

# Meet Franz Kafka



*I am separated from all things by a hollow space, and  
I do not even reach to its boundaries.*

—Franz Kafka, in a letter of December 16, 1911

**F**ranz Kafka was born in Prague, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on July 3, 1883. He was the oldest surviving child of Jewish parents Hermann Kafka, a successful merchant, and Julie Löwy Kafka. Hermann Kafka was an overbearing man who was never able to appreciate his son's special talents. The strained relationship between father and son became the key element in Kafka's personality and led to lifelong guilt, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence.

The young Franz was a good student and popular with his classmates and teachers. Already, however, the boy showed signs of an inward-looking personality and the poor health that was to trouble him his entire life. He disliked the authoritarian discipline of school life but found pleasure and escape in literature. The English novelist Charles Dickens was a favorite.

In 1901, when he was eighteen, Kafka went to the German University in Prague. He studied for a law degree, a course of study approved by his domineering father and one that would lead to a prestigious job, but the young man found the coursework boring. His real interest was literature, and he attended many lectures and readings in his

spare time. He also began to write short sketches and other pieces of fiction.

Soon after graduating with a law degree in 1906, Kafka began working in a government workers' insurance office. Like Gregor Samsa, the main character of *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka still lived with his parents. His work at the insurance office, while dull, did leave some time for Kafka to pursue his interest in literature. However, family tensions, the deteriorating health of his parents, and his own self-doubts made concentrating on his writing difficult. He began to keep a diary and also started work on his novel *Amerika*.

In 1912, when he was twenty-nine, Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*. That same year, he had met Felice Bauer, a visitor from Berlin. Although he was tortured by his usual self-doubts, Kafka became engaged to Felice in 1914. Three months later, he broke the engagement, worried that marriage and family life were incompatible with his writing. Several months later, they became engaged again. In August of that year, Kafka finally moved out of his parents' home. He began work on a novel, *The Trial*, the dark, eerie tale of a man arrested and executed for reasons he never discovers.

The year 1917 was a startlingly productive one for Kafka, during which he wrote about a dozen stories. These stories feature bizarre situations and characters that embody the alienation, search for meaning, and despair of modern life. Kafka's health worsened, and in 1917 he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He took a leave of absence at the insurance institute. He also broke his engagement to Felice a second time. In 1918 he became engaged to Julie Wozrsek, but this engagement, too, he broke.

The last years of Kafka's life were marked by periods of intense writing activity, family tensions, unsuccessful love relationships, and worsening health. In 1922, he was forced to retire from the insurance institute. When he was healthy enough, he continued to write. In 1924, however, he went to a rest home in Austria, where he died at the age of forty-one. During Kafka's lifetime, only a handful of his writings were published.

## Background Information

### PARALLELS TO KAFKA'S LIFE

Although it is debatable exactly to what extent the characters in *The Metamorphosis* are drawn directly from Kafka's life, certain parallels cannot be overlooked.

In order to study Kafka's writing, an understanding of Kafka's life can be helpful. It has been suggested, in fact, that Kafka used writing to express ideas he was not able to express in his real life; ranging from social analysis and criticism to feelings of anxiety and inadequacy—in this light, Gregor, Kafka's anti-hero turned “gargantuan pest” in *The Metamorphosis*, can be interpreted as a projection of some of Kafka's darker feelings about himself.

### EARLY LIFE

Franz Kafka was born in 1883 to a middle-class, German-speaking, Jewish family in Prague, Bohemia (now the Czech Republic).

Franz was the first born of six children, and before he was six years old he witnessed the deaths of his two younger brothers, leaving him with a keen sense of mortality. Franz had three younger sisters whom he helped a series of governesses and housemaids raise while his parents worked at his father's business as many as 12 hours every day.

Kafka's relationship with his parents was strained; his father was domineering and cold; his mother loving, but non-committal. Despite this, Kafka developed a strong emotional dependence on his family, which would last his entire life. This idea is mirrored in *The Metamorphosis*, in Gregor's dependence on his sister and mother and his acquiescence to his father.

As a youth Kafka did well in school, but struggled against feelings of isolation—in part due to his frail physique and sensitive nature, and in part due to his status as a minority and his inability to identify with the Jewish community. Themes of isolation and alienation would recur in Kafka's writing.

After a largely successful university career, Kafka found employment at a series of insurance companies and wrote in his spare time. He was a social person, but was often left feeling dejected by his failed relationships with women. Many of Kafka's characters would suffer similar difficulties, and the motif of sexual confusion is recurrent in his work.

In part due to his experiences as a youth, Kafka lived under the dark cloud of self-doubt, a fact which urged him to keep his writings private. Fortunately, he was prompted into divulgence by his friend and fellow writer, Max Brod, who, against Kafka's wishes, was also responsible for publishing a number of Kafka's works posthumously. Almost ironically, in keeping with one of Kafka's major themes—that life is uncertain, and nothing (not even health) can be taken for granted—Franz Kafka died prematurely, one month before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, due to complications from tuberculosis.