

Kazantzakis's
Zorba the Greek

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Five Readings

By

Wook-Dong Kim

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*For
Amy Kim
In consideration of Love & Affection*

Happy the man who hears the Cry of his
times (each epoch has its own Cry) and
works in collaboration with it. He alone can
be saved.

—Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*

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PREFACE

Since its first publication in 1946 in Greece as the title of Βίος και Πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά (Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas) and the subsequent French and English translations in 1947 and 1952, respectively, *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis has been widely read throughout the world. Unquestionably, the novel has been acclaimed both as a modern classic and as an international bestseller. Despite this unprecedented popularity, however, this Greek novel has received comparatively less critical as well as scholarly attention, not only in Greece but also throughout the countries of both the West and the East; so this is one of the reasons why I undertook to write this book. As a translator of the novel into Korean, I wanted to draw scholarly attention to this marvelous work of fiction written by one of the great writers. I firmly believe that Kazantzakis is one of the greatest writers Greece has ever produced since Homer and the Ancient Greek dramatists and playwrights. I am also of the opinion that *Zorba the Greek* is one of Kazantzakis's greatest achievements as a literary artist.

The present book is not primarily concerned with any of the matters relating to the conception, composition, and publication of Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek*, but rather with a detailed analysis of the published work. In other words, it attempts to read the novel synchronically rather than diachronically. I believe that a good piece of literary work, no matter what thematic concerns it may treat, is largely polysemic; depending on different contexts, it may have a number of different meanings, interpretations, or understandings. This book reads Kazantzakis's novel from five different critical perspectives: formalist, existentialist, feminist, ecocritical, and intercultural. Hence the title of the book *Kazantzakis's Zorba the Greek: Five Readings*. The wide spectrum of possible meanings helps guarantee a particular book's status as *either* a classic *or* a throwaway. Here one is reminded of the Italian novelist Italo Calvino, who once suggested some definitions of literary classics. As he states, "the classics are the books of which we usually hear people say: 'I am rereading' and never 'I am reading.'" True, Kazantzakis's novel is surely worth rereading, particularly because each new reading of it will produce profoundly fresh insights and meanings.

This book is based on scholarly articles published in certain scholarly journals. It was thus originally intended for an audience of critics and

scholars already well-acquainted with one of the greatest modern novels ever produced in Greece. However, I did not only rewrite and revise the published articles for the book but also added new chapters to make them more acceptable to the general reader. Parts of the book are somewhat technical, this is inevitable in a book that includes specialized topics, but it should not dismay the general reader because the main arguments demand little or no previous knowledge of the topic.

In writing this book, I have always been reminded of an image of Kazantzakis having a book (as well as a pipe) in his hand. An avid, almost obsessed reader, he always had a book in his hand, sometimes Dante or Homer, sometimes newspapers and magazines. In his somewhat fictionalized spiritual autobiography entitled *Report to Greco*, Kazantzakis states that “man could become immortal and that the world’s heterogeneous surface of houses, people, joys, insults—the incoherent chaos we call life—was capable of uniting into harmony.” Obviously, literature, as well as art, can transform, or *transubstantiate* (to use Kazantzakis’s favorite term), the heterogeneous into the homogeneous, chaos into order, and discord into unity. With the advent of the digital age, and the fourth Industrial Revolution, blurring the boundaries between the real world and the technological world, literature seems to be more relevant and pertinent than ever. As Umberto Eco, an Italian novelist, literary critic, philosopher, semiotician, and university professor, cogently claims, “Books will remain indispensable not only for literature but for any circumstance in which one needs to read carefully not only to receive information but also to speculate and to reflect about it.” Kazantzakis’s *Zorba the Greek* clearly demonstrates that books, printed or in digital form, will not disappear.

In East Asia, particularly in South Korea, located on the other side of the Balkan peninsula, Kazantzakis is one of the most celebrated Western (at least from the East Asian point of view) writers. South Korea’s major bookstore chain Kyobo Book Center’s podcast, Nangman Bookstore, recently disclosed that an analysis of sales records of world classics publisher brands from 2008 to 2017 found that Hermann Hesse’s *Demian*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and Kazantzakis’s *Zorba the Greek* topped the most-sold list. For elderly readers in their 50s and 60s, the Greek author’s novel ranked first on the most-purchased chart. The book was also highly popular with the younger generation. This popularity shows no sign of waning and, if anything, is only expected to rise.

A number of scholars and colleagues contributed useful suggestions while I prepared the manuscript of this book. In particular, however, I should like to thank Professor Artemis Leontis of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and Dr. William Stroebel for enriching the chapter

on the intertextual and intercultural reading of Kazantzakis's novel. They provided me with their valuable comments and suggestions. I am also deeply grateful to the reviewers of some chapters, who offered me invaluable help in clarifying its theme by giving it their thorough, most perceptive attention. I am grateful to the librarians of the University Library at Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology and of Sogang University for providing me with the materials whenever they were needed. Last but not least, I should mention that I shall be using Professor Peter Bien's more recent and reliable English translation of *Zorba the Greek* for my detailed analysis of this well-known novel. In both scholarship and translation, Professor Bien truly deserves his title as the "Dean of Kazantzakis studies."

Busan, South Korea
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CHAPTER ONE

A FORMALIST READING

A reaction against historical criticism—and, for that matter, against Romanticist theories of literature as well—formalist literary criticism attempts to analyze, interpret, or evaluate the inherent features of a text. As its name denotes, formalism places the text itself into the spotlight to show how it is indebted to forms and their related matters. Following Russian formalism, and soon after Anglo-American New Criticism, formalism was the dominant mode of academic literary study in the United States at least from the end of the Second World War through the 1970s. Beginning in the late 1970s, however, formalism was substantially replaced by various new approaches (often with political aims or assumptions) that were deeply suspicious of the formalist idea that a literary work could be an independent entity, separate from its origins or uses. Thus, the term “formalism” has often had a pejorative connotation and has been used by various opponents to indicate either its aridity or ideological deviance. It turns out, however, that formalism, as a form of literary criticism, is not completely dead, but merely playing possum. W. J. T. Mitchell, who questions its status as a pejorative, claims that throughout the critical debates of the last few decades, formalism has “continued to rear its head, even when most fervently disavowed” (2003, 222).

