Biography Resource Center

Franz Kafka

Birth: July 3, 1883 in Prague, Bohemia
Death: June 3, 1924 in Kierling, Klosterneuberg, Austria
Nationality: Czech
Ethnicity: Jewish
Occupation: Writer
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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

One of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka penned novels and short stories that portray the bewildered alienation of modern society. His characters frequently find themselves in threatening situations for which there is no explanation and from which there is no escape. Writing in the *Bookman,* Edwin Muir found that "the four main ideas which run through Kafka's work may be condensed into four axioms. The first two are that, compared with the divine law, no matter how unjust it may sometimes appear to us, all human effort, even the highest, is in the wrong; and that always whatever our minds or our feelings may tell us, the claim of the divine law to unconditional reverence and obedience is absolute. The other two are complementary: that there is a right way of life, and that its discovery depends on one's attitude to powers which are almost unknown."

In an article for the *New Yorker,* John Updike explained: "The century since Franz Kafka was born has been marked by the idea of `modernism' a self-consciousness new among centuries, a consciousness of being new. Sixty years after his death, Kafka epitomizes one aspect of this modern mind-set: a sensation of anxiety and shame whose center cannot be located and therefore cannot be placated; a sense of an infinite difficulty within things, impeding every step; a sensitivity acute beyond usefulness, as if the nervous system, flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain. In Kafka's peculiar and highly original case,

this dreadful quality is mixed with immense tenderness, oddly good humor, and a certain severe and reassuring formality. The combination makes him an artist; but rarely can an artist have struggled against greater inner resistance and more sincere diffidence as to the worth of his art." Among Kafka's most-studied works are the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* and the short stories "The Metamorphosis," "The Hunger Artist," and "In the Penal Colony."

Experiences Social Prejudice Early in Life

Kafka was born into a Jewish family in the city of Prague in 1883. Prague was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time, and Jews were expected to live apart from gentiles in a ghetto area. Kafka's father operated a drygoods store in the ghetto, assisted by his wife, Kafka's mother. The elder Kafka's domineering manner with his son led to the boy's resentment. His mother tried to intervene but, as Richard H. Lawson noted in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "she proved unable to mediate the estrangement between her brusque, domineering husband and her quiet, tyrannized, oversensitive son." In 1901 Kafka entered the Karl-Ferdinand University, an act in open defiance of his father, who wished him to work in the family store. When he turned to the study of law, however, Kafka met with his father's approval. During his college years he met his close friend and future literary executor Max Brod.

Following his graduation from college in 1907, Kafka took a position at an insurance office in Prague. The next year he moved to a government job handling workmen's compensation claims. At this time he also published his first short fiction in a literary magazine. He soon began writing stories drawing on elements from his own life. Lawson found that this early fiction possessed "narrative features ... typical of Kafka: a first-person narrator as a persona of the author, an episodic structure, an ambivalent questor on an ambiguous mission, and pervasive irony." During his lifetime Kafka was to publish short stories in various literary magazines. But his novels, including *The Trial* and *The Castle,* were never completed. In fact, Kafka left orders with his friend Brod to destroy the unfinished manuscripts upon his death. This was something Brod decided not to do following Kafka's death in 1924 from tuberculosis; instead the literary executor published these novels posthumously, assembling the loosely organized manuscripts as he thought best.

Kafka wrote *The Trial* during 1914 in the months following his breakup with his fiancee, Felice Bauer. The couple had met in 1912 and became engaged, but before the engagement was officially announced Kafka had backed out. He became romantically involved with one of Felice's friends, Grete. Despite having broken the engagement himself, Kafka felt rejected by Felice and was soon imploring her to return to him. When she did so, and the two again became engaged, Kafka vowed that his love for Grete would continue despite his engagement. The unsettled emotional entanglements eventually led Felice, her sister, Grete, and Kafka's friend Ernst Weiss to confront the writer in a hotel room to sort out the tangled situation. Kafka would later call the long session a kind of "law court" in which he was put on trial for his confused behavior. With the engagement finally canceled for good, Kafka began writing *The Trial,* a novel based in part on some of the events of his unhappy relationship with Felice. The novel remained out of print until Brod decided to release it a year after Kafka's death. It was published in 1925.

