradation in a society which has lost its values. *Jakub a pán* (*Jacques and His Master*), on the other hand, was written as an "homage to Diderot," a variation on Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*. Kundera later claimed that when he wrote it, he saw the shadow of encroaching Asian hordes falling across the western world, and felt that he was trying to hold on to the disappearing civilisation of Diderot's world.

The subject of the novel *La Vie est ailleurs* (*Life Is Elsewhere*) is the degeneration which brought the West close to disintegration. The young poet, Jaromil—a precocious surrealist and Party hack poet—thinks of himself as an intellectual descendant of Arthur Rimbaud; to Kundera, he is a forerunner of the pretentious students revolting in the streets of Paris in May 1968. In *La Valse aux adieux* (*The Farewell Party*) the theme is death. The action follows five days in the life of a popular jazz trumpeter who tries to persuade a young nurse to abort the child which she claims is his; it is a picture of a society in the grip of a life-denying force which seeks to suppress and condemn every natural, irrational or "mystical" experience.

In July 1967, during the run-up to the Prague Spring, Kundera, together with Ivan Klíma, Václav Havel, and Ludvík Vaculík (*qq.v.*), made a speech at the Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union which was regarded by Party functionaries as a political outrage. Kundera appealed to writers to consider the role of literature in the wider context of Czech history. He described how the writers of the 19th century had helped to shape Czechoslovakia's destiny, and asked whether today's writers were prepared to let the decline into provincialism and officially sanctioned vandalism continue.

In Spring 1970, 18 months after the Russian occupation, the Communists embarked on a systematic humiliation of those considered to be in any way responsible. Early in 1970 Kundera lost his lectureship in world literature at the Prague Film Academy. At this time he did not expect to be published again in Czechoslovakia in his lifetime, and in 1975 accepted the post of Professor of comparative literature at the University of Rennes in France. Soon afterwards he was notified of the confiscation of his Czechoslovak

citizenship. Ironically, the exile and the loss of his nationality led him to reassess his position, and to consider himself as a European rather than a Czechoslovak writer.

It was in France that Kundera wrote the two novels that enhanced his international fame —*Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*) and *L'Insoutenable Légéreté de l'être* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). In these novels he abandons continuous narrative for a structure which resembles film collage. He juxtaposes one narrative with another, moves backward and forward in time, fictionalises historical characters, and treats fictional characters as real by bringing them into dialogue with the author-narrator. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* the central character is Tamina, an exiled Czech working as a waitress in a provincial French town, who tries to remember her dead husband and to regain the diary and letters she left behind in Prague. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Kundera contrasts the fate of two exiles, Tereza and Sabina: the one drawn back to her homeland and her death; the other who floats free and drifts to America. The novel weaves a web of chance encounters, uncertainties, and betrayals, both political and personal. The third member of the triangle is Tomas, husband of Tereza and lover of (among many other women) Sabina. Tomas is a surgeon who returns with Tereza to "normalised" Prague where, harassed by the secret police, he becomes a window cleaner. He and Tereza take "the only escape open to them," life in the countryside, where those who no longer have anything to lose have nothing to fear. They die together, when the weight of Tomas's badly main-tained truck crushes their bodies into the earth. Sabina, abandoning one lover in Geneva on her way to Paris, with a final destination of America, is aware of emptiness all around her: "Until that time, her betrayals had filled her with excitement and joy, because they opened up new paths to new adventures of betrayal. But what if the paths came to an end? One could betray one's parents, husband, country, love, but when parents, husband, country and love were gone—what was left to betray?"

The theme of identity powerfully re-emerges in Kundera's most recent novel, *L'Immortalité* (*Immortality*). It is not the immortal soul that Kundera is thinking of, but earthly immortality; as Laura says: "After all, we want to leave something behind!" only to be challenged by her sister Agnes's "sceptical astonishment." Although Agnes's life forms the axis of the novel, around it revolve other stories, fantasies, and feuilletons. Central to the theme is the story of Bettina von Arnim, who created her own immortality out of two or three meetings and an exchange of letters with Goethe. The structure of *Immortality* is built on echo and reflection, gesture and memory. Kundera contrasts the reality experienced by his grandmother in her Moravian village community with the "reality" seen by the average Parisian businessman on his evening TV news. Immortality is not in the roles we create for ourselves, the images we set up for posterity, but in the continuity of life and the fragile survival of our culture.

History is for Kundera the land and its traditions, which have shaped lives for generations. His exile from his country has shaped his awareness of the disintegration of European society. In his writing he tries to recapture and hold on to the last remnants of a vanishing western civilisation.