Responding to recent critical discussions concerning a resurgent formalism, as suggested by Mitchell and other critics, Jim Hansen further investigates the distinction between formalism and historicism itself. Unquestionably, these recent trends in academic literary criticism suggest that formalism may be making a comeback (or even a strike back), at least in North American literary criticism. As Hansen cogently argues, “After facing decades of apparent exile at the successive hands of the structuralists of the late 1960s, the poststructuralists of the 1970s and 1980s, and the various historicist schools of the 1990s, the formalist analysis of aesthetic tropes appears to have returned to the post-2000 academic scene” (2004, 663). Hence, new oxymoronic terms, such as “new formalism,” “historical formalism,” “strategic formalism,” and “tactical formalism,” have been newly coined.

In this sense, *Zorba the Greek*, published in Greece as Βίος και Πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά (Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas) by Nikos Kazantzakis, a novel that has been widely acclaimed as one of the truly memorable creations of literature internationally as well as in Greece, deserves to be read specifically from a formalist perspective. A cursory reading of the novel shows that it appears to be formless, a mere collection of episodes, however, upon scrutiny, it is revealed that the book contains an exquisitely worked-out design of its own. This formalist reading of one of Kazantzakis's representative works will focus on its formal features, such as narrative structure, motifs, images, symbols, multifocal voices, and generic hybridity, among other things. It will not seek to locate this Greek novel in a wider political or cultural context except insofar as it helps to improve the reader's understanding of the text itself. This chapter will further show that "form" is not simply a fixed container, like a glass or metal bottle into which the "content" of a literary work is poured and preserved, but rather a soft container like a fabric grab bag, which is sufficiently flexible to contain just about anything. And this is precisely where Kazantzakis's significance as a literary artist lies, as well as the greatness of *Zorba the Greek*.

Life-as-a-journey motif

Louis Sullivan's famous maxim, "form follows function," is a principle associated with twentieth-century modernist industrial design. As early as 1896, the influential American architect eloquently claimed that the shape of a building or object should primarily relate to its intended function or purpose: "It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life [*sic*] is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law" (Sullivan 1896, 408; original emphasis). This statement has been, in fact, a manifesto of formalist movements in the design industry as well as in architecture.

From a formalist point of view, Sullivan's rather peremptory statement is also strikingly applicable to literary works of art. A closer reading of *Zorba the Greek* reveals that Nikos Kazantzakis may have had a formalist aesthetic in mind when he wrote it during the German occupation in 1941–1943. As a formalist writer, he crafted the novel in his artisan spirit in great detail, with meticulous care and attention. This novel is undoubtedly a well-constructed house of fiction when seen in terms of form as well as of function. Kazantzakis, like the American novelist Henry James, attempted to

build the novel into a house of good proportions. Kazantzakis's renowned book, to use another figure of speech, closely approximates either what one of the representative American New Critics, Cleanth Brooks, called a "well-wrought urn" or what his fellow New Critic William K. Wimsatt called a "verbal icon."

One of the most striking things about Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek* is its deceptively simple plot; it is not a complex plot by any means. Kazantzakis presents his deceptively simple plot through declarative, faux-naïf language that is so transparently poetic as to render not only the tale but the reading experience provocatively fresh. As early as 1953, a reviewer for *Time* magazine aptly summed this up when he asserted that "*Zorba the Greek* resists easy definition. Like the *Odyssey* and *Don Quixote*, it is the novel nearly plotless but never pointless" (1953, 122). There are few, if any, external events and adventures throughout the novel. It seems to be more appropriate to argue, as Vrasidas Karalis does, that the novel is "so over-plotted that it looks plotless and fragmentary" (2018). This explains at least that, like many of Kazantzakis's novels, *Zorba the Greek* reads like an extended essay. It should be noted that Kazantzakis is not so much interested in a traditional plot packed with external events and actions as he is with a new kind of plot, a plot fraught with internal psychological orientations. Simply put, the novel follows one of the oldest and most basic plot patterns: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy regains girl. In Kazantzakis's novel, a young intellectual narrator, who is a huge bibliophile (almost to the point of obsession), plays the role of a boy while Alexis Zorba, the illiterate but ingenious and much experienced mineworker, whom the unnamed narrator calls "a widely traveled, widely experienced Sinbad the Sailor" (Kazantzakis 2014, 17), fills the role of a girl.

In the narrator's memories, a close friend of his, Yannis Stavridakis, chides him for idling away his life chewing over books instead of exploring the seas and having adventures. In a half-hearted endeavor to lead the life his friend would have him live, the narrator decides to labor with the working class, prospecting an unused lignite mine on Crete. Weather-bound in a café at a port, the narrator is about to set sail to the island, weather permitting. Prior to his departure, he runs into Alexis Zorba, a 65-year-old roguish mineworker, whom the narrator, fascinated by his tall tales and his extrovert disposition, employs as a foreman and asks him to join him on his way to Crete. The young narrator, whom Zorba affectionately calls "the Boss," lives together with him in a hut on the beach. After seven months or so, they part company due to the complete failure of the mining business and later of the timber business. Yet their reunion occurs, not physically but psychologically as well as emotionally, when the narrator recreates his life

with Zorba by writing *The Saint's Life of Alexis Zorba*, the original title that Kazantzakis first intended for the novel. But he later published it in Greece with the title Βίος και Πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά. Since the publication of the first English translation in 1952 by Carl Wildman, the novel has been widely known and read as *Zorba the Greek*.

