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- *Selected Bibliography*

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# Kafka's Stories Notes

## LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Born in Prague in 1883, Franz Kafka is today considered the most important prose writer of the so-called Prague Circle, a loosely knit group of German-Jewish writers who contributed to the culturally fertile soil of Prague during the 1880s until after World War I. Yet from the Czech point of view, Kafka was German, and from the German point of view he was, above all, Jewish. In short, Kafka shared the fate of much of Western Jewry—people who were largely emancipated from their specifically Jewish ways and yet not fully assimilated into the culture of the countries where they lived. Although Kafka became extremely interested in Jewish culture after meeting a troupe of Yiddish actors in 1911, and although he began to study Hebrew shortly after that, it was not until late in his life that he became deeply interested in his heritage. His close relationship with Dora Dymant, his steady and understanding companion of his last years, contributed considerably toward this development. But even if Kafka had not been Jewish, it is hard to see how his artistic and religious sensitivity could have remained untouched by the ancient Jewish traditions of Prague which reached back to the city's tenth-century origin.

In addition to Kafka's German, Czech, and Jewish heritages, there was also the Austrian element into which Kafka had been born and in which he had been brought up. Prague was the major second capital of the Austrian Empire (after Vienna) since the early sixteenth century, and although Kafka was no friend of Austrian politics, it is important to emphasize this Austrian component of life in Prague because Kafka has too often been called a Czech writer—especially in America. Kafka's name is also grouped too often with German writers, which is accurate only in the sense that he belongs to the German-speaking world. Apart from that, however, it is about as meaningful as considering Faulkner an English novelist.

For his recurring theme of human alienation, Kafka is deeply indebted to Prague and his situation there as a social outcast, a victim of the friction between Czechs and Germans, Jews and non-Jews. To understand Kafka, it is important to realize that in Prague the atmosphere of medieval mysticism and Jewish orthodoxy lingered until after World War II, when the Communist regime began getting rid of most of its remnants. To this day, however, Kafka's tiny flat in Alchemists' Lane behind the towering Hradschin Castle is a major attraction for those in search of traces of Kafka. The haunting mood of Prague's narrow, cobblestoned streets, its slanted roofs, and its myriad backyards comes alive in the surreal settings of Kafka's stories. His simple, sober, and yet dense language is traced to the fact that in Prague the German language had been exposed to manifold Slavic influences for centuries and was virtually cut off from the mainstream language as spoken and written in Germany and Austria. Prague was a linguistic island as far as German was concerned, and while the Czech population of Prague doubled within the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the percentage of German Jews sank to a mere seven percent. The result was that Kafka actually wrote in a language which was on the verge of developing its own characteristics. This absence of any gap between the spoken and written word in his language is probably the secret behind the enormous appeal of his language, whose deceptive simplicity comes across in every decent translation.

Kafka's family situation was a reflection of his being a German-speaking Jew in a predominantly Slavic environment. The great socio-economic and educational differences between his father, Hermann Kafka, and his mother, Julie Löwy, were at the root of this complex situation. Kafka's father's whole life was shaped by his desperate and eventually successful attempt to break out of his poor Czech milieu and become accepted in the prestigious environment of German Prague; his mother, however, came from a wealthy German-Jewish bourgeois family. Throughout his lifetime, Franz Kafka could never extricate himself from the terrible friction between his parents which was caused, for the most part, by his tyrannical father. Kafka's only strong, positive ties with his family were with his favorite sister,

Ottla, who let him stay at her home and later helped him break off his relationship with Felice, his first fiancée. To one extent or another, all of Kafka's works bear the unmistakable imprint of the nerve-wracking struggle between his humility and hypersensitivity (his mother's heritage) and the crudity and superficiality of his father, who looked at his son's writing with indifference and, at times, with contempt. This total lack of understanding and the absence of any home life worthy the name (young Franz was virtually brought up by a nurse) caused the boy's early seriousness and anxiety. As late as 1919, five years before his death, this lifelong trauma manifested itself in his *Letter to His Father* (almost a hundred pages, but never actually delivered), in which Kafka passionately accuses his father of intimidation and brutality. Although it will not do to reduce the complex art of Franz Kafka to its autobiographical elements, the significance of these elements in his work is indeed striking. His story "The Judgment" seems especially to be the direct result of his deep-seated fear of his father.

