JVG

1. Examine this extract from Jakob von Gunten. **What does Jakob’s CV** tell us about his character and his world view? Why does Herr Benjamenta seem to enjoy reading this? What does this tell you about their relationship?
2. **Compare and contrast the representation of gender roles** in TWO of the following texts: Kafka’s Die Verwandlung; Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig; Walser’s Jakob von Gunten and Schnitzler’s Fräulein Else.
3. **Discuss the significance of space and place** for TWO of the following texts: Kafka’s Die Verwandlung; Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig; Walser’s Jakob von Gunten; Kaiser’s Von morgens bis mitternachts.
4. Analyse Jakob’s **‘Selbsterziehungspläne’** in Jakob von Gunten: to what extent does he succeed in his aim to become a ‘**reizende, kugelrunde Null’? (perfectly round zero)**
5. Focusing on the relationship between Jakob and Herr Benjamenta, analyse the following passage from Robert Walser’s Jakob von Gunten and its significance for the book as a whole. **To what extent do we see the master being enslaved by his slave here?**
6. **Dreams, in Freud’s view, were all forms of “wish fulfillment**” by which the unconscious tries to resolve some form of conflict which may be recent or from the recesses of the past. **Discuss the role of dreams** in two of the following texts: Schnitzler’s Fräulein Else, Walser’s Jakob von Gunten, Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig.
7. According to Franz Kuna: “The feeling of not quite fitting into the age, of being strangely out of tune, was a matter of considerable moral and psychological concern to the ‘moderns’; and they contrasted the solid bourgeois spirits who seemed to sit so harmoniously in the world with their own situation: passive, nervous, decadent, ugly, men without qualities**.” To what extent do you agree with this assessment of modernism**? Refer in your answer to two of the following texts: Walser’s Jakob von Gunten, Mann’s Der Tod in Venedig, Kafka’s Die Verwandlung.
8. **Break with tradition+ longing for renewal.**
9. **Compare and contrast the representation of the modern city.**