Inextricably related to this traditional plot is the journey motif that can be easily discerned in *Zorba the Greek*. To Kazantzakis, as to most of his major characters, the journey is of the utmost significance in that it is an excellent metaphor for human existence. Kazantzakis makes this point more explicitly when he states in his Prologue to the novel that “[t]he great benefactors in [his] life have been journeys and dreams” (1). Most of his literary works, most notably *Zorba the Greek*, are strongly characterized by the journey motif. In this sense, the opening scene of the novel, in which the narrator sits in a café full of sea-ragged sailors in Piraeus, turns out to be highly symbolic. Located within the Athens urban area, and along the east coast of the Saronic Gulf, Piraeus is the chief port in Greece, the largest passenger port in Europe, and the second largest in the world. This geographical setting is most appropriate for the major thematic concerns of the novel.

The journey motif is ancient, perhaps the oldest story structure in literary history that begins with the two great epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, by Homer (one of Kazantzakis's most respected literary ancestors), as well as with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which Alexander Heidel calls “the *Odyssey* of the Babylonians” (1963, 1). In *Zorba the Greek*, the narrator and Zorba share stories on their journey, and the latter's intriguing and enthralling anecdotes become a recurring staple of the narrative. As is the case with the work that contains the journey motif, the “quest” that the protagonists make is one of the most significant elements in the novel. This literary device, in fact, comprises the entirety of the plot itself—so much so that almost all of the characters' experiences are centered on the journey. In the novel, however, the physical or geographical journey turns out to be simply a psychological or spiritual journey. What counts in the book occurs more frequently in the moral or mental landscape of the characters rather than in the physical landscape. As in the Homeric epics, therefore, the journey is a powerful symbol in the book often used to represent both the narrator's spiritual and psychological adventure leading to an epiphany or some sort of self-recognition of human life.

Even after the two main characters of *Zorba the Greek* part company on Crete, they continue their own journeys separately for five years, in which “geographical boundaries joined the dance, time accelerated, nations expanded and contracted like accordions” (Kazantzakis 2014, 335). The

narrator leaves the island via Iraklio and then leaves Greece for Western Europe. On his return to Greece, he settles down in Aegina, located 16 miles below Athens. It should be noted that the narrator comes back near to the place where the story begins. Part of the Saronic Islands group, Aegina is easily accessible within 40 minutes from Piraeus. On the other hand, the postcards and letters that Zorba sends to the narrator indicate that the former employer has traveled from one country to another: the Holy Mountain at Atos, Romania, and Serbia. He finally dies near Skopia (Skopje) in Serbia, catching hold of the window sill and looking out toward the mountains, as if he still yearned to travel more. In more philosophical terms, this life-as-a-journey motif represents the concept of *homo viator*, the state of humanity always moving towards something; moving around is human beings' existential situation.

As the story of the novel progresses, the narrator, aided by Zorba, gradually comes to realize the true meaning of human existence as well as of the human condition. To a great extent, the novel concerns the slow but sure transformation of the narrator, thereby making him what E. M. Forster calls a "round" character—or, more appropriately, a developing character. Although Zorba is the main character (and the title character), Kazantzakis focuses attention on Zorba's effect on the narrator. Virtually nothing changes in Zorba, so he can be seen as a "flat" character, to use Forster's other term, but like the mythical Greek Midas, Zorba changes everything he touches. Intriguing yet invaluable lessons the narrator learns from Zorba include colorful new perspectives on women, ideologies, religion, and philosophy, among other things. Zorba always backs up his views with intriguing stories from his own rich experience of living, working, fighting, and loving throughout the eastern Mediterranean region. The reader is aware of how Zorba has come to be essentially an agnostic, to believe that God and the Devil are the same, that war and nationalism are mere human folly—above all things, that passionate love, simple earthly pleasure, and *joie de vivre* are what makes human life worth living.

Near the end of the novel, after the deaths of Madame Hortense, the mad priest, Father Zacharias, and the widow, Sourmelina, the narrator's questioning of human mortality deepens. Prompted by Zorba, the narrator solidifies his own theories on its meaning and comes up with the concept of "sacred awe." In Chapter 24, the narrator finally realizes that "humanity's highest reach was not knowledge, nor was it virtue, goodness, or victory, but something else, something higher, more heroic and despairing—namely, awe, sacred terror. Beyond sacred terror, the human mind cannot go" (299). By "sacred terror" he means, among other things, a sense of spiritual awakening that humans enjoy when they willingly accept the hard

reality of the human condition: the joyful acceptance of the inevitability of human mortality. This is what Friedrich Nietzsche means when he talks about a dance over habits and conventions. In *The Gay Science*, he asserts that “the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses” (1974, 189–90).

A little later on, in the memorable scene in which, after the complete destruction of the cables for the transportation of timber, they had their own “last supper” on the beach, the narrator demands that Zorba foretells the future by reading the roasted lamb’s back. Zorba replies that he sees “[a]t the journey’s extreme edge a large house with many doors. It must be some city, Boss, or possibly the monastery. . .” (Kazantzakis 2014, 320). At that, the Boss immediately tells him that he needs no more prophesying and then says, “I’ll tell you what the house with many doors is—it’s the earth, full of graves. That’s the journey’s extreme edge” (320). What the narrator means here is hardly mistakable: Death waits for every human being at the end of the journey of his or her life. Under the tutelage of Zorba, the narrator is now ready to accept human mortality without any fear at all. Morally inspired by this self-recognition, the narrator abruptly declares, “the world grew lighter; the sea was laughing, the earth swaying like a boat deck” (320). He even asks Zorba to teach dance for the first time, saying, “Let’s go, Zorba. My life has changed. Shake a leg” (320). One is here reminded of what Friedrich Nietzsche once said in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “I should only believe in a God who knows how to dance” (2008, 36).

