

Kazantzakis and Kafka: Differing Reactions to Existentialism

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by

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This paper establishes both Kafka and Kazantzakis as existential writers. Various works by each writer are explicated in order to show each as an existentialist. Their differing reactions to existentialism are then explored. By looking at the lives and environments of the writers, possible reasons for each writer's reactionary ideas are exposed.

Franz Kafka and Nikos Kazantzakis were both writers living and working during the first half of the twentieth century. Both writers were influenced by existentialism and, in fact, were existentialists. However, they each had very different approaches to their writing and their philosophies, and much of this had to do with the fact that they each had very different responses to existentialism. This paper will attempt to expose this difference and discuss various possible reasons for this difference. Before getting into the authors and their works, a quick glance at the evolution of thought up through existentialism is necessary.

Between the years of 100 and 500 B.C. in ancient Greece, there were those philosophers who preceded the pre-Socratics, such as Heraclitus. Their philosophy was generally expressed in the form of lyric poetry. In the fifth century, Parmenides founded the "being paradox," that is the idea that something has to be, and can only be, because if it doesn't exist, then it doesn't exist to talk about so there is only being, and there is no not being. Because of this way of thinking, Parmenides essentially split the world into two: being and not being, which are opposites. From this position, Socrates categorized more opposing ideas and objects and further split the world. His theories held basic assumptions that were accepted with little question throughout the Western world for two

thousand years. It is only in the last two centuries with the concept regarding the death of God and the Heisenberg's Uncertainty theory (which claimed that even scientific experiments have a certain margin of error; in other words science does not lead to absolute truth) that those assumptions have been questioned. Man's view of the world can no longer simply break into twos, whether it is the subject and object or Plato's earthly objects and universals. Philosophy today is much more abstract and deals with the interactions between subject and object, and the psychology of man.

There are many assumptions that Socrates (and therefore the rest of the West) relied on. The most important of these is that truth exists. It is because of this that the linear thought process was established. In other words, if everyone has a goal to reach, i.e. truth, then there is an end to each journey; something final to cross. Another great assumption made by Socrates is the idea that reason is a way to get to truth, which assumes not only that truth exists and that reason is its path, but also that man is capable of comprehending truth.

For the Socratics, art that was not a complete mimesis was worthless because it was not logical (Lee 115). For example, Heraclitus' writings about "constant change" would be completely dismissed by any

Socratic thinker because it does not make logical sense.

Constancy is the opposite of change.

Socratic change has its advantages as well as disadvantages.

Without reason and the scientific method, all the science and technology that makes the West academically advanced would not exist. The truth is that reason and logic work and do result in finding truths in the physical world. Before thinkers such as Nietzsche claimed that God was dead and that truth might not exist, Western thought seemed to assume that logic and linearity led to spiritual and theological truth as well as scientific truth. Because of new thinkers and the Oriental influence on the West during the last few centuries, the emphasis in metaphysics has moved from the logical to the artistic, and the psychological.

It is exactly this process, this evolution of thought that is to be elaborated on by looking at the works of Kafka and Kazantzakis. Both were educated men living in the same time period. Many of their characters are very similar: European males living in the same century and dealing with existential realities. However, the reactions of these characters during certain events vary greatly. While the characters of Kafka are filled with despair, they still have their feet rooted in Western culture. But Kazantzakis' Zorba, a good Macedonian citizen, does not seem to be stuck

in the western thought process.

This needs explanation: the characters of Kafka are not living in a sympathetic universe. They understand that there is no real meaning to life, and they live absurd, paranoid and unhappy lives. Their reactions to existentialism prove that their minds are rooted in western thought and Socratic assumptions. They realize that there is no meaning to life and it is possible that there is no point to be reached in any situation. To this they react with despair and shock, for Western thought tells them that there needs to be a goal, an answer, a truth to be reached. Kafka's characters are put into a terrible angst over this. It frightens them to think that there is no meaning to life, or even that humans cannot know. When a Western thinker ponders this, the metaphysical ground that he stands on disappears and the idea that he doesn't know something makes him question all of his assumptions. Kafka's characters are unhappy, and they would be happy if they lived in a universe where answers were concrete and God definitely existed. Unfortunately, this is not so. Kafka and his characters are westerners having to deal with the death of God.