The Trial begins with the mysterious arrest of Joseph K., a bank clerk celebrating his thirtieth birthday. K. has apparently done nothing wrong, but two members of a mysterious Court arrive at his lodgings first thing one morning and place him under arrest. Although arrested, K. is not taken to jail. He is allowed to go on with his life as before, while his efforts to determine just what crime he is supposed to have committed lead nowhere. K.'s ordeal over the course of a year is told in a series of brief, unrelated chapters. Those bureaucrats he meets cannot explain the charge to him, the lawyer he hires to handle his case is equally in the dark, and the judges of the Court remain inaccessible. When K. gains access to the Court's law books, he finds them to be filled with obscenities. K.'s attempts to unravel the mystery of his dilemma are hindered by the contradictory information he receives from those he consults and by the confusing nature of the legal system in which his life has become entangled. At times the court itself seems only a figment of K.'s imagination; it holds its proceedings in such unlikely places as the attics of disreputable buildings.

The Trial Prompts Diverse Critical Commentary

Many critics of *The Trial* have seen it, at least in part, as a story about guilt. In *Reference Guide to World Literature,* B. Ashbrook noted: "Josef K.'s actions betray a recognition on his part that the court does have a claim upon him.... Whatever his words may indicate, his behaviour is that of a man who feels guilty.... Josef K.'s sense of guilt cannot be attributed to any one specific action; nor can it be characterized as universal human guilt. There are other accused men in the story but, equally, there are many who do not stand accused by the court. Josef K.'s failing may be found in his lack of humility and self-understanding, in his aggressive impatience and stubbornness." Commenting on the work of his fellow novelist in an essay collected in his *Gesammelte Werke Volume 12,* Hermann Hesse described the novel's ongoing, mysterious trial as being about "none other than the guilt of life itself. The `accused' are the afflicted ones among the unsuspecting, harmless masses that have a dawning awareness of the terrible truth of all life, an awareness that is gradually strangling their hearts."

The chapter titled "In the Cathedral" offers some support for the idea that *The Trial* is concerned with a kind of universal guilt. In this chapter, K. visits a priest to seek his advice on what to do. The priest reveals that he is a chaplain for the Court and can help explain its enigmatic workings. He relates to K. the parable "Before the Law," a story about a man seeking the Law. When the man arrives at the door leading to the Law, the doorkeeper explains that he cannot let the man in "at present," and so he sits and waits. Years go by and the man is still waiting to be let into the Law. He tries bribing the doorkeeper, pleading with him, and questioning him about the Law's nature, all to no avail. Finally, as the man is dying, he asks the doorkeeper why he has been the only one to ever come seeking the Law. The doorkeeper explains: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was meant for you alone. I am now going to shut it." Following the story, the priest discusses the parable's meaning with K., who ends up as baffled as before about the Law he faces and the Court passing judgment upon him. Erich Heller, in his study *Franz Kafka,* interpreted "Before the Law" as possessing a "terrible charm"; it shows "all the characteristic features of Kafka's art at its most powerful," continued the critic; "-- possessing, that is, the kind of power that is in the gentle wafting of the wind rather than in the thunderous storm, and is the more destructive for it. Parodying Biblical simplicity, ... it expresses the most unholy complications of the intelligence and raises hellish questions in the key of the innocently unquestionable. Its humor is at the same time tender and cruel, teasing the mind with the semblance of light into losing itself in the utmost obscurity."

The parable "Before the Law" encapsulates *The Trial*'s fundamental paradox as well. As K. continues in his efforts to discover the nature of his legal problem with the Court, he comes to realize that the Court has violated its own Law. The priest has told K. that "The Court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go." But as Heinz Politzer explained in his *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox:* "if it is the law of the Law to receive those who come, dismiss those who desire to go, and otherwise remain unmoved and unmovable, then the Court has broken this Law by the very act of arresting K." This fundamental paradox explains the confusion of all the Court officials K. meets who attempt to reconcile the mistake made by the Court with the proper role of the Law.

