

READING KAFKA IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

One morning, Gregor Samsa awakens to find himself transformed into a cockroach yet his immediate concern is not his altered condition but the fear that he will be unable to work and earn a living. His anxiety about fulfilling his professional obligations outweighs even his sense of self. This narrative, from *The Metamorphosis*, reflects the distinctive literary vision of Franz Kafka, the Czech-German writer of the early twentieth century. Remarkably, more than a century after his death, Kafka remains profoundly relevant. His themes, his characterizations, and the oppressive circumstances in which his protagonists are trapped continue to resonate strongly with members of Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012. This article examines the basis of that continued relevance. It begins by outlining Kafka's life and historical context, and then considers the emergence of Kafkaesque as a descriptor of modern absurdity.

Keywords: Kafkaesque, Productivity, Generation Z, Alienation, Identity, Relevance, Bureaucracy, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Prague-born writer Franz Kafka, who wrote in German, has a substantial contemporary presence on Goodreads, where his 3,300 listed works collectively receive 49,72,029 ratings, the most popular being *The Metamorphosis*. This novella alone has accumulated nearly 1.4 million ratings and more than 67,000 reviews, underscoring his enduring readership and cultural relevance. Users continue to add his books to "want to read" lists, and active community discussions reveal a persistent engagement with his themes of alienation, existential anxiety, and the absurdity of modern life.

Franz Kafka was born into a middle - class, German-and Yiddish-speaking Jewish family in Prague, the capital of the Kingdom of Bohemia within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father, Hermann Kafka, was a self-made and highly assertive businessman, physically imposing and temperamentally dominant, who expected his son to emulate his drive and ambition. Kafka, however, was markedly different. He was a quiet, introspective child who spoke little and showed an early inclination toward literature rather than commerce.

Kafka excelled academically and was admitted to Charles University in Prague, initially enrolling in chemistry. His father, dissatisfied with this choice and intent on having him enter the family business, pressured him to pursue a more practical field. Consequently, Kafka shifted to the study of law, completed his legal education, and eventually secured full-time employment in various legal and insurance offices. This career path, undertaken largely out of filial obligation, contributed to Kafka's growing emotional distance from his father and reinforced a deep-seated sense of inadequacy, a tension famously expressed in his later writings. While still living in his parents' home, he devoted his evenings to writing, which functioned as a form of emotional relief and personal expression. He composed hundreds of letters to family members, friends, also to his father, articulating his internal conflicts and anxieties. Although he became engaged multiple times, he never married. Kafka died in 1924 at the age of 40 from tuberculosis, largely unrecognized during his lifetime, yet destined to become one of the most influential literary figures of the twentieth century.

Kafka's relevance extends beyond classrooms into the digital lives of Gen Z. His words circulate on Tik Tok and Instagram, where young people share quotes, memes, and even birthday cakes bearing his image. Though not always accurate, this trend reflects a genuine fascination and identification with Kafka's themes. Like his characters, many young people feel caught between authority and individuality, connection and isolation.

KAFKAESQUE PRODUCTIVITY, IDENTITY, AND ALIENATION

The term *Kafkaesque* has entered the modern lexicon as a descriptor for circumstances that resemble those portrayed in Kafka's fiction. It functions as an adjective denoting situations characterized by nightmarish complexity, bureaucratic irrationality, and a pervasive sense of bizarre or illogical. The word entered common circulation in the mid-twentieth century as Kafka's works reached a wider readership, particularly through English translations. By the postwar period, critics, journalists, and everyday speakers were invoking *Kafkaesque* to describe experiences of bureaucracy, systemic injustice, and surreal disorientation.

At its conceptual core, the *Kafkaesque* signifies a condition of entrapment within a labyrinthine system. Characters such as Josef. K. in *The Trial* or K. in *The Castle* move endlessly through opaque corridors of authority, confronted by rules that remain inaccessible and outcomes that appear irrational or perpetually deferred. In contemporary discourse, the term is frequently invoked across diverse contexts. For Generation Z, whose interactions with institutions are often mediated by digital systems, the term provides a particularly apt framework for articulating such experiences.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa transforms into an insect, but long before this physical change, he had already become the sole breadwinner of his family. Initially, his mother worries about him and his sister brings him food, attempting to care for him. Over time, however, these gestures fade. As his condition persists and he can no longer work, Gregor is gradually perceived as a burden. The family's concern turns into discomfort, then resentment, until they begin to wish, quietly but unmistakably, that he would simply disappear. Gregor's inability to earn renders him unworthy in their eyes, a harsh reality Kafka exposes with unsettling clarity.

