An Exploration of Beauty in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Beauty is one of the more frustrating concepts we, as humans, are faced with. It cannot be denied that beauty is an encompassing force not easily ignored, but the means by which beauty captures the attention of the human mind is still a mystery. One may argue in favor of evolutionary advantages, or lay claim to the simple appreciation of symmetry, and these answers admittedly have a stake in the command beauty holds over us. Still, no explanation seems to fully account for the exuberant feeling that slips down one’s spine when confronted with a honeyed piece of music, or the wonderful, melancholic confusion that tugs on one’s jaw while watching the moon track its way across the sky. Our inability to name this phenomenon intimidates us, leaving us with a narrowly sketched understanding of the effect beauty has on our lives. We are frustrated. We do not claw to reach the beauty within a peeled orange; we accept it with a flickering gaze. This internalization of beauty generates a lack of understanding, for if we do not ask ourselves *why* we find something beautiful, we dismiss a potential instance of self-reflection. Professed ignorance does not do beauty the justice it does us. Despite our best efforts to slip it under the rug, the influence beauty has over us is one that exists without exception, and it is this power Milan Kundera brings to the surface in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera’s belief that beauty is a guiding force in one’s life is presented through the development of his characters, four individuals with incongruent understandings of beauty. The dissimilarity in these respective interpretation of beauty is presented through a series of dualities that, through their contrasting elements, expose the composition of each character. By introducing beauty as the means through which inner qualities can be revealed Kundera poses the idea that beauty is inextricably connected to humans, and that it is perhaps through the expression of art that we can reflect our inner self. In this paper I will discuss how the dualities
expressed by Kundera’s characters serve to emphasize the poignancy of beauty, and why it is Kundera chose to make beauty the link between art and human nature.

If Kundera’s characters were merely seen, and not understood, they could be accused of being stereotypical. Tomas would be relegated to a bachelor; Tereza the typical romantic heroine. If we strip *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* of its words and examine just the plot, a familiar story emerges: the life of a man obsessed with sex (Tomas) is turned upside down by the unexpected arrival of a woman (Tereza). Tomas is presented by Kundera as a man who “could be fully himself only as a bachelor” (10) – before the arrival of Tereza, Tomas lives his life by a set of codes that allow him to garner as many mistresses with as little responsibility as possible. Tomas shows his ability to separate the soul and body when he concludes “Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two different passions” (15). This disconnect between love and sex seems at first a mere addition to the banality of Tomas’ character, but as the reader explores Tomas’ archetype they see an unexpected depth to his interactions with woman. Kundera describes Tomas as an “epic womanizer” (201), by which he means that Tomas sleeps with women not for the inflation of his ego, but for the “pursuit of knowledge” (201). It is this that differentiates Tomas from the bachelor the reader first assumed to be confronted with, and it is in the wake of this contradiction that Kundera is able to explain the reasons behind Tomas’ womanizing: the “desire not for pleasure…but for possession of the world…that sent [Tomas] in pursuit of women” (200). This desire for possession is only satisfied as Tomas discovers what he describes as the “one-millionth” of a woman; the “small gap of the unimaginable” hidden by privacy and societal expectations (199). Tomas’ obsession with the millionth signifies finding the hidden beauty in each woman he sleeps with – a fixation the reader finds all the more breathtaking it its unapologetic originality, the complete juxtaposition to the role Tomas was
previously assumed to play. By introducing Tomas as a stereotypical bachelor and then defying all the reader’s expectations for how that bachelor should think, Kundera is able to further deepen the significance of Tomas’ sexual expeditions. More than that: while the joy Tomas experiences arises from snipping “yet another strip off the infinite canvas of the universe” (207) it is still through the act of sex (an act associated most with the typical bachelor) that Tomas is able to uncover beauty. As Tomas finds meaning in the very act that gives him the title of “bachelor”, Kundera creates a duality between the reader’s expectations of beauty and the reality of an action. By allowing Tomas to discover beauty through sex, a discernable feature of his stereotype, Kundera gives beauty the power to transcend even the most banal of actions.

