

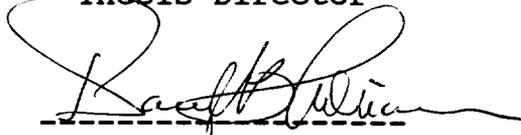
FRANZ KAFKA: A PERSONAL STUDY

An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Daryl B. Adrian", written over a horizontal dashed line.

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I. BIOGRAPHY

Franz Kafka was born on July third 1883, and died in June 1924. But in the span of those forty one years, Kafka wrote literature which will probably be known forever -- and thus, even in his short life span of forty-one years, he has made his name immortal.

I was introduced to Kafka quite by accident. We were allowed to read a book for extra credit in my junior English class in high school. Not having adequate time to read anything lengthy, I decided upon The Metamorphosis because of its relative brevity.

That was the first time I read Kafka, and I fell in love with his writing. I had never read anything with such unnecessary agony, such senseless misery, and such complete absurdity -- yet I enjoyed reading and pondering about Gregor Samsa's enormous dilemma. I enjoyed the vivid use of symbolism and the way Kafka's stories seemed to be absurd; yet, upon closer scrutinization; they seemed to mirror situations in contemporary society.

Kafka was also appealing to me at that time because I was going through a difficulty period in my life. There was a lot of senseless suffering and misery involved. I thus was able to identify to some extent with the characters in his stories. I was able, for example, to feel the sufferin and misery that Gregor Samsa and Joseph K. felt in The Metamorphosis and The Trial, respectively. I could identify with their senseless nature of their pain. There didn't seem to be any need or reason

for it. There wasn't any logic to explain it. I similarly could see no need or reason for my own suffering. It seemed to be totally unnecessary and irrational. I also was further able to identify with the bureaucratic systems in The Metamorphosis and The Trial, that is, the social, cultural, and economic systems over which the protagonists had no control. This comprehension of the protagonists' situations made Kafka's literature more poignant as the parallelism of their own lives and mine offered me great solace at that time.

And so it was by accident that I was introduced to the infinitely complex man who was Franz Kafka, and to his works. I read his works because they were short. Later, I suffered with him and found solace in what he was trying to say through his short works of fiction.

Kafka led an interesting life. However, because he was an incredibly shy and insecure individual, Kafka did not have a variety of exciting experiences. Some experts even say that he led a sheltered life, and his first sexual experience occurred when he was twenty years old. (Hayman 64) But he was by no means promiscuous. He had close relationships with only few women, and most of them were literary companions, rather than mates. Kafka never married, so there wasn't a wife who influenced his writing. But he was greatly influenced throughout his life by three major forces: his perceived failure to win his father's love; his need for his own identity as Czech, German, or Jewish; and by his experiences with the legal system in Czechoslovakia.

First, Kafka felt that his father did not love or respect

him. And there was nothing Kafka could do to win his father's acceptance. Hermann Kafka, Franz's father, was a big, strong man "who by the age of ten had proved his powers of physical endurance, getting up early in the morning to help his father pushing a small cart through the villages, wearing the same scanty clothes summer and winter, putting up with open sores on his legs." (Hayman 12) At the age of fourteen, Hermann was sent away from home to take care of himself. He worked for a shop in Pisek and learned to survive as a new member of a generation which had not only to confront social problems that were not entirely new but also to make decisions which were. "There were still outbreaks of violence and there was still the gentile assumption --not always tacit -- that Jews were racially different and cognitively inferior." (Rowman 36)

The area in which initiative could be taken -- had to be taken -- was over the degree of assimilation one attempted. The more ambitious one was the greater the temptation to escape stigma by implicitly or explicitly denying one's Jewish identity. One could, for example, give up one's Jewish religion and be baptized, thereby obtaining a ticket into European culture. Or, one could merely forsake the Jewish religious practices of one's parents, as Hermann Kafka did. Certainly, Hermann Kafka's chronic need for security was characteristic of his generation. His underlying anxiety was of losing the material advantages he had won by thrusting determination and relentless hard work in building up his fancy goods business. When Franz could not live up to his father's expectations to add to the prosperity of the

business, Hermann was disappointed. He could never forgive his son Franz for his sins of omission, and one of the most offensive was his disinclination to cooperate in building financial bulwarks against the danger that Hermann Kafka and his children would be victimized just like Hermann and his parents had been. Fundamentally, it was fear of victimization that made the fancy-goods dealer victimize his sensitive son. Hermann Kafka felt that Franz should take advantage of the opportunities presented to him. And so when Franz did not, or could not, Hermann was not pleased.

