

Introduction

Many professors of literature would prefer that I not group Kafka among the existentialists. After all, here was a man who was not a trained philosopher or disciplined writer. Kafka never indicated that he was expressing a deep philosophical theory in his aphorisms. But, when you consider the time, place, and nature of Kafka — then you see an existentialist.

This exploration of Kafka is included among my Web of pages because Jean-Paul Sartre recognized him as an existentialist and Albert Camus considered him an absurdist. If Sartre and Camus consider Kafka a like-minded writer, that's good enough for me.

Franz Kafka was the writer I most wanted to emulate as a student. While I cannot read his works in their original forms, the English translations are striking. The writing is simple and ironic, yet it demonstrates a complex wit. You find yourself smiling — but never laughing — at the humor he injects within tales of isolation, injustice, and cruelty. As I attempted to evolve my own style, I found Kafka, Ambrose Bierce, H. L. Mencken, and the other writers I admired all possessed the same dark wit.

Reading a Kafka short story is like running a race. You find yourself fighting to read, like a passerby trying not to look at a crime scene or accident victim. Because we know what "Kafkaesque" means, we know what to expect from the author. Yet, we read the tales, knowing the end might be neither just nor reasonable. This absurdity separates Kafka's tales from those of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* -- Serling tended to teach lessons and dispense justice while Kafka merely taunted his characters, then they suffered.

Kafka never wrote a long novel; he never seemed to have the time. I often wonder if that is for the best — I sense a longer work would not have the same affect upon readers as does a short piece in Kafka's style. Emotionally, readers reach a limit, and I think Kafka knew intuitively where that limit was.

My favorite works by Kafka are *Josephine the Singer*, *A Hunger Artist*, and *The Burrow*. While other works are more popular (or assigned to more students) these are the works to which I most closely relate. The more I have read about Franz Kafka, the more I see my own nature in these stories. I write at night, alone in a room, closed off from the world. I write because that is what I do. Like Josephine, I am not sure if it is the process or the audience I enjoy. Like the Hunger Artist, I would not pursue my art if I could find another form of emotional sustenance.

Over the years, I have had to purchase several paperbacks of Kafka's works. The books wear out from constant use. That speaks louder than any other comment I can record on this page.

Biography

Franz Kafka was born in Prague, in what is now part of the Czech Republic, on 3 July 1883. Prague was a confused city, much like Kafka himself. With numerous languages and ethnic groups fighting for position in Prague, it was clear in the late nineteenth century that Jewish residents were quite low in social rank. Kafka was a Czech-born, German-speaking Jewish boy... a reflection of Europe

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

in 1883. Franz's father, Hermann (1852–1931), was an importer and operated a store specializing in "fine goods" for the rising middle-class.

Hermann was a self-made man, acutely aware of his own success and his son's lack of success. Hermann's father had been a village butcher in Bohemia. There is some evidence Hermann contrasted his success to Kafka's grandfather's simple existence. Franz was verbally assaulted by his father often, a fact reflected in much of Kafka's stories and within his diaries.

Kafka's mother, Julie Löwy (1856-1934) came from an orthodox Jewish family. She was the moral pillar of the family. An only child for six years, Kafka's sisters Elli, Valli, and Ottla were born in 1889, 1890, and 1892, respectively. Because he was six years old when Elli was born, one might expect Kafka to be a protective older sibling. Instead, his sisters spent their adult years protecting Franz. Kafka was close to his sisters, vacationing with them and communicating with them frequently during his life.

Biographers have struggled to explain why Kafka chose to live with his parents for most of his life. As a lawyer, there was little reason for Kafka to remain in the same house as his abusive father. Did Kafka believe he was protecting other family members from his father? Living at home was difficult for Kafka, who suffered from hyper-sensitivity to noise and a desire for solitude. Kafka never did rebel openly against his father. It is possible Kafka did admire his father's ability to exist in a country where Jews were constantly under attack. Hermann Kafka's anger at home might have been viewed by Franz as a symptom of Prague itself.

Czech nationalism was on the rise in Prague at the end of the nineteenth century, and the German-dominated Hapsburg Empire was despised by many Czechs. German was the language of the Kafka household, with Yiddish spoken at times, but Hermann Kafka was careful not to present himself as either "too Jewish" or "too German" to do any damage to his business. Franz was to emulate his father's secular nature, though Franz seems to have been influenced by the Jewish culture that surrounded him in Prague.

Jewish Heritage

Hermann Kafka had located his store just beyond the Jewish ghetto of Prague, and even had his family legally declared Czech nationals. Still, the Kafkas were Jewish; Franz was bar-mitzvahed and attended temple at the local synagogue with his father. The paradox is clear — Jews and Germans were hated by the nationalistic Czechs, yet Hermann raised Franz to speak German and took his son to Friday-night services.

The seriousness of anti-Semitism revealed itself to Franz in April of 1899. Near the week of Passover, a young Christian girl was murdered, her throat slit with a knife. Throughout Europe there had been tales of Jews using Christian blood to prepare Matzos for Passover — and as far as many were concerned, this murder proved the tales. Anti-Semitic riots spread through Prague and other parts of Bohemia, with boycotts against Jewish-owned stores and even the destruction of shops. Hermann Kafka's shop was spared only because he was "officially" a Czech.

Franz was 16 years old at the time of the riots. He responded like many secular Jews, developing a strong anti-Jewish bias. Many critics claim Kafka's works are in fact tributes to the religious and mystic heritage of European Jews, but his own anti-Semitic streak is evident in his diaries.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

Sometimes I'd like to stuff all Jews (myself included) into the drawer of a laundry basket... then open it to see if they've suffocated.

What do I have in common with the Jews? I don't even have anything in common with myself!

During 1899 and 1900, Kafka's diaries indicate he read a great number of philosophy and science texts. He was fond of Spinoza, Darwin, and Nietzsche. His extensive reading was paralleled by a period of creativity. Kafka wrote extensively between 1899 and 1903, but these early writings were destroyed by the author. These writings probably reflected the author's predisposition toward the macabre, but we might never know. During this period of productivity, Kafka met Max Brod, a writer, critic, and editor of *Prager Tagblatt*. Brod was to be a close friend and editor throughout Kafka's life.

Hermann Kafka's opinion of his son was improved slightly in 1906, when Kafka received his law degree from German University, Prague. After receiving his law degree, Kafka worked briefly for an Italian insurance company. In 1908, Kafka took a position at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, a form of Czech "workers' compensation" insurance company subsidized by the government. The year he was hired, Kafka wrote "On Mandatory Insurance in the Construction Industry," a report demonstrating the need for insurance to protect construction workers' earnings and families in the event of injury. His fascination with death and injuries had found a purpose in advocating for workers.

During the winter months of 1911 and 1912, Kafka befriended a Yiddish actor, Isak Löwy, while the actor was performing with a traveling troupe in Prague. With Löwy's help, Kafka began to study Jewish folklore. Possibly influenced by his mother, Kafka became obsessed with Jewish mythology, history, and the Yiddish language. Kafka even lectured on the Yiddish language at a university.

On the night of 22 September 1912, Kafka began work on *The Judgment*. He began writing at 10 p.m. and did not stop until 6 a.m. the next morning. In the opinion of editor Erich Heller, this feat alone proved Kafka to be a genius. The story, in standard book format, is a mere 12 pages; but its affect upon a reader is incredible. Kafka had created a form of literary surrealism — a vivid nightmare.

