

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

Franz 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 Wohrzek, 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.