**The Double Fiction in JVG**

* **Text alludes to tradition of *Bildungsroman.*** Indicated by location in a school or Bildungsanstalt. In line with this Jakob promises his development over time. Does not predict however his degeneration into a subordinate subject.
* **He anticipates ‘amounting to nothing’.** Which would rank as a failure in any other kind of work, but here becoming nothing seen as an excellent achievement, next closest thing to godliness.
* **Jakob assigns Herr Benjamenta as his ‘ersatz’ paternal figure.** However, although he is the supposed subordinate, he must compel Herr to assume the role of the master. Overlooked is the quest for freedom that leads Jakob to a school where hierarchy is paramount.
* **Institute Benjamenta-** trapped in a bygone era. Metropolis city surrounding is modern? Central tenet is that all men are created equal.
* **Jakob implies equality is a form of enslavement as it deprives the individual of the ideals necessary to exercise freedom.** Sentiment not expressed directly, instead put in the mouth of his brother Johann.
* **"Die Masse, das ist der Sklave von heute, und der Einzelne ist der Sklave des grossartigen Massengedankens. Es gibt nichts Schones und Vortreffliches mehr. Du must dir das Schone und Gute und Rechtschaffene traumen. Sage mir, verstehst du zu traumen?" (67) (critique of modernity).**
* **Johann’s critique of modernity-** masses no longer have any ideals eg ‘the beautiful’, ‘the good’, ‘the upright’), they are enslaved as they have no occasion to demonstrate that they are free. Faced with this paradox of republicanism Jakob can only dream of becoming a servant who is a master of his destiny.
* **A servant is master of his fate because he is free- free to serve anyone who is in need.** A servant has access to eternity as his work/ service is never complete. Accordingly, the two virtues are emphasized in the institutes curriculum are **patience and obedience**, each is orientated toward the future: **Der Unterricht, den wir geniessen, besteht hauptsachlich darin, uns Geduld und Gehorsam einzupr?gen, zwei Eigenschaften, die wenig oder gar keinen Erfolg versprechen. Innere Erfolge, ja. Doch was hat man von solchen? (7)**
* **Patience and obedience usually characterised as passive dispositions-** here not justified, on the contrary the two are arguably the most wilful dispositions as subject is required to attend both present and the future, thus both can never fully be mastered. As a result, they never yield any rewards save the reward of the exercise itself. Jakob calls this reward ‘inner success’.
* **Teaching at school divided in theoretical and practical instruction:** majority of practical sessions include gymnastics, dance, role playing **(give shape to the body).** Also to give life to the law, so that the law may in turn guide the lives of the students: **Wir erfassen eines ums andere, und haben wir etwas erfasst, so besitzt es uns qua si. Nicht wir besitzen es, sondern im Gegenteil, was wir scheinbar zu unserem Besitz gemacht haben herrscht dann ?ber uns.... Das Gesetz, das befiehlt, der Zwang, der n?tigt, und die vielen unerbittlichen Vorschriften, die uns die Rich tung und den Geschmack angeben: das ist das Gro?e, und nicht wir, wir Eleven. (63-64)**
* **To that extent, students incarnate the law and let it take possession of them, they are placed in another dimension where time stands still even as it continues to pass for everyone around them.** As each student does as the law commands, they are returned to this one moment in the classroom, as if no time has passed. All the residents of the school ‘live on’ without direction or orientation in a dimension where time never passes and no one grows old or withers.
* **Freed from constraints of time, students become riddles-** Kraus is a riddle because no one suspects anything mysterious of him. His distinction is the fact that he is indistinct, has no particularities. **He has internalized the lessons of the servant school so thoroughly that he no longer stands out as an individual**. Rather, he blends in with nature as a natural phenomenon. Jakob refers to him as ‘**das An- den- Schopher- Mahnende’.**
* **Kraus function not only to illuminate what Jakob wants to be, also what he becomes:** Jakob is not only Kraus’s likeness, but also his antithesis in his perchant for irony and word play.
* **Fraulein Benjamenta suddenly dies.** Death means disbanding of the school and all the kids are sent away apart form Jakob who stays behind as the directors’ chosen companion. Children gather round her one final time, Kraus holds a euligy that encapsulates the lessons of the school on the rewards of service**: die Gedanken, die du uns eingepr?gt, die Lehren, und Kenntnisse, die du in uns befestigt hast, werden uns immer an dich, die Sch?pferin des Guten, was in uns ist, erinnern. Ganz von selber. Essen wir, so wird uns die Gabel sagen, wie du w?nschtest, da? wir sie f?hren und handhaben sollen.... In uns herrschest, gebietest, lebst, erziehst und fragst und tonst du weiter.**
* **Fraulein Benjamenta lives on in her students, as they live through her.** She is responsible for all their teachings and is simultaneously all they know. **Their professions require that they live their lives without any recognition or monetary reward.** Only reward they can claim is that they embody the law (law is its own reward).
* **This is the meaning of the phrase ‘ganz von unten’.** The law compensates those who serve it ‘of its own accord’. It grants ‘den Guten’, ‘ganz von unten’ eternal life, albeit at the price of any recognition for their accomplishment.
* **The ‘inner chambers’ are the rooms where the Benjamentas reside.** Only student who has seen it is Kraus. One evening Jakob is transported there when Frau Benjamenta appears behind him and puts her hands on his shoulders, as if bestowing a blessing on him. Transported to a cavernous place underground, Frau Benjamenta is his guide.
* **Although they claim to walk from room to room, more appropriate to say each room blends into the other like shifting stills or camera frames.** Rooms are too literary however to be viewed as citations of film technology. **Each room is the translation of an allegorical figure; represents a particular phrase or mood as a physical environment.** Eg. Jakob bumps his head against a wall, FB says: geh **und liebkose die Mauer. Es ist die Sorgen Wand. Sie wird stets vor deinen Blicken aufgerichtet sein" (100).**
* **Inner chambers are significant because they mirror the work as a whole.** Chambers are projections of the inner states. Jakob hinted that the chambers were a fantasy during his first stay by playing on the meanings of the noun ‘Gemach’ (room and comfort) as well as its negation, ‘das ungemach’. When FB utters the noun ‘**das Ungemach’**, Jakob is whisked away and plunged into a ‘Strom von Zweifel’. Other phrases appear as diverse settings, but in the case of ‘das Ungemach’, it does not materialize, it destroys the very illusion by exposing the chambers as nothing, but a vision based in words and nothing else. (Punctured like a balloon- Peter Utz).
* **Jakob’s passage through the narrow and winding corridors of the chambers end in a pool of grief-** ‘Strom von Zweifel’, in which he almost drowns. The passage through the inner chambers is a birth.

