

# The Confluence of European Ideology in Franz Kafka's Fiction

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**Abstract:** Franz Kafka one of the major German language novelist and short story writer was born on July 3, 1883 at Prague. His posthumous works brought him fame not only in Germany, but in Europe as well. By 1946 Kafka's works had a great effect abroad, and especially in translation. Apart from Max Brod who was the first commentator and publisher of the first Franz Kafka biography, we have Edwin and Willa Muir, principle English translators of Kafka's works. Majority studies of Franz Kafka's fictions generally present his works as an engagement with absurdity, a criticism of society, element of metaphysical, or the resultant of his legal profession, in the course failing to record the European influences that form an important factor of his fictions. In order to achieve a newer perspective in Kafka's art, and to understand his fictions in a better way, the present paper endeavors to trace the European influences in the fictions of Kafka. It is true that Kafka's legal profession dominated his writings, but the fact that we cannot ignore is the European influence, particularly the influence of various European literary masters of his time on the intellect of Kafka.

**Key Words:** Ideology, posthumous, psychosomatic, metaphysical, existentialism, disillusionment, protestations.

Franz Kafka a Prague born writer belonged to a middle-class Jewish family that was financially secure. He grew up during the period when Prague was a provincial capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Kafka's father sought acceptance for his family from the German speaking elite of the city and thus admitted Franz to German rather than Czech schools. Nevertheless, the dichotomous relations between the Czech and the German communities were the earliest encounters of Franz with the feelings of alienation. Since Franz was the eldest child and the only surviving son of his parents, he was expected to follow a rigorous schedule in life and rise to success, most of all in material terms. His paths always diverged from the decrees, desires and wishes of his father.

It was against the wishes of his father that Franz studied law at German University and earned his doctorate in the subject in 1906, but he could never chart a linear vocational path. He disliked the prospect of a legal career and joined an insurance organization in Prague and worked there from 1908 to 1922. It was at this stage of his life that he suffered from tuberculosis, which debilitated him to the extent that he had to retire from the insurance job in 1922, and spent most the remaining years of his life in various sanatoriums, while writing fictional stories and novellas until his death in Kierling, Austria on June 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1924. It was in his last will and testament that Kafka requested his friend Max Brod, whom he had selected as his literary facilitator to destroy the manuscripts of his writings, but his request was ignored by Brod, and instead he organized posthumous publication of several of his writings.

It is surprising to note that publications of his lifetime were relatively numerous. Between 1907 and 1924, approximately seventy texts appeared in print, excluding obituaries, reviews and non-literary material. They range from newspaper items and stories of varying length in journals to self-contained collections of prose passages and chapters from his novels. The earliest Kafka writing, *Description of a Struggle* was written in 1904-1905, whose extracts were published in 1909. It was in 1906, while working in uncle advocate's office in Prague that he wrote *Wedding Preparations in the Country*. The next year and a half he spent working on the "Assicurazioni Generali," which also saw his friendship growing closer with Max Brod. "Conversation with a Beggar" and "Conversation with a Drunkard" were published in 1909. The years 1912-1913 were productive and he wrote "The Sentence" (later as "The Judgment"), published in 1913. He also wrote the first chapter of *America*, entitled "The Stroker." "The Metamorphosis" was completed, but published in 1915. *Reflections* was completed and published in 1913. "In the Penal Settlement" was written in 1914, but printed in 1919. Franz Kafka began the writing of *The Trial* in 1914. Next year he decided to live alone, away from his parents and devoted more time to his writing. The stories of *A Country Doctor* belong to 1916-1917 and it was in 1917 that he was diagnosed a patient of tuberculosis, but he continued his work and made considerable progress with *The Great Wall of China* in 1918. Franz published *A Country Doctor* and *In the Penal Settlement* in 1919. His famous "Letter to his Father" also belongs to this year. Next

year onwards Kafka was frequently on sick leave, although he wrote letters to Milena, and frequented sanatoriums. He handed over the manuscript of *The Trial* to Max Brod in 1920. Kafka was sick and he finally handed over the manuscript of *The Castle* to Max Brod in 1923. *A Hunger-Artist* was published in 1924 while Franz remained in hospitals in or near Vienna, finally breathing his last on June 3, 1924. He was buried in the domestic grave in the Jewish graveyard in Prague.

