



Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

...Once more the odious courtesies began, the first handed the knife across K. to the second, who handed it across K. back again to the first. K. now perceived clearly that he was supposed to seize the knife himself, as it traveled from hand to hand above him, and plunge it into his own breast. But he did not do so, he merely turned his head, which was still free to move, and gazed around him. He could not completely rise to the occasion, he could not relieve the officials of all their tasks; the responsibility for this last failure of his lay with him who had not left him the remnant of strength necessary for the deed...

--from *The Trial*

Franz Kafka, b. Prague, Bohemia (then belonging to Austria), July 3, 1883, d. June 3, 1924, has come to be one of the most influential writers of this century. Virtually unknown during his lifetime, the works of Kafka have since been recognized as symbolizing modern man's anxiety-ridden and grotesque alienation in an unintelligible, hostile, or indifferent world. Kafka came from a middle-class Jewish family and grew up in the shadow of his domineering shopkeeper father, who impressed Kafka as an awesome patriarch. The feeling of impotence, even in his rebellion, was a syndrome that became a pervasive theme in his fiction. Kafka did well in the prestigious German high school in Prague and went on to receive a law degree in 1906. This allowed him to secure a livelihood that gave him time for writing, which he regarded as the essence--both blessing and curse--of his life. He soon found a position in the semipublic Workers' Accident Insurance institution, where he remained a loyal and successful employee until--beginning in 1917--tuberculosis forced him to take repeated sick leaves and finally, in 1922, to retire. Kafka spent half his time after 1917 in sanatoriums and health resorts, his tuberculosis of the lungs finally spreading to the larynx.

Kafka lived his life in emotional dependence on his parents, whom he both loved and resented. None of his largely unhappy love affairs could wean him from this inner dependence; though he longed to marry, he never did. Sexually, he apparently oscillated between an ascetic aversion to intercourse, which he called "the punishment for being together," and an attraction to prostitutes. Sex in Kafka's writings is frequently connected with dirt or guilt and treated as an attractive abomination. Nevertheless, Kafka led a fairly active social life, including acquaintance with many prominent literary and intellectual figures of his era, such as the writers Franz Werfel and Max Brod. He loved to hike, swim, and row, and during vacations he took carefully planned trips. He wrote primarily at night, the days being preempted by his job.

None of Kafka's novels was printed during his lifetime, and it was only with reluctance that he published a fraction of his shorter fiction. This fiction included *Meditation* (1913; Eng. trans., 1949), a collection of short prose pieces; *The Judgment* (1913; Eng. trans., 1945), a long short story, written in 1912, which Kafka himself considered his decisive breakthrough (it tells of a rebellious son condemned to suicide by his father); and *The Metamorphosis* (1915; Eng. trans., 1961), dealing again with the outsider, a son who suffers the literal and symbolic transformation into a huge,

repulsive, fatally wounded insect. In the *Penal Colony* (1919; Eng. trans., 1961) is a parable of a torture machine and its operators and victims--equally applicable to a person's inner sense of law, guilt, and retribution and to the age of World War I. *The Country Doctor* (1919; Eng. trans., 1946) was another collection of short prose. At the time of his death Kafka was also preparing *A Hunger Artist* (1924; Eng. trans., 1938), four stories centering on the artist's inability either to negate or come to terms with life in the human community.

Contrary to Kafka's halfhearted instruction that his unprinted manuscripts be destroyed after his death, his friend Max Brod set about publishing them and thus became the architect of his belated fame. The best known of the posthumous works are three fragmentary novels. *The Trial* (1925; Eng. trans., 1937) deals with a man persecuted and put to death by the inscrutable agencies of an unfathomable court of law. *The Castle* (1926; Eng. trans., 1930) describes the relentless but futile efforts of the protagonist to gain recognition from the mysterious authorities ruling (from their castle) the village where he wants to establish himself. *Amerika* (1927; Eng. trans., 1938), written early in Kafka's career, portrays the inconclusive struggle of a young immigrant to gain a foothold in an alien, incomprehensible country. In all of these works, as indeed in most of Kafka's mature prose, the lucid, concise style forms a striking contrast to the labyrinthine complexities, the anxiety-laden absurdities, and the powerfully oppressive symbols of torment and anomie that are the substance of the writer's vision. Kafka's fiction, somewhat like ink-blot tests, elicits and defeats attempts at conclusive explanation. Practically every school of modern criticism has produced a corpus of interpretations. Kafka's own aphorisms, however, may come the closest to offering a key.

Bibliography: Brod, Max, *Franz Kafka*, 2d ed. (1960); Citati, Pietro, *Kafka* (1990); Flores, Angel, ed., *The Kafka Debate* (1977); Glatzer, N. N., *The Loves of Franz Kafka* (1985); Gray, Ronald, ed., *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962); Hayman, Ronald, *Kafka* (1982); Heller, Erich, *Franz Kafka* (1975); Karl, Frederick R., *Franz Kafka: Representative Man* (1992); Lawson, R. H., *Franz Kafka* (1987); Pawel, E., *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (1984); Politzer, Heiny, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (1962); Sokel, Walter H., *Franz Kafka* (1966); Udoff, Alan, ed., *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance* (1987).

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[I would add [Milan Kundera's Testaments Betrayed](#) (*Les testaments trahis*, 1993) as essential to the beginning scholar of Kafka, particularly as a refutation of Brod's misguided beatification of him, and also [Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Literature](#) (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1980), one of which covers "The Metamorphosis". --RD]

Homepages, Biographies, Bibliographies

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Works Online

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Kafka Entries at NYU Medical

- [A Country Doctor](#)
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- [In the Penal Colony](#)
- [The Metamorphosis](#)
- [A Report to an Academy](#)

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