An Existential Crisis: The significance of the Opening and Concluding passages of Robert Walser’s Jacob von Gunten.

* **Walser picks up the theme of subordination and autonomy in his satire of modernism to portray aporias erected atop inter- discursivity of power, religion and ideology that issue the boundaries of the modernist society.** Power that is a chosen form of subordination by subjects who are seen to be dominated, it is this that Walser provides the readers the possibility of resistance by disobedience.
* **Walser chooses forms of subordination and domination as a critique of bourgeois, modernism, and course that lead him to an existential nothingness and alienation.**
* JVG takes on a mock- bildungsroman form, however, Jakob’s subordination comes with the acceptance of Mr. Benjamenta as his master but the fact is that this binary of power arises from Jakob’s participation in the institute to become **‘sehr Kleines und Untergeordnetes’. This participation implies choice,** a choice made by an autonomous mind reduced to its basic instinctual criterion of survival in the modern society that is defined by **‘Gelder verschwenden’ . This reification has been used by Walser to portray the structure of social consciousness wherein individuals are left to be identified with objects or things.**
* Believing he will become nothing with the anxiety of the gaze of the others in the society, Jakob wears uniforms that ‘**erniedrigt und erhebt’**, **him but brings a sort of social identity by making him a homogenous human labour, abstracted and defined by what he wears.**
* Jakob seeks to work as a butler because work is the source of money and social identity while he knows that this work will hardly bring him personal fulfilment and progression.
* Authentic existence in Walser is full of despair, ungratefulness, transmogrified autonomous but lacks choice, dispassionate toward the others and is filled with unethical ethics.
* Mr. Benjamenta+ Jakob wander through the desert. **Jakob as the commodified object turns Mr Benjamenta as an autotomized product to overpower him, an object dominating the subject.** This incident shatters the hierarchy of society that in the novel stems from the manifesto of Institute Benjamenta: **‘Wir werden alle etwas sehr Kleines und Ungeordnetes in spateren Leben sein.’**
* Individuals are in need of a leader and in the concluding passage of the novel, the non-violent death of Fraulein Benjamenta and the transition of power, leads to the liberation of the subordinates who now do not have a leader to dominate them. Jakob needs a master and when Fraulein dies, he suffices to a new master which is God himself.
* **The supposed autonomous and authorizing individual is a ‘Null’, as Jakob calls it, a herd animal ready for becoming small and dominated by obeying the principles of the institute.** Jakob’s ignorance for coming to the Institute can be justified by saying that he is nothing, thus innocent and ignorant.

