One of the greatest German prose writers of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka (1883-1924), was a Jewish lawyer who lived in Prague in the waning years of the Austro-Hungarian empire. This course examines Kafka’s writing in the context of the main literary, cultural and intellectual movements of early twentieth-century Central Europe. Since his oeuvre is compact—most of his works were written between 1912 and 1924, though relatively few were published during his lifetime—we will be able to read a large part of it in this course: the three (unfinished) novels, most important short stories and parables, the famous “Letter to his Father” and excerpts from the diaries.

In order to gain perspective on Kafka’s originality, we will devote a few sessions to works by other important authors of Kafka’s generation from the Austro-Hungarian and Eastern European milieus who dealt with similar questions, in particular Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931). A series of expressionist poems, together with the film The Blue Angel, a canonical work of German Expressionist cinema, will shed light on Kafka’s affinity with that movement; Liebelei is a famous cinematic interpretation of one of Schnitzler’s early dramas.

In our final unit, we will take up the vexed questions of Kafka’s Jewish identity, his status as a Jewish modernist, and relevance to Jewish culture today. In conjunction with a series of secondary readings about Kafka’s relationship to Judaism, the Yiddish theater, and cultural Zionism, students will have an opportunity to find their own way into this important topic by completing a research project that explores their own understanding of Kafka’s Jewishness. This assignment can take the form of a traditional research essay, a comparison paper, a book review essay, a piece of creative writing or midrash, or a project involving other media.

Our most important work will be the close analysis of the readings on a weekly basis. Above all, be prepared to discuss and raise questions about what you have read. Since Kafka’s texts are challenging and highly enigmatic, I advise you to read slowly and carefully and to re-read whenever possible. I stress that no previous background in literary studies is needed to
succeed in this class. Each student brings a different background and perspective to the material. By expressing your own ideas and reactions, you will enrich the course immeasurably.

Required Texts. (Important: Please purchase these editions.)


Optional Text


Shorter texts, primary and secondary, will be posted where relevant.

Course Requirements:

- Regular participation in discussions & explication 40%
- short essay (4-5 pp.) 20%
- final project on Kafka and Judaism 30%
- (n.b. this can take the form of an essay or another type of project)
- creative imitation (1-2 page) 10%

Films (available on Schoology or Youtube)

Josef von Sternberg, *The Blue Angel* (1930)
Max Ophuls, *Liebelei* (“Flirtation”) (1933)
Orson Welles, *The Trial*. (optional)

Schedule of Readings and Assignments. (Note: CS = Collected Stories.)

**Part I**  The Self in the Family. Kafka’s “Sons”

Week 1  January 28. Introduction. “Give it Up.” CS
- “The Metamorphosis.” CS


Week 3  Feb. 11 *Amerika*, chapters 1-6

Kafka’s biography. Excerpts from “Letter to the Father” and Diaries.


Part II.  Kafka in the Context of German Expressionism

Week 5  Feb. 25  Film: The Blue Angel. Poems by Else Lasker-Schüler.

Excerpts from Siegfried Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler, and from Walter Sokel, The Writer in Extremis.

Writing Assignment: Explication due. 2 pages.

Part III.  The Self in Society.


Week 7  March 11 The Trial

Week 8  March ’18 The Trial, continued. The parable “Before the Law.”

Writing Assignment: Interpretive Essay due. 4-5 pages.


Week 9  April 3 (Wednesday) Arthur Schnitzler, Fräulein Else.

Film: Max Ophuls, Liebelei.

Part IV.  The Artist’s Quest for Transcendence.

Week 10  April 8. “The Hunger Artist.” “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk” CS.

Secondary Sources


Week 12  April 22 The Castle, continued.

Film: Michael Haneke, Das Schloss.

Week 13  April 29 The Castle, continued.

Writing Assignment: Submit a two-page prospectus for final project, including description of the project and an annotated bibliography with at least three secondary sources you plan to consult.
Part V.  Kafka as a Jewish Writer.


Writing Assignment: Compose your own parable in imitation of Kafka.

Week 15  May 14 (Tuesday evening) - May 16 – Shavuot

Readings: Selected sources on Kafka and Judaism

Week 16  May 20  Readings: Kafka and Judaism (continued)

Final Project due May 24