As Tomas’ interpretation of beauty allows him to challenge the assumed mediocrity of his position in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, so does Sabina’s notion of beauty actively oppose the role she is expected to fill. While Kundera has Tomas contrast the reader’s expectations, Sabina works within the novel to conflict the forces she deems stifling to her existence – namely the force of the Communist regime. To combat these forces, Sabina finds joy and excitement in acts of betrayal that allow for an ultimate lightness of being; an inability to be burdened by anyone, or anything. This expression of individuality is shown through Sabina’s bowler hat. Affirmed by Kundera to be “a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina’s life” (88) the bowler hat starts as a symbolic representation of Sabina’s desire for rebellion. When Sabina places it on her head, she forces herself against the stereotype of femininity – she is, in her mind, betraying the sex she was born to. The idea that betrayal reveals individuality contrasts the negativity most often associated with the concept of betrayal – by drawing this parallel, Kundera once again toys with the reader’s expectation. In Sabina’s mind, betrayal is seen as “breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more
magnificent than going off into the unknown” (90). Here we are shown a similarity between Tomas and Sabina – the shared desire for the unimaginable. For Tomas, the unimaginable is found in the tiny dissimilarity exposed by a woman’s love-making; for Sabina, the unimaginable is neared in the act of betrayal, and so Kundera qualifies beauty as being that which gives us a glimpse of the inconceivable. He builds upon this when Sabina comes across a church in the countryside. While Sabina acknowledges that “neither the church nor the litany was beautiful in and of itself” (110) she nevertheless encounters beauty in that moment. It is not the aesthetic qualities that Sabina prizes, it is the fortuitous existence in the face of a regime determined to enforce conformity. By removing value from the aesthetic qualities of beauty and placing emphasis instead on the nature of existence, Kundera continues to challenge the readers’ expectations. The convention of beauty goes on to be challenged by Sabina’s determination that the most powerful form of beauty is “beauty by mistake” (101). Sabina finds great significance in the idea that beauty can be accidental, saying at one point “Before beauty disappears entirely from the earth, it will go on existing for a while by mistake” (101). Sabina has seen communism stamp out the factors that, for her, embody beauty – creativity, individuality, originality – and she therefore determines that when beauty does come to an end, its final stage of existence will be the understated beauty that is overlooked by ugliness, and it may even outlast us. By finding beauty in the church’s accidental survival, Sabina further links the idea that beauty is weaved intimately into the nature of existence.

If part of beauty’s power is found in the act of grasping that which is unimaginable, it makes sense that Kundera believes “Our dreams prove that to imagine – to dream about things that have not happened – is among mankind’s deepest needs” (59). Dreaming is the act of solidifying the unimaginable, and is therefore one of the greatest expressions of beauty in
existence. The dreams presented in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* belong to Tereza, and act as a source of constant torment for both her and Tomas. In one dream, Tereza imagines herself marching in naked formation with other women, whom she describes as having the “joyful solidarity of the soulless” (57). While Tomas only comprehends this dream as an accusation resulting from his infidelity, Tereza is able to analyze the strength behind her accusation, asserting to the reader that “[Tereza] had come to him to make her body unique…but he, too, had drawn an equal sign between her and the rest of [the women]” (58). Here, Kundera reveals Tereza’s craving for her soul to be recognized as one with her body, to be acknowledged as distinct from the bodies of others. By continuing his affairs, Tomas negates Tereza’s sense of worth. One duality these dreams introduce is Tomas and Tereza’s contrasting view on the relationship between soul and body; Tomas is able to continue his affairs because he determines early on that love and sex are unrelated objects of passion, but this distinction is impossible for Tereza to make, even in the context of others. When examining the lack of aesthetic beauty found in a woman at a sauna, Tereza muses “But what a monstrous soul it would have to be if it reflected that body” (138), unveiling Tereza’s belief that beauty extends from within the soul and reflects outwards onto the body. Tomas cannot view the body and soul in this light, which is why Tereza’s dreams are incomprehensible to him. Kundera demonstrates that although Tomas cannot understand Tereza’s dreams, he is by no means immune to their power. Tereza returns time and time again to her dreams because of their beauty – “If dreams were not beautiful, they would quickly be forgotten” (59) – and Tomas is described to live “under the hypnotic spell cast by the excruciating beauty of Tereza’s dreams” (59). The purposeful dissimilarity between the words “excruciating” and “beauty” signifies the weightiness of Tereza’s character. The beauty
infused into Tereza’s dreams is not light, or whimsical, but agonizingly burdensome – and made all the more powerful because of it.

The duality that is revealed by Tereza’s dreams is one of weight against lightness. While Tomas finds beauty in the separation of soul and body, and Sabina discovers meaning in the act of endless betrayal, Tereza’s interpretation of beauty reveals her to be a character of weight. Tereza’s dreams are a direct reflection of this weight and its power, but her relationship with fortuity adds to her weightiness. In part 2 of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera details the many ways Tereza is able to find beauty in the coincidences that bring her and Tomas together. It begins with Beethoven (Tereza’s favorite composer) playing in the background as she is bringing Tomas a cognac, and here we first see Tereza’s interpretation of beauty acknowledged. Kundera notes “Everything going on around her at that moment would be haloed by the music and take on its beauty” (51) – “that moment” being the unexpected harmony between a stranger and a beloved melody, is inexplicably beautiful to Tereza. It is the sheer unpredictability of this moment that Tereza finds alluring because it signifies a break from what she sees as the monotonous “concentration camp” of her life (137). Tereza’s notion of beauty is that which provides an escape from “a life she found unsatisfying” (47) – more specifically, the notion of the unimaginable. When Tomas sits down, Tereza hears the unexpected call to her from within the strings of Beethoven’s quartet, and is then that her longing to uncover the unimaginable is born. Tereza is powerless to this call of fortuity – coincidence, and its significance, is woven into Tereza’s composition. On the night that Tomas returns to her Tereza remembers that the church bells chimed six o’clock upon his arrival. This tiny detail provokes a drastic reaction: “It was not superstition, it was a sense of beauty that cured her…and imbued her with a new will to live. The birds of fortuity had alighted once more on her shoulders…she was
unutterably happy to hear him breathing at her side” (78). In this moment, Tereza’s happiness stems from her ability to find beauty in the smallest of coincidences: the chiming of bells, heard by many, but given significance by Tereza alone. Chance is Tereza’s motif; it is through the unintended nature of life that Tereza finds beauty.