Virtuoso Servitude and (De) Mobilization

* **JVG belongs to ‘slow modernism’. –** vaguely apocalyptic setting, an anachronistic institute for the formation of servants, is a site for deferral, repetition and slumber in the midst of a bustling early twentieth- century metropolis.
* **Modernity’s excess of progressive movement is countered by an ascetic physical discipline of loitering at a school that teaches the virtuosity as an end in itself, more than as a preparation for a future post.**
* **Jakob comes from a noble family and repeatedly states his superiority over the other pupils, yet claims he desired nothing more than to become a ‘reizende, kugelrunde Null’ in later life.**
* **Jakob excels at the sovereign submissiveness of his at once subordinate and superior performance. –** He becomes a virtuoso at conducting his own play- in the sense of game and performance- of absolute servitude. **This simultaneous debasement and empowerment of the subject is reflected in the perpetual shifting of Jakob’s feelings between smallness and grandeur, impotence and omnipotence, obedience and transgression**. After the principal’s declaration of love for his pupil towards end of the novel, it is Jakob who insists on maintaining the hierarchical relationship- **he enjoys being thrown out of Herr Benjamenta’s office and indulges in self- assured laughter: "Wenn ich so lache, nun, dann steht nichts mehr iiber mir. Dann bin ich etwas an Umfassen und Beherrschen nicht zu Uberbietendes. Ich bin in solchen Momenten einfach gross’.**
* **Walser’s Jakob does not want to abandon servility; he refines and mocks its rules and rituals, which can only be done if those very rules are rituals are firmly in place.**
* **Jakob’s acquiescence to being molded is always also a form or role play which includes, as we have seen, its very own reversals (‘**so tun, wie’ evokes ‘so tun, als ob, which is to play act).
* **This discipline implies the formation of a different, second body- a body in uniform, prepared to respond immediately to every imaginable future requirement,** and this thus mirrors the care for the regime that dictates the educational program. **In Walser, the body gains eloquence by entering the symbolic field of domestic servitude, thereby able to speak its desires using the choreographic vocabulary of humility, respect, obedience and adoration** that structures Jakob’s relationship with Lisa and even more so Herr Benjamenta. Expectation of servile and polite behavior is first met with revulsion in the pupil, after a short time acts like knocking at the door, bowing to the principal, come to be experienced as ‘**schicklich und schon’**.

**A bursting Zero of Unknowing: Overcoming the Paradox**

* **Institute Benjamenta: a complete emptying out of self and consciousness as a means of attaining some ineffable and strangely satisfying secret.**
* **The process of Verdummung and Verkleinerung undertaken at the Institute by means of mindless repetition, obedience, and even dance is thus a prerequisite for entering into ‘die geheimnisvolle unbekannte Welt der inner Gemacher’**  which is not so much to crack the riddle **but to become one,** like Kraus, who has reduced himself do successfully that his appearance takes on the characteristics of an unthinking animal **(ein affenahnliches Wesen).**
* **This conflation of nothingness with esoteric knowledge, of emptiness with some new plane of existence, becomes a prominent motif in the novel.**
* **‘eine kugelrunde Null’ – both nothing and that which contains everything.** ‘kugelrund’- frivolous German expression for a plump/ pregnant belly, suggesting the zero is fully round or about to burst. Implies that the image of the bursting zero, height of nothingness somehow turns over into the opposite. Institute’s regiment of learning by emptying out one’s knowledge is in more than one sense- more fulfilling.
* **One of the primary means of (un)learning:** dance consisting primarily of the recitation of rules and ‘eine Art fortwahrend wiederholtes Tanzen’. In its ritualistic repetition, the dance becomes for Jakob one of the main sources of unnamable, esoteric meaning: ‘auch hier steckt ein tiefverborgener Sinn’. A mindless act, therefore is the prerequisite for something prodigious- that which empties one’s head allows access to a deeper meaning behind all things.
* **Paradox:** how can one know that one has reached un-self-consciousness? To know it would be to lose it. Once one is conscious of one’s un-self-consciousness, one is back with the ‘mit-wissen- Vollgepackten’. Instead of being ‘packed full’ one needs to be emptied out, or rather ‘packed full of nothing, like a plump zero.

Institute Benjamenta: trapped in bygone era. Surrounded by modern metropolis city

* **Place where students learn to be a servant (or- unlearn)**
* **Jakob wants to become a servant as he sees equality as a form of enslavement as it deprives the individual of the ideals to exercise freedom.**
* **Jakob can only wish of becoming a servant as a servant is ‘free’ to serve anyone, access to eternity as his work is never complete. Must be both present and future.**
* **His subordination comes with the acceptance of Herr Benajamenta as his master, binary of power stems from Jakob’s participation, implies choice.**
* **2 virtues emphasized in institute are patience and obedience: passive dispositions, subject required to attend both present and future, can never fully be mastered- never yield any reward, reward is exercise itself.**