Source: Barbara Day, "Kundera, Milan," in *Contemporary World Writers*, 2d ed., edited by Tracy Chevalier, St. James Press, 1993, pp. 301-03.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Calvino explores how Kundera's "characters' stories are his first interest" in The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.*

When he was twelve, she suddenly found herself alone, abandoned by Franz's father. The boy suspected something serious had happened, but his mother muted the drama with mild, insipid words so as not to upset him. The day his father left, Franz and his mother went into town together, and as they left home Franz noticed that she was wearing a different shoe on each foot. He was in a quandry: he wanted to point out her mistake, but was afraid he would hurt her. So during the two hours they spent walking through the city together he kept his eyes fixed on her feet. It was then that he had his first inkling of what it means to suffer.

This passage from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* illustrates well Milan Kundera's art of storytelling—its concreteness, its finesse—and brings us closer to understanding the secret due to which, in his last novel, the pleasure of reading is continuously rekindled. Among so many writers of novels, Kundera is a true novelist in the sense that the characters' stories are his first interest: private stories, stories, above all, of couples, in their singularity and unpredictability. His manner of storytelling progresses by successive waves (most of the action develops within the first thirty pages; the conclusion is already announced halfway through; every story is completed and illuminated layer by layer) and by means of digressions and remarks that transform the private problem into a universal problem and, thereby, one that is ours. But this overall development, rather than increasing the seriousness of the situation, functions as an ironic filter lightening its pathos. Among Kundera's readers, there will be those taken more with the goings-on and those (I, for example) more with the digressions. But even these become the tale. Like his eighteenth-century masters Sterne and Diderot, Kundera makes of his extemporaneous reflections almost a diary of his thoughts and moods.

The universal-existential problematic also involves that which, given that we are dealing with Czechoslovakia, cannot be forgotten even for a minute: that ensemble of shame and folly that once was called history and that now can only be called the cursed misfortune of being born in one country rather than another. But Kundera, making of this not "the problem" but merely one more complication of life's inconveniences, eliminates that dutiful, distancing respect that every literature of the oppressed rouses within us, the undeserving privileged, thereby involving us in the daily despair of Communist regimes much more than if he were to appeal to pathos.

The nucleus of the book resides in a truth as simple as it is ineludible: It is impossible to act according to experience because every situation we face is unique and presents itself to us for the first time. "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."

Kundera links this fundamental axiom with corollaries not as solid: the lightness of living for him resides in the fact that things only happen once, fleetingly, and it is therefore as if they had not happened. Weight, instead, is to be found in the "eternal recurrence" hypothesized by Nietzsche: every fact becomes dreadful if we know that it will repeat itself infinitely. But (I would object) if the "eternal recurrence"—the possible meaning of which has never been agreed upon—is the return of the same, a unique and unrepeatable life is precisely equal to a life infinitely repeated: every act is irrevocable, non-modifiable for eternity. If the "eternal recurrence" is, instead, a repetition of rhythms, patterns, structures, hieroglyphics of fate that leave room for infinite little variants in detail, then one could consider the possible as an ensemble of statistical fluctuations in which every event would not exclude better or worse alternatives and the finality of every gesture would end up lightened.

Lightness of living, for Kundera, is that which is opposed to irrevocability, to exclusive univocity: as much in love (the Prague doctor Tomas likes to practice only "erotic friendships" avoiding passionate involvements and conjugal cohabitation) as in politics (this is not explicitly said, but the tongue hits where the tooth hurts, and the tooth is, naturally, the impossibility of Eastern Europe's changing—or at least alleviating—a destiny it never dreamed of choosing).

But Tomas ends up taking in and marrying Tereza, a waitress in a country restaurant, out of "compassion." Not just that: after the Russian invasion of '68, Tomas succeeds in escaping from Prague and emigrating to Switzerland with Tereza who, after a few months, is overcome by a nostalgia that manifests itself as a vertigo of weakness over the weakness of her country without hope, and she returns. Here it is then that Tomas, who would have every reason, ideal and practical, to remain in Zurich, also decides to return to Prague, despite an awareness that he is entrapping himself, and to face persecutions and humiliations (he will no longer be able to practice medicine and will end up a window washer).

Why does he do it? Because, despite his professing the ideal of the lightness of living, and despite the practical example of his relationship with his friend, the painter Sabina, he has always suspected that truth lies in the opposing idea, in weight, in necessity. "Es muss sein!" / "It must be" says the last movement of Beethoven's last quartet. And Tereza, love nourished by compassion, love not chosen but imposed by fate, assumes in his eyes the meaning of this burden of the ineluctable, of the "Es muss sein!"