This self-recognition of the narrator makes *Zorba the Greek* a cheerful rather than tragic book. The novel can be considered a comedy in the sense that *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, whom both Kazantzakis and the narrator highly regard as a great poet, is a comedy, not a tragedy. Kazantzakis’s second wife Eleni (née Samiou) said of her husband when he wrote the novel in 1941–1943: “The days were growing shorter, our supplies were diminishing. We stayed in bed to conserve strength. And on the darkest days of starvation, Nikos penned his most joyous work *Zorba the Greek*” (1998, 473). Both internal and external evidence clearly demonstrates that, despite some misfortunes and deaths, the novel is indeed a bright book of life.

Contrasts and juxtapositions

In addition to the life-as-a-journey motif, another remarkable formal device that Nikos Kazantzakis makes skillful use of in *Zorba the Greek* is contrast and juxtaposition. He explores the tale through a series of contrasts,

established primarily in the characters that populate the novel. As a rhetorical device, mostly used in literary works both in verse and in prose, contrast refers to virtually all differences between two or more tangible or abstract entities, such as characters, settings (temporal as well as spatial or geographical), ideas and opinions, subjects, tones, and so on. The contrast generally involves a juxtaposition of two dissimilar things in order to identify and make their differences more conspicuously visible. There are a variety of reasons why a writer might want to use contrasts in a work of literature. In the novel, Kazantzakis uses elaborate contrasts and juxtapositions for two main purposes: to unite ideas and concepts, and to create an overall thematic argument.

In *Zorba the Greek*, Kazantzakis's use of contrast can first be seen between the two shepherds: one fictional or scriptural and the other real or actual. In Chapter 2, on the way to Crete, the narrator retires to his cabin on the steamship and reads from *The Dialogue of Buddha and the Shepherd*, the book that has filled his mind for the past few years. This fascinating dialogue between the Buddha and a shepherd tells of a young shepherd who is proud of possessing the daily necessities and gladly says, "And you, my heavens, may rain as much as you please!" (Kazantzakis 2014, 27). And yet the Buddha, who has nothing except "an obedient and free soul" (27), prays the same thing to heaven as the shepherd does, teaching the virtue of possessing nothing. This fable is fairly well-known from the Buddhist scriptures. In one version, Buddha decides to go on a long journey before he dies in order to visit some of his disciples and exhort them to observe his teachings with scrupulous care. With only his disciple Ananda for a companion, he leaves the city of Rajagriha and runs into a shepherd in a field who is perfectly content with his earthly life.

Later on, in Chapter 15, the reader meets the real shepherd when the narrator, overcome by a springtime malaise, takes a stroll down a mountain path and comes to the ruins of an ancient Minoan city. All of a sudden, the narrator bumps into a shepherd boy who is "sunburned, with blackened knees and a Cretan kerchief, black and tasseled, covering his curly hair" (192). Rude and even hostile, the boy pesters the narrator and will not return him to his solitude without a cigarette for his toll. This real shepherd seems to be very unhappy with his earthly life; as he says to the narrator, "[O]ut here in the wild I'm miserable" (193). The young shepherd spits out the last word "miserable" with such passion that the narrator's heart aches for him. In Carl Wildman's English translation of the novel, the same sentence is rendered as: "In this empty hole I get so fed up with life" (Kazantzakis 1952, 167). In spite of some difference in expression, both Peter Bien's new translation and Wildman's older translation clearly indicate that the life of

the real shepherd must be unbearably painful.

Despite some similarities, the two shepherds are in sharp contrast. The fictional or scriptural shepherd is full of a feeling of deep contentment with his earthly life, while the real one is unhappier with his life. Unlike the shepherd in the Buddhist scripture, the shepherd boy in the Minoan city has to lead a wretched existence and is most discontented with his position in life. Kazantzakis demonstrates significant differences between these two shepherds in terms of character, temperament, and outlook on life, as well as their material possessions. Moreover, through this device of contrast, he shows how miserable Cretan village life was in the first half of the 20th century. The real shepherd boy tells the narrator that he had better not stroll about in the ruins: "Those people are dead; we're alive" (Kazantzakis 2014, 193). His words seem slightly ironic because the narrator thinks that the shepherd looks "as though he was the ghost of the place" (193), not a living person. Having declared a political union with Greece after the Balkan Wars in 1908, and after being finally recognized internationally in 1913, Crete was economically hard-pressed. This is why one of the aged villagers states to the narrator at one point in the story, "It's a great sin to say that this food is good, that food is not good. . . . because there are people who are hungry" (196). Due to varied reasons, such as drought and wars, the Cretans suffered from severe food shortage.

In addition to the shepherd in the Minoan ruins, there is another real shepherd named Sifakas in the novel. Much later on, in Chapter 22, the narrator, returning from a visit to sick Madame Hortense, reaches the village square and finds the villagers enjoying the paschal dance led by a strange young man. Asked by the narrator who the young man is, Uncle Anagnostis tells him that he keeps his flock on the mountains all the year round and then comes down only at Easter to see people and dance. The tall, handsome, young shepherd of about 20, the village notable says with tongue in cheek, is "like the archangel who steals souls" (242). All the villagers, particularly the young girls, are entrapped by the shepherd's wild but self-disciplined dance. Compared to the other two shepherds, Sifakas best resembles Zorba in that both of them often express their feelings and emotions through dance.

The young man of "The Fig Tree of the Notable's Daughter" and Pavlis provide another good illustration of contrast in *Zorba the Greek*. In an earlier part of the novel, one of the village boys narrates the tragic story of what happened to the young couple beneath the fig tree a long time ago. According to the story, the daughter of one of the landowners in the village falls in love with a poor shepherd boy. Her father prevents her from loving the shepherd because he is very poor. One night the young lovesick couple

vanish into the air, and after a week the stink enables the villagers to find them “in each other’s arms beneath this fig tree, rotting away” (35). Hence, the villagers have called the tree “the Fig Tree of the Notable Daughter.”