Kazantzakis' Zorba, however, was much different. He was aware of the great abyss and of the death of God in the universe, yet he enjoyed life with a great passion. He was the true Superman as Nietzsche

described him. He needed no assumptions and walked the earth in awe, as a child would. Because Zorba did not need truth (in its most deified, linear and absolute definition) he saw the mystery that surrounds every object, living or not, and loved it for its beauty. He didn't want answers, he just wanted to feel each miracle: the ocean, the women, the sun, the dirt on the ground. Zorba enjoyed his life. He was happy and spiritually content and free from paranoia and unhappiness.

Both Kazantzakis and Kafka believed that they were powerless to the powers that be. All that man has is a creative mind that can be beautiful but cannot be trusted.

The atmosphere in Kafka's stories is anything but rational. It seems that reality for him is a dream state. Joyce Carol Oates writes that "Kafka is a realist of mystical perspective, resolutely unsentimental, even rather pitiless in his tracking of our numerous delusions " (Glatzer xxi). Man can try in vain to find some order to it, but it is always a paralyzing struggle. There is no meaning in anyone's actions or beliefs, and more often than not, Kafka's characters lead surreal and absurd lives, surrounded by absurd people who do absurd things.

Kazantzakis, too, does not follow Socratic thought, as was mentioned before. Kazantzakis' character Zorba lives every day as if it is

the last, absorbing and laughing and dancing and simply being. But Kazantzakis writing style is realistic, unlike Kafka's surrealism, which expresses a paralysis towards life and a loss of vitality and vigor.

Although Kafka was a paranoid and frightened child, much of the darkness and fear that is ever present in his works can be justified by looking at Kafka's surroundings during his life. Kafka was a Polish Jew living in Europe during and before World War II. Anti-semitism has always been abundant in Europe. This came to an obvious climax during the life of Kafka, and it can be felt in his works. Even before Hitler won over the hearts of the German people, propaganda and negative ideas about Jews were everywhere. Kafka was aware and afraid, just like every other Jewish person. Also, Kafka led an urban life, and so he was constantly surrounded by many faces and smells and the gloom of brown buildings, surrounded by the ordinary.

Kafka's main characters are not typical heroes. In fact, they more fit the term anti-hero. They are ordinary men, usually not happy and certainly unsure and frightened by their surroundings. They are often bogged down by the fog and the gloom of an overpopulated urban life. Kafka's women are never anything out of the ordinary. The male characters in the stories, like Kafka, never seem to spend too much time on them, and the women, in

turn, don't make a fuss. For example the woman that K became attracted to in The Castle simply accepted him (rather silently) as soon as he decided to go after her.

Much of Kafka's work comes in the form of short stories, the most famous of which is probably "The Metamorphosis." This is a story about a man, living in urban Europe, who awakens one morning to find himself turning into a cockroach. Like most of Kafka's works, this story is not happy and is rather frightening. The main character, after becoming a complete insect, is shunned by everyone who surrounds him, even his family and loved ones (Glatzer 89). As Oates claims, "Gregor is swept away like any repulsive dung beetle" (Glatzer xviii). Not only does this tale deal with absurdity, it also exposes how justified Kafka was in his paranoia. "The Metamorphosis" was written before the Holocaust, but many Jews, especially after the propaganda was beginning to spread, began feeling shunned by non-Jewish friends. Many survivors remember suddenly not being invited to parties or being visited by friends, as if they themselves had turned into grotesque cockroaches.

"The Penal Colony" is another of Kafka's short stories. In this work, an explorer comes into a penal colony and is a witness to an execution. The officer in charge of the execution tells him about the execution

machine, which he himself designed for maximum brutality. With needles, this contraption slowly inscribes the name of the crime committed into the skin of the criminal until the criminal slowly bleeds to death over forty hours or so. The explorer, who comes from the West, is horrified. The officer who is so proud of this machine is angered by the fact that his superiors and the rest of the community do not like his machine. He tries to convince the explorer to talk with his Commandant and encourages him to use the machine. When the explorer refuses, the officer pulls the present prisoner from the machine and gets in it himself. Unfortunately, the machine, which is always breaking, breaks again and stabs him in the head, not giving him a slow death as it was designed to do. (Glatzer 140).

