



## An Analysis of Irony in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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### Abstract

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is widely known as a typical example of modern ironical novels of Milan Kundera. Through the analysis of the use of irony in the aspects of life value, love value and political implications in this novel, this paper concludes that people should balance “light” and “heavy” in daily life, so as to achieve a new and unique perspective of life, love and politics.

**Key words:** Irony; Life value; Love value; Political implication

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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of irony was first seen in Socrates’ strategy of the “Socratic Irony”, and it developed unprecedentedly in the 18th century in Europe. Then, irony is defined as the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning. Gradually, with the expansion and modification of the definition of irony made by different scholars, its forms are becoming more and more various. The use of irony has become an important novel creative pattern in modern history of literature, i.e. “a technique of indicating, as through character or plot development, an intention or attitude opposite to that which is actually

or ostensibly stated”<sup>1</sup>. And the fundamental characteristic of irony is to proclaim a kind of philosophical thinking and the attitude toward life in the frequent use of contrast. And it also shows a dialectical point of view toward life. With the development of irony writing, Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* becomes the best representative of the use of irony.

In *The Unbearable Lightness*, Kundera stands on the boundary of the century, from at the end of the 19th century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, outlining the individuals’ suffering in modern society and human’s attempt to return home. The use of irony is presented throughout this novel, with a complicated love story of a man with two women, which leads readers to the deeply thinking about human life, love and politics. The successful application of irony in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* forms the special style of Milan Kundera and profoundly triggers a new view on life, love and politics of people. And this paper will analyze the use of irony in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* according to the characteristics of the following three parts: reflecting the life value, mirroring the love value and revealing the political implications.

### 1. IRONY IN THE NOVEL

Irony is always applied to indicate some kind of subtle meaning in literary works, and in this novel, irony is mainly to express the life value, love value and political implications.

### 2. REFLECTING THE LIFE VALUE

Life value, literally including the concept of “life” and “value” (Li, 2008, p.2), refers to people’s conscious recognition to themselves and the meaning of others and

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in World English Dictionary. Retrieved 2014, may 12 from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/+irony?s=t>

the society, under a certain social historical condition. In August, 1968, Czechoslovakia was occupied by Soviet troops. A large number of Czech intellectuals were driven away. And Kundera was also one of those victims. He was fired from his party and was prohibited from any published word, with all his works suddenly being disappeared from bookstores and public libraries. These experiences made him become aware of the essence of life along with the human liberation tide. And thus what Kundera advocates in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is that life is without purposes, existing with no meaning. He uses irony to give out the declaration against the “prudent” social norms, which can be known as the earliest form of the pursuit of “the lightness of being”.

Milan Kundera put forward a sharp contrast between the “light” and “heavy” in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera once said, “Perhaps the heaviest burden is the most substantial life. And with the heaviest burden, our life will be closer to the earth, the reality and the honesty. On the contrary, with no burden, one is lighter than air” (Xu, 2003, p.5). Therefore, “light” and “heavy” are the most ironical and ambiguous contrast.

Through the body’s “light” and “heavy” feelings on the life value, Kundera then gives the interpretation of “light” - the loss of life value. And the “light” in the novel can also be known as the “heavy lightness”, which refers to a person’s bored, empty, lonely and unbearable sense of mood and painful feeling entangled spiritually in the deadlock caused by the negative. Thus people feel unbearable heavy under too much lightness.

But “heavy” also plays an indispensable part in human’s life. And people will find the value of their existence, obtain the sense of satisfied happiness from the bottom of the heart, and found themselves in the process of people’s natural power to change and be proud of who themselves are. Take Tereza and Sabina for examples.

In the novel, Tereza returned to her hometown owing to that she could not stand Tomas’s constantly having sex with other women. Tomas was free the first several days his wife Tereza left him. He returned to his single life and can take the ecstatic breath of freedom. But “On Monday, he was hit by a weight the likes of which he had never been known. The tons of steel of the Russian tanks were nothing compared with it. ... Not even one’s own pain weighs as heavy as the pain one feels with someone” (Zhang, 2009, p.27). With the sense of lightness, he hated the empty and lonely feeling and eager to return to his home to take the “heavy” responsibility for the family and marriage.