In marked contrast to the poor shepherd is Pavlis, the 20-year-old young son of the leading village notable Mavrandonis. Like the young shepherd who falls in love with the rich girl in the village, Pavlis is infatuated with Sourmelina, a young and attractive widowed woman, who is hated as well as admired by virtually all the men in the village. Spurned repeatedly by her and finding that she gives herself to the Boss, who amounts to being a “foreigner” to the Cretan village; Pavlis is unbearably hurt—so much so that he commits suicide. Unlike the lovesick young couple who die happily beneath the fig tree, Pavlis, whose love for the widow is not requited, drowns himself in the sea. If the father in the story of “The Fig Tree of the Notable’s Daughter” rejects his daughter’s love with the poor shepherd, in the story of Pavlis and Sourmelina the father stands between them and rejects his son’s relationship with the widow. When he sees his son in the village café, Mavrandonis frowns and angrily says to himself, “I feel like grabbing him by the scruff of his neck and banging him down on a stone like an octopus” (117). Both of the episodes clearly demonstrate that the Cretan village is characterized by rigid adherence to social customs and conventions.

A better illustration of contrast in *Zorba the Greek* can be found in that between Madame Hortense and the widow Sourmelina. Because they live outside the village, the two women are viewed as “aliens,” almost totally isolated from the Cretan community. Throughout Cretan history, fear of strangers has been considered not only safe but also desirable and rational. Even so, these two women are significantly different in various ways. Madame Hortense is first introduced as an older woman, saddened by her age and living in the past. Once a beautiful and much-desired courtesan, she is now “a stumpy, paunchy little woman with dyed flaxen-blond hair, now fading” (38), which are hardly attractive. Somewhat bizarrely, she strikes the narrator as “a sort of mustachioed, glistening seal that had been stranded half-rotted on this sandy beach thousands of years earlier” (38). Madame Hortense lives her life in seclusion until Zorba’s arrival serves to make her feel young again. He even takes to calling her Bouboulina after Laskarina “Bouboulina” Pinotsis, who is a renowned Greek heroine of the Greek War of Independence in 1821.

If Zorba decisively pursues Madame Hortense, the narrator hesitates to approach Sourmelina, although he is drawn to her. Unlike Madame Hortense, the widow is young, attractive, and majestically independent, thereby suffering social ostracism far more severely than the aged woman.

After Pavlis's suicide, the widow incurs the hatred of the villagers, both male and female, more deeply than before. Asked jokingly by Zorba if he likes the widow, even the village idiot Mimithos answers, "Why shouldn't I like her, friend? Didn't I, too, come out of a sewer?" (118): unquestionably, what he means by "a sewer" is a mother's womb. More daring than the narrator, Sourmelina tries to flirt with him when they pass each other on the path in the village. She even ignites his desire for her by sending him, through Mimithos, a small basket of oranges from her own orchard.

Another excellent illustration of character contrast can be seen between the narrator and a good friend of his, Stavridakis. Despite their intimate friendship, the two men greatly differ in outlook on life as well as in character and personality. Stavridakis is a man of action while his friend is a man of reflection. The narrator's friend says to him deprecatingly, "How much longer are you going to continue gnawing paper, smearing yourself with ink?" (11). Of the greatest significance is the political background against which the story of the two characters is set; while the narrator and Zorba engage in what may, by and large, be considered escapist adventures on Crete, Stavridakis sets off to rescue some fellow Greeks who have been captured and persecuted by foreign invaders, such as the Bolsheviks and the Kurds. While the narrator ruminates in a café over what has been happening around him, Stavridakis is helping Greek partisans in the Caucasus evacuate endangered compatriots from that region, where they face an almost certain massacre. The guilty feeling, as well as the uneasiness that the narrator feels at times about his abandonment of Stavridakis, stems from his recognition that men have a moral and social responsibility, which he has almost totally avoided. Throughout the novel, the dominant image of the narrator is that of sitting in a café or a hut by the seashore either writing or reading, while the prevailing image of Stavridakis is that of constantly moving from one place to another in the face of danger.

In *Zorba the Greek*, however, no better illustration of character contrast can be found than between the narrator and his employee Alexis Zorba. Prompted by Stavridakis to do more practical things, the narrator finally decides to set sail to Crete and labor with the working class who are reopening an unused lignite mine. But prior to his departure, he runs into a 65-year-old man, a jack of all trades, Zorba. Fascinated by the stranger's adventurous tales and his extrovert disposition, he employs him as a foreman who oversees the mining crew. It turns out that in almost everything Zorba is exactly what the narrator is *not*. Throughout the novel, the dominant conflict—or duality—is focused on the contrasts between, as well as the juxtaposition of, the narrator and Zorba. Their contrasting approaches to almost every crisis that confronts them, as well as their lively

dialogues about a human being's duty toward himself and others, provide Kazantzakis with a convenient forum for discussing various conflicts, such as spirit vs. flesh, word vs. deed, involvement vs. withdrawal, and other similar themes.

The birthplaces of the narrator and Zorba, it should be noted, provide a good contrast: an island located off the southernmost tip of mainland Greece, and the northern part of Greece in the southern Balkans, respectively. There is some internal evidence in the novel that demonstrates that the narrator must be a native of Crete, or at least closely related to the island. His grandfather on his mother's side, for instance, lived in a Cretan village, and one of his friends and fellow students, the former professor of theology, Karayannis, was born on Crete. One scene in Chapter 16 indubitably demonstrates that the narrator comes from Crete. In the scene, on the star-twinkling evening of his return from the trip to Iraklio, Zorba tries to melt away all his cares by playing the santouri. The narrator asks him to sing a Macedonian tune. At that, Zorba responds by saying, "A Cretan one, from yours!" (206), denoting that his employer comes from Crete. Obviously, he is not a British-Greek (named Basil) who bears the hallmarks of a prim, middle-class British man, as described in a 1964 British-Greek film scripted and directed by Michael Cacoyannis. On the other hand, Zorba was born in Macedonia and is known as a Macedonian among the villagers in the novel. Dishonored by Zorba during his attempt to kill the widow Sourmelina, Captain Manolakas threatens him. The narrator intervenes and says to the village constable, "And don't forget that Zorba is a foreigner, a Macedonian, and it's a great disgrace for us Cretans to lift a hand against an outsider who came here to our land" (282; emphasis added). The phrase "us Cretans" clearly shows that the narrator comes from the island. The narrator's peacemaking intervention works miraculously because they immediately settle their dispute.

