

# [An exploration into the postmodern in the unbearable lightness of being](https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-into-the-postmodern-in-the-unbearable-lightness-of-being/)

Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being outlines a richly detailed world of philosophical and metaphysical exploration. The novel projects and addresses a variety of sociocultural, political and ideological issues of the period of publication, with many of the events serving to draw parallels between the lives of the characters and the author himself. He utilizes elements of postmodern literature such as intertextuality, pastiche, temporal distortion and metafiction to convey the grandeur of man’s thoughts through the juxtaposition of the simple plot and complex abstract ideas. Through the use of these elements of the postmodern, Kundera exemplifies how every individual strives to develop and express his spiritual self through analysis and exploration of various arts and studies such as writing, music and philosophy rather than through direct, conventional communication.

Through the use of pastiche and the recurring musical motif, the novel incorporates a plethora of music references, which are used to demonstrate the spiritually lifting, intellectual qualities of this art form and the way it allows individuals to reach a greater understanding of themselves and simultaneously to communicate with others with ease. The first glimpse of this melodious theme is presented in the conversation between Tomas and the director of a hospital, in which the actual notes of Beethoven’s last quarter are incorporated in the text, infusing the novel with a more holistic artistic feeling through the unorthodox structure. Tomas’s explanation of his resignation in the tone of Beethoven’s notes fuels the exploration of the significance of this musical movement in regard to the two characters’ own lives, described in detail as:“[t]his allusion to Beethoven was actually Tomas’ first step back to Tereza, because she was the one to buy records of the Beethoven quartets and sonatas. The allusion was even more pertinent than he had thought because the Swiss doctor was a great music lover. Smiling serenely, he asked, in the melody of Beethoven’s motif, “ Muss es sein?” “ Ja, es muss sein!” Tomas said again” (32).

The power of a single musical motif to evoke such strong individual reactions in the characters’ minds is a testament to the uplifting, ethereal power of music as an art form. The strong association in Tomas’ mind between Tereza and Beethoven’s compositions immediately induces him to feel nostalgia for their ephemeral domestic life. Through the juxtaposition of the unearthly nature of music and its metaphoric portrayal as the toiling, physical “ first step” to their reunion, the author manages to infuse the musical motif with the transcendent qualities of art that allow self-actualization and communication beyond the realms of the corporeal. Moreover, through the usage of the tune, the situation between the two men is relieved, and the hospital director initially “ in fact offended” (32) grows “ smiling serenely”, peacefully accepting Tomas’ sudden resignation. The way pastiche is utilized to incorporate the original German phrase which inspired the musical movement, in combination with the laconic understanding achieved by the two characters serves to exemplify how interaction between individuals is carried out much better on the divine level of art.

The idea of music as a spiritual assistant and conductor continues to appear in the novel as Tomas’s dependence on Beethoven’s motif as his credo in life is revealed. Guided by this intrinsic “ Es muss sein!”, Tomas makes a lot of the decisions in his life based on the merit of whether he feels the moral obligation to proceed or not. The musical motif is augmented to encompass all of Tomas’ life, especially his medical career, dictating his every move as a surgeon. The importance and joy of surgery for him are exemplified through Beethoven’s quartet as “ that was the “ Es muss sein!” rooted deep inside him, and it was planted there not by chance, not by the chief’s sciatica, or by anything external” (194). The sharp refutation of all external motivation, achieved through the syntactic and lexical parallelism of “ not by” and the emphasis of the musical motif metaphorically “ rooted deep inside him […] planted there” are employed to highlight the compelling effect music and its motifs can have on an individual, negating all outside influence and allowing him to reach equilibrium with his own innate self.

The exploration and reassessment of this motif is continued through the metafictional introspection of the narrator later on in the text, revealing the true nature and conception of Beethoven’s quartet. The originally light-hearted story concerning Beethoven and Dembscher is alluded to in Kundera’s text, musing how “ the words […] had acquired a much more solemn ring; they seemed to issue directly from the lips of Fate” (195). In this passage, the omniscient narrator steps out of the scope of the novel and reveals the important background of the composition of Beethoven’s work, crucial to its understanding in the text. This intertextuality and the allusion to the personified Fates of Greek mythology are used to highlight the unearthly, unlimited power that an art medium such as music can possess. The description of the transformation of the motif’s connotation, in which the words “ acquire a much more solemn ring”, evokes the sense of spiritual change, so inherently rooted in the heavenly nature of music. This transforming quality of music is presented throughout the whole text as the characters’ decisions and moods are heavily influenced by the musical motif of Beethoven. Through it, the author effectively demonstrates how the richness and variety of music can dictate a person’s whole existence as well as his interaction with other individuals.

The author takes a similarly sweeping approach in the exploration of writing as an art, incorporating many intertextual references and regularly breaking the fourth wall through metafiction to illustrate intellectual growth and one’s ability to freely express himself through the analysis of the characters and the plot rather than through straightforward character-character interaction. The most striking example of this introspection is the narrator’s analysis of each of the four individuals and his relation to them. While ascribing his qualities to each one of the four central characters, he muses how: “[s]taring impotently across a courtyard, at a loss for what to do during a moment of love; betraying, yet lacking the will to abandon the glamorous path of betrayal; raising one’s fist with the crowds in the grand March; displaying one’s wit before hidden microphones—I have known all these situations, I have experienced them myself, yet none of them has give rise to the person my curriculum vitae and I represent” (221). The enumeration of the various social situations presented in the characters’ own chapters evoke a sense of great philosophical and metaphysical awareness in the narrator’s mind. His experience with writing the story, conveyed through his extreme familiarity with the four central characters’ personal experiences highlights how virtuous, uplifting and illuminating the writing process can truly be. Through the postmodern technique of metafiction, the author bridges the gap between his own life and the seemingly abstract ideas conveyed in the text by giving the narrator’s account of writing the story within the novel. This is achieved through the repetition of the personal pronoun “ I” and the emphasis on the omniscient nature of the narrator. The close analysis of complex human emotions and conditions such as “ love, betrayal and wit” and the metafictional awareness of the narrator evoke a sense of a strong spiritual connection between himself and the art of writing.

Through postmodernist writing techniques, the narrator also engages the topic of the Communist in Czechoslovakia, opening up to previously taboo subjects such as the Prague Spring and its infamous consequences. These references are incorporated in many ways, with one of the most prominent being the intertextual reference to “ the “ Two Thousand Words” [, the] glorious manifesto of the 1968 Prague Spring. It called for the radical democratization of the Communist regime. First it was signed by a number of intellectuals [and] anyone who admitted to having done so was summarily dismissed from his job” (212). This free disclosure of the details of the oppression creates a sense of confidence in regard to the author’s unabashed courage in coming forward and scrutinizing the Communist party so freely. The strength of writing as a medium which allows both personal, spiritual self-reflection and social critique is supported through such frank commentaries on the regime in Czechoslovakia. Through postmodernist writing techniques such as intertextuality and metafiction, Kundera aims to portray writing as a social art form that achieves self-actualization alongside real cultural impact. By utilizing these elements, he makes a two-fold argument: writing about writing is a exemplary medium for spiritual and intellectual exploration, and one is free to do so without becoming the victim of censorship all while making social progress.

Milan Kundera’s novel is a labyrinth of philosophical and spiritual ideas and concepts, expertly woven through the synthesis of postmodernist literary techniques such as pastiche, intertextuality and metafiction. Through the skillful usage of these elements, the author successfully testifies to the vast opportunities that one has upon finding spiritual and physical freedom. Once granted this freedom, a person can extraordinarily develop his intellectual and sacred self through emphasis on arts and studies such as music, philosophy and literature.