

# In the following activity, you will read a biographical essay that predominantly focuses on several works of Franz Kafka. Using the essay, answer the following questions in complete sentences and quoting particular information when necessary.

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ne of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka penned novels and short stories that portray the bewildered alienation of modern society. His characters frequently find themselves in threatening situations for which there is no explanation and from which there is no escape. Writing in the *Bookman,* Edwin Muir found that "the four main ideas which run through Kafka's work may be condensed into four axioms[[1]](#footnote-1). The first two are that, compared with the divine law, no matter how unjust it may sometimes appear to us, all human effort, even the highest, is in the wrong; and that always whatever our minds or our feelings may tell us, the claim of the divine law to unconditional reverence and obedience is absolute. The other two are complementary: that there is a right way of life, and that its discovery depends on one's attitude to powers which are almost unknown."

In an article for the *New Yorker,* John Updike explained: "The century since Franz Kafka was born has been marked by the idea of `modernism' a self-consciousness new among centuries, a consciousness of being new. Sixty years after his death, Kafka epitomizes one aspect of this modern mind-set: a sensation of anxiety and shame whose center cannot be located and therefore cannot be placated[[2]](#footnote-2); a sense of an infinite difficulty within things, impeding every step; a sensitivity intense beyond usefulness, as if the nervous system, flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain. In Kafka's peculiar and highly original case, this dreadful quality is mixed with immense tenderness, oddly good humor, and a certain severe and reassuring formality. The combination makes him an artist; but rarely can an artist have struggled against greater inner resistance and more sincere diffidence as to the worth of his art." Among Kafka's most-studied works are the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* and the short stories "The Metamorphosis," "The Hunger Artist," and "In the Penal Colony."

Experiences social prejudice in early life

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

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

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

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

*The Trial* prompts diverse critical commentary

Many critics of *The Trial* have seen it, at least in part, as a story about guilt. In *Reference Guide to World Literature,* B. Ashbrook noted: "Josef K.'s actions betray a recognition on his part that the court does have a claim upon him....Whatever his words may indicate, his behaviour is that of a man who feels guilty.... Josef K.'s sense of guilt cannotbe attributed to any one specific action; nor can it be characterized as universal human guilt. There are otheraccused men in the story but, equally, there are many who do not stand accused by the court. Josef K.'s failingmay be found in his lack of humility and self-understanding, in his aggressive impatience and stubbornness."

Commenting on the work of his fellow novelist in an essay collected in his *Gesammelte Werke Volume 12,* Hermann Hesse described the novel's ongoing, mysterious trial as being about "none other than the guilt of lifeitself. The `accused' are the afflicted ones among the unsuspecting, harmless masses that have a dawningawareness of the terrible truth of all life, an awareness that is gradually strangling their hearts."

The chapter titled "In the Cathedral" offers some support for the idea that *The Trial* is concerned with a kind of universal guilt. In this chapter, K. visits a priest to seek his advice on what to do. The priest reveals that he is a chaplain for the Court and can help explain its enigmatic workings. He relates to K. the parable "Before the Law," a story about a man seeking the Law. When the man arrives at the door leading to the Law, the doorkeeper explains that he cannot let the man in "at present," and so he sits and waits. Years go by and the man is still waiting to be let into the Law. He tries bribing the doorkeeper, pleading with him, and questioning him about the Law's nature, all to no avail. Finally, as the man is dying, he asks the doorkeeper why he has been the only one to ever come seeking the Law. The doorkeeper explains: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was meant for you alone. I am now going to shut it." Following the story, the priest discusses the parable's meaning with

K., who ends up as baffled as before about the Law he faces and the Court passing judgment upon him. Erich Heller, in his study *Franz Kafka,* interpreted "Before the Law" as possessing a "terrible charm"; it shows "all the characteristic features of Kafka's art at its most powerful," continued the critic; "-- possessing, that is, the kind of power that is in the gentle wafting of the wind rather than in the thunderous storm, and is the more destructive for it. Parodying Biblical simplicity, ... it expresses the most unholy complications of the intelligence and raises hellish questions in the key of the innocently unquestionable. Its humor is at the same time tender and cruel, teasing the mind with the semblance of light into losing itself in the utmost obscurity."

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

K.'s growing confusion, disorientation, and desperate attempts to make sense of his situation make *The Trial* a powerful symbol of alienation. "*The Trial,*" wrote Rene Dauvin in *Franz Kafka Today,* "is so mysterious, so vague, that many interpretations are possible. As we stand on the threshold of Kafka's work, we feel uneasy, disoriented.

The very form and structure of the novel amaze us, for it escapes all classification and transports us into an atmosphere of hallucination and strange disquiet." Many critics interpret K.'s alienation as that of modern man in a society where traditional values have broken down or as that of every man in a fundamentally mysterious universe. Hesse, for example, argued that *The Trial* was a religious text. Speaking of the brief, unconnected chapters comprising the novel, he wrote: "This oppressive and fearful nightmare image persists until gradually the hidden significance dawns on the reader. Only then do [Kafka's] willful and fantastic evocations radiate their redemption, only then do we understand that contrary to their appearance as carefully wrought miniatures their significance is not artistic but religious. They are expressions of piety and elicitations of devotion, even reverence."

Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*

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

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

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

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

"The story's first part," noted Klingenstein, "is desperate slapstick.... When Gregor finally manages to open the door of his room and reveals himself to his assembled family and his boss, their horrified reaction confirms that he is indeed a giant cockroach." Gregor's father drives him back into the room using a cane and a newspaper.

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

# Gathering important information and reflecting on the essay

Using the essay, answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper. Please do not write your answers on this sheet!

EXPERIENCES SOCIAL PREJUDICE EARLY IN LIFE

1. Where was Kafka born? What do you know about his experience here?

**ANSWER: Kafka was born in Prague in 1883. It was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Jews lived apart from other groups of people in ghettos.**

1. What do we learn about Kafka’s relationship with his father? How did it affect him?
2. Who is Max Brod? What does he have to do with Kafka’s literary career?
3. What features characterized Kafka’s early writing?
4. How old was Kafka when he died? What killed him?

# The Trial Prompts Diverse Critical Commentary & kafka’s *metamorphosis*

1. What do many critics say *The Trial* is about?
2. How does Hermann Hesse explain the basic meaning of Kafka’s *The Trial*?
3. What does *The Trial* symbolize?
4. What “seems to have been [Kafka’s] intention” when creating the trial?
5. What does Vannatta say that Kafka “dramatizes” more than any other writer?
6. What do Kafka’s stories “strain with”?
7. Summarize the basic plot of *The Metamorphosis*.
8. What is odd about the way the author depicts Gregor’s transformation?

FINAL QUESTION

1. After reading the biographical information, what prominent themes do you expect to encounter in *The Metamorphosis*?
1. axiom: a statement that is widely and commonly accepted as true. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. placate: to make something less angry or hostile. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)