Zorba and the narrator can be best seen in more classical terms as a contrast of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, as the opposing representatives of what Friedrich Nietzsche expounds in his *The Birth of Tragedy*. The narrator is cerebral; Zorba is instinctual; the former being swayed by reason, the latter by visceral impulses. While not openly advocating the adoption of the Apollonian principle, the narrator is sitting and smoking while running grains of sand through his fingers. Apollonian on the whole, he is rational, reflective, orderly, and restrained. Worshiped at the Delphic oracle, where a priestess gave forth her predictions, Apollo thus represents all aspects of civilization and culture. The narrator can be seen as an embodiment of Western culture and civilization. On the other hand, Zorba, brimming with life-affirming ardor, is a living embodiment of

the belief that one should live to the fullest without fears and expectations. By and large Dionysian, he is wildly sensual, indulgent, unrestrained, and dauntlessly loose with women. In short, he depicts himself as “a wild beast from head to toe” (251). A quintessential free spirit, Zorba is eager to follow all his passions and give in to all his desires. Not only does he pursue what he wants, but he also pursues it with fervor and intense passion. It is no wonder that Gregory Jusdanis describes Zorba as “orgiastic, nearly chthonic” (1993, 168). Like Dionysus, Zorba reacts to overwhelming emotion with a passionate outburst by playing a santouri in the form of a dance.

One cannot overemphasize the great influence of Nietzsche on Kazantzakis. In this connection, Andreas K. Poulakidas claims that “without a serious study of Nietzsche’s works, and above all, Zarathustra, Kazantzakis’ novel could not have been written” (1970, 235). The German philosopher’s influence on *Zorba the Greek* goes far beyond the parable on the “death of God” of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and includes the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy of *The Birth of Tragedy*. As Darren J. N. Middleton persuasively points out, “*Zorba the Greek* converts this Apollonian-Dionysiac duality into a parable. While the narrator, the pen-pushing Boss, embodies peaceful serenity, Zorba, the untamable Macedonian, incarnates confident vitality” (2000, 167). It should be kept in mind that Kazantzakis does not completely concur with Zorba’s Dionysian principle because the mineworker’s worldview has merits and faults. At the same time, the narrator’s Apollonian principle is insufficient as a way for a man to achieve a full appreciation of humanity. Kazantzakis suggests strongly in the novel that to be really human is to embrace the Apollonian and the Dionysian at the same time. This is evidenced by the decision the narrator takes at the close of the novel when he parts with Zorba. The narrator rejects his suggestion that they go together by saying, “I have learned [my lessons], Zorba; many thanks. But I need to follow my own path” (Kazantzakis 2014, 329).

This explains, at least in part, why Jerry A. Gill meticulously examines the dynamic yet opposing interpersonal relations between the two major characters, Zorba and the narrator (2018, 7–13). Gill brings to light the two characters’ understanding of societal mores and their sense of justice, as well as their relationship with women. According to him, two classic personality types clearly illustrate Kazantzakis’s philosophy of human nature. Gill insightfully suggests that Kazantzakis saw himself more like the narrator but at the same time wished to resemble Zorba. Although it appears to be inconsistent and even contradictory, this seems to be a more plausible explanation of human nature. Humans often act in very bizarre ways that

often contradict what they feel deep down, not only because human minds are complex, irrational, and unpredictable, but also because so much of human behavior is ruled by subconscious depths. The human dynamic between these two personality types, as illustrated by the narrator and Zorba, can be extended to include the meaning and value of personal freedom amidst broader social and intellectual concerns.

Images and symbols

No prose writer has ever reveled as much in the senses as Nikos Kazantzakis does. As Howard F. Dossor figuratively asserts, for him the senses, such as sight, hearing, smell, and touch, were “the slender tines of a fork with which he pecked at the plenitude of life arranged on his plate, constantly tempting his receptive palate” (2017, 14). In *Zorba the Greek*, Kazantzakis makes profuse use of imagery and symbolism in order to make the novel more intriguing as well as to add a layer of deeper meanings. As early as 1953, Anthony West wrote regarding the novel for the *New Yorker*, “Every page is alive with ideas and limpid images that have the precision and the concentrated, vibrant quality of poetry” (126). Being set in a Cretan village, the novel is amazingly rich in vivid images that appeal to the senses as well as fresh symbols that represent an abstract idea or concept. The island of Crete itself is charged with symbolic images. As Jerry H. Gill points out, the island, called *Kriti* in Greek, is “often addressed and spoken of by native Cretans as if it were an actual person” (2018, 8).

Although Kazantzakis has been known internationally as a novelist, few people are familiar with him as a poet, but he wrote *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, which he viewed as his magnum opus. A continuation of Homer’s great epic poem, it has been considered one of the greatest accomplishments of modern world literature. Dossor further asserts that “[t]here is a poetic element in all fiction as the novelist applies his imagination to create a new world and people it with representative figures who interact like real human beings in such a way as to reveal new insights for those seeking a more meaningful interaction with life” (2017, 14). According to him, the novel as a literary genre is, for the most part, “poetry written in the guise of prose” (14). When he makes this statement, Dossor has the novelist in general in mind. This statement is, however, applicable particularly to Kazantzakis and his *Zorba the Greek*, which is strongly characterized by passionate and florid lyrical prose. Moreover, Kazantzakis had the inspiration from the Cretan landscape—the bright sunlight, the ink-blue sea, and the pine and cypress forests inhabited by various flora and fauna. In his spiritual or fictionalized autobiography *Report to Greco*, he speaks of his five senses as

“the five doors through which the world enters” (Kazantzakis 1965, 343), meaning that without the senses the mystery of the world cannot be comprehensible. In short, he states, “The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand—when I can smell, see, and touch” (43).