Hermann Kafka very much wanted Franz to learn proper manners and decorum in order to advance himself in social groups. Hermann thus was determined to teach his son good table manners. Franz must not, for example, crunch bones, or lap up vinegar or let scraps of food fall to the floor, though ironically his father did all these things. Furthermore, the bread must be sliced straight, though it was acceptable to do it with gravy on the knife. Ironically the good table manners excluded cleaning one's nails or ears with a toothpick. (Hayman 32) Though self-contradictory, these arbitrary rules and careless practices were followed to enable Franz to advance in the Society of Prague and at the same time discard his Jewish heritage. This also provided an avenue for Franz's father to advance in society through the unsuccessful efforts of his son.

The earliest, most traumatic experience of Franz's childhood seems to have occurred when he was about four years. In bed one night, unable to sleep, he was wimpering for water, ignoring his

father's attempts to silence him. Suddenly his father entered the room, picked him out of bed, carried him out to the balcony, and left him there alone in his nightshirt. "Years later," says Franz, "I still suffered from the tormenting fantasy that the gigantic man, my father, the supreme authority, could come at night, almost without any grounds, and carry me from my bed to the balcony and that I was therefore, for him, such a non-entity." (Rowman 102)

This action seems to be a perfect example of the relationship that Kafka had with his father. Hermann was trying desperately to gain greater acceptance into Prague society through Franz. And when Franz was not able to comply with his father's expectations, Hermann Kafka unknowingly terrorized his son. As a result, Franz had a very tumultuous relationship with his father. Kafka's relationship with his father, however, was only one of the factors which strongly influenced him.

Another thing which played a significant part in Franz's life was his marginality, that is his not belonging to one specific culture. Instead of having a definite sense of belonging, Franz was confused about his identity. He could not determine what he was. He was torn about whether he was a Czech, a German, or a Jew. His father did not have the same dilemma because his father knew that he was neither a German nor a Czech, but a Jew trying to gain entrance into Bourgeois Prague.

Franz, however, was uncertain of his place in society. Was he a German? a Jew? a Czech? He had been reared in a Czech home with Jewish customs. He had, for example, had his Barmitzvah in

June 1896. (Hayman 10) But, at the same time that he was being told to be Jewish, there were many forces which were pushing for him to be Czech and/or German.

One historical fact that sheds light on Franz Kafka's internal conflicts is the fact that Czechoslovakia was still in the midst of gaining autonomy from Germany. So Franz was not only being torn by his being Jewish, but also was being torn by his not realizing whether he was German or Czech. Franz could choose to support the Germans, in hopes of being more socially mobile while they occupied Czechoslovakia. Or, he could support Czechoslovakia, in hopes of being favored if Czechoslovakia became autonomous. This indeed seemed like a difficult decision for him to make. And it appears that Franz never was able to really make that decision. He thus went through life in a state of "not belonging." This made him feel alienated -- not only from his family but also from the entire world. He felt that he did not belong anywhere; he indeed felt that he was isolated, and even ugly.

This state of limbo prompted Franz to search for a place in the world. He partially achieved this through his writing. The Metamorphosis and The Trial are two of his most famous works through which he reflected not only his own search for identity but also his continuing sense of alienation.

Finally, Franz Kafka's experience after his law studies was another major influence in his life. He started out his studies as a chemistry major but abruptly switched to law two weeks later. His father did not object to this because the legal

profession seemed to be one in which a person could earn substantial money. His experiences while studying law for his doctorate in law also significantly influenced him for the rest of his life.

One thing that Kafka learned while he was a law student was the arbitrary nature of the legal system. He saw innocent people sent to jail, and saw criminals set free. This affected him tremendously because he was able to see how hopeless it was to try to use reason and logic in a world with such confused standards. He therefore searched for meaning in the happenings of the world, but found none. Instead of logic and reason, he discovered that the world was functioning apparently without any laws or sanity. This approach made him give up the premise that the world was logical and coherent. He thus concluded that the only absolute in the world was absurdity.