It is to the lasting credit of Max Brod that he did not carry out his friend's wish to burn his unpublished works. Mere fifty six days after Kafka's death, Brod signed an agreement with the publisher *Die Schmiede* which committed him to produce important posthumous publications of *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*, 1925), *The Castle* (*Das Schloß*, 1926) and *Amerika* (*Der Verschollene*, 1927). All of the previously unprinted shorter pieces were published under the title *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer* (*The Great Wall of China*) in 1931.

His posthumous writings brought him fame not only in Germany, but in Europe as well. By 1946 Kafka's works had a great effect abroad, and especially in translation. Apart from Max Brod who was the first commentator and publisher of the first Franz Kafka biography, we have Edwin and Willa Muir, principle English translators of Kafka's works.

There are critics who find similarities and influence of writers like Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Soren Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Gustave Flaubert on Kafka and his works. To cite an example is of a famous critic William Hubben who compares Kafka with Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, and comments:

THESE FOUR WRITERS, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kafka, occupy, each in his peculiar way, the position of outsiders in the society that had produced them. They lived the insecure existence of spiritual frontiersmen who no longer fit into the accepted categories of theology, philosophy, or *belles-lettres*, and can see during their lifetime no immediate chance for getting the hearing they deserve. They realized that they were both the end products of a dying civilization and the clairvoyant prophets of coming chaos. Kierkegaard's judgment of himself as an 'enigma', and Kafka's self-characterization as 'an end or a beginning' pertain to all four (Hubben 159).

Another critic Walter H. Sokel discusses the Dionysian connection between Nietzsche and Kafka in "Nietzsche and Kafka: The Dionysian Connection." He says:

There are several distinct aspects and areas in which Kafka's writing relates to Nietzsche's in a very striking way. I have counted at least five distinct areas where Kafka texts show significant analogies to Nietzschean thought. . . . The area that is first and foremost fundamental to both authors I should like to term the Dionysian. . . . The second area of at times stunning agreement deals with the ironization of asceticism and ascetic values. A third common area links the birth of the continuous individual to the infliction of painful suffering. . . . A fourth and fifth area center around a complex and problematic view of 'truth' and what Nietzsche termed 'the spirit of gravity' (Sokel 64).

Uta Degner talks about affinities between Kafka and Flaubert in "What Kafka Learned from Flaubert." He begins his essay by writing:

KAFKA'S REPEATED DECLARATION about an 'elective affinity' with French writer Gustave Flaubert – here in a letter of November 1912 to Felice Bauer – has led to various suggestions from scholars about how to interpret Flaubert's role in Kafka's writing. Attention has primarily focused on psychoanalytical and narratological parallels between the two authors. Indeed, it is apparent that Kafka models his letters to Felice Bauer on Flaubert's letters to Louise Colet; and Kafka's narrators might have learned from the French model and its 'impassiveness'. . . Kafka's affinity with Flaubert can be considered along structural lines by taking into account the state of the literary field of their time . . . Kafka, who read Flaubert at least partially in French was sensitive to the formal aspects to the art of Flaubert. In a letter to Felice, he enthusiastically highlights the stylistic beauty of a sentence from *Madame Bovary*. Kafka had surely perceived Flaubert's 'collision of opposites' as he began developing a generative formula structurally homologous with Flaubert's. Like Flaubert, Kafka relates to the literary field of his time in a form of 'negative contact' (Degner 75-77).

Julian Preece adumbrates upon the reference of shaken European streets in Kafka's fiction in "Introduction: Kafka's Europe." She says:

This was a Europe whose values had been shaken by the writings of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, whose revolutions in thought left their mark on Kafka's work. . . . Of most concern to Kafka was the rise of anti-Semitism and the burgeoning Zionist movement in which he took a great interest. The age was marked by technological innovation, which both fascinated and repelled him, and rapid industrialisation, particularly in Bohemia, the industrial powerhouse of the empire . . . . If Kafka does not name places in his fiction, his rootedness, if that is the right expression, in Central Europe becomes clearer in his correspondence and diaries, which record his journey (Preece 4).