We come to know a little later (and here is how the digressions form almost a parallel novel) that the pretext that led Beethoven to write "Es muss sein!" was in no way sublime, but a banal story of loaned money to be repaid, just as the fate that had brought Tereza into Tomas's life was only a series of fortuitous coincidences.

In reality, this novel dedicated to lightness speaks to us above all of constraint: the web of public and private constraints that envelops people, that exercises its weight over every human relationship (and does not even spare those that Tomas would consider passing *couchages*). Even the Don Juanism, on which Kundera gives us a page of original definitions, has entirely other than "light" motivations: whether it be when it

answers to a "lyrical obsession," which is to say it seeks among many women the unique and ideal woman, or when it is motivated by an "epic obsession," which is to say it seeks a universal knowledge in diversity.

Among the parallel stories, the most notable is that of Sabina and Franz. Sabina, as the representative of lightness and the bearer of the meanings of the book, is more persuasive than the character with whom she is contrasted, that is, Tereza. (I would say that Tereza does not succeed in having the "weight" necessary to justify a decision as self-destructive as that of Tomas.) It is through Sabina that lightness is shown to be a "semantic river," that is to say, a web of associations and images and words on which is based her amorous agreement with Tomas, a complicity that Tomas cannot find again with Tereza, or Sabina with Franz. Franz, the Swiss scientist, is the Western progressive intellectual, as can be seen by he who, from Eastern Europe, considers him with the impassive objectivity of the ethnologist studying the customs of an inhabitant of the antipodes. The vertigo of indetermination that has sustained the leftist passions of the last twenty years is indicated by Kundera with the maximum of precision compatible with so elusive an object: "The dictatorship of the proletariat or democracy? Rejection of the consumer society or demands for increased productivity? The guillotine or an end to the death penalty? It is all beside the point." What characterizes the Western left, according to Kundera, is what he calls the Grand March, which develops with the same vagueness of purpose and emotion:

. . . yesterday against the American occupation of Vietnam, today against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia; yesterday for Israel, today for the Palestinians; yesterday for Cuba, tomorrow against Cuba—and always against America; at times against massacres and at times in support of other massacres; Europe marches on, and to keep up with events, to leave none of them out, its pace grows faster and faster, until finally the Grand March is a procession of rushing, galloping people and the platform is shrinking and shrinking until one day it will be reduced to a mere dimensionless dot.

In accordance with the agonized imperatives of Franz's sense of duty, Kundera brings us to the threshold of the most monstrous hell generated by ideological abstractions become reality, Cambodia, and describes an international humanitarian march in pages that are a masterpiece of political satire.

At the opposite extreme of Franz, his temporary partner Sabina, by virtue of her lucid mind, acts as the author's mouthpiece, establishing comparisons and contrasts and parallels between the experience of the Communist society in which she grew up and the Western experience. One of the pivotal bases for these comparisons is the category of kitsch. Kundera explores kitsch in the sense of edulcorated, edifying, "Victorian" representation, and he thinks naturally of "socialist realism" and of political propaganda, the hypocritical mask of all horrors. Sabina, who, having established herself in the United States, loves New York for what there is there of "non-intentional beauty," "beauty by error," is upset when she sees American kitsch, Coca-Cola-like publicity, surface to remind her of the radiant images of virtue and health in which she grew up. But Kundera justly specifies:

Kitsch is the aesthetic idea of all politicians and all political parties and movements. Those of us who live in a society where various political tendencies exist side by side and competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the kitsch inquisition . . . But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of *totalitarian kitsch*.

The step that remains to be taken is to free oneself of the fear of kitsch, once having saved oneself from its totalitarianism, and to be able to see it as an element among others, an image that quickly loses its own mystifying power to conserve only the color of passing time, evidence of mediocrity or of yesterday's naïveté. This is what seems to me to happen to Sabina, in whose story we can recognize a spiritual itinerary of reconciliation with the world. At the sight, typical of the American idyll, of windows lit in a white clapboard house on a lawn, Sabina is surprised by an emotional realization. And nothing remains but for her to conclude: "No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition."

A much sadder conclusion is that of the story of Tereza and Tomas; but here, through the death of a dog, and the obliteration of their own selves in a lost site in the country, there is almost an absorption into the cycle of nature, into an idea of the world that not only does not have man at its center, but that is absolutely not made for man.