This dynamic resonates strongly with Generation Z. Many young people today have internalized the belief that their productivity determines their value. The internet is saturated with productivity culture, self-improvement content, and time-management philosophies. Self-help books are increasingly popular, and failure to achieve an 'ideal productive day' often leads to guilt or self-criticism. In this sense, Kafka's portrayal of Gregor Samsa speaks directly to contemporary anxieties: the fear that one's worth is measured solely by output, usefulness, or achievement. It is this thematic alignment that makes Kafka feel, in many ways, like an older sibling to Gen Z.

Kafka's experience of alienation was deeply rooted in the complex cultural and linguistic landscape of early twentieth-century Prague. As a German-speaking Jew living in a predominantly Czech environment, he occupied a marginal position from the outset. He was not fully accepted by the Czech majority, who viewed German speakers with suspicion due to the political dynamics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the same time, he remained an outsider within the German community, which often regarded Jews as culturally and socially other. Even within the Jewish population of Prague, Kafka felt a degree of estrangement. His family was not particularly religious, and he did not share the communal practices that united many of his contemporaries. This triple distance contributed significantly to his enduring sense of isolation.

Alienation, a central theme in Kafka's work, bears striking relevance for contemporary society, particularly for Gen Z. Despite living in an era of unprecedented digital connectivity, young people increasingly report feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Social media offers an endless stream of interactions, yet these interactions often lack the depth and authenticity necessary for meaningful relationships. As a result, Generation Z has frequently been described as the 'Loneliest Generation'. Kafka's personal experiences and literary portrayals of isolation thus resonate powerfully today, illuminating the persistent tension between external connection and internal estrangement in the modern world.

Although Franz Kafka's works are often associated with existential dread, they are equally characterized by a striking sense of absurdity and dark humor. The grotesque transformation of a man into an insect, the prosecution of an individual for an unnamed crime, or the futile wandering through endless bureaucratic corridors all exemplify narrative situations that are simultaneously disturbing and comically bizarre. A close acquaintance recalled that during public readings, both the audience and Kafka frequently laughed so intensely at certain passages that he was unable to continue, forced to pause and compose himself before resuming the recitation. Such testimony underscores the extent to which absurdity, for Kafka, was inseparable from irony and the ridiculous.

Generation Z has enthusiastically embraced this absurdist aspect of Kafka's work, translating it into the visual and rhetorical idioms of internet culture. On platforms such as Tik Tok, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, users routinely circulate memes that draw upon Kafka's imagery to articulate the contradictions of contemporary experience. Gregor Samsa's insect body becomes an emblem of burnout, depression, or the exhaustion of daily routines, while Josef. K. is recast as the patron figure of endless bureaucratic procedures, automated rejections, and digital paperwork.

This phenomenon, often described as the 'memeification' of Kafka, functions as more than a form of humor. It represents a distinct coping strategy. Gen Z commonly responds to existential anxiety through irony, satire, and self-referential humor, transforming distress into shared, digestible commentary. By reinterpreting Kafka's bleakest scenarios through comedic framing, young people convert feelings of overwhelm into a communal, ironic mode of expression. The absurdity that Kafka originally rendered with grave seriousness thus becomes, in digital culture, a method of negotiating the comparable absurdities of twenty-first-century life.

In this sense, Kafka has become an unexpected yet fitting cultural companion for Generation Z. His blend of absurdity, irony, and existential tension parallels the survival strategies of a generation that often expresses its deepest anxieties through humor.

CONCLUSION

Even a hundred years after his death, Franz Kafka endures because his writing captures the defining conditions of life modernity. His works are not confined to the historical anxieties of the early twentieth century, rather, they continue to resonate across generations that confront bureaucratic control, social alienation, and existential uncertainty. Kafka's fiction articulates a persistent tension between the individual and structures of power that remain inaccessible, unresponsive, and indifferent. For Gen Z, Kafka's relevance is especially pronounced. As a generation navigating digital surveillance and economic instability, Gen Z encounters conditions that closely parallel the environments depicted in Kafka's narratives. Feelings of helplessness, alienation, and systemic absurdity are not merely thematic elements in Kafka's work but lived realities for many contemporary readers.

Kafka's claim that 'literature should be the axe for the frozen sea inside us' further illuminates the enduring affective and ethical force of his writing. More than a century after Kafka's death, his voice continues to cut through the noise of modern life, challenging readers to confront the psychological and social realities they inhabit. Yet within this recognition lies a paradoxical form of connection. Kafka's work does not merely expose alienation, it also fosters a shared awareness of vulnerability and endurance. By articulating experiences that appear isolating, Kafka enables readers to recognize their struggles as collective rather than singular. In this regard, Kafka's work affirms literature's enduring capacity to illuminate shared human conditions shaped by alienation, uncertainty, and systemic constraint, and to generate meaning and critical reflection even within the most disorienting structures of modern existence.

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