

Zorba the greek by
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essay



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In the book by the recognised Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, Zorba, the main character is an avatar of the Dionysiac nature and practitioner of the Epicurean philosophy of the pursuit of earthly happiness. The word dionysiac is derived from the name of the ancient Greek god Dionysus, who was the god of wine, fertility and drama. Similarly the word Epicurean derives from the philosopher, Epicurus (270 BC.), who denied the existence of any after lives or other worlds and said that we must live so as to content ourselves and others. Epicurus and his philosophy have been controversial for over two millennia. One reason is our tendency to reject pleasure as a moral good.

We usually think of charity, compassion, humility, wisdom, honor, justice, and other virtues as morally good and pleasure as, at best, morally neutral, but for Epicurus, behavior in pursuit of pleasure assured an upright life. “ It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life” [Epicurus, Sovran Maxims].

Epicureans lived in the ‘ now’ and refused to dwell on the past and the future. Zorba follows a Dionysiac and Epicurean life philosophy. An example of this is Zorba’s love of music – music is an example of appreciating and participating in the world in a way that brings pleasure to oneself and to others.

When Zorba plays his santuri or dances, he expresses his emotions and ideas in an unrestrained Dionysiac style. Nietzsche wrote that the “ chasm of oblivion separates the world of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality”

(Birth of Tragedy 7). His philosophy becomes clearer throughout the book and is even manifested on the last page when Zorba's death, many years after the events of the novel, is described. Zorba explains to Boss that his characteristic dance is a tool for him to free himself: "Whenever I feel I'm choking with some emotion...

I dance. And I feel better!" (p. 79). The quote clarifies the meaning of the dance to Zorba and defines it as being a method to give an outlet for that which is too powerful to be expressed in words. The dance is thus a transcendent language for Zorba.

He also not only uses dancing as a way to cope with negative emotions such as his unbearable grief over the death of his three year old son, "Once, when my little Dimitriaki died, I got up as I did a moment ago and I danced" (p. 79), but also resorts to dance when he is in an ecstasy of happiness. He performs his dance whenever he feels like it - an obvious feature of dionysiac style. Dance is also a narrative device for Zorba.

He tells Boss how in Russia, unable to speak to a Russian friend, he danced his own life story. I danced my misfortunes; my travels; how many times I'd been married; the trades I'd learned - quarrier, miner, pedlar, potter, comitadji, santuri-player, passa-tempo hawker, blacksmith, smuggler" (pp. 80-81). Instead of using words to tell his own life history, he dances it.

Words are mere verbal sounds, which originate in rational thought.

Movement is, in contrast to speaking or writing, fundamentally of the body. It is not just movement, it is insanity embodied in one's body language that Zorba represents. Verbal language is simply incapable of conveying Zorba's

entire ideas due to the complex simplicity of them. Boss's asking Zorba to teach him to dance in the end of the novel is the symbolic representation of the completion of Boss's education by Zorba.

“ ‘Come on, Zorba,’ I cried, ‘teach me to dance!’ [...] Off we go, then, Zorba! My life has changed! ” Boss has reached a spiritual level to comprehend and follow Zorbatic way of living life. The new realm of faith without hope and passion without fake ultimate compassion was formed in his soul and mind on the ruins of the mountain cable, symbolising false hopes and aspirations of the materialistic world.

Zorba pointed to Boss at his real self, the Epicurean naturalist and materialist, who enjoys the moment and lives every day as his last. Boss inherited Zorba's Dionysiac religion. He is not afraid anymore to express his emotions and he wants to learn Zorba's language of dance. The teacher and the student have become so similar and they have so much to tell each other - in their language of Epicurean love for life, the will to seize the moment - in the language of dance. For generally the same reasons as for dancing, Zorba plays his santuri with great passion. When I'm feeling down, or when I'm broke, I play the santuri and it cheers me up.

When I'm playing, you can't talk to me, I hear nothing, and even if I hear, I can't speak" (p. 13). Music is an element of the dionysiac way of life. Another aspect of dionysiac life philosophy in ancient Greece was the massive sex orgies. Dionysus is the god of fertility, which clarifies the importance of sexual acts in the Dionysiac idea. “ They [Zorba's fingers] were horny, cracked, deformed and sinewy.

With great care and tenderness, as if undressing a woman... hey drew out an old santuri" and " those big fingers caressed it, slowly, passionately, all over, as if caressing a woman" (both p.

15) Both quotes display the deep love Zorba has for his santuri and illustrate how Zorba treats it erotically and sensually as if it were a sentient, conscious being with a soul. Zorba states that " everything seems to have a soul - wood, stones, the wine we drink and the earth we tread on" (p. 85). This personification of the santuri and of all things is central to the novel, since it encapsulates the lesson Zorba is trying to teach Boss and which Kazantzakis is seemingly trying to convey to us readers.

Epicurean philosophy is characterised by the will to live every minute as if it were the last ones. " I carry on as if I was going to die any minute" (p. 38) But beyond that, a man of truly Dionysiac and Epicurean nature, like Zorba, would also rather live one moment thoroughly, than a whole life incompletely. This is what Zorba tells Boss when he says: " Sometimes I feel I should like to make a bargain: to live one brief minute and give the rest of my life in exchange. " The fact that Zorba is a Dionysiac icon and a true Epicurean is strikingly manifested on the last page of the book, where Kazantzakis masterfully describes the dramatic death of Zorba. After uttering his last words, he stood up and " brushed us all roughly aside, jumped out of bed and went to the window.

There he gripped the frame, looked out far into the mountains, opened wide his eyes and began to laugh, then to whinny like a horse. It was thus,

standing, with his nails dug into the window frame, that death came to him” (p. 335). Even when dying, Zorba did what he felt like in that single minute.

His last act of resistance against death and his superhuman strength in going to the window to gaze a last time at the beauty of the life and the world is a motion of his nature. His death is abnormal and crazy. Forcing oneself to stand, brushing away healthy strong people, digging nails into the window frame and whinnying like a wild horse is not what is associated with death bed scenes and this underlines the special personality and temperament of Zorba. To the end, Zorba remains himself, clearing to the Dionysiac personality and the Epicurean idea of total engagement in life.