The influence of Dostoevsky on Kafka is an admitted fact. Dostoevsky is pointed out seven times in *The Diaries* of Franz Kafka and all these entries coming in the years 1913-14; it was in 1914 that Kafka worked extensively on *The Trial*. In his biography Max Brod mentions that during the period 1912-17 Kafka read in "the Bible, Dostoevski, Pascal, Herzen and Kropotkin." (Brod, *A Biography* 153). In fact his letter of 2 September 1913 to Felice mentions his appreciation for Dostoevsky. In this letter Kafka mentions Dostoevsky a "true blood-relation" (Kafka, *I Am a Memory* 95).

*The Trial* which Kafka started writing in 1914 can be viewed as repeating of Dostoevsky's theme in relations to the internal world of the nightmares. Both books Kafka's *The Trial* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* have in common the two central themes: the conflict with the system and the sense of guilt among the protagonists of these novels. Though Kafka's and Dostoevsky's books begin at dissimilar situations, one with an arrest of the protagonist, the other with the crime by the protagonist but both the beginnings deal with the similar purpose in that, through them the heroes suffer disturbing setbacks. K.'s routinely ordered day as a bank officer is attacked by the mediators of his trial, in the same way that Raskolnikov's coherent superman theory is troubled by his murder of the pawn-broker. Likewise, Raskolnikov's chief difficulty is his own crime, which seems to exist before the commission of the murder, as can be seen from his otherwise mysterious generosity to the Marmeladovs, from his reaction to his mother's letter, or in his dream. Both the heroes, Joseph K. of *The Trial* and Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment* are seeking a resolution of their own bothered associations to the societies. (Church 106-108).

*Crime and Punishment* and *The Trial* deliver us with a complex image of a contemporary man – the psychosomatic portrait of a tortured young man with a conscience of guilt. Both the heroes suffer from alienation and isolation and are found to be searching answers from others, particularly women in their lives. The shielding and loving role of mother, which K. seeks in Fraulein Burstner, Frau Grubach, and in all other women he meets, is equivalent to the role in which Raskolnikov sees in his protected mother, sister and later in Sonia who becomes his support (108).

Another European influence on Kafka's sensitive mind was of Danish thinker, theologian, versifier, communal critic and spiritual writer Soren Kierkegaard. Kafka's understanding of Kierkegaard originated in 1913 when he attained a compilation of excerpts from Kierkegaard's diaries, published as *Das Buch des Richters*, and his reading sustained until near the end of his life. Scrawny from his health, Kafka penned in the next to-last entry in his own diary (December 18, 1922), "All this time in bed. Yesterday *Either/Or*." (Kafka, *Diaries* 1914-24 232). Kafka's library included *Repetition*, *Das Buch des Richters*, *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *The Moment*, Kierkegaard's papers, and a biography of Kierkegaard. He read all the German translations of but *Fear and Trembling* appears to have been the work that most affianced his mind. It interested Kafka at a number of points (Robertson 191).

Robert Arnold Darrow discusses the biographical similarities of Kafka and Kierkegaard. He quotes Kafka's diary, dated August 21, 1913 where Kafka penned Kierkegaard: "As I suspected, his [Kierkegaard's] case, despite essential differences, is very similar to mine, at least he is on the same side of the world. He bears me out like a friend" (Darrow 52). He further comments:

Kafka was referring to difficulties he foresaw in his engagement to Felice Bauer, arising from his commitment to writing, which seemed to match those that lead Kierkegaard to break his engagement to Regine Olsen. The negative influence of Kierkegaard's domineering father on his son's personality, as described in Monrad's biography, provided Kafka with a second point of correspondence with Kierkegaard. Kafka's own father was no less domineering but in other ways; coarse and insensitive, overbearing, exclusively materialistic, he never understood the son repeatedly tried, without success, to please him (Darrow 52-53).

Kafka's in his letter to Brod mentions *Das Buch des Richters*, where Kierkegaard approbations the transmuting power of any decision by an individual not to conform to "what the world regard as good" (Kafka *Letters* 203). To quote the example regarding the influence of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* on Kafka's thought of writing, we may say that both of them have in common their importance on subjectivity and the prominence of contemporary man. Kafka's hero as individuals struggle against authority, here particularly Joseph K. in *The Trial*, who struggles throughout the novel against the system and finally submits to the power as powerless. In the same manner Kierkegaard's scriptural Abraham succumbs the ultimate authority to God, as a powerless man. (Darrow 75).