While attending a small party at the home of Max Brod's father on 13 August, 1912, Kafka met Felice Bauer, a secretarial assistant in a Berlin office. On 20 September, 1912, Kafka began writing letters to Felice. Many biographers believe Kafka "created" Felice during this period; not being near her he created a mental image Felice could never equal. It was not until the spring of 1913 that Kafka met with Felice in Berlin. A number of sources indicate Kafka did not love Felice, and any attraction was limited. It is possible Kafka was looking to prove to his father he was "normal" and planned to settle and start a family. About the same time, Kafka met an Swiss woman, according to his diary, and there is also evidence of a close friendship with Grete Bloch, a friend of Felice Bauer. If nothing else, Kafka's relationships were complex.

Kafka seems to have thought wedding someone would help him maintain a sense of normalcy, so he proposed marriage to Felice on 12 April, 1914. He broke the engagement on 12 July of the same year. In early 1915, he revived the relationship with Felice, trying to maintain their friendship. Curiously, on 20 August, 1916, Kafka composed a list of reasons for and arguments against marriage to Felice. Nearly a year later, in July of 1917, Kafka again proposed to Felice.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

Kafka's diary entries for September 1917 reflect a man suffering a great emotional stress. He apparently considered destroying his notebooks, calling his writings the result of a "reward" from the devil for "services rendered." It is unclear what those services might have been. A few days later, he noted the power literature has to lift "the world into the pure, the true, the immutable" truth. During such manic cycles, Kafka would write pages for hours, depriving himself of sleep. This sleep deprivation might have exacerbated his condition.

Writing is a deeper sleep than death.... Just as one wouldn't pull a corpse from its grave, I can't be dragged from my desk at night.

A life-long hypochondriac, Kafka's fears were realized when the writer was diagnosed with tuberculosis, not an uncommon disease during the early twentieth century, on 4 September, 1917. Not long after the diagnosis, Kafka temporarily ceased maintaining his diary. He slipped into a mild depression and broke his second engagement to Felice in December 1917.

Felice Bauer finally married another man in early 1919. She had loved Kafka, but could not endure his depressions and manic episodes any longer. His emotions for her were never clear, even to Kafka.

The Republic of Czechoslovakia was formed in 1919, yet Kafka continued to write in German. As a result of Kafka's use of the German language, his works did not appear in a translated form in Czechoslovakia for more than a decade after his death. Kafka was not fond of the Czechs and they did not appear fond of him.

Kafka met Milena Jesenská-Pollak (also "Jesenska-Polack"), a Czech writer, in 1920. She was 13 years younger than Kafka. Their relationship seems to have been close, with Milena's own diaries indicating they made love several times when Kafka visited her. A potential problem with their deep attraction was the fact Milena was married to Ernst Pollak (also "Polack"), a well-known intellectual of the time. Thankfully, Ernst and Milena appear to have had an open relationship. (Ernst had several well-known affairs.)

Kafka made a note in his diaries on 15 October, 1921, that his diaries were to be given to Milena upon his death. The pair last met in May of 1922. Kafka's ability to travel had been limited by tuberculosis and other ailments, real and imagined, while Milena remained young and energetic.

As mentioned previously, tuberculosis was a common disease in the early twentieth century, and Kafka was among its many victims. By the age of 39, Kafka was unable to work — he was bleeding to death internally. In 1922 he resigned from his position at the workers' insurance. For some time he lived with his sister, Ottla, long his favorite Kafka family member. In personal notes, Franz described his relationship with his sister as a "marriage" without the normal problems.

In 1923 Kafka found a new companion, Dora Dymant, a Polish Orthodox Jew. Dora was only 19 when the pair moved to Berlin. Kafka enjoyed Dora's company, forming a relationship much better than those of his past. It is possible Dora and Franz were in love, not merely companions. They traveled together during the last year of Kafka's life. Kafka was so pleased with his life, he decided to burn his previous writings. He informed Dora, asking her to destroy the manuscripts if he was unable. Curiously, after making the request Kafka produced *The Burrow*.

On 10 April, 1924, Kafka was taken to Wiener Wald Sanatorium, accompanied by Dora. While in the sanatorium, Kafka struggled with severe pain. During the final months of his life, Kafka was

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

reduced to communicating via written notes. He berated his doctors and demanded morphine for his pain, a reasonable request due to the suffering he was enduring.

Kafka died 3 June, 1924. Three days later Milena presented an obituary, referring to Kafka as “a man condemned to regard the world with such blinding clarity that he found it unbearable and went to his death.”

Kafka’s Self-Image

Franz Kafka spent much of his life trying to improve his mental and physical health. However, his friends considered Franz physically fit. He was an accomplished swimmer, enjoyed hiking in the mountains, and was a talented horseman. Still, Kafka saw himself as thin, awkward, and even cowardly. He pursued various “treatments” to improve his health, when none seemed necessary.

Milena Jesenká-Pollak wrote that Kafka seemed repulsed by his own body, and to a lesser extent, hers. Milena seems to have been reasonably attractive and enjoyed hiking, yet Kafka still had difficulty looking directly at her. Milena wrote:

I knew his fear before I knew him.... In the four days Frank was near me, he lost it. We even laughed about it. But he will never be healthy as long as he has this fear.... It isn't just about me, but about everything which is shamelessly alive, for example, the flesh. Flesh is too open, too naked: he can't bear the sight of it.... When he felt the fear coming on, he would stare into my eyes, we would wait for awhile and it would soon pass... everything was simple and clear.

- *Introducing Kafka*; Mairowitz, p. 107

The irony would not be lost on Kafka.

After Franz Kafka’s Death

While Kafka had written of cruel and unjust treatments of individuals, even he could not have foreseen the horrors of the Holocaust. Max Brod saved many of Kafka’s manuscript pages, despite the author’s request that all his notes and manuscripts be burned upon his death. Unfortunately, many pages were lost when the German army raided the apartment of Dora Dymant. While Dora survived the Holocaust, Kafka’s letters and works he had left with her are presumed to have been burned by the Gestapo.

Grete Bloch and Milena Jesenská-Pollak died in 1944, in Nazi concentration camps. Kafka’s three sisters also died in Nazi concentration camps. Kafka’s sister Ottla died a tragic death, having divorced her non-Jewish husband to remain with the Kafka family.

Chronology

1883 July 3	Franz Kafka is born to Hermann and Julie Kafka.
1902	Meets Max Brod, literary critic and editor.
1903	Begins writing the novel <i>The Child and the City</i> which is noted in his journals, but has been lost.
1904	Writes <i>Description of a Struggle</i> .
1906	Receives law degree from German University, Prague