K.'s growing confusion, disorientation, and desperate attempts to make sense of his situation make *The Trial* a powerful symbol of alienation. "*The Trial,*" wrote Rene Dauvin in *Franz Kafka Today,* "is so mysterious, so vague, that many interpretations are possible. As we stand on the threshold of Kafka's work, we feel uneasy, disoriented. The very form and structure of the novel amaze us, for it escapes all classification and transports us into an atmosphere of hallucination and strange disquiet." Many critics interpret K.'s alienation as that of modern man in a society where traditional values have broken down or as that of every man in a fundamentally mysterious universe. Hesse, for example, argued that *The Trial* was a religious text. Speaking of the brief, unconnected chapters comprising the novel, he wrote: "This oppressive and fearful nightmare image persists until gradually the hidden significance dawns on the reader. Only then do [Kafka's] wilful and fantastic evocations radiate their redemption, only then do we understand that contrary to their appearance as carefully wrought miniatures their significance is not artistic but religious. They are expressions of piety and elicitations of devotion, even reverence."

Ultimately, K.'s confusion is never fully explained. On the eve of his thirty-first birthday, a year after his enigmatic arrest took place, he is knifed to death by two representatives of the Court. He is never given an explanation of the charges made against him, nor provided with knowledge as to the nature of the Court which has had him executed. "Ultimately," Ashbrook concluded, "it is impossible to ascribe any one single meaning to *The Trial.* It presents a double image: an innocent man destroyed by a despotic authority and a guilty man rightly condemned. We are not forced to choose between these possibilities; they co-exist and interpenetrate each other. Kafka's novel constantly challenges the reader to supply his own interpretation of its elusive substance." Similarly, Alvin J. Seltzer, writing in *Chaos in the Novel, the Novel in Chaos,* found that "*The Trial* is surely one of the most unrelenting works of chaos created in the first half of this century, and critics have done it the honor of interpreting it on many levels of significance.... But while the book certainly invites interpretations of a social, political, and religious nature, Kafka seems to have wanted it to evade any facile explanation.... It seems to have been his intention to create a world in which things happen arbitrarily to people whose only fault is in being there at the time."

Brod recounted how Kafka read from the manuscript of *The Trial* to several of his friends. "When Kafka read aloud himself," Brod later recalled in *Franz Kafka: A Biography,* "this humor became particularly clear. Thus, for example, we friends of his laughed quite immoderately when he first let us hear the first chapter of *The Trial.*And he himself laughed so much that there were moments when he couldn't read any further. Astonishing enough, when you think of the fearful earnestness of this chapter. But that is how it was. Certainly it was not entirely good, comfortable laughter.... I am only pointing out the fact that is otherwise so easily forgotten in studies of Kafka--the streak of joy in the world and in life."

Same Name, Different Character

A character named K. also appears in Kafka's novel *The Castle,* published in 1926, although he is far different from the character of the same name in *The Trial.* One evening while traveling in the country, K. stops at an inn. In the middle of the night he is awakened and informed that he cannot stay at the inn without permission from the nearby castle. K. claims that he is in fact a land surveyor working for the castle. His claim is at first denied by those in the castle, but later confirmed. At this point K. realizes that those in the castle were "taking up the challenge with a smile." As Ashbrook explained: "This opening establishes a fundamental ambiguity in the relationship between K. and the castle. It is never clear whether K. has really been summoned by the castle or whether he invents the story to try to justify his presence. In either case his purpose is to penetrate into the castle and to obtain absolute confirmation of the position he claims for himself."

K. finds that the castle is run by Count Westwest and is a dilapidated building on the edge of town. "It houses a vast hierarchy of officials who are constantly engaged in frenetic bureaucratic activity," Ashbrook wrote, "all to no apparent purpose. They are obscene and immoral, regarding the women of the village as their rightful prey while the village sees it as the highest honour for a woman to be the mistress of an official. The castle has absolute dominion over the village. The villagers treat it with awe, devotion, and obedience. To them it is omnipotent and infallible. It seems to assume the qualities which they project onto it."

