You are required to read two books for English this summer:

1) Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

2) Your choice of one of the twenty books that follow.

**We will give you a multiple-choice test** on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* during the first week of school next fall; therefore, 1) read the novel with care this summer; 2) bring your copy of it when you return in the fall and review the novel carefully before the test. The test will ask you to show a solid knowledge of the details of the novel and of its overall structure. For the most part, the questions will be based on the study questions at the end of this document (and the knowledge of the novel those questions require).

**In addition, we will ask you to write an in-class essay** on whichever of the twenty books you choose to read in an English class during the first week of school. You will need your copies of your text(s) to write this essay.

**NOTE:** Your test and in-class essay will be graded and will count as a substantial part of your first-quarter grade.

We have created a study guide for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—a brief introduction to the novel, followed by some questions to think about as you read. Please print out and use this material.

**The Twenty Novels: Choose One**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*
Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*
Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*
Don Delillo, *White Noise*
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*
George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
Louise Erdrich, *The Round House*
William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*
Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*
Adam Johnson, *The Orphan Master’s Son*
James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist a Young Man*
Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Vol. 1*
Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*
Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*
Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
Richard Wright, *Native Son*
Study Guide for Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

Born in Czechoslovakia in 1929, Milan Kundera lived and wrote there until 1975, when he was blacklisted by the Soviet-controlled Communist government. He then emigrated to France, where he has lived and written since. Thus, he wrote *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (published in 1984) as an émigré or exile, looking back on times and places he had known—specifically, Czechoslovakia in the years before and after the Soviet invasion in 1968. The novel is informed, unsurprisingly, by a horror of totalitarianism, but does not limit this horror to Communist totalitarianism, seeing the same essential problems in all political ideologies.

The novel (Kundera’s most famous) is well known both for its portrayal of individual lives affected by Communist repression and for its questions and ideas about (contemporary) life in general. The narrator is himself a character, and like the novel’s other characters, he has many questions; to some extent the events and feelings the novel presents may help us, as readers, to answer these questions for ourselves. The book’s most central question is how to make sense of our lives when they happen only once. Since they happen only once, since history itself happens only once, how can we ever judge or evaluate our own actions or decisions? We will never know whether, if we had acted differently, our lives (or our country) would have been better or worse.

Kundera associates with this question the contrasting concepts “lightness” and “heaviness.” If we think of our lives as happening only once, they are “unbearably [intolerably] light,” the narrator says, since we can never attach a clear meaning or significance to anything that happens in them; on the other hand, if we think of our lives as happening over and over again, they are “intolerably heavy,” the narrator says, because everything we do will continue to matter forever. Different characters in the novel seem to live more lightly or heavily, depending on their beliefs and characters. With lightness, Kundera associates both freedom and meaninglessness (p. 5); with heaviness, both bondage and meaning (p. 5). Is it better, Kundera seems continually to ask, to live as if our lives are light (free, but insignificant) or heavy (constrained, but meaningful)? Do we have a choice?

Here are some questions to think about as you read and to help you prepare for your essay and test.

**Study Questions**

*Part One ‘Lightness and Weight’ (pp. 1-35):*
1) How do you see Tomas, Teresa, and their relationship in terms of lightness and heaviness? What do you make of Teresa’s suitcase?
2) What significance do you see in their differing ideas about sex and love, especially in terms of lightness and heaviness?
3) What is the role of chance in their relationship? Why does Tomas seem to think that chance is different from fate? (Follow the concepts of chance and fate in the novel and see if they always seem different; in particular follow the sentence, “Es muss sein.”—“It must be.”)
Part Two “Soul and Body” (pp. 39-78):
1) Why does Teresa view “the body” as she does? What does she hope for when she looks at her own body, by contrast?
2) Kundera defines “vertigo” in terms of weakness and strength, concepts that turn out to be important in the relationship between Tomas and Teresa. What important role does “vertigo” play in this part of the novel?

Part Three “Words Misunderstood” (pp. 81-127)
1) Why can’t Franz and Sabina understand each other? How, in terms of the novel’s ideas, does this couple relate to Tomas and Teresa?

Parts Four and Five “Soul and Body” and “Lightness and Weight” (pp. 131-240)
1) How do Tomas and Teresa react differently to their return to Prague and a “police state”? How do they react quite similarly? What happens to their relationship during these two years?
2) One of Teresa’s dreams is related as if it were not a dream, but part of the present reality of the novel (Chapters 11-14, pp. 146-151)—why does Kundera present this dream as if it were a reality?

Part Six “The Grand March” (pp. 243-278)
1) What is kitsch? What is the connection, according to the narrator, between kitsch and the story of creation in Genesis? Why does Sabina hate kitsch so much?
2) Why does the narrator remark, “No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition”?
3) Kundera seems to use Franz’s trip and his death as a kind of satire—a satire of what? How is kitsch connected?

Part Seven “Karenin’s Smile” (pp. 281-314)
1) Why is this last section titled “Karenin’s Smile”? What is the significance of the dog in this final section?
2) Are Tomas and Teresa happy at the end of the novel? If so, does their happiness consist in their having become light (or lighter)? Heavy (or heavier)? Of one becoming lighter and the other heavier?

Sample multiple-choice question:

1. Sabina and Franz end their relationship when
   A. Sabina abandons Franz when he makes their love public and she feels him become a burden.
   B. he meets a young bespectacled student who loves him.
   C. he recognizes his own guilt and chooses to return to Marie-Claude.
   D. she flees Prague and he does not.
   E. Marie-Claude discovers Franz’s infidelity and she forces him to break it off.
   
   Answer: A