

Franz Kafka (1883–1924) is one of those authors whose impact on World literature cannot be underestimated. Born an Austrian Jew; living in the German-speaking Diaspora of Prague; making his living during the day as a relatively successful employee of an insurance company and at night desperately trying to create fiction that meets his own extreme expectations; constantly at odds with the expectations of his family, friends, and fiancées/female acquaintances; and plagued by frail health, Franz Kafka struggled his entire life to reconcile the irreconcilable: life and writing. He published only very few texts during his lifetime, and on his death bed he asked his friend Max Brod to



burn all remaining manuscripts—a last will with which Brod did not comply. Kafka's texts constitute a new level and quality of literature that has triggered innumerable responses in many languages, media, and discourses. He is an "international" author of a new type of "world literature," the quality of which is clear yet denies all attempts to approach it by way of traditional reading. Our imagination and understanding fall short of grasping that textual world: Kafka's texts demand a transdisciplinary and comparative approach. It is perplexing: We understand the words and sentences of Kafka's texts, but when it comes to envisioning the universe of his texts and its internal logic, we encounter almost insurmountable barriers.

Similar to Kafka's characters, who are losers from the outset, the readers of Kafka's texts seem doomed to fail in their attempts to understand this uncanny world, created only from common language. And here lies the uncomfortable paradox: We can understand his texts but we struggle to follow their logic and the mysterious world created by them. The term "Kafkaesque" makes clear that the type and dimension of Kafka's texts has been perceived as strange, uncanny, and resistant to any classification. Other authors have tried to adopt the Kafkaesque, situating themselves in the literary tradition of the uncanny mystified city of Prague with its long Romanticist and 'Gothic' texts. that relies on the world of the Jewish tradition as well as on



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In this course, we will read a wide selection of texts by Franz Kafka in order to prepare our understanding of his universe in comparison with other contemporary authors as well as authors from other cultures and eras (J. Joyce, W.G. Sebald, T. Pynchon, H. Mulisch, Ph. Roth). Lectures will also highlight literature, film, and art works in the tradition of the Kafkaesque. A small number of short writing assignments might be required (depending on funding for TAs or readers). There will be a midterm and a final exam. This course is open to freshmen.

Kaf•ka•esque



Pronunciation: (käf"ku-esk')—adj.

1. of, pertaining to, characteristic of, or resembling the literary work of Franz Kafka: the Kafkaesque terror of the endless interrogations.

2. marked by a senseless, disorienting, often menacing complexity: Kafkaesque bureaucracies.