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

1907	Writes <i>Wedding Preparations in the Country</i> , an unfinished novel.
1908	Takes a position at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute.
1909	Publishes eight pieces of prose in <i>Hyperion</i> , a Munich literary journal. Also writes <i>The Aeroplanes at Brescia</i> .
1910 May	Began writing <i>Diaries</i> .
1911	Begins work on <i>Amerika</i> , stopped work on the novel in 1914.
1912 August 14	Submits the manuscript of <i>Betrachtung (Meditation)</i> to a publisher.
1912 August 13	Meets Felice Bauer at Max Brod's family home.
1912 September 22–23	Writes <i>The Judgment</i> in one sitting.
1912 November	Writes <i>The Metamorphosis</i> .
1913	Publication of <i>Betrachtung</i> , <i>The Judgment</i> , and <i>The Stoker</i> (the first chapter of <i>Amerika</i>).
1914 April 12	Engaged to Felice
1914 July 12	Brakes engagement to Felice.
1914 Summer	Writes <i>Memoirs of the Kalda Railroad</i> .
1914 October	Writes <i>The Penal Colony</i> .
1915 November	<i>The Metamorphosis</i> is published.
1916 January	Completes <i>The Village Schoolmaster</i> .
1917	Writes <i>The Hunter Gracchus</i> and <i>The Great Wall of China</i> .
1917 September 4	Diagnosed with tuberculosis.
1918	Reads <u>Kierkegaard</u> 's writings.
1919 Spring	Felice marries another man in Prague.
1919	Writes <i>Letter to His Father</i> and <i>He</i> .
1920 March	Meets Milena Jesenská-Pollak
1922	Writes <i>The Castle</i> , <i>A Hunger Artist</i> , <i>Investigations of a Dog</i> .
1923 June 12	Last entry in the <i>Diaries</i> .
1923 July	Meets Dora Dymant, Jewish-Orthodox from Poland. The two remain together until Kafka's death.
1924 Spring	Writes <i>Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk</i> .
1924 April 10	Taken to sanatorium by Dora
1924 June 3	Died at the Wiener Wald Sanatorium.
1924 Summer	Publication of <i>A Hunger Artist</i> .
1942	Kafka's sister Ottla dies in Auschwitz. His two other sisters also die in concentration camps about this time.
1944	Milena dies in a concentration camp.
1952 August	Dora dies in London.
1960	Felice Bauer dies.

Works

- Various Works; all were lost or destroyed: 1899-1903
- *The Child and the City*; Novel: 1903 (lost)
- *Description of a Struggle*; Short Story: 1904
- *Wedding Preparation in the Country*; Novel: 1908 (unfinished)
- *On Mandatory Insurance in the Construction Industry*; Report / Essay: 1908
- *Measures to Prevent Accidents in Factories and Farms*; Report / Essay: 1911
- *The Judgment*; Short Story: 1912
- *The Stroker or The Man Who Disappeared*; Short Story / Novel Fragment: 1912
- *The Metamorphosis*; Short Story: 1912, published 1915
- *In the Penal Colony*; Short Story: 1914, published 1919
- *The Trial*; Short Story: 1914
- *The Village Schoolmaster or The Giant Mole*; Short Story: 1915
- *A Country Doctor*; Short Story: 1919
- *The Castle*; Short Story: 1922
- *A Hunger Artist*; Short Story: 1922
- *The Burrow*; Short Story: 1923
- *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*; Short Story: 1924

Commentaries

Franz Kafka is best known for describing absurd situations with simple, cold words. Kafka did not attempt to shock readers with detailed descriptions of horrific scenes; instead, Kafka preferred blunt absurdity. Consider the simple bluntness of the first sentence to *The Metamorphosis*:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

Gregor does not scream. He does not panic... at least not until he worries about reporting for work. That one should not bother reporting for work as a gigantic insect does not immediately enter his thoughts. The reader is shocked not by the use of dashes or exclamation points, but rather by their absence. The reader knows that he or she would panic in Gregor's position. Why does Gregor accept fate so readily?

Kafka's diaries and letters indicate that he considered Gregor's fate no worse, or better, than that of any person. The previous life of a traveling salesman versus the one-room Gregor inhabits as an insect are both lives of solitude. Kafka wrote that "the cares we have to struggle with every day" are emotional torture.

The short essay, of less than a half-page, *On Parables*, describes Kafka's ambivalence towards "the wise" philosophers. In the essay, Kafka claims that sages' parables tend to prove only that "the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already." For Kafka, the absurdities of life exist, they cannot be challenged or understood. His characters accept their fates, knowing that sometimes a fate is unjust — or at least unreasonable.

In Kafka's novel *The Trial*, Joseph K., the prisoner, is stabbed to death. To most readers, this would seem a cruel and unreasonable death. In his diary, however, Kafka wrote that Joseph K. was disposed of "with a gentler hand, more pushed aside than struck down." The thought that a

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

stabbing was a “gentle” act seems absurd. However, to Kafka, death might have been better than a lengthy, illogical punishment.

Cursed to Write

Kafka did not look at writing as a “gift” in the traditional sense. If anything, he considered both his talent for writing and what he produced as a writer curses for some unknown sin. Since Kafka was agnostic or even an atheist, it is best to assume his sense of sin and curse were metaphors.

1. Kafka knew he was a gifted writer, a fact he recorded in his diaries.
2. He felt cursed by his gift, hating the need to write and the desire for public accolades.
3. Kafka spent his life in perpetual depression and blamed alternately his father and himself.

These elements of Kafka’s personality can be observed in the characters of his stories. The hunger artist and Josephine, the mouse singer, are cursed by talent and a need for public attention. In *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, Josephine claims a desire to be ignored, but the reader knows she needs to hear praise. The theme of father versus son appears in several texts, most notably *The Judgment*. Kafka is at times disguised in his stories as Samsa, Bende, or K; at other times, he appears as an artist. Notice the letter patterns of names, or the descriptions of characters.

Combining the above issues in a somewhat coherent manner is *Letter to His Father*. Kafka’s November 1919 letter to his father is an indictment filled with near-hate for his own father. The letter recounts the punishment he received for annoying his father one night, by constantly asking for a drink of water. His father locked him out of the house for a brief time. While the punishment was not violent, nor did his father leave him outside, Kafka’s sensitive nature was forever marked.

Even years afterwards I suffered from the tormenting fancy that the huge man, my father, the ultimate authority, would come almost for no reason at all and take me out of bed in the night and carry me out.

The confusion for Kafka, the loyal son and emotional victim, is recorded in the words. Kafka manages to attack one of the most important people in his life, knowing that in doing so he is also attacking himself with guilt. The writer misbehaved as a child, and was punished. Still, the father’s punishment was viewed as extreme for the offense. This theme of punishment beyond reason for the offense appears throughout Kafka’s writings. Then, in juxtaposition, Kafka offers a defense of his father in the same document.

Franz Kafka was never clear if he was writing because he needed to do so, or if his pages were meant for the public. Kafka considered Flaubert a kindred spirit; both were driven to write. The problem for Kafka was an inability to finish. It is unclear if he tired of his novels or struggled to complete them. Kafka’s *The Trial* and *The Castle* show promise, but they languished either ignored or put aside by the author. Kafka as Existentialist

Philosophy professor Robert Solomon states, “The existential attitude begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world he cannot accept” (ix). However, the individual eventually accepts and even embraces the absurdity of life. Albert Camus’ Sisyphus is the often-cited example of such an existential hero. Sisyphus not only accepts his fate, he sees his acceptance as a form of revolt against the absurdity. Kafka’s characters, too, accept their fates and embrace the absurdity of the universe. As William Hubben writes of K. in *The Castle*:

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

As with Camus' Sisyphus, every failure is succeeded by a new and futile effort.

- Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche & Kafka; Hubben, p. 141

Existentialism and the absurdism of Camus are often considered together in philosophy and literature. Kafka's absurd world belongs in this same grouping, as he explores the absurd relationships between individuals, society, technology, and words. Kafka's works meet the basic criteria of existentialism, while adding the additional depth of postmodern absurdity.

Continental philosophy historian Walter Kaufmann observes that individualism is one of the few common traits among those writers associated with existentialism. This focus on the individual in an absurd world is one reason Kaufmann decides to include works by Kafka in collections of existential works. As Kaufmann explains:

Certainly, existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets. The three writers who appear invariably on every list of existentialists — Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre — are not in agreement on essentials. By the time we consider adding Rilke, Kafka, and Camus, it becomes plain that one essential feature shared by all these men is their fervent individualism.

- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 11

While Marx and various Marxist movements see a social evolution in humanity towards a utopian society that moves beyond a need for government, postmodernism often rejects this tradition. For this reason, many Marxist critics consider postmodernism to be a symptom of capitalism and the alienation caused by materialism. The postmodern can be a bleak society larded over by systems and mindless organizational psychology. This bureaucratic nightmare is the world of Kafka, which Hubben suggests existed throughout Europe before World War II:

He expresses an existentialist *Weltgefühl* with stronger visionary force than his French colleagues, and speaks undoubtedly to the condition of untold men and women in Europe.

- Hubben, p. 139

Kafka does not theorize a utopian future for humanity. At best, Kafka has no philosophical or political motives and merely wants to reflect what he has seen of human nature. At worst, Kafka believes humanity is descending into an abyss of alienation in which individuals can rely on no external truths or communal obligations. The end result is an extreme version of alienation that is a forced, not chosen, individualism.

If anything, Kafka is more pessimistic than Sartre, Jaspers, Heidegger, or even Camus. The individual's conflict against the absurd is not even heroic; it is hopeless. Solomon suggests Kafka's pessimism moves beyond existential despair:

It is now standard to link Kafka with Camus as a prophet of the absurd, but this view ignores the ultimate despair of Kafka that Camus rejects. [...] One might say that the basic difference between Camus and Kafka is that Camus attempts to provide an answer for the problem Kafka sees as inescapable.

- *Existentialism*; Solomon, p. 166

Readers should compare *The Judgment*, *The Trial*, and *In The Penal Colony*. In Kafka's stories the greatest sin, as in existentialism, is a failure to be authentic in the sense Jean-Paul Sartre used the term. Something does not seem authentic about Kafka's punished characters — they do not seem true to themselves. It is one thing to accept a situation, it is another to fail to assert an identity. Without an identity, alienation is certain.

Alienation

The concept of alienation in existentialism derives from the tension between individual free will and various relationships. The metaphysical alienation is represented by the existential understanding of faith; humans are separated from any understanding of their creator. The social alienation is caused by the inability of one person to understand another with any certainty.

Alienation becomes a way of life as people realize connecting in the postmodern world is an unrealistic dream. Kafka's characters have not surrendered to this alienation, however. If, as Sartre famously argues, people must define themselves through choices and living, then many of Kafka's characters have chosen to be individuals apart from their communities. Most notably, the artists in Kafka's stories are no longer essential to their communities but insist on remaining true to their natures. Josephine the mouse singer and the hunger artist are outdated and unessential, but they choose to remain artists. The alienation of Josephine and the hunger artist might seem extreme, but in the postmodern world, all people are alienated from each other and reality to some degree.

Kafka's diaries and letters indicate that he considered Gregor Samsa's alienated fate in *The Metamorphosis* no worse, or better, than that of any person. The previous life of a traveling salesman versus the one room Gregor inhabits as an insect are both lives of solitude. Kafka wrote that "the cares we have to struggle with every day" are emotional torture. Hubben relates this to the conflicts between economic models:

It is interesting that Kafka was one of the first to touch upon the despair of a key figure in the economic system that is now engaged in a life and death struggle in Europe, the salesmen whose function in free enterprise is that of a missionary.

- Hubben, p. 154

Some Marxist critics have tried to claim Kafka as one of their own, a voice against the alienation in this postmodern life. Walter H. Sokel makes this claim, suggesting Gregor Samsa represents a man "estranged from himself" by capitalism (Thiher, 148). Olson takes this further by relating Sartre's notion of "the look" to the competition faced by men like Gregor Samsa:

Clearly, Sartre's "The Look" is not a basic ontological fact from which all conflict is derived and in terms of which conflict must be defined. A moment's reflection will reveal that we do not enter into conflict with one another because we look at one another. On the contrary, it is because we conflict with one another that we look. We rarely look as passing strangers on the street, but we do look closely at the man who is competing for a job we want ourselves.

- Existentialism; Olson, p. 187

According to Hubben, Kafka was unable to share his friend Martin Buber's religious fervor. While Buber influenced Kafka's understanding of existentialism, he was unable to help Kafka find faith. Hubben notes that Kafka's fiction demonstrates this loss of faith:

God has indeed died.

Kafka, who is neither an atheist nor one capable of rallying himself to a strong affirmation of his Jewish faith. Kafka's men are living in that world without God of which Nietzsche predicted that it would be somehow older, strange, and suspicious, a late hour of mankind.

- Hubben, p. 144-5

Solomon explains that Kafka comes to see sin and guilt not as personal truths, as some postmodernists might, but as too difficult to distinguish. Words have become so confusing that

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

determining what is an objective truth, and therefore pure and good, is impossible. Solomon considers this the basis for much of the absurdity in Kafka's tales:

For Kafka, the absurdity of sin and guilt lies not in the indifferent world but rather in the very indistinguishability of the subjective and the objective.

- Solomon, p. 166

Kafka was in search of wisdom, not an epistemic search for truth. His literature mocks the search for truth, since wisdom requires more than scientific pursuits. There is validity to things as they are, even when events and situations seem absurd and confusing. An epistemological exploration of Gregor Samsa, K., Josephine, or any other character in Kafka is to ignore Kafka's existentialism.

While Kafka might not pursue the epistemic, he does pursue the ontological. If we define ontology as the quest for a description of the concepts and relationships that can exist for an agent or a community of agents, then all Kafka's writings deal with the ontology of human, and therefore complex, relationships.

In 1908, Kafka accepted a position at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, a "workers compensation" insurance company subsidized by the government. The year he was hired, Kafka wrote "On Mandatory Insurance in the Construction Industry," a report demonstrating the need for insurance to protect construction workers and families in the event of injury. Despite his work, Hubben tells us Kafka was not developing a philosophy of social justice:

His position at the Workers' Accident Insurance afforded many contacts with those whose claims came to his desk, and he once remarked in a mixture of admiration and impatience how humble these little people were.

...he shared Henry David Thoreau's conclusion that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

Kafka was hardly a reformer. He was, likewise, not a great thinker, philosopher, or theologian. His own life... speaks to the condition of many who are searching for the causes of our present moral exhaustion.

- Hubben, p. 154

As stated earlier, in stripping language bare, countering the figurative language of nineteenth-century literature, Franz Kafka represents a bridge to the philosophical schools of the twentieth century, especially the heightened distrust of words, science, and truth we find in European postmodernism and specifically in existentialism. Kaufmann recognizes this bridging:

Kafka stands between Nietzsche and the existentialists: he pictures the world into which Heidegger's man, in *Sein und Zeit*, is "thrown," the Godless world of Sartre, the "absurd" world of Camus.

- Kaufmann, p. 143

Before the twentieth century, philosophers hoped to reveal the best way to achieve a good and meaningful life, which generally meant a life connected to nature and community. Existentialism rejected these connections, and more drastically rejected any notion of achieving real satisfaction in life. Characters in Kafka's tales are left wanting something, needing a connection to the world that can never be made complete.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

Kafka, influenced by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and his friend Martin Buber, merges these recognized existential philosophers to create a more refined worldview — and a razor-sharp writing style. His friend and editor, Max Brod, struggles to define the “fundamental” Kafka, despite the disarmingly simple language Kafka used. Brod writes of both a fundamental outlook and a fundamental principle behind Kafka’s works:

Kafka’s fundamental outlook may be summarized in some such formula as this: almost everything is uncertain, but once one has a certain degree of understanding one never loses the way anymore.