K.'s efforts to contact those in the castle, and even to visit the building, are consistently blocked. Like his namesake in *The Trial,* K. spends his time trying to gain access to a mysterious bureaucracy which holds unnatural power over his society. But in *The Castle,* he tries unsuccessfully to push the bureaucracy into validating his place in society. "Despite all of K.'s movement and activity," explained Frederick R. Karl in *Journal of Modern Literature,* "he never leaves the periphery of the village, he never finds the path or road that leads to the castle or the castle compound, and he never finds clues to the labyrinthine process in which he finds himself."

The castle sits on a hill near the town. "Its tower belongs to a private house and is of uncertain significance," critic Charles Bernheimer maintained in *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for Our Time.* "It is pierced with windows that glitter in an `insane' manner and is topped with battlements of `unsure, irregular, broken' design. Confused by his perceptive faculties, K. finally resorts to a metaphor to describe the appearance of the Castle. But the image he

chooses, of a deranged ... tenant breaking through the roof and lifting himself up to show himself to the world, is clearly a reflection of his own deranged state of mind." "The castle is, of course, the central symbol of the novel," wrote Peter Mailloux in *A Hesitation before Birth: The Life of Franz Kafka,* "and it is presented much more fully than its obvious counterpart, the court in *The Trial.* But it nonetheless seems just as vague, mysterious, and ultimately ambiguous as the court is."

Ashbrook concluded: "The castle contains an unfathomable bureaucratic authority but, at the same time, the text repeatedly insinuates that it is the seat of some transcendental principle. However, the nature of this principle is not spelled out. It might equally well be argued that it is the principle of divine truth or the principle of evil and negation. The ultimate mystery at the heart of the castle remains a mystery; neither K., nor the reader, can ever know the unknowable."

Short Fiction Captures Public Interest

Among Kafka's most widely studied short stories are "The Metamorphosis," "A Hunger Artist," and "In the Penal Colony," which were included in anthologies of his stories published between 1914 and 1919. As Dennis Vannatta wrote in the *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* "No writer has more memorably dramatized the alienation of the individual in a fathomless world than Kafka in his short fiction. Kafka's short stories writhe with strain and struggle, with seeking, searching, questing, asking. They almost never resolve themselves by answering, finding, arriving. Inevitably the struggle ends in death ... , in the realization that the struggle is endless ... , or in the even more bitter conclusion that the concept of `goal' or `end' is itself a deception.... In the hands of another writer the very intensity of the struggle might imply a certain existential affirmation, but not so in Kafka, where the greater the struggle, the more cruel the `punch line' at the end."

One of the most frequently studied stories in all of literature, "The Metamorphosis" concerns Gregor Samsa, an ordinary man who wakes one morning to discover himself inexplicably transformed into a giant insect. Although Gregor and his family try to deal with this horrific situation, things do not improve and Gregor is eventually killed during an argument with his father. While the story is fantastic, Kafka relates the tale in a realistic manner. Only the fact of Gregor's transformation is at all unusual; all of the other incidents in the story are ordinary and believable. Beginning from its outlandish premise, "The Metamorphosis" develops logically to a rational conclusion.

Man-into-Bug Imagery Prompts Freudian Interpretation

"The Metamorphosis," wrote Susanne Klingenstein in the *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* "centers on a son who takes over the role of the father as caretaker of the family, finds himself transformed into an enormous insect, and is left to die in his room by his visibly revived family. In much of the critical literature Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant bug is taken one of three ways: to signify his sense of guilt and desire for punishment for having usurped the role of the father, to symbolize both a libidinous rebellion and the condemnation of such a rebellion, or to represent a rebellious assertion of unconscious desires and energies that are identical with the primitive and infantile demands of the id."