This ability to assign significance to coincidental acts other characters don’t even notice adds weight to Tereza’s determination of beauty, and is sharply contrasted by Tomas’ inability to value chance. While Tereza takes comfort in the fatalistic significance of fortuity, Tomas (a being of rationality, characterized by a cold scalpel and quick fingers) is made miserable at the thought of the driving force behind his relationship with Tereza being “the result of six improbable fortuities” (48). As Tereza lies by him the night he follows her to Prague with tears of happiness in her eyes, Tomas just feels the “pressure in his stomach and the despair of having returned” (35). Fortuity is, to Tomas, a burden; Tereza is a “personification of absolute fortuity” (35) and she is therefore also a burden, an obligation brought to Tomas down the riverbed in a bulrush basket. It cannot be denied, however, that Tomas loves Tereza (why else would he assume such a burden? How else could he bear the weight of compassion?) and the misery he causes her is as severe as the burden she places on him. Just as Tereza finds beauty in the fortuity that so torments Tomas, Tomas finds beauty in the mistresses that plague Tereza’s mind. Kundera creates a dualistic relationship between Tereza’s weight and Tomas’ lightness, showing that despite the misery they experience, Tereza and Tomas are unable to live without each other. This paradox is shown by Kundera to be unresolvable because the beauty that arises from this joint suffering does not allow Tereza and Tomas to break ties, showing their reliance on beauty to be a necessity in their love.
It is important to understand the place motifs have in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera defines a motif as the transformation by an individual of a “fortuitous occurrence” into a something meaningful; a stamp on their very being (52). But before defining a motif, Kundera feels the need to defend it, explaining to his readers that a motif’s “novelistic” attributes should not brand it “fabricated” (52). The juxtaposition of these words is made all the more severe because of its subtlety – “novelistic” should not, in Kundera’s mind, be placed anywhere near “fabricated”, despite the ties that can be drawn between the two words. This contrast introduces the idea that a novel and its characters are more than fiction, a concept that is expanded when Kundera continues with “human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion. They are composed like music” (52). Just as Kundera gave the novel a claim to reality, he now gives humanity a claim to art. Motifs are the result of these claims: an accidental darkness that occurs between the two seemingly disparate universes of art and reality. Yet even more noteworthy than the existence of motifs is their development. Kundera muses that while Anna Karenina is not aware of the literary significance she inspires when she throws herself under a train, repeating the circumstances under which she met Vronsky, she is nevertheless drawn to its “dark beauty” (52). Kundera goes on to say “Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty” (52). Kundera gives beauty power with these words, showing it to be an absolute, omniscient force. The laws of beauty are to be obeyed without question; its authority respected regardless of an individual’s willingness to participate. Kundera’s characters exemplify this belief – Tereza is “impelled by the birds of fortuity” (53), and Sabina powerless to “the golden horn of betrayal beckoning her” (116). Even Tomas lacks “the strength control his need for other women” (20) despite knowing the suffering his infidelities cause Tereza. These characters are each defenseless in the face of the motifs that define them because they are
constantly drawn to the exploration of beauty – discovering what beauty can reveal. The “laws” of beauty dictate the development of motifs, and as motifs are innate to one’s existence, we must then conclude that beauty is an integral part of an individual’s composition.

Even more wonderful than the hues of a darkening sky are the colors that emerge when the setting sun is partially shrouded by clouds; gaseous beings that should prevent visibility, but instead act as an enhancement to the surrounding light. This is the role dualities serve in The Unbearable Lightness of Being – an unexpected, wonderful blending of words that give power to the beauty each character is seen to experience. Kundera’s juxtapositions reveal the most pressing concept of beauty: the desire to clasp the unimaginable, even if for just a second. Although Sabina, Tomas, and Tereza are shown to vary in their composition, the longing to hold that which cannot be solidified represents the human desire to understand one’s place in the world. We use beauty in the same way Kundera’s characters do – to express a fragment of our being for just an instance, assigning significance to a moment we will never again be able to revisit. The expression of art is our attempt to extend our interpretation of beauty to others, to translate the core of our being into a language recognizable by others. I cannot help but think that Kundera is right in comparing the composition of humans to that of music. It seems to me the only justification for why we are pulled towards the unimaginable, why we crave for the unexpected. I find it perfectly understandable that beauty is woven into our DNA; it is entirely plausible that humans are composed from instances of beauty, stacked one upon the other in a wonderful, unexpected harmony. Yes, we must be made of music. What else could it be?
Works Cited