My objections to Kundera are twofold; one terminological and one metaphysical. The terminological concerns the category of kitsch within which Kundera takes into consideration only one among many meanings. But the kitsch that claims to represent the most audacious and "cursed" broad-mindedness with facile and banal effects is also part of the bad taste of mass culture. Indeed, it is less dangerous than the other, but it must be taken into account to avoid our believing it an antidote. For example, to see the absolute contrast with kitsch in the image of a naked woman wearing a man's bowler hat does not seem to me totally convincing.

The metaphysical objection takes us farther. It regards the "categorical agreement with being," an attitude that, for Kundera, is the basis of kitsch as an aesthetic ideal. "The line separating those who doubt being as it is granted to man (no matter how or by whom) from those who accept it without reservation" resides in the fact that adherence imposes the illusion of a world in which defecation does not exist because, according to Kundera, s—t is absolute metaphysical negativity. I would object that for pantheists and for the constipated (I belong to one of these two categories, though I will not specify which) defecation is one of the greatest proofs of the generosity of the universe (of nature or providence or necessity or what have you). That s—t is to be considered of value and not worthless is for me a matter of principle.

From this some fundamental consequences derive. In order not to fall either into vague sentiments of a universal redemption that end up by producing monstrous police states or into generalized and temperamental pseudo-rebellions that are resolved in sheepish obedience, it is necessary to recognize how things are, whether we like them or not, both within the realm of the great, against which it is useless to struggle, and that of the small, which can be modified by our will. I believe then that a certain degree of

agreement with the existent (s—t included) is necessary precisely because it is incompatible with the kitsch that Kundera justly detests.

Source: Italo Calvino, "On Kundera," in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 1989, pp. 53-57.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay excerpt, Bayley explores how Kundera balances lighter, more eternal elements in his novel with the weight of reality and mortality.

Like most novelists of the present time Kundera is a theorist of his art, not only weaving ideas about it into the texture of the fiction he is inventing, but making the invention itself, and the characters produced by it, determined by his conception of where fiction can end and begin. From a casual sentence or two when we are getting on towards the end of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* we discover that the hero and heroine (conventional terms which carry an unusual emphasis in this novel) were (or are to be) killed in a driving accident shortly after the novel ends.

The confusion of tenses—were they killed, or are they to be killed?—shows the novelist drawing attention to a deliberate formal confusion: what is inside the fiction and what is outside it? The confusion can only be formal, of course, for anything mentioned in a novel belongs to that novel and nowhere else. The effect is none the less potent, how potent we can see if we imagine, for instance, that Henry James were to casually inform us, in *What Maisie Knew*, that something Maisie *didn't* know was that she would die of a chill and fever a few weeks after her story ends. James knew, as he put it in the Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, that "relations stop nowhere" and that the artists problem is to "draw the circle in which they shall happily appear to do so." The death of Roderick Hudson, as of Daisie Miller, indicates that the case under artistic examination has been closed, a conclusion or a diagnosis reached. But Maisie's case is just beginning; she has just acquired the knowledge to live in the world in which she will have to live, and a secret confidence in her own status as a moral judge. She is like James, entering upon living as James entered upon writing. The formal specification of her story, its drawn circle, includes her survival in a world which both she and her author can deal with.

Maisie was, but also is to be. By covering all tenses she has got outside the domination of time, as most novel characters do, including those whose existence is terminated inside the book, as a completion of its effect. Kundera has sought to combine the time-dominated bathos of contingent living and dying with the extra-temporal status normally assumed in novel characters. It is a curious paradox of the novel genre that we assume its characters live for ever, either by dying in it—a sure passport to immortality granted to Little Nell or Madame Bovary—or by surviving the novel, like Little Dorrit or Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse, into some reassuringly permanent limbo of non-fiction. Kundera tries to get his hero and heroine outside the novel, but not into this aftermath world. By killing them off outside it he suggests they have never been in it, although their story has been told as if they were.

Like everything to do with the novel the device is hardly new. When Milton's Satan flies up out of Chaos he hits an air pocket. "Fluttering his pennons vain plumb down he drops," and "still had been falling" if the blast from a convenient volcano hadn't sent him back up again. Briefly the reader toys with the notion that the fallen Archangel might have been still going down, like a receding galaxy, at the moment when he reads these

words, or when their first readers read them, or when they are read in time to come. In *The Old Wives' Tale* Arnold Bennett tells us that the papers Sophia secretes at the back of the top shelf of a hotel wardrobe may, for all he knows, still be there. By putting us momentarily outside it such touches of course confirm the fictiveness of the tale, its truth —that is to say—as a tale.