Franz Kafka could see such absurdity in the cases which came to court. For example, men were arrested for stealing food, though they hadn't eaten for weeks. Women were arrested for prostitution, though their only other option seemed to be starvation. At the same time, he saw criminals not convicted or sentenced for crimes they admitted having committed. This scarred Kafka's thinking for the rest of his life.

Kafka's emphasis on absurdity is readily evident in his writings. In The Trial, for example, absurdity of the legal system is presented as the central theme. Joseph K., the protagonist of the novel, is accused of committing a crime, is tried by court, and is executed. But the absurdity of the plot

lies in the fact that Joseph K. never knows the crime for which he is accused.

Another aspect of Franz Kafka's life which is indirectly influenced by his legal background is his love life. Kafka was never able to marry because he had decided that the rules which apply in a normal courtship are absurd. So, though he is engaged to Felice many different times, he somehow manages always to break off the engagement. Once he does this by having an affair and then telling Felice about it. This seems like an extremely cruel and sick thing to do. But if one considers that Franz Kafka had given up all the usual cultural and religious values of his society, then his actions are more understandable. This acceptance of absurdity which originated from his law school studies continued to influence him the rest of his life.

Finally, though my interest in Kafka was purely a superficial one -- I wanted to study a short work -- once I started to explore what Kafka was saying, I became intrigued by the genius behind the story. I became further interested in him after I read The Trial. I now had to know more about the man who had written such great works of literature. (Biography taken from Hayman Kafka: A Biography)

II. THE TRIAL

Franz Kafka worked as a lawyer for six years. During this time, he was greatly influenced by the happenings of the courts. He was surrounded by lawyers and judges -- men of power -- who by a wave of their hands doled out "justice" to the uninvolved masses. On the other hand, he was also around the accused -- people who seemed to have no rights. They would sit forever waiting for a verdict, a verdict which would either let them continue on with their present lives or one which would cause an irreversible change in their reality. These accused sat before the lawgivers much like souls sit before God waiting for judgement. This is how Kafka interpreted the legal system of Czechoslovakia.

His experience with the legal system was discouraging, but at the same time it provided him with inspiration for his writing. There are several ways in which this legal influence is present in The Trial. First, the entire plot of The Trial focuses around the courts. Next, the justice system in The Trial seems to be an endless quest for nonexistent people. Finally, the conclusion of the book demonstrates the absurdity and cruelty of the bureaucratic legal system. In these three ways, Kafka's experience in the courts influenced his work, The Trial.

First, the setting of The Trial demonstrates Kafka's legal background. The protagonist of work is Joseph K. He is a banker who lives a rather ordinary life. Then, one day he wakes up to find two warders (wardens) in his house. They inform him

that he is under arrest. When Joseph asks his warders under what charge he has been arrested, they reply that they have not been authorized to tell him. He is dumfounded. The warders do tell him that the charge must be serious, and they give him the date he is to appear in court. Joseph K. is terrified. How can he prepare a defense or have any chance of being acquitted when he has no idea of what the charge against him is? Joseph goes to an attorney and, as usual, the attorney assures Joseph that everything is going to be fine. The lawyer instructs Joseph to go to a civic office to find out what the charge is. The accused man goes there every day for a week. Every time he is told to wait. And after the office closes every evening, he is told to come back the next day. Eventually Joseph goes back to the attorney to seek some help. The lawyer tells Joseph there is nothing that can be done without knowing the nature of the charge. So Joseph K. takes his case to a different barrister.