Sabina also typifies the ironical meaning of “light” and “heavy”. And it is also said that Sabina is Kundera in the novel. Sabina was a painter in pursuit of life, who did not get rid of the bondage of fate. She wanted to be “heavy” to chase after the value of life, so she drifted from Prague to American, from the east to the west of

the whole life, chasing after the value of life. But with no love, no motherland and no loyalty in her life to express her life value, she was only to be “light” to lose the life value. Additionally, what she persistently pursued was just an abstract world, which has been destroyed beyond the real life. In human’s living space, she was just a person who wanted to be “heavy” in life but only in vain in the end. So when her passion of pursuing life comes to an end, she was just a totally “light” outsider in the world of life value. The ironical meaning is presented through the “light” and “heavy” contrast of life value of Sabina.

“The lightness of being refers to the playfulness with which Tomas and Sabina operate on the surface of human existence” (Johan, 1995, p.5). From the characters of Tomas and Sabina, Kundera’s life value in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is reflected in his exploration of the meaning of existence.

He combines the heavy, serious topics with love stories, and integrates the structure of the novel with irony. With the ironical contrast, Kundera forms the theme of the book as well as the value of him: There is completely no fixed meaning in the existence of life.

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### 3. MIRRORING PEOPLE’S VIEW OF LOVE

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Since ancient times, love always plays an attractive role in people’s life. So people are continuously looking for the appropriate characters like Romeo and Juliet, in the east and the west, to write an earthshaking love story. But it is surprising that Kundera easily abandon the conventional pattern, letting us really understand the existence of human love. As in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he reveals people’s view toward love under the specific historical circumstance where Soviet invaded Czechoslovakia in 1986. Though constantly writing separation of lovers, Kundera’s works expresses the spirit and essence of love that love is the combination of spiritual love and physical love (i.e. sex).

Most of the characters in the novel come from a home without any love support. And their parents are either victims of the loveless marriage or losing their own interest to love. Thus, broken love experience has been embedded in the different levels of people’s consciousness, forming a dark background and reflecting the characters’ attitude toward love. At the beginning of the novel, the characters are more or less losing their confidence to love, and as a result, the love, as a routine work in daily life, becomes a tragic ceremony.

Kundera’s view of love is that love and sex are of equal importance. However, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, his love value is reflected by irony, which is the opposite of the conventional idea of love. Because in the book, it is obvious for people to be aware of that love is “heavy” and sex is “light”. And this kind of use of irony

greatly emphasizes equivalent status of love and sex in people's love value. Tomas and Tereza are examples in the novel.

As for Tomas, marriage and the family that kept a relationship between individual existence and society was only heavy burdens in his life. He hungered for women but treated them as monsters at the same time, which forced him to find a so-called "sexual-friendship" (i.e. a relationship that men build with women through sex without love) between desires and fear. It can be seen everywhere that Tomas regards love and sex as two totally different and separated emotions.

Tomas came to this conclusion: Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman is 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) (Kundera, 2009, p.11).

Judging from the example above, we may easily obtain the conclusion that Tomas is a fundamentally sex-loved man. "By making the choice to be an unstoppable womanizer, in his own mind, Tomas feels he lives life with no ties, light as a feather, until he meets Tereza" (Walter, 2013, p.3) He may feel powerless under a lot of burden and contradictions, when steps into the territory of love. But he can not be light in the field of sex. "Tomas finds he can no longer enjoy other women so lightheartedly. While he does not give up his other sexual partners completely, he finds that if he does not drink before sex. Tereza's image haunts him" (Kundera, 2009, p.50). This kind of sex and love will form the most basic form in Tomas's whole conflicted life.

But Tereza was a love-believed woman. There were many roles in her life such as a hotel waitress, a photographer and Tomas's wife. She is long for getting rid of the abnormal "motherly world"; she is so urgent to fall in love with Tomas. Unfortunately, she can't stand Tomas' having sex with other women. And she was also beginning to have sex with the engineer, wandering life owing to the emotional torture caused by Tomas. However, after the testing of sex, she was afraid of having sex with a stranger and regarded it as the humiliation. She did not feel any happy and had the unbearable lightness toward her love and marriage. Finally, she returned to Tomas.

Obviously, the love value of Tomas and Tereza presented in the book is ironically opposite of the writer's love. Tomas and Tereza just entered a gate to love, who did not know the nature of the love. So the use of irony is properly demonstrate Milan Kundera's view that love and sex can not live without each other.

We can see that Milan Kundera is good at playing with the characters in the book ironically, and allows us to see the ironic side of human society, feeling funny and helpless at the same time. And thus due to such effect of the book, Kundera has no choice but to be a representative of irony.

As is mentioned above, love accumulates the emotional value orientation of people, at the same time, the love value orientation of individuals relates to the social values without exception. Love, a mythological power conquering individuals' unparalleled strength, is only presented by numerous sexual occasions in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and thus forms the unique style of irony of Kundera. The lost of love and life of Tereza and Tomas is the most powerful explanation for this abnormal lovely view and the most ironic representation in the novel.

