

FRANZ KAFKA

BORN: July 3, 1883

DIED: June 3, 1924

NATIONALITY: Czech, Hungarian

KEY WORK: *The Metamorphosis*



Franz Kafka changed the face of modern literature. Although largely unpublished in his own lifetime, he paved the way for future writers to shock, surprise, and push boundaries.

A Creative Outpouring

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.” The opening line of Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915) was revolutionary in its bold absurdity. It had a profound influence on a young Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) (see page 78): “The first line almost knocked me off the bed. I was so surprised...I thought to myself that I didn’t know anyone was allowed to write things like that.” *The Metamorphosis* changed the face of what a story could be—the metaphorical breakdown of body and mind is portrayed with such original absurdity. Samsa’s surreal transformation is set against reality. He increasingly disgusts his family, and he can no longer communicate,

even though his mind is still human. This existential nightmare set new ground for the modernist movement.

Despite his enormous influence on the literary world, Kafka was never aware of the impact of his work during his lifetime. He published only one collection of stories and a few stories in literary magazines. In fact, we may have seen only a fraction of his overall output. He is said to have burned 90% of his work, and many of his notebooks and letters remain unseen, having been confiscated by the Gestapo in 1933. One particular story published in his lifetime had a huge impact on the evolution of his writing. *The Judgment* (1912) is seen as his breakthrough work. It deals with the troubled relationship of a son and dominant father, a theme that would run throughout

Kafka’s treatment of the surreal in his novella *The Metamorphosis* prefigured the magical realism of works such as Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) (see page 86).

“My doubts stand in a circle around every word, I see them before I see the word, but what then! I do not see the word at all, I invent it.”

—Franz Kafka, *Diaries: 1910–1923*

his work, both explicitly and metaphorically. He wrote the story in a single night. He described this creative outpouring as “a complete opening of body and soul.” In a prolific year, Kafka also wrote *The Metamorphosis* and the novel *The Man Who Disappeared*, published posthumously in 1927 as *Amerika*.

Fearless

Kafka’s apparent lack of confidence in his work showed itself in a letter to his lifelong friend, Max Brod: “Dearest Max, my last request: Everything I leave behind me... in the way of diaries, manuscripts, letters (my own and others’), sketches, and so on, [is] to be burned unread.” Brod ignored his friend and took them to publication. Kafka’s masterpieces, *Amerika*, *The Trial* (1925), and *The Castle* (1926), all unfinished, were published after his death, cementing his place in literary history.

In an extract from his diary, Kafka said, “[I would] rather tear myself to a thousand pieces than be buried with this world within

me.” He poured his feelings of inadequacy and isolation into his stories. He tore into the overbearing power of faceless bureaucracy. In another diary entry, he described the writer inside him as “fearless, powerful, surprising, moved....”

Source for Characters

Kafka worked for The Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute all his adult life, largely to please his father. Rather than curtailing his creativity, it seemed only to fuel it further. His day job was certainly a source for his characters. Would he have written *The Metamorphosis* and the character of Gregor Samsa, traveling salesman transformed, without the anxieties and frustrations he felt within his own job? Through the surreal, as well as darkness, unease, humor, and shock, he spoke of universal human struggles. As W. H. Auden once wrote, “Kafka is important to us because his predicament is the predicament of modern man.”

FRANZ KAFKA

EXERCISES

034

“AS GREGOR SAMSA AWOKE...”

Can you come up with a killer first line? A line to shock, intrigue, or frame an entire story? Here is Gabriel García Márquez’s opening line in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.”

Exercise: Take a piece of your writing, or think of a new idea for a story. Try to write an opening line with impact, which will lead the reader straight into the story and inform them of what might be to come.

035

JUXTA- POSITION

Putting together images or thoughts that are not normally associated will create juxtapositions that remain in the reader’s mind. For example, a homeless man wearing a weathered tuxedo.

Exercise: Make a note of anything strange and unusual, weird and wonderful, that you see, hear, smell, read, taste, or touch. In your notes, begin to look for connections. Put together disconnected images that juxtapose. Form similes and metaphors. Look out for new characters and character descriptions.