But Kundera uses the device for a different purpose, a more dialectical one. For all its high-spirited vivacity (Kundera is a great admirer of Sterne) this masterpiece among his novels could not have been written by an Englishman, still less by a Frenchman. It is deeply, centrally European from the meeting-place of the Teutonic and Slav tradition, the tradition of Nietzsche in the spirit, and of Kafka's city of Prague, where neither Kafka nor Kundera can now be published. Kafka's heroes do not live in the world of fiction, and yet *The Castle* is one of the most completely realized fictional worlds that the art can show. Kundera sets about creating this paradox even more deliberately.

What is lightness of being? It 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 be shaped, no happening acquire significance. It is the state referred to by the German proverb which says *Einmal 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. The libertine speaks the truth in saying "it means nothing," that no importance or meaning can be attached to any of his goings on. They cannot be set up in a moral frame, the determined frame of an observed life.

Kundera does not set the actual or hypothetical present against the determined or storied past, as Milton and Arnold Bennett do in the examples I have given. He keeps everything in the present, but makes an antithesis between lightness of being, the non-fictional state in which all is forgiven because all is without meaning, and the weighted determined condition of life, story, or destiny which cannot be avoided or denied. Sex belongs to the first, love to the second. And, like the sophisticated technician of fictiveness that he is, Kundera suggests that two now time-honored ways of presenting the consciousness in fiction slot neatly into his antithesis: the sequential and determined narrative of the classic novelist, and the perpetually present envelope of awareness, which receives nothing but impressions. Inside his novel the technique of Balzac and Trollope confronts that of Virginia Woolf and Robbe-Grillet: the guidelines of concentration they set up for the reader become in Kundera a means of philosophic demonstration and debate, philosophy being contextualized as fiction by the nature of the antithesis itself. Doris Lessing did something similar in *The Golden Notebook*, creating an antithesis between novel creation and notebook creation, but her work is so humorless and laborious, that it fails either to delight the reader or to move him.

Naturally Kundera's hero and heroine themselves embody the antithesis he sets up. Tomas is a Prague surgeon, an insatiable womanizer, a once convinced communist who now has no belief at all in political or social solutions. Tereza, the heroine, is a waitress whom he happens to meet casually in a small town and who falls in love with him. Lightness encounters weight; consciousness meets destiny; the undefined casualness

of being comes up against the experience of fictional definition. Being a modern novelist Kundera is not slow to point out the fictional provenance and function of two such characters, and to suggest in what sense they are characters.

It would be senseless for author to try to convince reader that his characters had actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying *'Einmal ist keinmal.'* Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.

Of course neither character is real, but each represents a different kind of fictiveness. With great ingenuity Kundera makes use of his own highly contemporary proclamation of the fictiveness of all fiction to suggest that from this very fact can be demonstrated important truths about the nature of reality. From the antithesis of two fictive characters emerges an unexpected synthesis, with a new power to move and to convince us.

Tereza is born of the rumblings of a stomach—her own. She was overcome with shame because of the noise it made when Tomas first made love to her. In the excitement of traveling to meet him she had forgotten to eat anything, and she could do nothing about it. Neither of them can do anything about what is happening to them. Tomas, indeed, tries to continue his old life as if nothing has happened. He continues to make love to other women, to a circle of mistresses all of whom live as if everything was abolished as soon as it occurred. At night his hair smells of them, even though he has been careful to wash the rest of himself, and Tereza suffers from unbearable jealousy, which is not a weightless phenomenon.

Tomas, still light and adaptive, still living in the *Einmal*, gets a good job as a surgeon in Zurich, but his habits continue, and Tereza leaves him, goes back to Prague. This should be the moment at which lightness reasserts itself; Tomas might have been a prosperous and promiscuous surgeon in Zurich; or he might have emigrated to America, as one of his weightless mistresses, Sabina, has done, and lived in the "once only" limbo of modern fiction. But his destiny is the other sort of novel, and Tereza, who "could never learn lightness."

Realizing he cannot live without Tereza he too returns to Prague, just in time for the Russian invasion. He loses his hospital job, becomes a window-cleaner, then a driver on a collective farm. With their dog, Karenin, he and Tereza stay together. They make love in order to sleep together (he has never been able to sleep with a woman before, only to make love to her). The dog, Karenin, of course reminds us of Tolstoy's novel, one of Kundera's many pointed jokes about the fictional form. In *Anna Karenina* the love of Vronsky and Anna can be seen, and by Tolstoy no doubt was seen, as representing what Kundera calls lightness of being. Tolstoy contrasts the weight and destiny of life, the things that matter, Kitty and Dolly and Levin and their children, with the sterile passion of Vronsky and Anna, their bogus menage. Kundera breaks this mould by making the union of Tomas and Tereza deliberately sterile, and by representing the weight between them in the name and person of their big dog, to whom they become increasingly attached, and who at last dies painfully of cancer. It is typical of Kundera's

novel that what might be irritatingly knowing—the dog's name and the text it points to—is converted into the most directly, almost unbearably, moving sequence in the book.

