

Interpreting Milan Kundera's "Eduard and God": A Postmodern Parable of Faith and Futility

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Abstract: Milan Kundera's short story "Eduard and God" deals with the conflict between belief and ideological incongruity in a Communist state where religion and its manifestation cannot be practiced. It shows the spiritual and emotional unravelling of a man who attempts to balance faith and survival. It focuses on the conflict between what people truly believe in and what society expects them to believe. This paper will discuss the story as a postmodern parable, and how Kundera employs irony, paradox, and narrative fragmentation to critique not only religious dogma but also atheistic authoritarianism. Through a close reading of the text, this paper will bring out how Kundera depicts the performative faith of Eduard, the protagonist, as a survival strategy, which shows the absurdity of absolute belief systems in a politically oppressive society. The study uses a hermeneutic methodology, relying on postmodern theory and existentialist philosophy to place the work of Kundera in the context of the larger discussions of faith, power, and meaning. The results indicate that Kundera's narrative technique does not comply with binary oppositions rather portrays belief as a vague, frequently ridiculous performance. In this light, the narrative calls into question the beliefs held by both religious clusters and ideological groups.

Keywords: Postmodern; Faith; Absurdity; Hermeneutic; Parable

Introduction: The short story, "Eduard and God", explores questions about belief and faith in a postmodern world. Oftentimes, Kundera examines how truth can be ambiguous, and how someone's true self blends with their behavior and the unusual features of today's political and social views. The story "Eduard and God", from the short story collection *Laughable Loves*, illustrates these issues by showing Eduard lying about his religious beliefs to woo a devout woman, but later deals with the consequences of following faith or denying it. Kundera demonstrates that it can be difficult to differentiate the truth from lies, and people's beliefs fluctuate very often. Kundera highlights religious beliefs, authority, and the gap between our accomplishments and our hopes by following Eduard's journey. According to Michael Carroll, "The stories in *Laughable Loves* are [Kundera's] most explicitly nonpolitical", and yet "they are about the ironies of domination and subjugation" [1]. Based on the investigation, Kundera demonstrates using irony, absurdity, and several viewpoints in "Eduard and God" to focus on how one's faith can clash with those who oppose it. In this study, "Eduard and God" is presented as a postmodern narrative that questions the main ideas of religion and ideology.

Milan Kundera was born in Czechoslovakia in 1929 and was later exiled to France, where he lived until he died in 2023. The majority of his works are strongly postmodern and existentialist. As an existentialist, the characters in Kundera's work struggle with the meaning, freedom, and absurdity of life. His characters are often under the burden of choice, personal estrangement, and moral ambiguity. For Kundera, postmodern characteristics of fiction include narrative playfulness intertwined with philosophical inquiry. His works are essential to the field of literature and contemporary philosophy. They defy dogmatism, glorify ambiguity, and challenge the reader to examine the meaning of the self, of the past, and love in an unruly world.

In "Eduard and God", Milan Kundera has coined a dank and gloomy comedy that reveals the shallow nature of the ideological and religious beliefs of the Communist regime. Eduard is a young school teacher who lives within the arena of Communist Czechoslovakia. He is a fervent believer in the Communist Party of Stalin and has no belief that there is a God. He swoons over a girl, Alice, who frequents a local church. He manages to persuade her, acting like a true believer, and takes her to the church every day. One morning, he is seen by his school's janitor, making the sign of the cross across the street at a church, and is immediately summoned before the school committee and the school directress, Miss Chekachkova, the quintessential embodiment of Stalinism.

The school committee inquires about his views on religion. He does not believe in God, but he claims he feels obliged to believe in God's existence. Frustrated, the committee tries to fire him; however, it is Miss Chekachkova who tries to re-educate him on the fact that God does not exist. Eventually, fed up with the pretense, Eduard turns against God and the Party, declaring himself tired of it all. The resignation of Eduard shows that the fact that we find out about the reality of a belief system is ridiculous, because of their display of advances and power. This paper attempts to figure out how religion and ideologies function in a postmodern world where faith becomes futile.

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Literature Review: The form of a postmodern parable is similar to that of a traditional parable; however, a postmodern parable employs postmodern methods of humor, skepticism, and breaking the narrative. Unlike traditional parables, postmodern parables question whether there was ever one correct meaning and a permanent morality. Classic parables introduce the reader to a single lesson, whereas the tale introduced by Kundera generates questions and doubts as well as penetrating statements regarding the matters of faith and politics. It aligns with postmodernist ideologies of having no faith in large general truths, resisting fixed definitions, and an active yet skeptical approach to meaning.