More important to the story than how Gregor has become an insect--no explanation is even offered as to how such a thing occurred--is how others react to his unfortunate condition. The story is divided into three parts, with each part dealing with Gregor the insect emerging from his room and being confronted by someone. In the first part, it is his employer, who has come to Gregor's apartment because he is late for work. Gregor works as a salesperson for a company to which his family owes a large debt. His employment is helping to pay off this debt. Although he despises his work, Gregor has continued with the firm on his family's behalf. The first part of the story deals with Gregor's efforts to come to terms with his transformation, to find a way to climb out of his bed, and finally to summon the courage to open the door to his room so that his family and his boss will see him in this hideous state. "The story's first part," noted Klingenstein, "is desperate slapstick.... When Gregor finally manages to open the door of his room and reveals himself to his assembled family and his boss, their horrified reaction confirms that he is

indeed a giant cockroach." Gregor's father drives him back into the room using a cane and a newspaper.

The second part of the story deals with Gregor's family and their attempts to live with him in his current condition. His sister brings him food and treats him as an invalid who needs special care. She decides that it is best that all the furniture and other human decorations in the room be removed. But while she and the mother are removing the items, Gregor reacts strongly to their taking down a particular print off his wall. Politzer wrote: "For the insect, the print becomes the one of his possessions to which he is determined to adhere both physically and metaphorically. He creeps up to the picture and covers it with his body when mother and sister threaten to remove it." Gregor's defiance leads to a fight with his father, who chases him around the room and finally throws apples at his hapless insect-like progeny. One of the apples cracks the shell of Gregor's back.

In the story's third and final part Gregor is again isolated in his room, suffering from the damage caused by the thrown apple. His family "no longer see in Gregor a transformed family member," noted Klingenstein, "but primarily an animal." Left alone, Gregor is forced to confront the transformation he has undergone, realizing that he is no longer human. When he makes one final attempt to emerge from his room, drawn by the sound of his sister playing the violin, his appearance scares the family's three new boarders. His sister, whom he had relied upon until then, decides that Gregor must be gotten rid of. "As if to indulge and oblige his family one more time," Klingenstein wrote, "Gregor dies during the following night and is thrown out into the garbage by the charwoman the next morning. The remaining family members celebrate their liberation by taking a day off from their jobs and embarking on a train ride into the countryside."

Lawson called "The Metamorphosis" "one of the most widely read and discussed works of world literature: a shocking and yet comic tragedy of modern man's isolation, inadequacy, and existential guilt.... [The story] is compact, artistically and formally structured." According to John Updike, writing in the *New Yorker,* "The Metamorphosis" "alone would assure [Kafka] a place in world literature.... an indubitable masterpiece."

Growing Literary Reputation Enhanced after Death

"A Hunger Artist" was one of the works Kafka had instructed his friend Max Brod to burn upon the writer's death. Instead, Brod arranged for the story's publication. The work of short fiction details the career of a hunger artist, a man who makes a living in a sideshow by going on prolonged, even dangerous, fasts. At first, the public is enthralled with the idea and the hunger artist prospers. He tours the major European cities. But after a time his audience loses interest, and the hunger artist finds that he is so dedicated to his art that he does not mind. No longer able to fill major halls, he instead joins a traveling carnival where he goes on fasting as a novelty act. Because there is no longer an audience interested in what he is doing, the hunger artist is finally able to fast as long as he wants, until he achieves a lonely and unremarked-upon death. "At the end," noted Lawson, "he dies unnoticed in a pile of dirty straw. His dying reply to the question of why he pursued his unusual--but in nineteenth-century Europe not unique-- profession is that he could not find the food he liked; if he had, he would have made no fuss but would have eaten just like anyone else." The hunger artist fails to make known to either his audience or the reader exactly what manner of food he would have accepted, an omission that Lawson noted "has given rise to the critical suggestion that it is spiritual provender that he is talking about."