One of the obvious themes of this story is the absurdity of it all. Not only did this inhumane officer exist (which, as Kafka knew, was not such an absurd idea, for Germany was filled with them) and spend days designing this cruel machine, but the machine itself keeps on breaking, like a cheap car part. For Kafka, this story is almost a happy story, for the evil officer dies in the end. Yet there is a twist: the machine broke so the officer will not receive a slow and terrible death like all of his victims.

"The Judgement", another short story, is about a merchant who writes to his friend in Russia, letting a few white lies spill about his

upcoming marriage. The merchant then goes to his father to get advice about inviting his friend to the wedding. This is the first time that the merchant had mentioned anything about his Russian friend to his father. Much to his surprise, his father claims that he has known all along that he had been writing to his Russian friend and that he, too, (the father) has been writing to him and telling him things, not just little white lies. The father then sentences him to death (Glatzer 77).

This story is foggy and abstract, and like much of Kafka's works, the theme revolves around absurdity and the Gothic. There are also religious elements rarely seen, such as the all-knowing and unforgiving father.

Kafka's "The Refusal" is about a little town run by a bureaucracy. The highest official is the tax collector. He has the rank of a colonel. One day, some people of the lower class came to the tax collector to ask for funds for the rebuilding of their quarter which was burned down. The narrator's father was one who went to ask. There were soldiers everywhere around the tax collector's office, and these soldiers caused much discomfort and paranoia, although no one knew exactly why. Everyone was really nervous and found it hard to speak when the time came to request aid. They requested it, and then bowed down for a long time, and then the tax collector refused them. The crowd was so relieved that it

was finally over. This is the way that it always was. They knew that they were going to get refused, but they went through with it anyway (Glatzer 263).

This story has many very Kafkaesque themes. First of all, there is an urban and military environment, which Kafka was used to. The towns' people are dealing with an impossible and impassible Bureaucracy, which is absurd to say the least. There is social injustice that is openly acknowledged and ignored by the crowd, and because of society's stupidity, the idea that "that is the way that it always is" turns into the idea that "that is the way that it should be." The crowd went through with the request, knowing fully well that they would be refused, and this again touches upon the idea of man as a helpless creature in an unsympathetic universe.

"A Country Doctor" is a very Gothic and foggy story. There is a country doctor who has an emergency that he has to get to. There is also a great snowstorm at this time. He finds horses from a man that takes his servant girl in exchange, but the doctor doesn't want to lose the servant girl: he is affectionate towards her. After what seems like a second, he gets to the patient's house, and the sky is suddenly clear. In the house there is a young boy that is sick. He checks the boy out and finds nothing

wrong. The horses whinny at him as if they are knowledgeable spirits, so the doctor gets up to go home. Then he checks the patient again. This time he finds a grotesque wound in his side with worms crawling around in it. The boy wants to die. Then the boy's family strips the doctor and makes him lie by the boy. He runs to the horses and escapes, realizing that he will never see Rose, his servant girl, again (Glatzer 220).

There is something very important in this story that is very characteristic of Kafka: often the characters are in nightmaric situations in which they want to act in some way but are silently stopped from doing so. The doctor didn't want to trade his servant girl for the horses, but he does so anyway, thinking all the while that he does not want to do it. It is much like a dream in which one want to scream but nothing comes out of the mouth. Like many of Kafka's works, this one is abstract, unjust, unclear and tragic.

The Castle, a novel by Kafka, is about a young man referred to as K. K comes to a village and claims to be the Land Surveyor. Above the village stand a bunch of shacks that are referred to as the castle. All the villagers have great respect for the castle, for it is in charge of the village and anyone in the castle is thought of as superior to anyone else. But those who run the castle are never seen and neither are any results of

rk. K tries desperately to get permission to begin working, but his
s and needs are somehow always lost in the extremely
zed bureaucracy, and he spends all his days trying to untangle the
paperwork and mediocrity. As Oates says, "the great conceit of
le is, simply and horribly, that one cannot get into the castle"
ix). Amazingly, no one else seems to find anything wrong.