The short story “Eduard and God” by Milan Kundera has attracted a significant amount of critical attention for the multifaceted treatment of the themes of faith, freedom, and the absurd in the post-totalitarian and postmodern setting. Although Kundera is more famous as a novelist, this short story contains a condensed form of many of his oft-repeated philosophical preoccupations. The story can be considered a postmodern parable of faith and futility because the story is ironic, the narrative is not progressive, and the end is missing.

According to Lorna Martens, Kundera’s characters are “trapped in the theater of appearances” [3], and James Wood (2000) argues that Kundera’s fiction resists “moral seriousness” in a traditional sense and instead exposes the absurdities of belief and control [4]. In this reading, “Eduard and God” is not only a story about religion, but also about the politics of the soul, in which power, and not truth, determines faith. The absurdity of Eduard’s situation is dramatized by Kundera: he cannot be a religious person or a secular one; he stands between God and his beloved, church and the state, faith and pretense.

The story holds importance for its existential interpretation. The split personality of Eduard is a repetition of the idea of Kierkegaard concerning the notion of despair or inauthentic life when the person does not do the things he really believes. The story is also influenced by the philosophical influences of Kundera himself, such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, as the plot is a criticism of losing authenticity in bureaucratic societies. Another aspect of Foucault, which can be traced in Eduard, is the idea of power and surveillance, when identity is formed and governed by outside institutions [5].

In a more theological interpretation, Elizabeth Gedge argues that Kundera’s story explores “the futility of faith in the absence of freedom” [6]. Social forces are not the only factors that challenge the religiosity of Eduard; his superficiality, which is more sentimental than spiritual, has a role as well. The consequence is a person unable to either commit to God or to the woman he wants- a spiritual paralysis that is a symptom of the postmodern condition. Some researchers lay stress on the stylistic preferences of Kundera. The story’s ironic detachment, frequent use of interior monologue, and fragmented narration align it with postmodern narrative practices, as discussed by Linda Hutcheon [7]. These methods are used to subvert any fixed meaning of Eduard’s belief and, by extension, any fixed moral stance.

“Eduard and God” has been criticized for its relation to the post-socialist identity crisis. In her comparative study, Maria Nemcová Banerjee argues that Eduard’s identity, like that of many intellectuals under Communism is performative, fragmented, and shaped by fear rather than truth [8]. It remains a textual source of richness in addressing the issues of tensions between belief, identity, and power in the modern and postmodern world.

“Eduard and God” as a Postmodern Parable: Parables show that having faith leads people to truth or salvation. But in “Eduard and God”, faith is treated as a show acted out by individuals and groups for their gains, not out of true belief. His actions of crossing himself do not mean that he is praying or expressing an ideology. Eduard has only one motive: to make Alice think well of him. As a result of this ironic gesture, he faces tough consequences, pointing to the fact that things we do personally can be viewed out of context and twisted by bigger systems such as religious, political, or romantic in bizarre and hazardous ways. Since the story seems to flow without a clear conclusion, it underlines the way postmodern theory challenges the idea of absolute truth.

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, argues that postmodern texts often rely on irony and parody to reveal the contradictions in dominant ideologies [7]. The book inscribes its meaning precisely in this form: “Eduard and God”. It makes fun of the serious approach to religion and politics in Communist Czechoslovakia by showing Eduard as unreasonably punished for something small. Kundera points out the crazy way the regime handled things: “Just a little movement of the fingers could land someone in an official interrogation” [2]. This makes it obvious that language, gestures, and beliefs now stand for political messages, instead of personal reality. Having a little white lie become a major political case is the humorous twist often seen in postmodern write-ups.

Postmodern parables are not meant to have one fixed interpretation. Throughout “Eduard and God”, neither the reader nor Eduard can tell what the correct path looks like. Eduard does not believe in God, but he says otherwise to protect himself; Alice acts holy, but is a schemer. The officials reject the importance of religion but treat Eduard in an extremely religious way. This narrative ambiguity supports Jean-François Lyotard’s idea of the “incredulity toward metanarratives” [9]. No character in the story takes a hard line on moral or ideological points. All of the major systems including religion, love, and politics are represented as being unstable, conflicting, and incapable of trust.

The way readers contribute to understanding postmodern parables depends on their reading to make meaning, instead of telling them outright what to believe. Kundera does not give readers a clear moral message. Does the story have a critical message about religion? Of totalitarianism? Of love? One solution might fit both or fail for both. Those who read the story should figure out a

personal meaning from the conflicting points of view. From Hutcheon's point of view, postmodern fiction advises readers to question overarching explanations and to welcome doubt [7].

