

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Kafka

The Achievement of Franz Kafka. Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a writer in German—of short stories, novels, and aphorisms; a body of largely incomplete work which has nonetheless made Kafka one of the determinant literary forces of the twentieth century.

The Life of Franz Kafka: Jewishness and Education. Franz Kafka was born into a middle class German speaking Ashkenazi Jewish family living near the Town Square in Prague, in the later years of the Austro Hungarian Empire. Prague was a city in which both Czech and German were spoken, and which, during the course of Kafka's lifetime, was to see a rivalry verging on hostility develop between the two racial groups. (Kafka was later to dismiss the claim that his work was marked by its Jewish tone, and yet the lifetime evidence is that the sensitive Kafka strongly felt the Jewish predicament he found himself in.) Kafka's father was a ritual slaughterer, who later became a fancy goods retailer and traveling salesman rep. His mother was better educated than his Father, and easier for Kafka to understand and love than his Father, with whom Franz had a lifetime struggle toward an understanding which never materialized. (In his later Letters to His Father he described this parental disharmony as a major life-blockage.) Kafka himself was sent to the local boys' elementary school (1889-1893), then, for the usual eight years, to the State Gymnasium in Prague, a home to strict Latin and Greek educational practices. Kafka entered Charles University in 1901, majoring in Chemistry, but soon changing to Law, with which he was to complete his degree. While at Charles University, Kafka met Max Brod, with whom he formed a firm and creative relationship which was to be seminal for both men. (Brod would later be the biographer of Kafka, and the editor of his literary estate.) Together they read Plato (in Greek) and Flaubert together, and shared ideas, on aesthetics, which would buoy up their fellow Prague aesthetes in the years following graduation (1906). The life and work of Franz Kafka after graduation become increasingly bifurcated: fairly successful employee of two different insurance companies, at one point President of a new asphalt company, Kafka frets and will continue to fret at the only limited time he has for his work.

The work of Franz Kafka. The hypersensitive Kafka lived to see a brutal war (World War I) and its aftermath, the increasing bourgeoisification of European society, and formative stages of a uniquely barbaric political movement, National Socialism in Germany. (And fortunately not the Third Reich, in which three of his sisters were gassed.) Like many in his time, Kafka grew increasingly aware of the inhumanity of the 'new society' forming around him; a wasteland of bureaucracy, of faceless decisions, of abject middle-class values, and, of course, of undercurrents of menacing revenge for the wartime humiliation of his homeland. Better than any critic, however, Kafka knew how to describe the crisis of his time, in novels or short stories catching the human in the midst of bureaucratic labyrinths, and meaningless adventures.

Kafka's Work. *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), two of these novels, skewer the individual against the mysterious and threatening power of society. It is easy to see the spiritual kinship among George, Rilke, and Kafka, as they confront a world which to them seemed dangerously confused, but which to us is beginning to seem unremarkably familiar. But the turn Kafka gives, to these shadowy tales of individuals lost in the non-meaning of contemporary life—that is of life one hundred years less far, than we are today, into the ravages of alienation, family disintegration, impersonality, and occasional, mysterious transformation—is more directly spooky than the lamentational or aristocratic twists given by Rilke or George, as they call out against the monstrously new. Kafka places shadowy figurae in a shadowy world, and becomes their lostness with them.

Reading

Primary source reading

Kafka, Franz, *The Trial*, 2009.

Secondary source reading

Murray, Nicholas, *Kafka*, 2004.

Corngold, Stanley; Wagner, Benno, *Franz Kafka; The Ghosts in the Machine*, 2011.

Original language reading

Alt, Peter-Andre, *Franz Kafka: der ewige Sohn. Eine biographie*. 2011.

Excerpt en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Franz_Kafka

“Many a book is like a key to unknown chambers within the castle of one’s own self.”

“Don’t bend; don’t water it down; don’t try to make it logical; don’t edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly.”

“A First Sign of the Beginning of Understanding is the Wish to Die.”

“I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief.”

“All language is but a poor translation.”

“The meaning of life is that it stops.”