The Castle is a nightmare of the ordinary. It terrifies, but there is
ence , grotesqueness or supernatural elements. There is consistent
ess to seemingly important background events. The actions of
are inconsistent. Everything seems to be drenched with a fog of the
What adds to the oddness is that no villager, with the exception of
seems to be aware that there is anything wrong. They go on with
closed in, medieval lives.

The bureaucracy of the castle is another element that contributes to
trangeness of the environment. To the villagers, the term 'castle'
es godlike ideas. The castle is the law. It is superior, and anyone
ted with it is deemed superior in every way. It is not a matter of a
of superiority (such as intellectual or social superiority), rather, it
matter of pure, unquestioned human superiority. The villagers have
ys believed this. They seem to be completely brainwashed and

of this they don't seem to mind the fact that the bureaucracy that the castle doesn't ever accomplish anything. There is no communication between any of the sections of the bureaucracy. More importantly, it doesn't matter if anything did get accomplished, because it doesn't seem like God himself could change the oddness of the environment. As the story develops, it becomes unclear whether the castle even exists. It looks like a castle, doesn't do anything and the people who run it have never been seen. Perhaps this is another statement about the absurdity that confronts human beings.

A potent paranoia is also felt throughout the book. It is unclear if it is the paranoia of K or the reader. The background is always blurry. There are always things going on around K that he cannot see. People do things consistently, as if they are guilty of something, as if they have an ulterior motive that K is purposefully being kept away from. What makes this worse is that K never does anything about it. He is always helpless, but yet paralyzed.

The works of Kazantzakis, however, differ greatly. Unlike Kafka's protagonist, Kazantzakis' main characters are so heroic they could be (and have been) considered superhuman. Alexis, Michales and Jesus are energetic and spirited men who enjoy the fresh life of sunshine and open

space. They are brave and bigger than life. Kazantzakis also treats women differently in his works than Kafka. He tends to spend more time on his women. Zorba, of course, had much passion for womankind. He very much appreciated their existence, and Kazantzakis develops the female characters in much more detail. Although the old-world view of women comes through clearly in Zorba, there is a beautiful humanity that is acknowledged and also comes through.

The element of joy that is found with Kazantzakis and not with Kafka is partially due to the difference in lifestyle between the two authors. As was stated earlier, Kafka was a Jew in anti-semitic Europe living in an urban, hostile environment. Although there was much turbulence in Greece, Kazantzakis always felt that Greece was his home. He was not an outsider being shunned (and persecuted) by the dominant community. He also had the Mediterranean sunshine and the Greek countryside to enjoy, which is spiritually therapeutic. Kafka did not have this.

Kazantzakis' three works, Zorba the Greek, Freedom or Death, and The Last Temptation of Christ can be seen as a trilogy, each one, in order, showing steps in man's journey through adulthood and to the eternal. Zorba the Greek is a novel about the great individual. Freedom or Death is about a

great patriot; about belonging and loyalty to one's community. The Last Temptation of Christ is a novel that is about more than the life of Jesus. It is a story about man reaching toward God, reaching toward the eternal. Through these three works, Kazantzakis is exposing a certain pattern in which man develops. First, the individuality of man must arise, as Zorba exemplifies. Then, man must become a meaningful part of his community, for unprotected and isolated, man dies (if not of the wilderness, then of loneliness). This is a big part of Freedom or Death. The third step, as shown in The Last Temptation of Christ, involves attaining some form of the eternal, or immortality, going beyond one's self and one's own. Like Kafka, Kazantzakis was an existentialist. But unlike Kafka, there is a rich element of joy in all of Kazantzakis' work, especially Zorba the Greek. This is the difference in reactions to existentialist views between Kafka and Kazantzakis. While Kafka is disturbed and depressed by and unsympathetic universe, Kazantzakis is delighted by its mystery. The mystery of the supernatural is found very much in the natural world for Kazantzakis

Zorba the Greek is a story about a wonderful Macedonian man who fully appreciates every second of every day and all the millions of miracles that surround him. He has a passion for everything, from

expressing himself by dancing to silence to looking at the sea. He doesn't know of a God that exists or a truth that exists, but he has an unending passion for plain existence. He especially appreciates the existence of womankind. There is an old, saggy widow that Zorba becomes involved with. He has such appreciation for her that through his eyes, she is a wonderful young sprite. For the most part, he treats her like a princess, and this, of course, brings great joy to her. Here Zorba talks to the narrator about her:

