

Kafka and his Readers

GERM 380Q/COLI 380 Q (for composition credit) meets with ENG 380S/COLI 380P
(4 credits)

Professor Neil Christian Pages

Comparative Literature/GREAL/Binghamton University SUNY

Spring 2008

Course meets: Mondays & Wednesdays, 4:40 – 6:05 p.m. (LNG335)

Office hours: Wednesdays, 1:30 – 3:30 p.m. and by appointment (LT 1408)

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“Germany declared war on Russia. Swimming lessons in the afternoon.”

- Franz Kafka’s diary entry for 2 August 1914

“Que faire?” - “What is to be done?” asks Maurice Blanchot when faced with the mass of chatter, discourse and commentary surrounding the work of Franz Kafka. Ever suspicious of readers and viewers, filmmaker Stanley Kubrick once said that anyone who calls Kafka ‘Kafkaesque’ probably has never read Kafka. Kafka himself wrote that he wanted to be “nothing but literature,” but did not publish much of it in his lifetime. Like these cryptic quotations, the list of thinkers and writers who have grappled with ‘Kafka’ is daunting: Benjamin, Blanchot, Borges, Brod, Canetti, Coetzee, Deleuze & Guattari, Derrida, Flusser, Kundera, Musil, Nabokov, Sebald. What, then, are we to do?

This course is an opportunity to read and reflect upon Kafka’s writings and their ‘afterlife’ in the work of others. After all, Kafka is probably the greatest writer of twentieth century Modernism, one whose influence on contemporary writing and criticism is staggering. The course asks you to think about some of the following questions: How has the proliferation of ‘Kafka’ as an object of study influenced how we think about ‘literature’ (if we think of it at all)? How have Kafka’s writings penetrated the styles of others? How has ‘Kafka’ infiltrated literary criticism, theories of fiction and narration, psychoanalysis, cinema, and popular culture? The deep study of one author will lead us to questions about scholarly inquiry, reading and aesthetics more generally, and in approaching these questions we will explore crucial trajectories and gambits that shadow every act of reading, interpretation and critique. The course will, of course, fail in any attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of Kafka’s writings or Kafka criticism. Thus, it makes no claim to such a dubious project. Instead, it offers participants an occasion to engage with the person and work of an author in the context of a complex tradition of reception and interpretation.

Format: This course is a discussion-based seminar with short, informal lectures. Student participation and engagement in ongoing discussions are required. This is not a lecture course. Others will appreciate your questions and comments. Present your ideas without fear of reproach or embarrassment. Attend to your own interests as you develop research projects that will be informed also by our seminar discussions.

Course Requirements: Sustained hard work and interest in dense and difficult reading and in intellectual conversation. You will need to do a few things in order to make the experience valuable for yourself and for the others in the group. I am interested in your learning and in your progress, and not in coercing you to fulfill random tasks that do not necessarily serve your intellectual or personal development. However, you will indeed need to provide me with evidence of your progress by preparing for class (at least 2 hours of preparation for each hour in class), by participating actively

in discussions, by conducting independent research, and by writing about your research and thinking. Be engaged and curious. Note that you also have an obligation to the others in the course to be prepared and to contribute to the collective conversation. I take these matters very seriously. Below is how you demonstrate your learning progress so that I can assign a grade at the end of the semester. **Note: I will not give incompletes; a grade will be submitted at the end of the term based on the work I have received from you.**

COLI 380P/ENG 380S

Attendance, scrupulous preparation and active participation	20%
Portfolio of 1-2 page, typed reflections on your work, submitted at least every two weeks, And ending with a comprehensive reflection on your work during the semester (10-20 typed pages total)	35%
Research paper of not more than 15 pages (due on May 7, 2008)	45%

COLI/GERM 380Q (for 'C'-composition credit)

Attendance, scrupulous preparation and active participation	20%
Portfolio of 1-2 page, typed reflections on your work, submitted at least every two weeks, And ending with a comprehensive reflection on your work during the semester (10-20 typed pages total)	30%
Two 5-7 page essays that show that you are learning to improve your English writing:	
Essay 1 with revision (due on or before March 19, 2008)	25%
Essay 2 (no revision; due on or before May 5, 2008)	25%

Attendance, Preparation and Participation are required: Take careful notes while reading and come to class ready to discuss. I will not take attendance during the first two weeks of classes. Thereafter, each absence **above two** will result in a deduction of twenty (20) points from your attendance/participation grade (up to a total of 200 points or 20% of your final grade). You are responsible for all work missed due to absences. **Use your two absences wisely and plan ahead: celebrate a religious holiday, stay home sick, visit an ailing relative, recover from a particularly festive evening – but do not (do not) contact me with explanations for absences unless you will miss more than one week of class due to a legitimate emergency.** Note: If you usually skip lots of classes, you will do badly in this course. Know thyself.