Kafka is the classical painter of the *estrangement of modern man*, although he is never its apostle. As early as 1905, in his "Description of a Fight," Kafka already denied man's ability to obtain certainty through sensory perception and intellectual effort because, according to him, these methods inevitably distort the nature of the Absolute by forcing it into their prefabricated structures. The resulting skepticism, of which he himself was to become the tragic victim, was the basis of his conviction that none of our fleeting impressions and accidental associations have a fixed counterpart in a "real" and stable world. There is no clear-cut boundary between reality and the realm of dreams, and if one of his characters appears to have found such a boundary, it quickly turns out that he has set it up merely as something to cling to in the face of chaos. The "real" world of phenomena develops its own logic and leaves Kafka's characters yearning for a firm metaphysical anchor which they never quite grasp.

At no time did Kafka seek refuge from his culturally and socially alienated situation by joining literary or social circles—something many of his fellow writers did. He remained an



outcast, suffering from the consequences of his partly self-imposed seclusion, and yet welcoming it for the sake of literary productivity. Anxious although he was to use his positions, as well as his engagements to Felice Bauer and Julie Wohryzek, as a means to gain recognition for his writing, his life story is, nevertheless, one long struggle against his feelings of guilt and inferiority.

The one person who could and did help him was Max Brod, whom he met in 1902 and who was to become not only his editor but also an intimate friend. The numerous letters which Kafka wrote to him are a moving testimony of their mutual appreciation. Because of Brod's encouragement, Kafka began to read his first literary efforts to small private audiences long before he was recognized as a significant writer. With Brod, Kafka traveled to Italy, Weimar (where Goethe and Schiller had written), and Paris; later, Brod introduced him into the literary circles of Prague. In short, Brod helped Kafka to fend off an increasingly threatening self-isolation. Most significantly for posterity, it was Brod who, contrary to Kafka's express request, did not burn the manuscripts which Kafka left behind; instead, he became their enthusiastic editor.

If Kafka had a strong inclination to isolate himself, this does not mean he was indifferent to what was going on around him. Especially in the years until 1912, Kafka familiarized himself with some of the far-reaching new ideas of the day. At a friend's house, he attended lectures and discussions on Einstein's theory of relativity, Planck's quantum theory, and Freud's psychoanalytical experiments. He was also interested in politics, especially the nationalistic aspirations of the Czechs in the Austrian Empire. In his function as a lawyer at the Workers' Insurance Company, he was confronted daily with the social situation of workers, and toward the end of World War I, he even composed a brochure on the plight of the proletariat. This is, in part, proof that Franz Kafka was not the melancholy dreamer of nightmares, isolated in his ivory tower in Prague—a view still commonly held today.

It was at Max Brod's home that Kafka met Felice Bauer in 1912. This encounter plunged him into a frustrating relationship for many years, oscillating between engagements and periods of complete withdrawal. "The Judgment" (1912) is a document of this encounter. Having literally poured it out in one long sitting, Kafka came to regard it as an illustration of how one should always write; it was the subject of his first public reading. At that time, Kafka was already filling a detailed diary, full of reflections and parables as a means of self-analysis. The same year, 1912, he wrote "The Metamorphosis," one of the most haunting treatments of human alienation, and most of the fragmentary novel *Amerika*. According to his own conviction, his literary productivity reached a peak at precisely the time when his insecurity and anxiety over whether or not to marry Felice reached a climax. For the first time, the deep-seated conflict between his yearning for the simple life of a married man and his determination not to succumb to it became critical.

More and more, Kafka's writing began to deal with *Angst* (anxiety, anguish), probably because of the sustained anxiety induced by his domineering father and by the problem of whether or not to break away from his bachelorhood existence. Toward the end of "The Judgment," and in "In the Penal Colony," as well as in *The Trial* and *The Castle*, the father figure assumes the mysterious qualities of an ineffable god. Suffering, punishment, judgment, trial—all these are manifestations of Kafka's rigorous, ethical mind. The philosophy of Franz Brentano, to which he was exposed at the university, intensified his interest in these themes. The essence of this philosophy is that since emotions and concepts cannot sufficiently explain moral action, personal judgment alone must determine it; thorough self-analysis is the only prerequisite for such a total autonomy of personal judgment, a view which Kafka came to exercise almost to the point of self-destruction.