- Franz Kafka; Brod, p. 173

Kafka’s fundamental principle: pity for a mankind that finds it so hard a task to do what’s right. Pity, half-smiling, half-weeping, pity.

- Brod, p. 180

Kafka’s internal conflict — the desire for a universal truth and connection to others while assuming such connections were illusions — certainly brings him into the realm of existentialism. Like Frankl, Buber, or Sartre during the war Kafka would not experience, Kafka tried to convince himself of something he thought was a lie: truth.

The Judgment (1912)

Scholars seem prone to either over-simplify or over-analyze *The Judgment*. Then again, I am likely to over-analyze the work because it demanded my attention the first time I read the story in junior high school. I have read the story many times, studying the structure and the tale. It is not my personal favorite Kafka story, but the structure is quite compelling.

The main character in *The Judgment*, for there is no hero, is Georg Bendemann. Kafka explained in a letter to Felice Bauer that Georg Bende was him, thinly veiled. The “-mann” was a reference to manlihood or authority, which Georg wishes to assert. By trying to be a man, Georg is attempting to become his father’s equal, which no son can do in his own mind. His punishment, as decided by his father — death by drowning.

One potential issue for study is why Georg is driven mad by the break with his fiancée. Kafka broke two engagements with Felice. Another might be the choice of punishment, since Kafka was an excellent swimmer. Kafka is everywhere in his tales, especially his fears and insecurities.

The tale begins when a young man, Georg, writes a letter to inform a close friend who lives in Russia of his engagement to a young woman from a well-placed family. Actually, Georg had mailed three previous letters to the friend, each discussing the wedding plans of an unimportant man to an unimportant woman in the town. Georg has yet to reveal that it is he getting married. Georg’s friend had moved to Russia to conduct business. Unfortunately, the friend’s ventures are failing. Out of empathy, Georg has not revealed his own increasingly good fortunes to this friend.

Before mailing the letter, Georg checks on his father, a once imposing man who is now a sickly, senile shell. *The Judgment* then becomes a recounting of the last conversation between father and son. The conversation begins with the father, who admits to a faulty memory, demanding to know if Georg really has a friend in St. Petersburg. After Georg tells the story of his friend’s move to Russia, his father declares that he does indeed remember the friend.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

Georg's father declares, "Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart." This mildly cruel statement is accompanied by the revelation Georg's father is aware that his son has been writing "lies" to the friend. The father's outrage makes little sense, since the friend is a failing businessman, while Georg has turned his father's business into a growing enterprise.

Suddenly, Georg's father begins to dance about, proclaiming that his son is marrying only because Georg has slept with the woman. Worse, Georg's father reveals he has been writing to Georg's friend during the last few years. While it might seem reasonable to question the sanity of the Georg's father, he has stolen a friendship and threatens to destroy his son's wedding plans. The father's tirade ends with "I sentence you now to death by drowning."

Disgraced by his father, Georg flees the house, runs to a bridge, and tosses himself into the river. Kafka describes Georg's last act: "He swung himself over, like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth, to his parents' pride." Oddly enough, Georg's last statement is, "Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same."

Written in a single night, 22 September, 1912, *The Judgment* is a great literary accomplishment. The story is not simple to read, requiring the reader untangle the relationships between a father, son, and an unseen friend in Russia. It is the difficulty of the story that draws the reader into the text. The convoluted story reflects the neurosis of the son, the main character.

As stated previously, the main character in *The Judgment*, Georg Bendemann, is Franz Kafka. The "mann" suffix of the last name was a reference to manlihood or authority, which Georg wishes to assert. By trying to be a man, Georg is aspiring to the greatness he once attached to his father. Young children see their parents as giants, in Kafka's view. Georg's punishment for encroaching on this authority, as decided by his father, is death. The irony is that Georg is healthy and the father appears near death.

Georg has improved his father's business and taken his father's place as the head of the company. Compounding his sins against authority, Georg now cares for his father, assuming control over the old man's care. In effect, Georg is now like the father in every way that matters. This assumption of power is unacceptable, so Georg **must** die.

Some critics have maintained the story is much more basic than that of a son punished for taking power from his father. The simple reading of the tale is that Georg did dishonor his mother, possibly by sleeping with his girlfriend in his parents' house. If this is true, then Georg's suicide is an act of guilt. It is worth noting Kafka himself had an aversion to sex and all forms of pleasure, yet found himself visiting brothels at the time this story was written.

If marriage serves to improve the standing of Georg Bendemann, then it might be fair to relate this tale to Kafka's own engagements to Felice Bauer. *The Judgment* was written before Franz Kafka asked Felice Bauer, a young woman from a moderately successful family, to marry. Is Felice *The Judgment's* "Frieda" or was the name a mere coincidence? If Felice is Frieda, did Kafka intend from their first meeting to propose marriage? These questions are important, as evidence suggests Kafka did not love Felice. His offers of marriage seem more a gesture to placate his father than to truly find companionship.

Metamorphosis (Die Verwandlung, 1915)

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning after disturbing dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into an enormous bug.

Als Gregor Samsa eines morgens aus unruhigen träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem bett zu einem ungeheueren ungeziefer verwandelt.

Translated in various editions as a “gigantic insect” and an “enormous bug,” the form assumed by Gregor Samsa one morning is never specific. Easily Kafka’s most famous work, *Metamorphosis* deals with the acceptance of an absurd fate.

Salesman Gregor Samsa wakes one morning to find himself an insect. He does not panic; in fact, he reacts with an eerie calm, convinced he can still function within human society. As the story progresses, Gregor slowly accepts he is not human. Not only can he not function within normal society, but he is also an outcast from his own family, even his beloved sister.

Gregor’s income had supported the Samsa family, so his transformation results in a series of changes within the household. First, his father is forced to take a position as a doorman. Mr. Samsa is forced to wear an ill-fitting military-style uniform, which looks ridiculous on the old man. When the job proves insufficient, the Samsas take in three boarders.

These men are quite orderly and demanding. One night they ask Gregor’s sister, Grete, to play the violin for them. Before Gregor’s transformation, she had hoped to study violin. While she plays, Gregor is overcome by emotion and leaves his room, in which he normally hides from his family and the renters. When one of the renters spot Gregor, he and the other renters announce the house is disgusting and filthy. The loss of rental income will certainly devastate the family, Gregor realizes.

Gregor returns to his room, while the family discusses what a problem he has become. Even his sister, the person for whom he cared most, suggests the family must find a way to dispose of Gregor. Emotionally broken, Gregor dies, alone in his room that very night. When the giant insect is discovered the next morning by the chambermaid, the family finds new energy. Free of Gregor, it is made clear by Kafka the family is now happy — they have been transformed.

When *Metamorphosis* was published, it was common to include illustrations within a work. Kafka objected strongly to any illustration depicting the insect, preferring the image be left to the readers. When the first edition of the story appeared in book form, Kafka wrote an angry letter to the publisher, Kurt Wolff, regarding the cover illustration:

Not that, anything but that! The insect itself **cannot** be depicted. It mustn’t even be shown from a distance.

Kafka wanted readers to imagine the worst possible fate for Gregor, which no artist could accomplish with universal affect.

It is much too easy to see the Kafka name in “Samsa” — there was no effort by the author to hide the fact he was writing a story about his own emotional state. Kafka’s acute sense of alienation is well documented. In his diaries, he often compared himself to a bug, a worm, and other animals meant to generate disgust. There are many passages within the story worthy of in-depth analysis; I

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

suggest students pay particular attention to Gregor's relationships within the family. Kafka himself had one sister, Ottla, with whom he was particularly close. How does the story reflect the Kafka household? How do you think his family reacted to the tale? Did they see themselves clearly or miss the obvious?