Essays (C-credit) and final research paper: This is a 300-level course, which means that students are expected to write scholarly essays that present an argument based on a thesis that is supported by evidence and research. If this kind of writing is new to you, I invite you to discuss it with me as often as needed in office hours or by appointment. In general, you should be sure to see your instructors to discuss your work at least once during any given semester.

COLI 380Q/GERM 380Q (C-credit): Two (2) essays of approximately five to seven (5-7) pages each are required. For your first essay you will submit a first draft, which I will read and comment upon, and later submit a revision. Your grade is the average of the first draft and the revision. A revision demands substantive rethinking and rewriting. It is not simply the correction of basic errors. Your grade will be reduced should you not attend to serious revision. **Submit both versions of the essay when submitting the revision.** There is no revision for the second essay. Your essays might emerge from the writing you do in your intellectual journal (see below). That's good.

COLI 380P/ENG 380S (H-credit only): A research paper of no more than fifteen (15) pages is due on or before Wednesday, May 7, 2008. Please see me to discuss your topic before you proceed.

For all: Written assignments must focus on a thesis statement, informed analysis and the mobilization of pertinent scholarly evidence to support a larger argument. Plot summary is unacceptable, as is opinion, book reviewing and unfounded speculation. Topics will not be assigned, since developing a theme is a primary part of the thinking and writing process. You will need to conduct research to prepare for the writing of your paper, which in turn requires visits to the library and additional readings. **Do not use electronic sources that are not accessed through the Binghamton University Library website (see, for example, the electronic journals section). Do not submit work with other electronic references, as it will not receive credit.** All written assignments must be typed with numbered pages and reasonable font and margins. Proofread thoroughly. **An essay always has a title that indicates to the reader the argument that will be elucidated in the writing that follows.** Staple the pages together. **I will not accept papers that are not stapled and that have no title. No paper submitted via email will be accepted.**

Students are expected to be familiar with the rules and conventions of English grammar and composition, and to avail themselves of both the resources of the BU Writing Center and reference works on writing. An excellent selection of handouts on writing about literature is available through the University of North Carolina writing center website (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/>). Knowledge of the basic rules for the citation of sources is expected. The UNC Writing Center website offers a helpful handout, "Citation and Documentation in the Humanities: MLA Format." Our library offers similar handouts. The MLA (Modern Language Association) format is preferred (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*), but Chicago Style is also acceptable. **I will not accept essays that do not cite sources properly and that do not include a list of works cited. Do not submit any work without proper citation, because it will be returned to you unread.**

Portfolios: Every two weeks (or so) you will submit approximately 1-2 typed pages of writing about your thinking about the readings and discussions for the course. **WHEN you hand in your writing is your decision, but you must do so regularly. Think of these assignments as preparation for class discussion.** They serve as an intellectual journal, as a sounding board for our conversations and as a basis for larger projects. I will read and comment on your work so that you have substantive feedback. I have no set form in mind for these responses. You may want to focus on a close reading of a particularly intriguing or opaque passage, to reflect on a particular aspect of 'Kafka' that inspires you at the moment. You may want to address a conundrum in reading Kafka that you cannot seem to solve. You may want to summarize/abstract/scrutinize the scholarly work of someone else and therewith deepen your research. You may want to work out a thesis for a larger paper. At the end of the term you will submit **all** of your work from the semester, handsomely presented in a binder or folder, and including a statement of general reflection on your work during the semester. Hand in your final portfolio with the final paper/or on the last day of class (as applicable). **All portfolios will include a final 1-2 page comprehensive reflective statement on your work during the semester. If you want to write more, that is fine (and that goes for all of the shorter assignments).**

Plagiarism: Of utmost importance in this class is your intellectual honesty. Any writing that you submit should be yours; it is your responsibility to ensure that all citations (quotations, indirect

references, paraphrasing, etc.) are properly credited. Adhere to the University's Academic Honesty Policy (see <http://studenthandbook.binghamton.edu/>). An explanation and examples of what constitutes plagiarism can be found on the BU writing center website at <http://writingcenter.binghamton.edu/handout.htm>. **Plagiarism will result in a grade of 'F' for the course and will be reported to the appropriate university offices.** The instructor reserves the right to submit any written work to plagiarism detection services, and may request that students submit their work in electronic form. **When in doubt, just ask me.**

Classroom Etiquette: Turn off all mobile telephones; **absolutely no eating during class**; leave the classroom only in emergencies because doing so is disruptive and irritating. Please be courteous and come to class on time. If you bring beverages to our meetings, dispose of your trash.