At the new lawyer's office, Joseph is told of the several options he has. Joseph can try to find out the nature of the charges against him by many different avenues. For example, he can go to the Office of the Examining Magistrate, or he can try to get additional information from the warders. Joseph is also given names of several insiders who may be able to help him. From there, Joseph investigates all of the sources one at a time. The clerks at the Examining Magistrate's Office tell him that the Magistrate won't be able to see Joseph until after his trial date. Also, he finds that it's not that the warders don't want to tell him anything, but it is the fact that they don't know

anything about his case. The only light the warders can shed on the subject is that his case is a very serious and important one. Otherwise, the warders would not have been called to watch him for ten hours every day. This new makes Joseph more uneasy and restless. The rest of Joseph K.'s life is spent on trying to find out the charge against him. This quest continues on till the trial date. At "the trial," Joseph K. still does not find out the charge. But sentence is passed on his case. The judgement by the barrister is that Joseph K. is to be executed. This ends The Trial. The plot of The Trial clearly demonstrates the influence of Kafka's legal background had on his literature. Kafka must have seen similar cases in the courtroom. He must have seen the arbitrary nature of justice. He must have noticed how "justice" seems to be a quest for unavailable people.

Next, the justice system in The Trial seems to be a quest for unreachable people. Joseph K. is often given names of people who would be able to shed some light on his situation. They might even be able to show him a way out of this quagmire. However, he is never able to find any of them.

By this elusive nature of justice, Kafka is hinting at the elusive nature of the law. He is trying to show how the law is its own protector. He is hinting at how the legal system is shrouded in mystery. Kafka is also testing the validity of the legal system.

Too many times, "the law," is taken at face value. There are many cases decided on the basis of current law, but there is

almost never a direct challenge to the origin of the law. In The Trial, Kafka uses Joseph K.'s struggle against the legal system to symbolize the difficulty one has in establishing the justification of any legal system. This is true if one analyzes any legal system because they are all based on normative ethics.

Kafka has hit on the only truth he believes -- the normative nature of life. And he has used the legal system to reach this goal. By showing the arbitrary nature of justice, Kafka demonstrates to us the absurdity of our social systems. He gets us to look beyond the superficial acceptance of what we have been taught to believe. Instead, by throwing such a blatant miscarriage of justice into our face, he forces us to reexamine Justice's veiled face. And after we have perused it without its cloak, he wants us to see it for what it is -- an arbitrary, cruel, and normative social system. From these first glimpses, he hopes that we will slowly begin to question other widely accepted institutions. This is why Kafka has Joseph K.'s quest for justice be so hopeless and absurd.

Finally, the conclusion of the book not only emphasizes the absurdity of the legal system, but it also stresses that deadly results are possible by its mistakes. The Trial ends with Joseph K. being stabbed to death. Through Joseph K.'s death, Kafka wants us to know that our not examining the legal system may result in deaths of countless innocent victims. By such a sudden and inexplicable ending, Kafka hopes to shock us into action -- into a state of moral dilemma. He wants to make sure

that we are jolted into action by Joseph K.'s death. In this way, maybe we will not take our man made social systems to be always correct. We will be able to see their limits -- their artificiality -- their unnaturality.

Thus, through the plot of the work, the justice system present in the book, and the conclusion of the work, Kafka's book The Trial demonstrates the legal influence of Kafka's life. There are many superficial signs of Kafka's legal background. Also, there are deeper reasons behind The Trial. Kafka intends his work to be an ethical examination of the legal system which we have imposed on ourselves and on Joseph K. He intends to use Joseph K's death to shock us into examining it. And he wants us to come to the conclusion that it is a social system based on norms and should be taken to nothing more.

III. THE METAMORPHOSIS

The Metamorphosis was the first book by Franz Kafka that I read. After I had finished it, I didn't quite know how to interpret it. It seemed to be a very depressing and weird story. After all, the plot of a man suddenly turning into an insect was nothing short of bizarre. Furthermore, eventually the insect dies. How mysterious, how awful yet intriguing. It was only after I had time to reflect on the work that I comprehended the subtle nuances. Moreover, only after interpreting the work from several different perspectives was I able to find what I now consider to be the true meaning of The Metamorphosis.

The Metamorphosis begins with Gregor Samsa waking up one day and, to his horror, discovering that he has been transformed into a bug. This transformation not only shocks and immobilizes Gregor, but also elicits very negative reactions from other people including his family. After they survive the initial shock and their total inability to help him, they must adapt their lives to accommodate his survival and theirs. For example, both Gregor's father and mother have to go out and find jobs. This is very troublesome for them because they are very old. Compounding the misery is the fact that Gregor's father is very ill. However, because the family is without Gregor's income, they must find other means to earn money to pay the bills.