Their helplessness, the death of their dog, their own death, news of which reaches us before the novel's tranquil ending—all emphasize the timeless nature of human life, suffering, destiny. Hero and heroine come to live as characters in an old-fashioned fiction might do, but the way in which their death is contrived outside its tranquillity reminds us of the unexpected ending of *King Lear*, when the calm of tragedy is dispelled by the wholly gratuitous death of Cordelia, and the abrupt extinction of Lear himself, wracked by delight at the illusion that she may still be alive.

What is so striking about *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is the way in which Kundera has succeeded in making so schematic, even diagrammatic, a novel so unexpectedly human and moving. In this respect it has something in common with Lionel Trilling's novel *The Middle of the Journey*, which has in some ways a remarkably similar analytic pattern. Trilling also separates the weight of living from the lightness, associating the latter with the world of politics and ideology and the former with love and death, and the individual's acceptance of them as determinants of his being. Trilling quotes with admiration E. M. Forster's statement that "Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him." The idea of death, like that of love, is incompatible with lightness of being.

And incompatible too with the new versions of Marxist man. One of the most effective satiric ploys in the novel, developing out of the way such satire is used in Kundera's previous novels and stories like

The Joke and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, is the relation between the political and social pretenses of a Marxist country like Czechoslovakia, and the new frivolous and negative attitudes towards them. The only escape from the congealed political *kitsch* of the regime is into the lightness of total irresponsibility. Kundera shows how the regime corrupts totally the private consciousness of the citizens; and this is more frightening and more desolating than the more simple-minded way (for it was not based upon his own actual experience) in which Orwell had seen opposition to Big Brother being inexorably destroyed until every dissident had learned to love Big Brother. That is a naive prediction of what happens, as is in its own way Trilling's more contemplative image of human privacy and dignity becoming disillusioned by the way the claims on Marxism push them aside. What really happens is for Kundera less dramatic, more depressingly banal. Communism in practice cannot conquer the private life, but makes it light and meaningless, weightless and cynical.

This, Kundera implies, is the final damnation of a frozen ideology. It destroys the instinctive and almost unconscious decencies and weighty rhythms which men and women have always lived by. No wonder Solzhenitsyn has claimed that there is no answer to Marxism except in other and more traditional kinds of spiritual authoritarianism, the old authority of Russian church and state. More empirically, Kundera shows what happens to the citizens of a country for whom total cynicism is the only defense against the hypocritical pretense of the regime that all are joyfully taking

part in the grand march towards the gleaming heights of socialism. In the eastern bloc these ideals are now nothing but political kitsch, and kitsch, as Kundera observes, has become "the aesthetic ideal of all politicians." "The Brotherhood of Man will only be possible on a basis of kitsch." spiritually destroyed by the only way she can oppose the regime. She also destroys another lover, Franz, who loves her in the old-fashioned way and feels weighty emotions like jealousy, fidelity, despair, connubial devotion—emotions that fill Sabina with disgust because she logically but fatally identifies them with the propaganda of a communist regime. For her, weightlessness is the only answer, the only way out. Her life-style must express subversion of kitsch.

It amuses Kundera to display the ironies that arise from this. The authorities responsible for art have trained Sabina in the Socialist Realist manner, but she soon learned to practice a subterfuge which in the end became her own highly personal and original style, and which makes her rich and successful when she gets away to America. She produced a nice kitschy composition—children running on sunlit grass or happy workers handling girders—but then with the aid of a few apparently random drops of paint she evoked, as it were, in and beneath the scene a wholly unintelligible reality, a meaningless and therefore liberating lightness of being.

But of course the bogus, the congealed weight of a communist regime, a regime which spawns kitsch everywhere, has called up its oppositional counterpart in the west. Sabina is disgusted to find that her admirers in America mount an exhibition showing her name and a blurb against a tasteful background of barbed wire, and other corny symbols of oppression. This is ideological kitsch by other means, and Sabina protests that it is not communism itself that she dislikes so much but the horrible aesthetic falsity it brings with it. True communist reality—persecution, suspicion, shortages of all kinds—she finds quite honest and tolerable. What she can't bear is its false idealism, its films, its art, its pretenses. Kundera himself, we may remember, was a professor of film technology before his escape to the west, and his pupils at that time produced a new wave in the Czech cinema.