In *Zorba the Greek*, as in other literary writings, imagery that appeals to various sensory experiences and symbolism that appeals to the intellect are often used interchangeably. The very opening scene of the novel provides a good example of this. The novel begins with a description of the weather in great detail: “It was almost daybreak—rain, strong southwest wind, sea spray reaching the small café, its glass doors shut, the air inside smelling of sage and human sweat” (Kazantzakis 2014, 9). This scene, fraught with varied imagery (visual, aural, and olfactory), can also be explored for hidden meanings. At one point in the novel, the narrator states, “All objects in this world have hidden meanings. All of them, I thought—people, animals, trees, stars—are hieroglyphics” (57). His statement takes on a new meaning when it comes to symbolism in the novel. Jerry H. Gill argues that throughout his fiction, “Kazantzakis makes use of the natural elements when creating his vision of the world and human life” (2018, 7). Gill even goes further to say that water in general and rain in particular actually function as an additional character in the development of this story.

This opening scene of the novel is charged with imagery and symbols that are closely related to the natural elements. The mention of the rainy storm, as well as the small café crammed with people; bring an image of imprisonment into the reader’s vision: the weather-bound passengers, sailors, and fishermen, awaiting the end of the storm. The café is described as something of a hermetically sealed box, “...its glass doors shut, the air inside smelling of sage and human sweat. Cold outside windows frosted over from exhalations” (Kazantzakis 2014, 9). An old fisherman named Kostandis complains about the monotonous daily routine of his life: his time spent in a café during the mornings and at home during the evenings. In response to this statement, a mustachioed sailor philosophically responds, “Our existence equals life imprisonment...Life imprisonment, goddamn it to hell!” (9–10). This image of imprisonment is soon further intensified by the steamboat bound to Crete and its final destination. Despite the beautiful natural surroundings, the Cretan island is cut off not only from mainland Greece but also from other outside worlds.

Throughout the novel, Kazantzakis is very fond of employing plant imagery for a vivid organic worldview. He uses it in many different forms, particularly to relate to the characters and themes. On the way to Crete on the steamship, Zorba finds large dolphins leaping as they keep pace with the

ship and points at them with his left hand. At that moment the narrator notices for the first time that almost half of the forefinger of Zorba's left hand is missing. Hearing that he cut it off because it interfered with his potting work, the narrator asks him if he did not feel pain. At that, Zorba, in turn, asks the narrator in a rhetorical question, "Of course it hurt! Am I a tree trunk?" (25). What he actually means is unmistakable: he is a living human being made of flesh and blood, not an inanimate object like a tree or a stone.

A bit later on, in the same chapter, further tree imagery is skillfully used. On the way to the village, led by the boys, the narrator and Zorba pass by a great fig tree with a twisted double trunk that is beginning to grow hollow with age. One of the children tells the sad story involving "The Fig Tree of the Notable's Daughter":

In my grandfather's day, the daughter of one of our notables fell in love with a young shepherd. But her father refused to approve. The daughter wept, screamed, and nearly pleaded herself to death, but he never changed his tune. So one evening the lovesick couple disappeared. People searched for them for one day, two days, three days, a whole week. Vanished! But it was summertime and they stank. People followed the trail of the smell and found the couple in each other's arms beneath this fig tree, rotting away (Kazantzakis 2014, 35; emphasis added).

Undoubtedly, this passage displays how dexterous Kazantzakis is in handling the images to create a graphic mental picture in the reader's mind. This episode of tragic love is, in fact, packed not only with visual images but also with virtually all kinds of images: auditory, olfactory, tactile, and even kinesthetic. In addition to these images, there is another important form of imagery: organic. Reading the passage above, some readers may feel thirsty, hungry, or nauseous. These varied images not only appeal indirectly to the reader's senses but also ignite the imagination, thereby adding depth to the story.

The reader is also reminded of this aging tree later on in Chapter 5, in which one of the old notables in the Cretan village, Uncle Anagnostis, invites the narrator and Zorba as well as some other villagers to celebrate the castrating of the pigs as well as the name day of his grandson. Uncle Anagnostis is compared to a tree: "[H]is peaceful existence [is] like that of a tree in a hollow protected from wind" (71). Given that the aged man has led a peaceful, aristocratic life, respected by his family members and the villagers, the image of a protected tree is most appropriate to describe him. Born deaf, he has been protected by the storms of life, including the insurrections of the Cretan people against the Ottoman occupation of the island.

In sharp contrast to the aging tree is a young blossoming orange tree, which is most often associated with the widow Sourmelina. For example, on one New Year's Day, the narrator runs into the widow, who is walking mincingly beneath the olive trees along the road from the village and then disappears into her own orchard where "the winter sun fell upon the golden lemon and orange trees and their darkened foliage; the entire orchard was radiant, like Paradise" (144). That evening, he comes near, tempting her. A little later on, in Chapter 18, in which the narrator and Zorba visit the monastery, the former sits down on a low stone wall around the orange tree. He wonders in bliss, "How long . . . will I continue to live, enjoying this sweetness of earth, air, silence, and the aroma of the blossoming orange tree?" (226). An icon of Saint Bacchus, which he had looked at in the chapel a few minutes before, makes his heart overflow with happiness. Given that the Hellenic Dionysus has been transformed into the Christian Saint Bacchus, it may be safely surmised that the narrator here is thinking of Sourmelina. A few months later, on Easter Sunday, the narrator walks into the village alone and finds himself near the widow's orchard. Approaching it, he pushes the reeds aside: "A woman clothed in a black dress, décolleté, was standing beneath an orange tree" (264). This time, with Zorba's free-spirited words in mind, the narrator finds the courage to pursue the widow and finally succeeds in tempting her.