Faith as a Social Construct: Faith in this story is portrayed as a creation of the culture around it, rather than a subjective belief. Eduard does not believe in worshipping, but when Alice asks whether he believes in God, he lies in an attempt to impress her. This is an example of how religion should be acted, rather than felt. Kundera notes: "It was because of love, not faith, that made Eduard cross himself" [2]. Such an act has shattering consequences, despite its simplicity. An expression of love can be misinterpreted by others as a political and religious statement, without the individual's consent. Representatives of the Communist Party, who view religion as a potential danger, label Eduard as a believer. These same authorities accepted him, although his philosophy remains unaltered, even after he started listening to music. This implies that faith has a lot to do with the perceptions and actions of society, rather than the truth. Kundera uses irony to demonstrate that personal identity is greatly influenced by outside factors. However, the authorities reject the truth regarding Eduard's faith and view it as an action that violates the law.

The liaison that Eduard has with the directress of the school, Miss Chekachkova, is based on irony, tension, and conflict between inner faith and external conformity. The directress is not only his boss but also an embodiment of a totalitarian system that strictly follows and controls personal life. Her experiences with Eduard are not just professional, but a negotiation of power and vulnerability, truth and cover up. Their relationship is important because it dramatizes the issue of ideology on the freedom of individuals. Kundera reveals the absurdity of a system in which the entire transparency of belief is required and there is no place where personal ambiguity can be allowed through the tense negotiations between Eduard and the directress.

Irony and the Futility of Resistance: The narrative of Kundera opposes the dichotomies of faith and atheism, sincerity and deceit by reflecting on the idea of belief as something unstable. The fixation of communist officials on the issue of Eduard's faith is a reflection of the same kind of religiosity that they fight on a fundamental level, which reveals the irony of dogmatic atheism. Eduard's final forbearance, "He was tired of God and tired of the Party" [2] - epitomizes Camus' philosophy of the absurd, where meaning is neither inherent nor attainable, only performed. Irony assists Kundera in bringing out the message that there is no use struggling against authority. The more he tries to control things, the less Eduard can control what takes place. A place where everyone believes in the same way, opposing those thoughts may, at times, lead to the fulfillment of things that were not supposed to be fulfilled. Eduard is not introduced as a person fighting against oppression, but as someone imprisoned in an imaginary cycle.

"Eduard and God" presents the futility of human choices. His love and his ideology do not give Eduard the chance to alter his destiny, as evidenced in the story. When Eduard has no choice but to say a simple lie that he believes in God, he is put into a trap within the system where he does not have a choice. Irony is another device Kundera employs to stress the futility of the desire to find meaning in the existence that obeys inexplicable laws. The ending of the story depends not on what Eduard thinks about it, but on what others think about him and what individuals can do to Eduard. This realization shows through as he thinks: "He had lied to win her love, and now, for the same lie, he was losing everything" [2]. As a result of this cycle, an extra dose of absurdity has emerged that echoes existentialist sentiments of people trying to find meaning in a merciless world.

Faith and Futility in the Light of Existentialism: The story conveys significant insights about the nature of faith and futility. It reflects the ideas of existentialist philosophers like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who emphasize the individual's confrontation with a meaningless world and the pursuit of personal authenticity amid external pressures. For existentialists, believing in God often entails setting aside reason: Søren Kierkegaard frequently used the term "leap" or "leap of faith" [10] in his most notable work, *Fear and Trembling*, to illustrate this concept. He used the term in a related sense to refer to the process of embracing faith, especially religious faith, which he believed requires a shift from intellectual knowledge and logical evidence. However, Eduard's "faith" is neither authentic nor spiritual; it is a performance shaped by social pressure and romantic desire. Eduard crosses himself because of Alice, not because of his genuine belief: "It was Alice's love that caused Eduard to cross himself and not a deep faith" [2]. This absence of authentic commitment reflects Sartre's concept of "bad faith" [11]- when individuals deceive themselves to conform to social expectations rather than act in freedom and truth. Eduard refuses to acknowledge that he is an atheist and manages to charm Alice while failing to accept responsibility for his actions. In this way, Kundera highlights how artificial, flimsy, and casually breakable socially constructed faith can be.

Eduard's story closely mirrors Albert Camus's "notion of the absurd" [12], as described in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The conflict between people wanting meaning and the world being indifferent makes the absurd, says Camus. Although Eduard does not believe it, the lie leads him to be punished. Not his choices, but misunderstanding, authority, and irony determine the outcome for him. It is mentioned by Kundera that he lied to get her love, and for the same reason, he would lose everything. This irony reflects that human decisions are not generally interpreted as they are meant to be because of outside influences. Eduard's actions are not because of any sense of right or wrong, despite Camus's belief that "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" [12]. Similarly, not being able to understand or solve Eduard's problems reflects Sartre's view that, without heavenly order, individuals are responsible for making sense of their lives [11], yet Eduard does not achieve this. Neither does he believe in something nor does he deny atheism; instead, he moves between different identities, shaped by Alice and the society.