"I saw her close too, boss. She's got a beauty spot on her cheek that's enough to send you crazy. Another of those mysteries-beauty spots on women's cheeks!"(Kazantzakis 125)

Zorba did not believe in God, but when forced to think about it, he created a modern, existential, mortal sort of God:

"God enjoys himself, kills, commits injustice, makes love, works, likes impossible things, just the same as I do. He eats what he pleases; takes the woman he chooses. If you see a lovely woman going by, as fresh as clear water, your heart leaps at the sight. Suddenly the ground opens and she disappears. Where does she go? Who takes her? If she's a good woman, they say 'God has taken her.' If she is a harlot, they say: 'the devil has carried her off.' But, boss, I've said before, and I say it again, God and

the devil are one and the same thing!" (Kazantzakis 235) Zorba's life is not divided by dualistic, Socratic thoughts.

Freedom or Death is a novel that deals with the Turkish rule over Greece and Crete before the revolution. Captain Michales, like Zorba, has superhuman characteristics, but unlike Zorba, his forte is not in his individuality but rather in his loyalty to his country and his hatred of the Turkish rule. This novel does not have as many existential aspects to explore like Zorba the Greek, but it is existentialist in that there doesn't seem to be much hope for the Greeks when the Turkish ruled. Hundreds of thousands were brutally slaughtered in unimaginable ways and in a seemingly unsympathetic universe. Captain Michales did not have it easy. It is his fantastical strength and bravery that brings joy and wonder to this story as he transcends the realities that prevent the Cretan people from being free from the Turkish rule:

"When Crete is set free, he sometimes thought, my heart too will be free....His blood came in waves, his brain seemed to grow too large, his eyes became bloodshot. Crete rose and fell within him--it was no longer an island, it was a wild beast gazing out to sea. It was the great Gorgon, the sister of Alexander the Great, lamenting and slashing with her fish tail and stirring up the sea. As Captain Michales heard her lament, she

again changed her aspect, and a shudder went through his brain. Crete struck root in him like a plane tree and began to feed on his vitals. From its branches there dangled gray-haired, barefoot forefathers; their heads looked bluish and they bit their tongues....” (Kazantzakis II ,83)

Although The Last Temptation of Christ is about the life of Jesus, it is still a very beautiful work that deals with a seemingly unsympathetic universe. Jesus has God in him, and he knows this, and he struggles with it, coming to terms with the growing consciousness that he is divine. He never asked God to make him part deity, and is angered by God’s silence and seeming lack of love and care. What is important to note is that in this novel it is emphasized that Jesus was not only God, he was also man. This is where much of his existential struggle comes in. He knows that he has to die, but he is afraid, just like any man. The earth still looks to him as it looks to everyone else, rugged and harsh. Unlike most men of his time, he had to completely stop himself from ever giving in to temptation, he only dreamt about it. His life was hard. He had duties to fulfill without satisfaction. This can be seen in the following scene that involves Mary and Jesus:

“Today, large black flames were blazing in his eyes. Frightened, she wanted for a moment to ask him, Who are you? but she restrained herself.

“My boy!” she said with trembling lips. She remained quiet, waiting to see if this grown man was truly her son....He did not turn. Giving a heave, he thrust the cross on his back and, walking steadily now, strode out of the house.” (Kazantzakis III , 31)

Those who opposed this novel and were so offended by it obviously could not comprehend this work. It is a very loving look at Jesus. His only crime was committed in his head, as a dream. Even the New Testament admits that Jesus was human as well as God. The Last Temptation of Christ portrays him as loving and good, yet sad.

Kafka and Kazantzakis had obviously differing reactions to existential thought. This difference in reaction is probably best summed up in Andreas Poulakidas’ article “Kazantzakis’ Zorba the Greek and Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra”. This difference is referred to as “weak pessimism” and “strong pessimism.” Weak pessimism involves being pessimistic, that is thinking there is no meaning to life, and reacting to that idea pessimistically, like Kafka does by being disturbed and depressed by an unsympathetic universe. Strong pessimism involves being pessimistic, that is thinking there is no meaning to life, and reacting to it optimistically , as Zorba does by loving the mysteries of life and not fearing death.

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