Sabina, then, is in a subtle but profound sense wholly corrupted by her experience of communism, from which she cannot escape, even in the west. She is condemned to perpetual lightness of being, condemned to a rejection of all values, because every value seems to her compromised with and covered by the slime of ideological falsity. Were she a character in a Dostoevsky novel she would commit suicide. Being in a Kundera novel she merely shrugs it off, and goes on living in the only way she can; but the situation, the dialectic, is decidedly a Slavic one, and reminds us of the kind of tradition in which Kundera is writing. He is too expert a craftsman to make the pattern too clear. But the deepest irony in his book is that Tereza and Tomas unwittingly save themselves by returning to the oppression of Prague, which means disgrace, alienation, and finally a random death: while Sabina, for whom emigration means merely an accentuation of her former lifestyle, means success, affluence and as many lovers as she wants, remains a hollow shell of frivolity, a ghostly bubble. What she calls kitsch is not mocked; it wins out in the end, because in its horrible way it can still represent the enduring values of the human race, the Tolstoyan truths of what men live by.

Of course Kundera is very careful not to let all this become too visible. It is the merest implication in his novel, if that. There *is* a deep moral about suffering and love, but it is overlaid with something much more acceptable to the sophistication of contemporary and international novel-reading sensibility. Kundera's escape from the world of Socialist Realism, and its moral and aesthetic premises, is as complete and whole-hearted as Sabina's; all his writing shows a determination to be as brilliant and as frivolous as any author in the west. The point is obvious if we compare him with Solzhenitsyn, who has simply used the traditional methods of Socialist Realism for a purpose very different from that on which they are employed in their homeland. Solzhenitsyn remains a traditional Russian writer, while Kundera has reasserted for himself a complete European birthright, brought up to date and furnished with all the devices of modernist fiction. It remains to be seen whether his fiction is not too man-made, created by the fashion of the time and disappearing with it.

While both Kundera and Solzhenitsyn are wholly opposed to the state socialism of the eastern bloc, it is because they are technically such very different writers that their "messages" are also so different. Solzhenitsyn opposes communism with an ideal of Russian Christian orthodoxy which is equally authoritarian. Kundera is more intellectual, more metaphysical, more unexpected. He makes no simple East/West distinction, but transforms the symptoms and consequences of communist ideology into our overall modern consciousness, into consciousness as the novel today can present it. He reminds us that self-consciousness—"lightness of being"—is a permanent feature of the human state; and has always been opposed, since the days of the Greek philosopher Parmenides, to the determined aspect of our lives, to love, death, suffering, weight. His novel makes effective play with this ancient opposition by putting it in the framework of all that arises, ideologically speaking, from today's opposition between East and West.

In so doing Kundera reminds us too that the development of the novel form itself shows the same opposition. The novel is both the expression of ever-increasing self-consciousness and its antithesis or antidote. In so far as we have "lightness of being" we have neither future nor past, neither story nor character. Because in terms of lightness *Einmal ist keinmal*, all the bloody events of man's history "have turned into mere words, theories and discussions, frightening no one." They have turned into the light material of the modern novel. But the novel is also its own antidote because we escape lightness by representing ourselves in the weight of plotted and determined fictions. In Cartesian formula we think up characters: therefore we exist. And on the same basis we think up history, stories, morals; erecting them on the grave weight of human necessity, love, death, birth, etc.

By trying to make things ideologically, and thus spuriously "heavy," by emphasizing the Brotherhood of man and so forth, communism has only succeeded in making the consciousness of its subjects lighter, more cynical, more indifferent to everything except pleasure and advantage. Where fiction is concerned the instrument of the communist state is Socialist Realism, which produces its dead artificial kinds of weight, responsibilities, loyalties, moralities. The novelist can oppose the state, as Solzhenitsyn has done, by using its own method against it, by making Socialist Realism serve a different though equally "serious" moral outlook. Or it can be opposed by means of

fantasy and irresponsibility, as Russian dissident writers—Sinyavsky, Dovlatov, Aksyonov—have lately been doing, and as Kundera has done in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The drawback of this method is that you may throw out the baby with the bath-water, so to speak. By opposing lightness and humor to communist weight the novelist may himself become merely light and frivolous. The dialectical scheme of Kundera's novel recognizes and avoids this danger, but does so much more than dialectically. Tereza and Tomas and their fated meeting, their clinging together in adversity, their dog's death, their own death, are deeply and unexpectedly moving, as moving as life and death in some old-fashioned novel, like *War and Peace*, or *The Old Wives' Tale*.