Franz Kafka too like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche was an existential writer. In this context famous critic William Hubben talks of the existential quality of Kafka by relating him to European writers - Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche:

Kafka is the most existentialist among the existentialist writers employing insecurity and defeat as the fatalistic 'solution' of that same sense of suspense and motion which Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche welcomed as the very element in which to rise above accident and fate. He expresses an existentialist *Weltgefühl* with stronger visionary force than his French colleagues, and speaks undoubtedly to the condition of untold men and women in Europe (Hubben 139).

Existentialism is recent philosophical movement dealing with man's disillusionment and despair. The roots of this movement nourished by philosophers like Socrates, Hegel these philosophers grew up the existential tree and Kierkegaard constituted its trunk while writers like Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kafka and others who followed him emerged as its various branches. Realizing man's dignity and uniqueness Kierkegaard launches a crusade to make man renounce his identification with state, society, church, and the most insidious of all, speculative metaphysical systems. Thus, he brings about a revolutionary change in the basic concept of existentialism, and put forward an entirely different kind of philosophy, the first principle of which is that man's existence is supreme and precedes his essence, if any. He discovers reality in self: "subjectivity in truth and subjectivity in reality." Thus, he glorifies the individual's act of choice and will, raising both to the moral level. To cite his particular work *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard in this work shows his philosophy of 'freedom of choice' or 'free choice'. He shows how an individual must make either the aesthetic choice, by which he chooses finite things for himself, or the ethical, by which he gives himself to God. He recommends man the way to be authentic and to achieve genuine personal existence which involves him in nothing less than a leap across a bottomless chasm. Man acquires self-knowledge through an awareness of the condition around him. But self-knowledge is possible only when he has an 'intensified awareness' of an encounter with God. Man starts from 'doubt' which characterizes the early (aesthetic) stage of his life (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*).

Friedrich Nietzsche is perhaps the most conspicuous figure among the catalysts of existentialism. With him it became a direct revolt against the state, orthodox religion and philosophical systems. He shares Kierkegaard's adoration of the human 'will' and supporter 'authentic living'. He also insists that the individual must prefer his choices in generating ideals for his own development into a Superman. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is Nietzsche's attempt to help man surpass himself, to become 'Superman'. His basic idea is that 'will' is most important aspect of all existence. Moreover, Nietzsche declares through Zarathustra that for modern man God is dead (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Prologue and XXV)). This is an interesting theme upon which the existentialists have concentrated to convey the awful fact that the individual is thrown into a dreadful situation in which he alone is responsible for his choices. In this context William Hubben is of the view that, Kafka's characters are existing in that realm where there is absence of God (Hubben 145). As far as *The Trial* is concerned we sense in the whole novel right from beginning till end, the absence of God and any kind of belief on Him. The protagonist Joseph K. is thrown into a dreadful situation in the novel for which he alone can be blamed responsible because of his choices that he made in his life. The more he tries to defend himself, with his pleads to court, then the lawyer Huld, the painter Titorelli, the more he adds to his crime. The existential attitude in the novel can be seen through environs of confusion and the meaningless obscure world which Joseph K. faces. Desperateness, in existentialism, is usually defined as a loss of hope. *The Trial* is full of the atmosphere of despair and it ends with the loss of hope against the system. Joseph K. in the novel is shown to be straightaway arrested "one fine morning," with the warders initially restraining him from leaving his room, and then a seemingly endless trial where "definite acquittal" is the remotest of possibilities. The conflict between the juridical restraining and K.'s protestations of innocence remains irresolvable even at the end of the novel when "hands of one of the partners were . . . at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife into his heart and turned it there twice. With the failing eyes K. could . . . see . . . the final act. 'Like a dog!' he said . . ." It is "the shame of it" that is "to outlive him" (Kafka, *The Trial* 211). The novel existing between these two scenes, that are the first and the last scenes, respectively is an exploratory voyage through the hallucinations of urban existence in a modern European city. Kafka's European influence can be visualised in the sense that he has shown the same existential attitude as has been shown by

Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche in their works respectively. So, Kafka was not the German writer alone but the mouth piece of Europe.

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