

Lightness vs. weight:
Kundera's persuasive
argument in the
unbearable lightness
of...



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The Unbearable Lightness of Being is as much of a philosophical work as it is a fictional story, not following a typical plotline. The novel includes multiple interwoven plotlines surrounding different characters with the same events being narrated many times from different characters' points of view. Due to the non-chronological and non-linear nature of the work, it cannot be broken into plot-driven stages. Rather, the work may be viewed as an extended three-part persuasive essay of sorts with the author, Milan Kundera, attempting to prove his philosophy of "Lightness vs. Weight". Following the three-part persuasive essay model, the author first explains the fundamental idea behind his philosophy and defines the terms to be used in his essay, then moves on to discuss his stance and other scholars viewpoints and once this is established, he hones the argument with fictional characters that he has interjected himself into to control their actions and validate his point. Part One and Two act as an "introductory" segment for the three-part essay, putting the reader on equal footing as the author in preparation for his argument while establishing his stance on the "Lightness vs. Weight" conflict.

Kundera claims that eternal return is a false premise in order to explain that our lives cannot have weight because of the idea of *Einmal ist keinmal*, which he translates as "what happens but once, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all." (8) He further explicates this through the characters of Tomas and Sabina. As Tomas returns to Czechoslovakia to be with Tereza, she attempts to give his actions and their relationship significance; however she ultimately fails as he does not reflect on his past and chooses not to carry

this weight. Similarly, Sabina chooses the path of “ Lightness”, as she lets go of all aspects of her life that bring weight upon her, which is demonstrated by her choice to leave behind Franz as he begins to seek commitment. By bringing this abstract concept to life through these characters, Kundera establishes a strong foundation for his thesis. He later reinforces this concept through the short dictionary of “ Words Misunderstood” (89), which allows the reader to be sufficiently acquainted with the terms and understand them under one predefined light. Due to the metafictional quality of the work, external scholars are commonly referenced, namely Nietzsche and Parmenides, to add a sense of verisimilitude and create a foundation for the author’s stance on the “ Lightness vs. Weight” conflict.

In Part Three, the author begins to delve into the debate of “ Lightness vs. Weight,” approaching the topic from multiple angles. Ironically at this point, Kundera rejects the theories of Nietzsche and Parmenides in order to elevate his argument by implying that their beliefs and ideas do not apply to the novel’s characters. In this second segment of the novel, the author uses both fictional anecdotes and self-introspection to narrate the journey of each character. Furthermore, Kundera occasionally steps out of the novel to discuss the actions of these characters and explain how they reflect on his life and the alternate paths he could have taken. Through the use of these self-created examples and attempts at self-justification of his actions, Kundera hopes to persuade the reader to accept his opinions, “ but isn’t it true that an author can only write about himself?” (221) As the novel comes to a close, the author moves to the final stage of the three-part essay. Instead of posing new ideas Kundera takes the time to lay down a wide

variety of examples to strengthen his argument. The most notable example lies in Part Seven, “Karenin’s Smile,” where he provides verification of the three-part essay layout. At first glance, Part Six would seem to be the end of the novel, as major thematic issues are wrapped up and the characters are followed to their deaths (concluding the discussion of eternal return). Part Seven, which acts as an epilogue to the work, anchors the discussion of time and “Lightness vs. Weight”. By this point, the author has explained his stance in opposition to Nietzsche. Nietzsche claims that time moves in a circular manner and that our lives repeat indefinitely. Whereas Kundera says that time progresses in a linear fashion and we only live our lives once. Kundera then begins to delve into the character Karenin, who is viewed as an androgynous being, with the use of female and male pronouns used interchangeably. The “idyll” in which the characters in Part Seven live is paradise of sorts, mirroring the Garden of Eden; man’s attempt at achieving the circular lifestyle that Adam had experienced before the Biblical fall. Kundera explicitly states, “Adam was like Karenin.” (298) Since Adam was not entirely human, much like Karenin is not, he was able to experience time circularly as “in Paradise man was not yet man” (296) This blurs the lines in the “Lightness vs. Weight” debate, with Karenin depicted to be an exception to Kundera’s rules, as are all non-human beings. Karenin lives her life in a routine manner, with routine being the essence of eternal return.

Kundera adds on to the idea of “Lightness vs. Weight” by allowing the characters, noticeably Tereza, to have epiphanies, gaining understanding and coming to conclusions contrasting what he had told the reader throughout the novel. This leaves the discussion open-ended, allowing the

reader to ponder on the topic endlessly. Continuing this trend, the author uses political backdrops and personal anecdotes as metafictional levels to provide more examples, mainly in the life of the fictional characters he has created, but also examples related to well-known events/personalities at that period of time. Recognizing that self-created examples alone are not capable of swaying the reader's opinion, he turns towards referencing these known events and personalities to strengthen his argument and create a sense of verisimilitude, allowing the reader to have a connection of sorts to the characters in the novel.

The setting of Prague in 1968, with the political liberalization it undergoes in the "Prague Spring", places the characters in situations that pose fundamental questions. This allows Kundera to draw big-picture conclusions based on scaled down scenarios. For example, as Tomas debates the personal consequences of *Einmal ist keinmal* [Never knowing if one's decisions are correct] (223) in relation to the Soviet Union's control of Czechoslovakia after WWII, the narrator moves on to extend the concept to the broader topic of the decisions mankind has made throughout the course of history.

The author's stance on the "Lightness vs. Weight" debate seems to be quite ironic, as through creating this novel he attempts to give his life weight even though he had previously mentioned that it is unattainable and only achievable by immortals and animals. The use of self-created examples and self-justification gives the author's actions significance. According to Kundera's philosophy, a human lives his merry life and then fades away into oblivion with his actions having no recurring effect or extended

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consequences, for “ Human time does not turn in a circle, [...] it runs ahead in a straight line” (298). In spite of the author’s rejection of “ Eternal Return” throughout the book, he tries to achieve this feat, with the novel itself representing his attempt at doing so.