In The Penal Colony (In Der Strafkolonie, 1914)

Few stories affect a political discussion quite like *In The Penal Colony*. To state the story cemented my views on punishment might be an overstatement, as I think Hugo's essays on punishment had a greater influence upon me, but this tale did offer important reinforcement of my views. Somehow those inflicting a punishment manage to convince themselves, at least momentarily, that there is some greater good in punishment. Suffering is expected to enlighten the violator, resulting in a mystical state of euphoria and understanding. Personally, when reprimanded I have only come to believe more strongly in the correctness of my actions or have come to resent the one delivering the punishment.

Some have suggested my outline and discussion of this work are not true to the work's form or message. All readers impose their own biases upon a work. Also, I am not outlining the work for students, but rather as a starting point for discussion.

The story opens with a traveler being given a tour of a penal colony by its governor, or "the officer," as Kafka's narrator refers to him. This chief officer of punishments is quite pleased to have a visitor and enjoys the opportunity to showcase his colony and its methods. Upon encountering a complex machine, the traveler is told he is about to witness the execution of a guard. This guard, representing order and justice, has been condemned by the governor for "disobeying and insulting a superior." It seems the guard had the misfortune of falling asleep while on duty.

As in many Kafka tales, the governor of the colony imposes justice in a very precise manner: guilt is never in doubt. The governor is judge, jury, and executioner; he is the authority within the colony. The guard to be executed received no trial, not even an explanation of the charges against him. He should know what he has done, the governor indicates.

The condemned man looked like such a submissive little dog that he might have been left to wander the surrounding hills and only whistled for at the moment of execution.

Kafka has the governor describe the machine and its function in detail. In one of Kafka's best-written dialogues, the governor revels in describing the machine. The governor's absolute pleasure contributes to the tale's horrific nature.

The harrow is then lowered on to the man's body so that its needles just barely touch the skin.

The harrow is made of glass so you can watch its progress....

There are two kinds of needles. The long needles write on the skin and the short ones spray water to wash away the blood so that the inscription is clear. The harrow keeps on writing deeper and deeper for twelve hours. Usually, after six hours, the condemned can decipher the message through his wounds.

Finally, when the harrow has pierced through his entire body, after turning him around, it casts him automatically into the grave.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

After describing the machine and the process by which it is to execute the guard, the governor of the colony seeks the approval of the traveler. However, the traveler does not approve of the device and refuses, albeit politely, to speak on behalf of the machine upon his return to their native country. Desperate for approval, the colony's governor orders the condemned guard released. For a moment, the traveler wonders if the governor might reevaluate the use of such a cruel device. Of course, Kafka would not be Kafka without adding a twist to the tale.

As with many early “programmable” devices, the execution machine’s inscription can be changed via a template. The governor shows the traveler a leather guide reading “Be Just” — though the traveler cannot make out the phrase — and inserts the guide into the device. Without warning, the governor disrobes and climbs unto the bed of the machine. Guards, including the formerly condemned man, then strap the governor to the table. It seems the governor only wishes to show how the machine works, but the traveler anticipates much more is about to occur.

In grand Kafka style, the machine malfunctions, disintegrating as it tortures the colony’s governor. Instead of gently carving the “Be Just” phrase into the man’s back, the machine plunges needles deep into his flesh.

Instead of writing, the harrow was only jabbing, and the bed, not turning the body over, simply raising it up, quivering, against the needles.

The traveler knows instantly that the governor is being killed by his own machine. All that is left to do is wait for the machine to discard the body into a grave.

...and now the last thing went wrong as well: the body failed to come loose from the long needles but hung suspended above the pit without falling.

His face remained as in life. What the others had found in the machine the officer had not found. His lips were pressed together, the eyes open, calm and full of conviction, through the forehead came the point of the big iron spike.

On a historical note, it is useful to know “writing automatons” were popular amusements before World War I. These figures would hold a pen and write words or phrases using a template and a spring-based mechanism. Kafka certainly would have seen such devices. One common figure was that of a monk or saint writing biblical quotations. Kafka was surely aware of these machines; he had a great deal of interest in technology. Why might Kafka have a programmable machine kill? Why did it kill its owner? Was Kafka afraid of technology or the uses people might find for technology? It has been said it is easier to have a machine execute a person. Is the death penalty made easier if no human contact is involved?

The Trial (Der Prozess, Written 1914)

Known for its “story-within,” *The Trial* was one of Kafka’s favorite works. As with Kafka’s other works, the reader meets a man witnessing an absurd form of “justice” — a legal system without logic. *The Trial* represents a common theme in Kafka’s stories: all people are guilty of something and the punishments are in inverse proportion to the sin.

Josef K. awakes one night to discover men walking about the boarding house in which he resides. These men promptly arrest Josef, without stating a reason. When Josef asks why he is being arrested, one man tells him he will be told in “due course.” The reader senses immediately Josef

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

will not learn what crime he has committed, especially if the reader is familiar with Kafka. Maybe Josef has committed no crime, or maybe the crime was minor, but the reader knows the punishment is certainly severe.

The Parable of The Law

While awaiting trial, Josef is counseled by a priest, who tells him a parable. This story within *The Trial* is better known by many students than *The Trial* itself. In the priest's tale a man from the country arrives in front of "the law" — a common term meaning both "the courts" and "truth" in Talmudic tales. The man from the country wishes to be admitted to "the law" but the door is guarded by a menacing doorman. The doorman informs the traveler he cannot enter at the present time. Being reasonable, the man decides to wait until he is permitted entrance into the law.

The doorman offers the man a stool, upon which the traveler sits and rests. Days pass, then years, with the man asking from time to time if it is now the time at which he can enter the law. Each time the guard responds, "not yet." The traveler is eager to enter the law, however, and offers the guard bribes. Though the doorman accepts the bribes, he does not let the man pass through the door.

As the traveler nears death after years of waiting, he notices a radiance from beyond the door. He asks why no one has passed through the door. The guard responds that the door was meant only for this one man. Then, the guard goes to close the door. Josef K. is left to ponder, along with the reader, the meaning of the priest's parable. Should the man from the country have attempted to pass the doorman? Was "the law" symbolic of truth, a court, or something else? Why does the man not leave and go about his life?

Leni, The Nurse

Kafka's sexual insecurities and peculiarities are given form through the character of Leni, the Advocate's nurse. The Advocate, a form of judge-attorney, maintains a nurse to care for accused men. Unfortunately, she seems attracted to these men, including Josef K., who is also attracted to her. Leni sneaks Josef into the Advocate's office, where she attempts to seduce him. Several times during her pursuit of Josef she demands to know why he is more concerned with his trial than her. The reader is presented with passion as a distraction from greater issues.

Josef attempts to explain the trial's importance, as his very existence is at stake. However, Leni responds by asking if Josef has a girlfriend. Josef does have a girlfriend, Elsa, and carries a picture of her. As Leni studies the picture of Elsa, she demands to know of Elsa's defects. This curious request is explained by a minor defect possessed by Leni; readers might consider the significance of this defect. While studying Leni's defect, Josef and Leni begin a physical encounter unlike most described in the works of Kafka.