Kafka's character of the hunger artist has been interpreted by some critics as a symbol of the creative artist whose efforts were once appreciated by society but are now scorned. As Grace Eckley explained in the *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* "The artist, then, lives an existence trapped in his own nature and between two worlds of pleasing others and pleasing himself. If he were not an artist, no system could make him one; because he is an artist, no system can prevent his being so." Politzer commented: "The art of this Artist is a negative performance. His fasting represents a passive act, which is a paradox. Running counter to human nature, it may, at least in the minds of a curious crowd, have proved attractive, so long as it was performed as a show of self-denial and a feast of sacrifice. Our Artist, however, was cheating even when he thought that he was working honestly; he could not help starving himself; he was forced into his fanatically pursued profession by the absence of the unknown nourishment appropriate to him and his tastes. His art is produced by a deficiency, and the question whether he is at fault for not

finding the right food or whether the world is to be blamed for not providing him with it, this question aims ultimately at the meaning of the role that the artist performs in any kind of human context." Frederick R. Karl, in his *Franz Kafka: Representative Man,* argued that the hunger artist represents even more than the artist, but that of a spiritual man as well. Once the hunger artist left behind his glamorous days as a popular entertainer and joined the carnival, he was able to devote his energies exclusively to fasting. At this stage "the hunger artist," Karl wrote, "is becoming a shaman, a clairvoyant, a seer.... He has questioned the very foundation of the existence of the ordinary. He opens up questions of existential experience, of the individual edging toward the abyss, of a creature attempting to move ever closer ... toward that forbidden borderline between life and death where the ultimate mysteries lie." Robert W. Stallman, writing in *Accent,* concluded: "`The Hunger Artist' is one of Kafka's perfections and belongs with the greatest short stories of our time."

Creates Vivid Images of Violence, Captivity, and Death

Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony" was written in 1914, published in German in 1919, and translated into English in 1948. It takes place in a prison camp on a remote island. The story opens with an officer of the camp showing a visiting explorer a machine used to execute prisoners. The complicated apparatus is fixed with needles that pierce the condemned man's flesh, writing into his skin the law he has been charged with breaking and killing the man in the process. While preparing the machine for use, the officer complains to the explorer that the present commandant of the camp shows no interest in this remarkable machine. The former commandant had built the machine and enjoyed using it frequently, while the new commandant is more interested in women. The officer tries to enlist the explorer's aid in persuading the new commandant of the machine's value. When it comes time to execute the prisoner, the explorer finally speaks out against the proceedings. This moves the officer to realize that his last chance of using the explorer to gain the commandant's favor is lost. He releases the prisoner and climbs onto the execution machine himself, setting it to write the law "Be Just" into his body. The machine breaks down while operating, however, and the needles move about crazily, tearing the officer apart. Following this the explorer, seemingly unmoved by the events he has witnessed, leaves the island.

Criticism of "In the Penal Colony" often focuses on its religious themes. As Klingenstein noted in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* "The novella can be read as an allegory of the transition from the stern, purifying notion of Justice in Judaism to the softer, seemingly more charitable and humanitarian attitude in Christianity. Like Yahweh the old commandant, who had always been remote and has now been superseded, was `soldier, judge, mechanic, chemist and draughtsman,' whereas the new commandant is surrounded by women like Christ."

In contrast to this view, Douglas Angus in *Criticism,* who called "In the Penal Colony" "a remarkable story about a diabolical machine," saw the execution machine as a symbol for the Godless, mechanistic nature of the universe itself. He drew a parallel between the machine of the story with "those dangerous factory machines which so mutilated the workers in Kafka's day and which his work with the Insurance Institute made him so conscious of. These machines were a part of that very real and monstrous world in which Kafka found himself; they were a part of, and a symbol of, that total mechanistic universe in which he lived. From this system too God had departed. If you sought Him for explanation, pity or recompense, you were likely to end up in the red tape of The Workers' Accidental Insurance Institute."