Another poignant effect of his transformation is that Gregor's young sister Grete must stop taking violin lessons. Gregor finds this to be especially tormenting because he himself had started her taking the lessons and had visions of his sister

becoming a great musician. And now, he is the one responsible for her discontinuing her lessons due to lack of money.

Kafka goes on to narrate several other changes which occur as a result of Gregor's transformation. After these events have occurred, the family discovers that they can no longer continue living with the bug. And the story concludes with Gregor's death, due to a piece of apple thrown by his father, which gets embedded in his body.

Through The Metamorphosis, Kafka is trying to demonstrate two things. First, he is trying to show man's limited control over his own life. By this, he means that when outside forces interrupt the normal routine of life, sometimes the only thing people can do is to adjust the best that they can in an attempt to go on with their lives. Second, he is trying to say that any being's concept of reality is an arbitrary view.

First, Kafka wants us to realize the limited control that we have over our lives. The beginning lines of The Metamorphosis stress this point most vividly. "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin." (Kafka 6). No reason is given for Gregor's transformation, it just happened. It isn't that Gregor has done something evil and that this change has been a result of that. No where in the work is a reason stated or even suggested for the change.

Kafka does this to show the universality of forces beyond our control. The situation did not have to Gregor's being transformed into a bug; it could have been an illness leaving

Gregor incapacitated. Or it could have been a natural disaster like an earthquake, or a lightning storm, which had left Gregor crippled. Less dramatically, it could have been a common household accident such as slipping on a wet surface, or eating poisoned food, which could have been the factor to change Gregor's life. All of these events could have been beyond Gregor Samsa's control.

But by using a transformation which is universally absurd and unbelievable, Kafka generalizes the factor which is beyond Gregor's control. In this manner, Kafka's The Metamorphosis can be taken to be applicable to anyone. "Thus, The Metamorphosis is often said to be the predicament of modern man." (Auden 202).

For example, by simply being born into a certain family, people are already affected by forces beyond their control. Much of what they will be has already been decided. This is different not only because of the economic class one is born into, but also by the country, religion, and prejudices one has. The best anyone can do is to adjust to these forces and continue on. This occurs in The Metamorphosis when the Samsa household adjusts to Gregor's transformation. Gregor's father obtains a job with a bank, his mother does delicate sewing, and his sister works behind the counter in a store. By obtaining these new jobs, Gregor's family is adjusting to his metamorphosis.

Second, The Metamorphosis emphasizes that a person's view of reality is arbitrary and can be changed. When the story begins, Gregor is thinking like a human being. He is concerned about the fact that he has missed the 5 o'clock train to work. He is

thinking about whether he should try to make it to the 7 o'clock train or whether he should just lie there and sleep. Gregor doesn't realize that his transformation into a bug will have a drastic and definite effect on his view of reality.

As *The Metamorphosis* continues, Gregor Samsa realizes that his world concept is changing. The first time Gregor realizes a change in his reality is in his eating habits. "His sister brought him a bowl of milk which she thought was his favorite drink." However, Gregor did not touch the milk. He couldn't stand it. His sister also brought in a variety of food for him to try, and he selected the moldy cheese as his favorite. A change in the basic habit of eating demonstrates a change in Gregor's reality. Kafka thus hopes to make us see that this change in world view can happen to us.

There are several ways a change in our reality may occur. For example, a change in economic stances may affect our priorities. Also, moving to a different city, state, or even country can alter what our values are. These are some physical ways in which our concept of reality may be changed.

There are many ways in which our concept of the world may be altered. For example, it is often said that drug abusers are responsible for their own disease. However, can it be said that this is true if the drug is responsible for altering their reality? What if they were not in our reality? Are they responsible for their alternative concept of the world? Another way in which this may be possible is in the often tragic case of criminal mental patients. Are these men and women cognitive

enough to know what they are doing? Or are they in their own reality? When they do commit crimes, are they to be tried and sentenced to prison?