#### 4. REVEALING THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

In the year of 1986, owing to the invasion of Soviet, many writers include Kundera forced to flee abroad. Thus, quiet village culture of Czechoslovakia is beaten into fragments, losing its traditional order." Half of his friends had emigrated, and half of the half that remained had died. For it is a fact which will go unrecorded by historians that the years following the Russian invasion were a period of funerals: the death rate soared" (Kundera, 1985, p.173). Politics lets people wear out their energy and run out of their life. The political doctrine breaks the mass civilization in history of several thousands of years, but the millions of young people are on the way to be the mortgage slaves in modern society. How ridiculous it is!

Kundera ironically uses Tomas's experiences of political persecution to make people better understand the situation at that special time. Kundera once said, "Politics is not vulgar, but it needs to be vulgar" (Li, 2003, p.68). The vulgarity is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians, and also the aesthetic ideal of all political parties and political activities. And in the novel, many people obeyed the politics blindly while Tomas was an exception who was against the political vulgarity. Thus, the obvious contrast ironically presents Kundera's attitude toward political vulgarity.

And Tomas was a best example of victims in political vulgarity in the novel. If he obeys the authorities blindly, he will feel "light" and have a wonderful career, and he will be "heavy" of his life and political attitude if he is against the political vulgarity.

Tomas was a famous surgeon in Prague with a free life originally, but his life changed when facing the political issue that Czech Republic was made to become independent by Russia. Tomas thought that communist regimes of Central Europe should be responsible for the Russian atrocities, while the communists shouted that they were innocent. And the ridiculous reason the communists said was that they did not know the Russians. And then he published an article about who should bear the burden of guilt, which was against the communist regime, on a weekly newspaper for the Union of Czech writers. Latter

he was asked by the chief surgeon to write a retraction to admit that he was wrong, or he would be fired. It is the plot that political vulgarity began to appear in the novel. When making choices between obeying the communists and insisting on his own ideas, he was bewildered and melancholy. Though he could have a bright future and pleased the authorities concerned, he felt unbearable lightness if he betrayed himself. As a result, he chose to leave the hospital.

Tomas's whole life, in fact, is spent in such heavy and light choices, but he made his life heavy in the aspect of politics because he did not go with public to agree with the communist regimes' advocates. In fact, Tomas's decision to leave his career in the novel was the Kundera's attitude towards Czech's loss of independences. Because his view is that everyone should be responsible for his country's division rather than pass the buck to others. Thus, it can be clearly known that Kundera uses the irony presented in the novel to protest against political vulgarity and appeal to the individuals' thinking in politics.

Additionally, the French professor Franz, was another appropriate victim of political vulgarity. He could have been "light" to comply with the communist, but he chose to be "heavy" to protest against the political vulgarity and gloriously died in the end.

Franz was an optimistic dreamer, established his career of a philosophy professor at the age of 20, but he did not satisfy with a boring scholastic life; he was full of passion and desire to communicate with people. Franz lived in the eyes of others, looking forward to obtaining approval from others. He was "light" in the field of politics. But without any hesitation, he participated in the support to help Cambodia, which was against the communists. Finally, he died due to a fight in Bangkok and made himself "heavy".

From Franz, people were aware of that he used his tragic death to protest against political vulgarity in his life, for he might live his promising life if he did not join the rebellion. Franz's death in the novel is the use of irony to criticize the authorities at that time. In a word, he was just a terminator of the political convention.

Kundera uses the two political victims' suffering-Tomas's loss of job and Franz's death- to ironically express his view of protesting against the political vulgarity. The irony is seen in the novel: people die, disagreeing with the communists, while people live, agreeing with the communists. The novel with irony

aimed at pointing out the political status and social systems directly, which is easy for readers to understand the Czech historical experiences and take lessons on history from the book.

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## CONCLUSION

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Though the novel seems to be a simple love story, it contains a rich philosophic theory, beamed with the light of thought. Thus, the author, with his ironic style, splits the human life jacket, explores the secrets of the soul and uncovers the deeply hidden truth of human nature.

Judging from what mentioned above, we can recognize that the irony is obviously presented in the aspects of life value, love value and political implications in Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

In this novel, the author uses the irony not only to depict the fate of many vivid characters, but also to analyze the traditional morals, exposing the covered truth under the traditional values. Kundera belongs to both his time and today. Therefore, our young people should spend more time and energy to read this novel, learning his literary spirit and use of irony in language in our future writing.

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