Writing in his *Of War and War's Alarms: Fiction and Politics in the Modern World,* Paul J. Dolan saw "In the Penal Colony" as a story with personal and political dimensions. It is, he wrote, "Kafka's artistic statement of his sense of self-torture and the fantasies of self-destruction with which he lived. The story is also a prophecy of the horrors of German National Socialism in Europe from 1933 to 1945. The two visions, personal and public, psychological and political, are, in fact, one. The two are united because Kafka attempted no prophecy. He wrote of his own nightmare feelings so completely and so honestly that he wrote the history of the future when others made those feelings of guilt and self-torture motives for public policy and the nightmare became everyday reality."

Remains a Subject of Literary Study and Debate

In the years since his death in 1924, Kafka has served as the focus of study of numerous critics, who have attempted to penetrate the seemingly impenetrable works he composed during his brief life through use of psychoanalytic, theological, and political analysis. A reflection of the age in which he lived, a time and place marked by immense social and political upheaval poised on the verge of a social and cultural evolution that often was enacted through violent means, Kafka's body of work can be seen to reflect turn-of-the century Europe and prefigure a bellicose nation poised on the brink of declaring war on the world.

Summing up the variety of criticism "In the Penal Colony" has generated, Arnold Weinstein wrote in *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature:* "Like all of Kafka's best stories, `In the Penal Colony' is maddeningly rife with multiple and contradictory interpretations. Some have made it announce Auschwitz and Dachau; others have seen in it a grim reminder of harsher Old Testament values, according to which our modern liberal world stands either condemned or threatened; the brief tale has been read psychologically, psychoanalytically, anthropologically, historically, paradoxically and parabolically. No matter how one reads it, however, the story's resolution, i.e., the explorer's response to the penal colony, appears so ambivalent that it becomes effectively impossible to do the very thing that is central here and happening everywhere in Kafka: pronounce judgment."

"If one were to judge the worth of an author solely according to the amount of critical commentary which his works have generated," wrote A. P. Foulkes, summing up the German writer's body of work in *Reference Guide to World Literature,* "then there is no doubt that Franz Kafka has already earned his place beside Shakespeare, Goethe, and Cervantes. The primary attraction and challenge for the critic lie in the strange and enigmatic quality of the fiction, its disturbing capacity to invite and yet resist interpretation, and at the same time the intuitive belief of many readers that they are being addressed by a writer who has managed to capture in words the very essence of 20th-century experience and angst."

"Kafka is one of the founders of modern literature," wrote Lawson in his description of the author's overall accomplishment. "His claim to greatness includes his service in completely collapsing the aesthetic distance that had traditionally separated the writer from the reader.... Finally, in an age that celebrates the mass, Kafka redirects the focus to the individual. His characters stand for themselves as individuals; in the case of the male protagonists--and almost all of his protagonists are male--they stand for Kafka himself."

UPDATES

March 14, 2005: *Kafka's Trial,* an opera based on the writer's life, opened at the Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen. The work was composed by Poul Ruders and librettist Paul Bentley. **Source:** *New York Times,* <http://www.nytimes.com>, March 14, 2005.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born July 3, 1883, in Prague, Bohemia (now Czechoslovakia); died of tuberculosis of the larynx, June 3, 1924, in Kierling, Klosterneuburg, Austria; buried in Jewish cemetery in Prague-Straschnitz, Czechoslovakia; son of Hermann (a merchant and manufacturer) and Julie (Loewy) Kafka; children: one son. *Education:* Ferdinand-Karls University (Prague), earned doctorate in law, 1906; also attended technical institute in Prague. *Religion:* Jewish.

CAREER

Writer. Worked for attorney Richard Loewy drafting legal notices, Prague, Bohemia (now Czechoslovakia), 1906; intern in law courts, Prague, 1906-07; staff member of insurance company Assicurazioni Generali, Prague, 1907-08; Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia, Prague, specialist in accident prevention and workplace safety, 1908-22. Worked at Prague Asbestos Works Hermann & Co. (manufacturers), Zizkov, Bohemia, 1911-17.