Empty Death

The last scene of the tale is Josef K.'s execution. Still uncertain of his crime, but even less certain of his innocence, Josef K. goes to the slaughter much like the guard sentenced to die in *The Penal Colony*. Josef offers no resistance; he does not even plead his innocence. Kafka's characters seem to accept their situations, no matter how grim.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

The execution scene is too complex to relate well in a short commentary. In brief, the two executioners offer Josef K. an opportunity to take his own life. In *The Judgment*, that is exactly the choice made by the main character, but Josef K. is not able to take his own life.

K. knew perfectly well that he was meant to take the knife and plunge it into himself, but he did not do so.

Is Josef K. weak? Does he have doubts about his guilt? Instead of taking his own life, Josef looks to a house located near the edge of the quarry where he is to be executed. Seeing a figure in one of the windows, Josef ponders who the figure might be. Josef wonders if it could be a friend... or could it be the very judge who sentenced him to death? While pondering this figure, Josef's executioners decide they will carry out the sentence.

...while the hands of one of the men closed around his throat, the other drove the knife deep into his heart and twisted it twice.

As his eyes grew dim K. could still make out the two men near his face, their cheeks touching as they observed the crucial moment...

Students of Kafka should compare *The Judgment*, *The Trial*, and *In The Penal Colony*. Is Josef K. any more or less tragic than other characters? I would suggest the greatest sin, especially in existentialism, is a failure to be authentic in the sense Jean-Paul Sartre used the term. Something does not seem authentic about most of Kafka's characters — they do not seem true to themselves. It is one thing to accept a situation, it is another to fail to assert an identity.

The Castle (Das Schloss, Written 1922)

An unfinished novel, *The Castle* is a continuation of Kafka's earlier works — it fails to establish any new themes or expansion of thought. There are hundreds of essays, books, and academic articles on *The Castle*; I personally fail to see this work as any better than Kafka's others. In my opinion, the only reason *The Castle* contributes to voluminous study is its lack of completion. Unfinished works leave a lot of room for conjecture. How did Kafka intend to end the work? Did he tire of the novel? Did he write himself out of an ending? Personally, I think he simply realized the work said nothing new to him or potential readers and stopped writing.

By the time he began writing *The Castle*, Kafka had shortened the name of his main character to "K," a man without a name but again a likely reference to the author. The novel begins with K, a professional land surveyor, arriving in a village during a winter storm. He has been summoned by Count West-West, whose castle overlooks the village. But, as one might expect in a Kafka story, K will not meet the Count or perform any specific work.

The castle of the novel's title is not what one might expect; it certainly is not what K expects to see:

He was disappointed... It was neither an old fortress nor a new mansion, but a dismal collection of innumerable small buildings packed together. Swarms of crows circled around the only tower.

It quickly becomes clear to K his presence in the village is the result of a bureaucratic mistake. A surveyor was requested some time ago by the Count, but the request was rescinded almost as long ago. Despite the error, The Castle and its authorities still send K a pair of assistants, Arthur

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

and Jeremiah. Readers should recognize these characters as “fools” in the traditional sense; they provide comic relief while acting as a chorus. The use of fools indicates Kafka’s familiarity with dramatic tradition.

The only reason there is a novel is K’s failure to leave the village, long after he has realized there is no need for a land surveyor. Why does K remain? Only Kafka knows why K does not leave the village — and only Kafka knows if he intended to finish the novel.

The Characters

The Castle features many interesting and confusing tales as K remains in the village, but it is the characters who make the story worthy of some study. The characters and their relationships to K reflect Kafka’s own relationships and fears. Instead of dissecting the novel, I prefer to study the characters and how they reveal facets of Kafka to the reader. Of course, I have already stated the characters seldom reveal anything not already indicated in other tales. It is possible had Kafka lived a full life his writings might have evolved, but *The Castle* leads me to wonder if he had stagnated as a writer.

One can see the characters of *The Castle* as a set of recycled types, found in Kafka’s various works. The unknown, unseen Count is the authority we never meet in *The Trial*. Klamm, the official, is a man simply doing his job, no matter how unreasonable; a father figure of sorts. But most striking are the female characters. K needs the women and relies upon them for support — literally, in several scenes. While the women provide support, they also distract the surveyor from his pursuit of work. The women are obstacles to varying degrees.

Klamm, The Castle Official

The land surveyor K searches for Klamm, an official linked to *The Castle*. Klamm symbolizes authority and bureaucracy, which is present in most Kafka tales. When K spies Klamm through a peephole, the official is described as a paunchy, middle-aged man behind a desk; Klamm is a stereotypical government employee.

Frieda, The Barmaid

Possibly based upon Milena Jesenská-Pollak, Frieda is the mistress of an official from *The Castle*. Milena was married to Ernst Polack, a noted intellectual power, as Frieda is the mistress of a powerful figure. While Frieda works at the local inn as a barmaid, she does not view herself as a mere worker. Her affair with Klamm, the bureaucrat, makes her important.

Frieda is unquestionably a strong female character; she even uses a whip at one point to control a mob of castle servants who are drinking at the inn. This expression of power has an obvious effect upon K — his attraction for her increases with each dominant act she performs. After Frieda has chased the castle’s servants from the inn’s bar with a whip, the landlord of the inn enters. K hides under the bar counter, having been previously warned he is not truly welcome at the inn. Frieda presses K down with her foot while she tells the landlord the surveyor is not in the bar. K is excited by her ruse.

The scene that follows describes K and Frieda making love under the counter, without the use of graphic imagery. Passion for Kafka is not something easily accepted or understood; he often felt disgusted by sexuality, yet seemed unable to resist it. The encounter between K and Frieda is

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

abruptly ended by a voice from Klamm's room, adjacent to the bar, calling for Frieda. To K's horror she responds, "I'm with the land surveyor!" and vows never to go to Klamm again.

Frieda becomes K's fiancée overnight, then leaves him in the morning for one of the fools. One must wonder how a fool is superior to K. Kafka's poor self-image seems to be the underlying issue, or is this merely fiction?

Olga and Amalia, Sisters

It is Olga, a "great strapping wench," who introduces K to the inn and the bar. If it were not for Olga, K would not encounter Frieda as he does. There are several scenes with Olga, usually demonstrating the peasants' need for escape and debauchery.

Amalia represents the plight of a moral person in an amoral world, where authority can do as it pleases. Amalia refuses the advances of a an official from The Castle, but as a result her entire family suffers.

Pepi and the Chambermaids

Pepi replaces Frieda as the barmaid and as K's interest. Pepi offers K a room, which she shares with two chambermaids. K's presence in the room must be kept secret, which Pepi claims will bring the four closer together. There is an unmistakable sexual tension in the situation, with K as the "protector" of the women, yet obviously subservient to them. The oedipal nature of this room is worthy of study.

The Landlady

The final scenes of *The Castle* deal with the landlady. These scenes are as confusing as anything found in *The Judgment*, taking on an almost surreal quality. One might read these scenes several times, each time theorizing another motivation prompting Kafka's dialogue. Is the landlady similar to Pepi? Why are exchanges between the surveyor and the landlady focused upon her appearance? The final exchange in the novel indicates the landlady considers the surveyor a man of fine tastes; she wishes to take him shopping with her as a fashion consultant of sorts.... Then the story ends.

A Hunger Artist (Ein Hungerkünstler, Published June 1924)

During May 1924, Kafka was editing one of his best short stories: *A Hunger Artist*. In fitting irony, Kafka himself was starving as a result of his tuberculosis, which had made it nearly impossible to eat solid foods. Kafka was editing the final proofs of *A Hunger Artist* when he died in Wiener Wald Sanatorium on 3 June 1924.