On a more personal level, how does a person's concept of reality change as he is going through life? What changes happen during his transition into college and during his transition out into the "real world"? There are sure to be some changes in priorities, values, and reality. What may have been important at one stage will seem trivial at another stage. Priorities will be re-evaluated. Different criteria for choices will be used. and adjustments will be made. These methods demonstrate more realistic ways in which concepts of reality may be altered or modified.

One thus must conclude that though The Metamorphosis at first may seem to be an absurd story about an event which could not possibly happen, upon closer scrutinization, one finds that Kafka uses the transformation to sent his audience two messages. First, there are many forces in the world which are beyond an individual's control. The best method for dealing with them is by adjusting to them in the best way one can. Second, Kafka wants use to be aware of the different realities which are present in the world. He wants us to be aware of the fact that not everyone may see the world as we do. This is done to make us examine our own world view and also to make us more accepting to other's viewpoints.

VI. Conclusion

Sitting in my History 152 class, I noticed how a class discussion had started on contemporary music. Our professor had very definite views on which artists possessed talent and on which contemporary artists were "nothing but garbage." Not having any desire to discuss the current music scene, especially not at 9 o'clock in the morning, I started to doodle in the margins of my notes.

As forms flowed from my pencil, thoughts began to jump in mind. At first, there were only fragments, but soon the thoughts clumped together into questions. I considered what the class was discussing -- whether Madonna had any talent or not. My higher consciousness began to question the nature of this question. Did Madonna -- the millionaire singer -- possess talent, or was she just another performer using sex to sell herself? The answer to this question was simple. All I had to do was to define what talent was. After that, it would be simple to find out if Madonna possessed any!

Academic words used to describe music like voice quality, intonation, and harmony came into the silent discussion. These were the qualities that people who "knew" music attributed to the nebulous concept of talent. If one possessed a wide range of these qualities, then one was said to be talented. This theory stayed in the back of my mind even after class was over.

As the semester progressed, I found myself getting overloaded, over-extended, and generally too busy to think about anything not class related. The answer to the revolutionary,

earth-shaking question about Madonna's talent would have to wait until another day.

After the semester was over, I found myself with some free time and with an incredible feeling of guilt for being unproductive. Evaluating my financial situation, I noticed that I had made a minor profit of \$52.74 from the sale of my books back to the campus bookstore. Realizing that this had to last me for three weeks, I threw out the possibility of going to a bookstore to splurge on some reading material. But at the same time, I remembered that a used book store in town had a good selection at bargain prices. Having evaluated this alternative, I decided that I would spend the afternoon on a quest for a good novel.

When I went to the bookstore, I browsed around looking for something which would not be taxing on my overused brain. One book I noticed because it was a big and priced relatively cheap was James Clavell's The Shogun. I picked it up and remembered when I had watched the mini-series on television. I vividly recalled one scene which involved a Japanese woman playing a musical instrument. I thought nothing of the experience, returned the novel to its original place, and went on to buy a couple of selections which were less ambitious.

Several months later, the question of Madonna's talent was dredged up from the depths of my consciousness. One thing that I noticed was that different things were considered to be talent in different parts of the world. The sounds which were accumulated and classified as great music in one culture were nothing but

cacophony in the other. If this was truly the case, then "talent" was an arbitrary quality. What was talent to one culture could be garbage to another. I extended this to the individual. What was seen to be talent by one person could be considered to be nonsense by another. And both of them would be right.

This meant that talent was an arbitrary value. If talent could be arbitrary, were there other values which were truly arbitrary -- even if they were reinforced to be absolutes by overwhelming support of a majority of people?

"What about intelligence?" my mind said. What was intelligence? Is intelligence the ability to score well on the SAT? What if one does not speak English? Or what if one does not use a decimal number system? If one constrained by these conditions were to take the SAT, he would do very poorly. Does that mean that the individual would be deficient of "intelligence?" Or would this individual possess a different type of intelligence?

Intelligence is often interpreted to mean "the quality which results in success." However, success is measured in our particular system -- a system which is bound by specific norms and mores. What would happen if the system was altered?

This point is the point which drew me to Existential literature. Kafka's The Trial emphasizes this point by demonstrating the absurdity of the legal system of Czechoslovakia, while at the same time The Metamorphosis explores the meaning of reality. As a

result, one is led to question the world as it exists today --
and questioning is the first step in finding an answer.

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