Source: John Bayley, "Fictive Lightness, Fictive Weight," in *Salmagundi*, No. 73, Winter 1987, pp. 84-92.

Adaptations

The Unbearable Lightness of Being was adapted as a film in 1988. The film was directed by Phillip Kaufman, and stars Daniel Day-Lewis and Juliette Binoche. The film is available on DVD from Home Vision Entertainment.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being was recorded on audiocassette in 1988 by Books on Tape (Newport Beach, CA). Christopher Hurt is the reader.

Topics for Further Study

In part six of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera writes at length about the notion of "kitsch." Define kitsch. Find examples in magazines of kitsch from twenty-first-century American culture. Create a collage using these images that gives the viewer insight as to the role of kitsch in the United States.

Reread the sections of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that describe Tereza's dreams. Read several entries on dreams from psychology textbooks or reference works. What do these books indicate that Tereza's dreams reveal about her?

Research the literary history of Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century. Who are some notable writers and their subjects? Create a timeline to locate these writers historically and to connect them with important events of their time. On your time-line, be sure to include illustrations, note major works, and identify important historical events.

Define social realism. Using art-history books, encyclopedias, and reference works, identify the underpinning principles of social realism. Write a report explaining what you have discovered. Use images you find on the World Wide Web to illustrate your points.

Research the lives of Alexander Dubcek and Vaclav Havel. What roles did these two important Czechs play in the history of their country?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Czechoslovakia is firmly part of the Warsaw Pact, a military alliance that includes the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries.

Today: The Czech Republic has joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance that includes the United States and western European Nations.

1960s: Beginning in 1962, the Czechoslovakian government begins to make movements toward reform, easing the restrictions on its citizens. In 1968, during what is known as the Prague Spring, several writers and artists speak out against totalitarianism. Within months, Soviet tanks invade Czechoslovakia, and the country is forcibly brought back within Soviet domination. It is a time of great repression.

Today: The Czech Republic, after a period of economic reform, applies for membership in the European Union in 1996 and expects to be granted admission in 2004. At the same time, the country has maintained its close ties with some of the former Warsaw Pact nations. The Social Democratic party, under the leadership of Vladimir Spidla, wins the general election in June 2002.

1960s: Writers and artists in Czechoslovakia are forced to submit their work to state-sponsored censors. All works are subjected to the aesthetic of "social realism." Works that do not conform are banned. Nevertheless, there is an active underground of writers and artists who continue to produce high quality work, although it cannot be published or shown in Czechoslovakia. Many writers and artists are forced to leave their homes and are subjected to severe oppression in their homeland.

Today: Works by dissident Czech writers now circulate in Czechoslovakia. Vaclav Havel, himself a noted dissident writer who spent four years in prison under the old regime, is elected president of the Czech Republic in 1993. Many exiled Czech writers are able to return to their homeland for visits.

What Do I Read Next?

Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* (1986) offers insight into Kundera's aesthetics of fiction and theories of the development of the novel.

Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala (1990), by Karel Hvizdala and Vaclav Havel, offers a series of interviews Hvizdala conducted with playwright-turned-statesman Havel. Havel went from persecuted artist to president of Czechoslovakia. In this book, he offers his views of Czechoslovakia under communism, of the social and political role of art, and of the historic revolutions that brought democracy to Eastern Europe.

Nancy Huston's novel *The Mark of the Angel* (1999) has been compared to Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* for its similar writing style, content, and adherence to Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return. Huston's work follows the life and loves of a German girl working as a maid in post-World War II France.

Tina Rosenberg's *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts after Communism* (1995) offers a reflection on guilt and punishment in post-communist Eastern Europe. This book won both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award.

Further Study

Brink, André, *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*, New York University Press, 1998.

Brink's book provides chapter-length analyses of a chronologically arranged series of novels. His chapter on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* uses reader-response criticism to "explore the gaps."

Misurella, Fred, *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs*, University of South Carolina Press, 1993.

Misurella's book is an excellent, accessible starting point for the student wanting to further study Kundera.

Petro, Peter, ed., *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera*, G. K. Hall, 1999.

This excellent collection of scholarly analyses and interviews with Kundera should prove valuable to those studying Kundera's work.

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Lesser, Wendy, "The Character as Victim," in *Hudson Review*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 3, Autumn 1984, pp. 468-82.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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