036

REVEALING CHARACTER #1

In the following description, there is a strong feeling of a writer noting down the facts of a man and his life. The writer is present to the reader. The only presence should be the characters in the story; the writer’s voice should be implicit.

Character: A traveling salesman. He is 6 feet 4 inches tall. He has a bad back because he spends so many nights sleeping in cheap hotels with uncomfortable beds. He is divorced and has two young children, a boy and a girl.

Exercise: Take these facts and write them into a description of the character that is revealed through actions and strong narration and/or dialogue.

037

REVEALING CHARACTER #2

Character: A doctor. She is married and has a one-year-old baby boy. Her husband is a stay-at-home dad. She has just finished a twenty-hour shift and is beginning to hallucinate.

Exercise: Take these facts and write them into a description of the character that is revealed through actions and strong narration and/or dialogue.

MARGARET ATWOOD

BORN: November 18, 1939

DIED: N/A

NATIONALITY: Canadian

KEY WORK: *The Handmaid's Tale*



Margaret Atwood is one of Canada's most celebrated writers. She is a prolific writer of novels, poetry, short fiction, and nonfiction. She is experimental and progressive in her writing projects.

Out of the Wilderness

As with many current writers, such as Peter Carey (see page 208) and J. M. Coetzee (see page 214), Atwood covers a wide variety of literary genres. *Surfacing* (1972) draws upon elements of thriller, ghost story, and travelogue; *Alias Grace* (1996) is a historical novel based on a true figure in nineteenth-century history; *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is set in a dystopian future. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood has her own name for the genre. Rather than science fiction, it is “speculative fiction,” meaning “a work that employs the means already to hand and that takes place on Planet Earth.”

Atwood writes with brevity, precision, and elegance. In *Alias Grace* she shows in only

a few words the innocent nature of the main protagonist and the seeming joy of a simple domestic task: “The shirts and the nightgowns flapping in the breeze on a sunny day were like large white birds, or angels rejoicing, although without any heads.” The flowing rhythm is jolted by her “correction” to her thought process. Atwood’s humor is dark. In *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the Chase family discusses buttons: “War is good for the button trade. So many buttons are lost in a war, and have to be replaced—whole boxfuls, whole truckloads of buttons at a time. They’re blown to pieces, they sink into the ground, they go up in flames.”

The theme of women’s status and subjugation is common in Atwood’s work—

Atwood sees the label “science fiction” as a pejorative term when it is applied to her work. In an interview with the BBC in the UK, she distanced herself from a genre of “talking squids in outer space.”

“Never map it out. Just get into it. Jump in, like going swimming.”

—Margaret Atwood, interview with *The Daily Beast*

from her first novel, where a recently engaged woman feels her body and mind becoming separated (*The Edible Woman*; 1969), to a possible future of sexual oppression (*The Handmaid's Tale*), and to a past, where a woman convicted of murder is either a desperate victim or innately evil (*Alias Grace*). Atwood grew up in the wilderness of northern Quebec, Canada, and experienced the increasing commercial impact of America in the 1960s and '70s. Her relationship with Canada plays an important role in her work. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Canadian wilderness is seen as the only escape from the oppressive republic, which was once the United States of America.

A Poetic Catalyst

Atwood is a prolific writer. In addition to her novels, she has published numerous collections of short fiction and poetry. Her poetry is often a catalyst to her novels. In an interview with *The Paris Review* she describes the process: “I don’t think I solve problems in my poetry; I think I uncover the

problems. Then the novel seems a process of working them out.” As many writers attest to, ideas begin with an image, a scene, or a voice: “Sometimes that seed is contained in a poem I’ve already written.”