WORKS

- ## Writings
- ## *Short Fiction*

- **1913:** *Der Heizer: Ein Fragment* (title means "The Stoker: A Fragment"; also see below), Kurt Wolff (Leipzig), limited edition, illustrated by Elisabeth Siefer, Mary S. Rosenberg, 1985.
- **1913:** *Betrachtung* (title means "Meditations"; includes stories later translated as "Children on a Country Road," "Unmasking a Confidence Trickster," "Excursion into the Mountains," and "The Street Window"; also see below), Rowohlt.
- **1915:** *Die Verwandlung* (also see below), Kurt Wolff, new edition edited by Majorie L. Hoover, Norton (New York City), 1960, translated by A. L. Lloyd as *The Metamorphosis,* Parton, 1937, Vanguard Press, 1946, expanded as *Metamorphosis and Other Stories,* translation by Willa and Edwin Muir, Penguin, 1961.
- **1916:** *Das Urteil: Eine Geschichte* (title means "The Judgement: A Story"; also see below), Kurt Wolff.
- **1919:** *In der Strafkolonie,* Kurt Wolff, translated by Willa Muir and Edwin Muir and C. Greenberg as *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces,* Schocken (New York City), 1948.
- **1919:** *Ein Landarzt: Kleine Erzaehlungen* (also see below), Kurt Wolff, translated by Vera Leslie as *The Country Doctor: A Collection of Fourteen Stories,* Counter-Point, 1945.
- **1924:** *Ein Hungerkunstler: Vier Geschichten* (includes stories later translated as "A Hunger Artist," "A Little Woman," "First Sorrow," and "Josephine the Singer; or, the Mouse Folk"; also see below), Die Schmiede (Berlin).
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- **1995:** *Give It Up!: And Other Short Stories,* NBM Comics.
- Stories also published in English translation independently and in additional collections and anthologies.

• *Novels*

- **1925:** *Der Prozess,* edited by Brod, Die Schmiede, translation by Willa and Edwin Muir published as *The Trial,* Gollancz (London), 1935, Knopf (New York City), 1937, revised edition with additional chapters translated by E. M. Butler, Secker & Warburg, 1956, definitive edition, with illustrations by George Salter, Knopf, 1957, with drawings by Kafka, Schocken, 1968.
- **1926:** *Das Schloss,* edited by Brod, Kurt Wolff, translation by Willa and Edwin Muir published as *The Castle,* Knopf, 1930, new edition with introduction by Thomas Mann, Knopf, 1941, definitive edition with additional material translated by Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser and introduction by Mann, Secker & Warburg, 1953, Knopf, 1954, revised edition, Schocken, 1974.
- **1927:** *Amerika,* edited by Brod, Kurt Wolff, translation by Willa and Edwin Muir with preface by Mann, afterword by Brod, and illustrations by Emlen Etting, Routledge (London), 1938, New Directions (New York City), 1946, with foreword by John Updike, Schocken, 1983.

- Novels also collected in single-volume editions.

• *Nonfiction*

- **1948:** *The Diaries of Franz Kafka,* edited by Brod, Volume 1: *1910-1913,* translated by Joseph Kresh, Schocken, Volume 2: *1914-1923,* translated by Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt, Schocken, 1949, published as one volume, 1989.
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- **1974:** *I Am a Memory Come Alive: Autobiographical Writings,* edited by Glatzer, Schocken.

• *Collected Works*

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- **1983:** *The Basic Kafka* (omnibus volume), edited by Heller, Pocket Books.
- Fiction and nonfiction also published together in other collections.

• *Other*

- **1938:** (Contributor) Harry Steinhauer and Helen Jessiman, editors, *Modern German Stories* (contains "A Hunger Artist"), Oxford University Press.
- Contributor to periodicals, including *Arkadia, Bohemia,* and *Hyperion.*

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Adaptations

- *The Trial* was adapted by writer-director Orson Welles as a film of the same title in 1963, and by writer Harold Pinter and director David Jones in 1993; *Amerika* was adapted by writer-directors Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet for a film released in the United States as *Class Relations* in 1984; works adapted for the stage include *The Metamorphosis* and "The Hunger Artist."

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