Kafka's fascination with these themes received new impetus when he began to read the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in 1913. As radical a skeptic as Kafka and equally religious by temperament, Kierkegaard envisages man as caught in the

dilemma of wanting to comprehend Divinity with the altogether inadequate tools of rationality. Since God's transcendence is absolute for him, Kierkegaard sees no way of solving this dilemma except by abandoning intellectual pursuit and venturing a "leap into faith." Kafka's plea for man to "enter into the law," stated most explicitly in the parable "Before the Law" (in *The Trial*), deals with this dilemma. The difference is that Kierkegaard is cornered by the overwhelming presence of God forcing him to make decisions. In Kafka's parable, his hero wants to enter the first gate of the palace—that is, "the law"—but he dies because he does not exert sufficient will to enter and leaves all possible decisions to the gatekeeper; Kafka's searching man has no divine guidance to show him the way, and the situation he faces is one of total uncertainty and despair. Antithetically, Kierkegaard's radical skepticism results in faith.

Kafka and Kierkegaard have been called existentialists, and though this label has some merits, it should nevertheless be used very carefully. Both men were fascinated by the theme of moral integrity in the face of freedom of choice and were convinced that man lives meaningfully only to the extent which he realizes himself. In this connection, it is interesting to know that Kafka felt close to Kierkegaard because of the latter's lifelong unresolved relationship to his fiancée. The problem dominated Kierkegaard's life and work as much as Kafka's life and work was dominated by his relationships with Felice Bauer (to whom he was engaged twice—in 1914 and 1917), Julie Wohryzek (engaged in 1919), and Milena Jesenska (1920-22).

Perhaps more than any other story, Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" (1914) reflects his reaction to the outbreak of World War I, a feeling of sheer horror as well as disgust with the politicians in power. The result was a renewed fascination with Schopenhauer and Dostoevsky, whose extolment of physical pain finds expression in a variety of ways. Near this same time, Kafka began working on *The Trial*, about which he remarked that its ghastly thoughts devoured him in much the same way as did his thoughts about Felice. The novel is an elaborate and heavily autobiographical fantasy of punishment: on the eve of his thirty-first

birthday, Joseph K. is executed; on the evening of his own thirty-first birthday, Kafka decided to travel to Berlin to break off his first engagement with Felice. Symptomatically for Kafka, this novel remained fragmentary—as did his other two, *Amerika* and *The Castle*. “A Report to an Academy” and the fragmentary “The Hunter Gracchus” followed, and in 1919 several stories were published under the title *A Country Doctor*. The title story is a symbolic description of modern man living outside a binding universal order and brought to death by sensuality and the aimlessness of the forces working within him. This volume contains perhaps Kafka’s best parable on the nature of absurdity, “The Imperial Message.” It is a terrifying description of how important messages, ordered at the top level to save men at the bottom, never stand a chance of getting through the manifold obstacles of bureaucracy. “The Imperial Message” is an interesting reversal of “Before the Law,” where the lowly searcher never even gets beyond the first gate (the lowest obstacle) in his attempt to proceed to higher insights. In both cases, the human need to communicate is frustrated, and the inevitable result is alienation and subsequent death.

These stories were written during a time when Kafka, engaged once again to Felice, was finding a measure of stability again. Although he was determined this time to give up his insurance position and to use his time writing, he soon realized that this effort was an escape, as had been his (rejected) application to be drafted into the army. Kafka was to remain much like the roving hunter Gracchus, burdened with the knowledge that he could not gain inner poise by drowning the fundamental questions of existence in the comforts of married life.

In 1917 Kafka was stricken with tuberculosis, an illness which he was convinced was only the physical manifestation of his disturbed inner condition. For years he had fought hopeless battles for and against marriage (he had a son with Grete Bloch, a friend of Felice’s, but never knew about him); during this time, he continually sought to justify his suffering by writing. Now he gave up. “The world—Felice is its representative—and my innermost self have torn apart (my body in unresolvable

opposition," he wrote in his diary. His suffering was alleviated by the fact that he could spend many months in the country, either in sanatoriums or with his favorite sister, Ottila. These months brought with them a new freedom from his work as a lawyer and, for the second time, from Felice.

