

Kafka and His Contexts

Syllabus Spring 2011

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Office hours: Wednesday 4:30–5:00 P.M., Professors Room, NYU Malé náměstí 2, 3rd floor, or by appointment

Course description: The multinational and multilingual *fin de siècle* Prague has often been credited for generating a distinct strain of Modernism. In this course, we will have the advantage of exploring the texts of Franz Kafka in the place where he spent most of his life, in Prague, the “little mother” who held him in her “claws.” We will also read Kafka’s modernist contemporaries such as Hoffmannsthal, Adolf Loos and Jaroslav Hašek as well as later writers such as Havel, and Blatný. A selection of primary texts and critical essays will help us gain insights into cultural, aesthetic and historical “contexts” of Kafka’s prose. The topics will include: family and solitude, provincialism and worldliness, travel and museums, languages, Judaism. While expanding our understanding of Modernism, we will also attempt to read Kafka “out of contexts,” in order to maintain a fresh look at his prose through close readings. The goal of the course is to encourage students to develop their own understanding of Kafka and engage further with the literature and arts of Kafka’s Prague. (A commented walk through Kafka’s Prague, including a viewing of Kafka’s library and his grave, will be a part of the course.)

Grading policy

Class attendance:	30 %
Reading presentations and other assignments:	20 %
Mid-term:	20 %
Final Paper:	30 %

Schedule of classes

*[R] = Reader

Week 1

January 24th: **Course Overview**

January 26th: **Kafka’s Early Texts**

Selection of Kafka’s short texts from *Contemplation* (1912) [R]

Week 2

January 31st: **Modernism – Points of Departure**

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “The Letter of Lord Chandos” (1902) [R]

February 2nd: **Modernism – Points of Departure cont.**

Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” (1908) [R]

Week 3

February 7th: **Kafka’s Prague**

“Description of a Struggle” (1904–1909) [R]

February 9th: **Kafka's Languages**
Film: "Description of a Struggle"
Pavel Eisner, *Franz Kafka and Prague* [R]

Week 4

February 14th: **Prague Ghetto**
Klaus Wagenbach, "Prague at the Turn of the Century" [R]
Derek Sayer, "The Language of Nationality and the Nationality of Language: Prague 1870–1920"[R]

February 16th: **Prague Ghetto cont.**
Gustav Meyrink, *The Golem*
Demetz, Peter, "Rabbi Loew and his Golem in German Literature"
Toman, Jindřich, "Renarrating the Rabbi and his Golem in Czech"

Week 5

February 21st: **Kafka and his Family**
"The Judgment" (1912) [R]
"The Cares of a Family Man" (1914–1917) [R]

February 23rd: **Kafka and his Family cont.**
Kafka's "Letter to His Father" (1919) [R]

Week 6

February 28th: **Writing as a Way Out**
Kafka's *Letters to Felice* (1912–1917, selection, [R])

March 2nd: **Kafka's Trial**
The Trial

Week 7

March 7th: **Kafka's Trial**
The Trial

March 9th:
MIDTERM

Week 8

March 14th: **Trial: Politics and History**
Hannah Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation" (1944) [R]

March 16th: **Kafka's Trial**
Film: *The Trial* (Orson Welles, 1962)

Week 9

SPRING BREAK – NO CLASSES

Week 10

March 28th: **Kafka's Languages – A Way Out?**

“For a Small Literature” (1911) [R]
“An Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language” (1912) [R]

March 30th: **Museum, Exoticism**
“Report to the Academy,” (1917)
“Jackals and Arabs,”(1917) [R]

Week 11

April 4th – **Kafka’s Prague**
A COMMENTED WALK

April 6th: **Existential Horizons**
“In the Penal Colony” (1919) [R];
“The Starvation Artist” (1924) [R]

Week 12

April 11th: **Travels**
Amerika (first chapter, “The Stoker”) [R]

April 13th:
Letters to Milena [R]

Week 13

April 18th: **Kafka’s Contemporaries**
Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921–1923) [R]

April 20th: **Kafka’s Heirs**
Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997)

Week 14

April 25th:
NATIONAL HOLIDAY – NO CLASSES

April 27th: **Wider Contexts**
Havel, *Largo Desolato* (1984) [R]

Week 15

May 2nd: **Wider Contexts cont.**
Ivan Blatný, *The Drug of Art*. (Poems from *Bixley Remedial School*) [R]

May 4th: **Course Review**

Week 16

May 11th:
THE FINAL PAPER DUE

Bibliography:

Students should procure:

Reader assembled by Veronika Tuckerová (2008)

Reader assembled by Magdalena Platzová (2009)

The Trial by Kafka

The Golem by Meyrink

Primary (Mandatory) Reading:

1. Hašek, Jaroslav, *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War*, Trans. Cecil Parrott, Penguin, 1973. (Parts one and two)
2. Eisner, Paul. *Kafka and Prague*. NY. 1950. (Essay)
3. Havel, Václav, *Largo desolato*. (Play, 1984)
4. Kafka, Franz, *The Trial*. Trans. Breon Mitchell, NY: Schocken, 1998.
5. *Kafka's Selected Stories*. Trans. & Ed. Stanley Corngold. (Selection)
6. Kafka, Franz, *Diaries 1910–1932*. Norton Critical Edition, 2007. (Selection)
7. Meyrink, Gustav. *The Golem*. NY: Dover Publications, 1976.

Secondary (Recommended) Reading:

1. Anderson, Mark, Ed. *Reading Kafka. Prague, Politics, and the fin de siècle*. NY: Schocken Books, 1989.
2. Brod, Max, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*.
3. French, Alfred, *Czech Writers and Politics 1945–1969*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1982.
4. Kosík, Karel, “Hašek and Kafka” (1963)
5. Pawel, Ernst, *Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka*. New York: Vintage Books, 1985.
6. Specter, Scott, *Prague Territories. National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2000.
7. Steiner, Peter, *The Deserts of Bohemia. Czech Fiction and its Social Context*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.
8. Sayer, Derek, “The Language of Nationality and the Nationality of Language: Prague 1870-1920.” *Past and Present* 153 (1996), 164-210.
9. Weil, Jiří, *Life with a Star*. Trans. Rita Klímová with Roslyn Schloss. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1989.
10. Zilcosky, John, *Kafka's Travels. Exoticism, Colonialism and the Traffic of Writing*. NY: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003.
11. Zischler, Hanns, *Kafka goes to the Movies*. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2002.