In Kundera's postmodern stories, the search of truth, meaning, and salvation are either ridiculed, left unsuccessful, or remain unresolved. Eduard does not experience any spiritual growth, and he does not stand up against the system heroically. All that happens is that he falls prey to problems in communication and understanding. His struggle leads nowhere, which illustrates the emptiness of big, general stories in postmodern fiction. This aligns with what Brian McHale describes in *Postmodernist Fiction*: the shift from epistemological questions ("What do we know?") to ontological ones ("What is real?") [13]. In the story, reality is unsteady, and Eduard himself is not religious, but the people in his life act as if he is. His "truth" is irrelevant compared to public perception.

Since Kundera uses a postmodern style, Eduard's life seems both funny and sad. His story is pushed forward by mistakes and random events instead of logical reasoning. Alice, who at first admires his faith, ends up betraying him to the authorities. The story points out that beliefs, relationships, and political systems are not dependable. Eduard is pulled into the conflict Albert Camus terms "the absurd," about trying to find meaning in life that ultimately lacks meaning. Communists send Eduard away for a belief that is not his, and Alice controls Eduard through her faith. As things in this world are so messy, Eduard cannot find a sense of stability.

The story also carries echoes of Dostoevsky's existential despair, where the absence of spiritual or moral foundations leads to confusion and downfall [14]. Eduard's problems begin with a lack of a firm personal grounding. Because of love, fear, and ideas, he begins to give up control over his own identity. His indecisiveness and silence is similar to existential despair, which leaves someone unable to choose freely. In Sartre's words: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" [11]. Because Eduard allows people to decide who he is and where his life goes, he falls apart at their hands.

Eduard's oscillation between feigned faith and enforced atheism illustrates the instability of any singular "truth". The government in charge, which says it promotes reason and atheism, actually acts in a stubbornly dogmatic way. Party officials, like inquisitors, require ideological purity, which shows that both systems depend on forced compliance instead of personal belief. The way Kundera tells the story reinforces his doubts about absolute truths. Because the story changes viewpoints and is often ironic, readers do not completely back any specific ideology. Rather, Kundera interprets beliefs not as facts within us but as things people express for power reasons in different social settings.

Eduard's situation indicates the struggle between humanity's need for meaning and the universe's silence. His forced adherence to atheism to keep his job and his feigned religiosity to seduce Alice render both positions meaningless. Kundera's portrayal of Eduard echoes Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, where identity is a series of roles performed for survival [15]. Eduard finds he has to act differently to every crowd: Alice sees Eduard as a true believer, the Party demands he pretend to have lost his faith to avoid being attacked, and Eduard himself stays unclear, burdened by irony. It mirrors the general situation under totalitarianism, since only obeying the state's demands was valued and nothing else mattered.

It appears that Eduard's rejection of both religion and the Party indicates Sartre's doctrine, "all major philosophical ideas lose their meaning as time goes on" [11]. Instead of giving us a new answer, Kundera concentrates on the things that remain uncertain, just like much of today's literature. Unlike Dostoevsky's "If God does not exist, everything is permitted" [14], Kundera advocates that whether God exists or not, everything is still absurd because power dictates belief, not truth [2]. Foucault's belief in power shows that beliefs are developed and supported by employing power and social control [5].

Eduard turns towards religion to gain some benefit from Alice, but ends up realizing that religion costs him the dogmatic thinking that was devoid of any purpose in the communist world. Kundera states, "He had to pretend to believe in God to make love to Alice, but now he had to pretend even more to keep his job" [2]. The narrative twists together religious and communist codes of belief, neither of which appears to be transcendently true, but are instead higher-stakes performances. Kundera's shifting perspectives destabilize any singular "truth", reinforcing postmodern skepticism towards grand narratives.

Conclusion: "Eduard and God" is a strong parable that comments on religion and dogma. Irony, absurdity, and the changing of viewpoints in Kundera's writing uncover how people's beliefs may be guided more by situation than by their thinking. Eduard's experiences show that there is no point in looking for real meaning when love, faith, and power are unreliable. Kundera concludes that members of a postmodern society are ensnared by contradictions, and faith is used to influence and dominate rather than save them. The theme is still important in today's arguments about political polarization, as people often focus more on appearing convincing than on real learning. The story creates an atmosphere of doubt, irony, and reflection on life, rather than revealing the truth which makes it truly postmodern. Kundera, as Camus and Sartre do, does not present hopeful solutions but shows how ironic and sometimes tragic our lives can be. By the end, "Eduard and God" becomes a warning story about being false and the ludicrous nature of life in a controlled and artificial age. "Eduard and God" is not just a critique of communism or religion but a broader meditation on the impossibility of authentic belief in a world where ideology dictates identity. Kundera reveals that beliefs can become just a way of looking good, and the pursuit of truth is frequently laughable.

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