In 1922, Kafka wrote "A Hunger Artist," "Investigations of a Dog," and most of his third novel, *The Castle*. Highly autobiographical like all of his works, the hero of "A Hunger Artist" starves himself because he cannot find the spiritual food he requires. The investigations of the chief dog in the story of the same name reflect Kafka's own literary attempts to impart at least a notion of the universal to his readers. In *The Castle*, K. becomes entangled in the snares of a castle's "celestial" hierarchy as hopelessly as does Joseph K. in the "terrestrial" bureaucracy of *The Trial*. All these stories originated in the years 1921 and 1922, years when Kafka lived under the strong influence of Milena Jesenska, to whom he owed his renewed strength to write. Although in many respects different from him (she was gentile, unhappily married, and much younger), the extremely sensitive Milena could justly claim "to have known his anxiety before having known Kafka himself," as she put it. Forever afraid of any deeper involvement with Milena, Kafka eventually stopped seeing her. That he gave her his diaries and several manuscripts, however, is proof of his deep commitment to her.

## COMMENTARIES

### "THE METAMORPHOSIS" (*DIE VERWANDLUNG*)

Kafka wrote "The Metamorphosis" at the end of 1912, soon after he finished "The Judgment," and it is worth noting that the two stories have much in common: a businessman and bachelor like Georg Bendemann of "The Judgment," Gregor Samsa is confronted with an absurd fate in the form of a "gigantic insect," while Georg is confronted by absurdity in the person of

his father. Also both men are guilty: like Georg in "The Judgment," Gregor Samsa (note the similarity of first names) is guilty of having cut himself off from his true self—long before his actual metamorphosis—and, to the extent he has done so, he is excluded from his family. His situation of intensifying anxiety, already an unalterable fact at his awakening, corresponds to Georg's after his sentence. More so than Georg, however, who comes to accept his judgment, out of proportion though it may be, Gregor is a puzzled victim brought before the Absolute—here in the form of the chief clerk—which forever recedes into the background. This element of receding, an important theme in Kafka's works, intensifies the gap between the hero and the unknown source of his condemnation. Thus the reader finds himself confronted with Gregor's horrible fate and is left in doubt about the source of Gregor's doom and the existence of enough personal guilt to warrant such a harsh verdict. The selection of an ordinary individual as victim heightens the impact of the absurd. Gregor is not an enchanted prince in a fairy tale, yearning for deliverance from his animal state; instead, he is a rather average salesman who awakens and finds himself transformed into an insect.

In a sense, Gregor is the archetype of many of Kafka's male characters: he is a man reluctant to act, fearful of possible mishaps, rather prone to exaggerated contemplation, and given to juvenile, surrogate dealings with sex. For example, he uses his whole body to anxiously guard the magazine clipping of a lady in a fur cape; this is a good illustration of his pitiful preoccupation with sex. Though it would be unfair to blame him for procrastinating, for not getting out of bed on the first morning of his metamorphosis, we have every reason to assume that he has procrastinated long before this—especially in regard to a decision about his unbearable situation at work. Gregor has also put off sending his sister to the conservatory, although he promised to do so. He craves love and understanding, but his prolonged inactivity gradually leads him to feel ever more indifferent about everything. It is through all his failures to act, then, rather than from specific irresponsible actions he commits, that Gregor is guilty. The price his guilt exacts is that of agonizing loneliness.

Plays on words and obvious similarities of names point to the story's highly autobiographical character. The arrangement of the vowels in *Samsa* is the same as in *Kafka*. More significantly yet, *samsja* means "being alone" in Czech. (In this connection, it is noteworthy that in "Wedding Preparations in the Country," an earlier use of the metamorphosis motif, the hero's name is *Raban*. The same arrangement of the vowel *a* prevails, and there is also another play on words: *Rabe* is German for *raven*, the Czech word for which is *kavka*; the raven, by the way, was the business emblem of Kafka's father.)

It is easy to view Gregor as an autobiographical study of Kafka himself. Gregor's father, his mother, and his sister also have their parallels with Kafka's family. Gregor feels that he has to appease his father, who "approaches with a grim face" toward him, and it is his father's bombardment with apples that causes his death. The two women, on the other hand, have the best of intentions — his mother pleading for her son's life, believing that Gregor's state is only some sort of temporary sickness; she even wants to leave the furniture in his room the way it is "so that when he comes back to us he will find everything as it was and will be able to forget what has happened all the more easily." And Grete, so eager to understand and help her brother at first, soon changes; she does not want to forgo her "normal" life and is the first one to demand the insect's removal. These people simply do not understand, and the reason they do not understand is that they are habitually too "preoccupied with their immediate troubles."