The land on the Cretan island is covered with greenery, beautiful flowers, and trees. The people living on the island can almost hear all kinds of vegetation growing in the night. Near the end of Chapter 20, the narrator rises at dawn, stands by the door of the hut, and gazes in amazement at the sea and the land. The world seems to be miraculously transformed overnight: A small clump of thorn bushes has launched tiny white flowers, and newly blossomed lemon and orange trees have spilled a sweet, haunting aroma into the air. All of a sudden, Zorba, half-naked, joins the narrator in staring at the miracle and shouts, thrilled by the sight of spring, "That blue out there that's moving, what miracle is it? What is it called? The sea, the sea? And the one wearing the green pinafore with flowers? The earth?" (255). This visual image of the earth as a green apron with a flower pattern is so vividly expressive that it creates a picture in the reader's mind. One is immediately reminded of the image of Mother Earth, in both the western and eastern hemisphere, as a common personification of nature that focuses on her life-giving and nurturing aspects in the form of the mother. In this scene, "Sister Earth" might be a more appropriate term than "Mother Earth," because the former connotes a young woman who is brimming over with youth, vitality, and fertility.

Probably, far more common and significant images in *Zorba the Greek* are those of animals. A close examination of the book clearly reveals that Kazantzakis is very fond of using a variety of animal images—to the point of being somewhat excessive. In the opening chapter, for instance, Captain Lemonis enters the café and tells the sailors how the lightning has struck the masts of his ship during the storm: “Eh, what beasts we are we human beings!” (21). A little later, in the next chapter, Zorba says to the narrator, “A man in his youth is a wild animal, a ferocious beast that eats other men!” (29). And then he immediately adds, “Yes, he also eats sheep, hens, and suckling pigs. . . . But no, he’s not satisfied unless he eats another man” (29–30). According to Zorba, not only young men but all men are, in fact, wild beasts. In the novel, he more than once makes the narrator believe that people are mere wild beasts rather than noble creatures created by God. This is the reason why Zorba tells the narrator that he should abandon his books because wild beasts do not read books. Unlike the narrator, who has faith in human nature, Zorba has no faith in anything. Zorba makes it clear when he gets very angry about his employer’s meddling with his mine workers:

“Human beings are brutes!” he shouted angrily, banging his staff on the stones. “Great big brutes. The likes of you don’t know this; everything came to you too easily. But ask me. Brutes, I’m telling you. If you treat them badly, they respect and dread you; if you treat them well, they cause your ruin. Keep your distance, Boss. . . . Keep your distance, Boss, for our own good!” (Kazantzakis 2014, 67–68).

Zorba’s repeated warnings (“Keep your distance!”) indicate the extent to which most of the crew (and all human beings as well) resemble wild beasts, whose actions are, by and large, governed by the law of the jungle where brutality and self-interest reign, devoid of ethics and morality. As Zorba describes to the narrator near the end of the novel, the Bulgarians attack the Greeks, “howling like wolves” (318) in order to frighten them. Positioned at the top of the food chain, wolves prey primarily on large, hooved mammals, such as deer, elk, moose, bison, and musk oxen, among others. Given that the many characters (most notably Alexis Zorba), however, do not often differentiate human beings from animals, Kazantzakis’s excessive use of animal imagery is quite understandable, or even a prerequisite for the novel.

The opening scene of Chapter 5, in which Uncle Anagnostis invites the narrator and Zorba as well as some villagers for a meal, provides a good illustration of animal imagery. The host treats his guests to roasted hogs’ unmentionables as a delicious *hors-d’oeuvre*. At that moment the wicket gate to the enclosure yields to a powerful thrust from a bellowing hog, who

darts out into the garden. Practically fainting from pain, the beast runs back and forth in front of the men, who sit there pleasantly conversing while eating its unmentionables. Zorba says sympathetically, “The poor thing is hurting” (75), which is soon followed by Uncle Anagnostis’s laughing reply: “You bet it’s hurting! . . . If they did the same to you, wouldn’t you be hurting too?” (75). Zorba is made to squirm when the aged Cretan relates the pigs’ misfortune in human terms. In this apparently comic scene, the reader is indisputably reminded of the tragic human condition.

This tragic human condition is further exemplified by the image of worms in the novel. Talking about his experience as one of the partisans of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, Zorba tells the narrator that human beings, regardless of nationality and morality, will be ultimately eaten by worms when they die. This is why Zorba states that all humans share a common destiny: “Poor miserable devils! We’re brothers, all of us. Food for worms” (253). A little later on, in Madame Hortense’s deathbed scene, Mimithos crosses himself and shouts that her face is beginning to fill with worms. In response to that, Uncle Anagnostis immediately says, shaking his aristocratic head:

You think that’s strange, you crazy lunatic? You should know that we humans are full of worms from the moment we’re born, but we can’t see them. As soon as they realize that we’re beginning to stink, they come out of their holes, as white as can be, just like cheese mites (Kazantzakis 2014, 296).

This apparently pessimistic statement made by Uncle Anagnostis reminds the reader of what Zorba tells the narrator about human beings as the ultimate food for worms. This image of human beings as mere food for worms becomes more evident later on when the narrator thinks of the dead body of Madame Hortense. He realizes that “human beings can endure everything except those minuscule white maggots” (324).

In *Zorba the Greek*, the dogs are often used as an effective image for domesticity and docility. For example, Mimithos, after the terrible murder of the widow Sourmelina by Mavrandonis, is described as sitting outside her orchard, “hunched up and cowed like a beaten dog” (285). Hearing her husband’s demeaning comment about herself, one of the village’s old wives is described as growling “like a chomping dog on a leash” (197). Zorba gives the narrator “the look of a thrashed dog” (316) when the first test of the cable railway for timber transportation fails. A friend of the narrator’s, Karayannis, refers to his two-year-old daughter of mixed blood born to him and his Usambara woman as a mere pet animal. In a letter he writes to the narrator, saying, “I love her, but in the same way that one loves one’s dog