Readings: Some texts will be made available via electronic reserve (accessed via blackboard) and in photocopy form. The following titles are available at the University Bookstore. Purchase the translations as listed below (all translations are NOT equal, and if you choose a lousy translation, i.e. not the one below, you will be reading a different book, which is your problem). You should read at least one biographical work on Kafka during the semester in addition to Wagenbach.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

Kafka, Franz. *The Castle*. Trans. Mark Harmon. New York: Schocken, 1998.

---. *Kafka's Selected Stories*. Trans. Stanley Corngold. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

---. *The Metamorphosis*. Trans. Stanley Corngold. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

Wagenbach, Klaus. *Kafka*. Trans. Ewald Osers. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.

Zilcosky, John. *Kafka's Travels*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004 (recommended).

Please ask me if you need advice regarding secondary works. If you can, read the stories in the original German and we'll figure out how to manage in class discussions.

Note: The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus at any time during the semester.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

M 1/28: Introduction

W 1/30: Reading Kafka: "An Old Manuscript" (in *Kafka's Stories*)

M 2/4: Who was Franz Kafka?
Readings: Wagenbach, *Kafka*

W 2/6: Who was Franz Kafka?
Readings: Wagenbach, *Kafka*

- M 2/11: Kafka, Literature and the Interpretive Tradition
Readings: Deleuze and Guattari, selections from *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature* (“An Exaggerated Oedipus”; “What is a Minor Literature?”)
- W 2/13: Discussion of Deleuze and Guattari
- M 2/18: Kafka and the Laws of Literature
Readings: Jacques Derrida, “Before the Law,” from *Acts of Literature* (ereserve)
See also: selections from Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998. “Form of Law,” 49-62 (ereserve)
- W 2/20: Kafka and the Modern Novel
Readings: *The Castle*
- M 2/25: *The Castle*
- W 2/27: *The Castle*
- M 3/3: *The Castle*; perhaps with some critical work on the text (TBA)
- W 3/5: Writers Under the Influence
Readings: Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” (ereserve); Kafka, “The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel” (in *Kafka’s Stories*)
- M 3/10: Discussion and close readings of Benjamin (cont’d)
- W 3/12: Kafka’s Uncanny
Readings: *The Metamorphosis* (in *Kafka’s Stories*); of interest: Nabokov’s Kafka lecture from *Lectures on Literature* (ereserve)
- M 3/17: *The Metamorphosis*
- W 3/19: *The Metamorphosis*
Essay 1 is due for C-credit students.
- M 3/24: NO CLASS/SPRING RECESS
- W 3/26: NO CLASS/SPRING RECESS
- M 3/31: Fathers and Sons
Readings: *The Judgment* (in *Kafka’s Stories*)
- W 4/2: *The Judgment*; excerpts from Kafka, *Letter to His Father* (photocopy TBA)
- M 4/7: Kafka and the Animals
Readings: *A Report to an Academy* (in *Kafka’s Stories*)
- W 4/9: *A Report to an Academy*

- M 4/14: Colonial Kafka?
Readings: *In the Penal Colony* (in *Kafka's Stories*)
- W 4/16: *In the Penal Colony*
- M 4/21: NO CLASS/PASSOVER RECESS
- W 4/ 23: Kafka's Travels
Readings: "The Hunter Gracchus" (in *Kafka's Stories*) and selections from John Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels* or other critical work (photocopy TBA)
- W 4/23: Kafka's Travels: Reportage
Readings; Kafka, "The Aeroplanes at Brescia" (photocopy TBA); perhaps W.G. Sebald, "Dr. K. Takes the Waters at Riva," from *Vertigo* (photocopy TBA)
- M 4/28: Kafka on Film/Kafka on the Web
Readings/Viewings: Steven Soderbergh's *Kafka*/Brigitte Peucker, "Kubrick and Kafka: The Corporeal Uncanny," *Modernism/modernity* 8.4 (2001): 663-674 (access through JSTOR through the library website METALINK). Recommended, if you can find them: BBC production of *The Trial*; Woody Allen's *Shadows and Fog* (1992); Orson Welles' *The Trial* (1962); We'll schedule the screening outside of class.
- W 4/30: Film discussion
Readings: W.G. Sebald, "Kafka Goes to the Movies," in *Campo Santo*. Trans. Anthea Bell. New York: Random House, 2005: 151-167 (ereserve TBA)
- M 5/5: Catch-up day
Essay 2 (no revision) is due for C-credit students.
- W 5/7: Final discussion and course evaluation
Final Papers are due. Final portfolios are due.