The story describes the act — and predicament — of a hunger artist, a professional faster. The hunger artist would fast for days at a time, attracting large crowds at carnivals with his ability to do without nourishment. In many ways he was admired for an apparent sacrifice. But with time the crowds dwindled and the hunger artist no longer attracted carnival guests.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

During these last decades the interest in professional fasting has markedly diminished. It used to pay very well to stage such great performances under one's own management, but today that is quite impossible. We live in a different world now. At one time the whole town took a lively interest in the hunger artist....

The obvious comparison is between Kafka and the hunger artist. Kafka, like many writers, believed he was driven to write — not necessarily enjoying the act of creation. In fact, writing was a troubling and almost painful process for Kafka. The hunger artist did not so much choose to be a professional faster as he simply was inclined to fast. Authentic existence is the act of being true to one's nature; Kafka and the hunger artist are both attempting to be authentic.

"I always wanted you to admire my fasting," said the hunger artist.

"We do admire it," said the overseer, affably.

"But you shouldn't admire it," said the hunger artist.

"Well then we don't admire it," said the hunger artist, "but why shouldn't we admire it?"

"Because I have to fast, I can't help it," said the hunger artist.

The remainder of the story is quite amazing. The artist dies as one expects, only to be replaced by a panther — kept in the same cage the artist once occupied. How is the panther symbolic? What is Kafka telling the reader? Was the overseer unsympathetic to the artist?

A Hunger Artist is a parable, a short story masterpiece in my opinion. I place it at the end of a Kafka reading list because it represents clarity Kafka often lacked in his other works. Introducing students to Kafka via *A Hunger Artist* might result in a misunderstanding of his works and style, much as *Metamorphosis* has become a defining work, mainly for those who do not read more of Kafka's works.

Josephine the Singer (Spring 1924)

My favorite work by Kafka, *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, an exploration of how artists relate to society. The story is told by a spectator, one of the mice living alongside Josephine. Presenting the reader with multiple points of view, the narrator demonstrates some confusion as to the allure of Josephine's singing — and her personality. Is Josephine a gifted singer? Is she merely self-absorbed? The narrator is not sure.

Among intimates we admit freely to one another that Josephine's singing, as singing, is nothing out of the ordinary.

Is it in fact singing at all? Although we are unmusical we have a tradition of singing; in the old days our people did sing; this is mentioned in legends and some songs have actually survived, which, it is true, no one can now sing. Thus we have an inkling of what singing is, and Josephine's art does not really correspond to it.

Josephine must have some special quality, or the narrator would not be compelled to tell her story. If she is not a talented singer and offers no major benefit to the other mice, there must be

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

something more to Josephine's position within the society. The reader must assume the narrator is not being completely honest — with either himself or the reader.

What drives people to make such exertions for Josephine's sake? This is no easier to answer than the first question about Josephine's singing, with which it is closely connected. Once could eliminate that and combine them both in the second question, if it were possible to assert that because of her singing our people are unconditionally devoted to Josephine. But this is simply not the case; unconditional devotion is hardly known among us....

Why do the other mice do as Josephine demands? There is a devotion to her, which the reader quickly recognizes. Is Kafka commenting upon society's view of art and its value? Artists are often viewed as emotionally frail, almost childlike. They are also considered self-absorbed.

So the people look after Josephine much as a father takes into his care a child whose little hand — one cannot tell whether in appeal or command — is stretched out to him....

Josephine... thinks just the opposite, she believes it is she who protects the people. When we are in a bad way politically or economically, her singing is supposed to save us, nothing less than that, and if it does not drive away the evil, at least gives us the strength to dear it.

One of the interesting traits of Josephine is her constant demand to be excused from labor. This view reflects that of many people toward artists: artistic pursuits are not truly work — nothing of value is produced. One must wonder if this somehow relates to Kafka and his inability to work during the last years of his life.

For a long time back, perhaps since the very beginning of her artistic career, Josephine has been fighting for exemption from all daily work on account of her singing; she should be relieved of all responsibility for earning her daily bread and being involved in the general struggle for existence, which — apparently — should be transferred on her behalf to the people as a whole.

The narrator does defend Josephine, remarking that given the opportunity she would not actually avoid work. After all, the reader is told, she is a mouse and all mice must work in order to survive. Therefore one must wonder why Josephine demands to be freed of labor — even though she would not cease performing her duties. It is likely Josephine is practicing the fine art of public relations: she is marketing herself as someone special.

The story ends with the narrator telling the reader Josephine has vanished. In the past, she has run away, but she has been gone longer than normal — two entire days. One must wonder if she has met misfortune. Curiously, the narrator attempts to convince the reader Josephine will eventually fade from memory, in part because there are no mouse historians. Yet, historian is exactly the role assumed by the narrator. Will Josephine be missed by the other mice?

The Burrow (Der Bau, Written 1924)

One of the last works by Franz Kafka, *The Burrow* reveals the secret life of a mole-like creature. I find this story one of Kafka's best works. The quality of the story reflects how closely the author related to the creature-narrator of his tale. Considering Kafka's strong desire to isolate himself from others, living alone with his work, it is easy to recognize the narrator is none other than Kafka; he makes no attempt to hide this parallel.

Christopher Scott Wyatt on Kafka

The most wonderful thing about my burrow is the silence. At any minute it may be broken... but for now I can stroll through its passages and hear nothing except the stirring of some tiny creatures which I quickly silence with my jaws.

Assuming we can compare the burrow in which the creature lives to Kafka's vision of the perfect workplace, we learn Kafka views whatever is just outside of the fortress as a threat. *The Burrow's* narrator is paranoid, as is the author. Kafka was a hypochondriac with a variety of mental quirks; this creature mirrors his creator. Living in a constant state of fear, the narrator eventually determines it is easier to surrender to an unseen predator than to continue an anxious existence. The narrator foresees being torn apart and tortured by the unknown predator. As the story ends, however, we are not certain of the creature's fate — and neither is the creature.

Quotes

Who is to confirm for me the truth or probability of this, that it is only because of my **literary mission** that I am uninterested in all other things and therefore heartless. *Diary*, March 1912. ("Mission" was translated from *Bestimmung*, which can also be considered "destiny" or a fate.)

I consist of literature and am unable to be anything else. *Said to Felice Bauer*.

I have often thought that the best mode of life for me would be to sit in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar with my writing things and a lamp.... And how I would write! From what depths I would drag it up! Without effort! For extreme concentration known no effort. The trouble is that I might not be able to keep it up for long, and at the first failure... would be bound to end in a grandiose fit of madness. *Letter to Felice Bauer*. 14-15 January, 1913.

Guilt is never to be doubted. *In the Penal Colony*, October, 1914.

...the innocent and the guilty, both executed without distinction in the end.... *Diary*, entry from 30 September, 1915.

My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background; my life has dwindled dreadfully, nor will it cease to dwindle. *Written at the start of World War I*.

The clocks are not in unison; the inner one runs crazily on at a devilish or demonic or in any case inhuman pace, the outer one limps along at its usual speed. What else can happen but that the worlds split apart, and they do split apart, or at least clash in a fearful manner. *Diary*, entry from 16 January, 1922

An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being! *The Judgment*. Father speaking to son.

There is a goal, but no way; what we call a way is hesitation.

Sometimes I feel I understand the Fall of Man better than anyone.

All these so-called [mental] illnesses, however sad they may look, are facts of belief, the distressed human being's anchorages in some maternal ground; thus it is not surprising that psychoanalysis finds the primal ground of all religions to be precisely the same thing as what causes the individual's "illnesses."

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