Gregor's situation in his family is that of Kafka within his own family: he had a tyrannical father who hated or, at best, ignored his son's writing; a well-meaning mother, who was not strong enough to cope with her husband's brutality; and a sister, Otla, whom Kafka felt very close to. Shortly after completing "The Metamorphosis," Kafka wrote in his diary: "I am living with my family, the dearest people, and yet I am more estranged from them than from a stranger."

Returning to the subject of Gregor, what strikes one most immediately is the fact that although he is outwardly equipped

with all the features of an insect, he reacts like a human being. Gregor never identifies himself with an insect. It is important to realize, therefore, that Gregor's metamorphosis actually takes place in his "uneasy dreams," which is something altogether different than saying it is the result of the lingering impact of these dreams. An interpretation often advanced categorizes Gregor's metamorphosis as an attempt at escaping his deep-seated conflict between his true self and the untenable situation at the company. He begs the chief clerk for precisely that situation which has caused him to be so unhappy; he implores him to help him maintain his position and, while doing so, completely forgets that he is a grotesquerie standing in front of the chief clerk.

What bothers Gregor most about his situation at the company is that there is no human dimension in what he is doing: "All the casual acquaintances never become intimate friends." If it were not for his parents' debt to his chief, whom—typical of Kafka's predilection for the anonymity of top echelons—we never hear about in concrete terms, Gregor would have quit working long ago. As will be shown later, he would have had every reason to do so. As it turns out, he was, and still is, too weak. Even now in his helpless condition, he continues to think of his life as a salesman in "normal" terms; he plans the day ahead as if he could start it like every other day, and he is upset only because of his clumsiness.

Although one might expect such a horrible fate to cause a maximum of intellectual and emotional disturbance in a human being—and Gregor remains one inwardly until his death—he stays surprisingly calm. His father shows the same incongruous behavior when confronted with Gregor's fate; he acts as if this fate were something to be expected from his son. The maid treats him like a curious pet, and the three lodgers are amused, rather than appalled, by the sight of the insect. The reason for the astounding behavior of all these people is found in their incapacity to comprehend disaster. This incapacity, in turn, is a concomitant symptom of their limitless indifference toward everything happening to Gregor. Because they have maintained a higher degree



of sensitivity, the women in Gregor's family respond differently at first, Gregor's mother even resorting to a fainting spell to escape having to identify the insect with her son.

Gregor's unbelievably stayed reaction to his horrible fate shows Kafka, the master painter of the grotesque, at his best. In paragraphs bristling with the most meticulous descriptions of the absurd, Kafka achieves the utmost in gallows humor and irony. Gregor's crawling up and down the wall, his delighting in dirt, and the fact that he "takes food only as a pastime" – all these are described in detail and presented as normal; at the same time, however, on the morning of his metamorphosis, Gregor "catches at some kind of irrational hope" that nobody will open the door. The comical effect of this reversal of the normal and the irrational is then further heightened by the servant girl's opening the door as usual.

Let us return to Gregor's conflict. His professional and social considerations are stronger than his desire to quit working for his company. In fact, he even toys with the idea of sleeping and forgetting "all this nonsense." This "nonsense" refers to his transformation, which he does not want to accept because he sees it only as something interfering with his daily routine. His insect appearance must not be real because it does not suit Gregor the businessman. By ignoring or negating his state, he can, of course, in no way eliminate it. The contrary seems to be the case: the more he wants to ignore it, the more horrible its features become; finally he has to shut his eyes "to keep from seeing his struggling legs."

As a representative of the run-of-the-mill mentality of modern man, Gregor is frustrated by his totally commercialized existence and yet does nothing about it, other than try to escape by new calculations along purely commercial lines. He vows that once he has sufficient money, he will quit, and yet he has no idea what he will do. He does not really know his innermost self, which is surrounded by an abyss of emptiness. This is why Kafka draws this "innermost self" as something strange and threatening to Gregor's commercialized existence.