Atwood likes to complete 1,000–2,000 words per day. She writes the first draft of a manuscript by hand and is attentive to the pen’s movement across the page. She is progressive in her outlook on the wider world of writing, inventing the Longpen, which allows a writer to sign books remotely using a computer in one city and an electronic pen in another. She is the first contributor to the Future Library Project. The project runs over a period of 100 years, with one writer contributing a piece of work every year, remaining unread until 2114. In Norway 1,000 trees have been planted and will be cut down in 2114 to provide the paper on which the texts will be printed. As an active campaigner for human rights, Atwood is, at the time of writing, auctioning the naming rights for a character in one of her novels to raise money for the cause.

MARGARET ATWOOD

EXERCISES

086

SENSE OF TOUCH

Communicating how something feels to the touch need not always be through associated descriptive words, such as “soft skin.” Making unusual associations to describe how something feels can make the sensation of touch more powerful. The description might be relating to how something else normally feels. For example, water can feel not only wet but like the touch of a loved one, a caress. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood writes, “Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress.”

Exercise: Write down a few objects or materials that you might touch. Next to this, write an adjective to describe what it feels like to the touch. Then write down how it makes you feel when you touch it. For example:

Object/material	Adjective	How it makes you feel
Water	Wet	Caressed
Wood	Smooth/rough	Belligerent

Finally, write a sentence that includes a description of how an object makes you feel when you touch it.

087

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

Exercise: Write a short piece using the following line for inspiration:

“The view from the top...”

088

FOUR SEASONS

Exercise: Imagine a setting and describe the place four times, changing each description according to the seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall.

089

WASHED-UP OBJECTS

“Love blurs your vision; but after it recedes, you can see more clearly than ever. It’s like the tide going out, revealing whatever’s been thrown away and sunk: broken bottles, old gloves, rusting pop cans, nibbled fishbodies, bones.”

—*Cat’s Eye*

Exercise: Make a list of five objects or more that might be washed up on the shore of a beach. Do any of them trigger ideas for your writing?

HARUKI MURAKAMI

BORN: January 12, 1949

DIED: N/A

NATIONALITY: Japanese

KEY WORK: *Kafka on the Shore*



Haruki Murakami is often cited as one of the finest living writers. He is one of a number of Japanese writers, including Banana Yoshimoto, who have been translated into many languages.

An Epiphany at the Baseball

Two epiphanies have been key to the life and work of Murakami. The first came in 1978 at the age of twenty-nine, while sitting on a grass verge outside the Jingo baseball stadium in Tokyo. With little writing experience, Murakami decided there and then he would write a novel. *Hear the Wind Sing* was published the following year. In 1982, having sold his jazz club to dedicate himself to his writing, Murakami had his second epiphany. He would give up his thirty-a-day smoking habit and go running. This epiphany, as he says in his memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (2008), led to a remarkable period of productivity that resulted in a series of novels, bringing him critical acclaim both in Japan and internationally.

Running is one of the key ingredients in Murakami's strict writing routine. He wakes up early and writes for several hours before going for a run. He then spends his afternoons translating classic Western literature, such as *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), into Japanese. As he says, "Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits: that's the essence of running, and a metaphor for life—and for me, for writing as a whole." Murakami believes repetition and routine allows imagination to flourish. In an interview with John Freedman (*How to Read a Novelist*), he describes how his ideas make their way onto the page: "It's like going into a dark room. I enter that room, open that door, and it's dark, completely dark. I can see something, and I can touch something and

Murakami's influences are diverse and include jazz, Dostoyevsky, Kafka (see page 44), and Raymond Chandler. His writing deals with Kafkaesque themes of alienation and loneliness and his brand of magical realism owes much to the absurdist elements of Kafka's work.

"There aren't any new words. Our job is to give new meanings and special overtones to absolutely ordinary words."

—Haruki Murakami, "Jazz Messenger"

come back to this world, this side, and write it." What he often finds are characters far from the regimented "normal" nature of his routine—a psychic hired to find a missing cat (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*; 1994), ageless Second World War soldiers (*Kafka on the Shore*; 2002), a man who believes a giant frog is taking over Tokyo (*After the Quake*; 2000). Before his epiphanies, Murakami says he had never created anything; afterward, creativity spewed out of him.

Inevitable Solitude

In 1995 the Kobe earthquake and the terrorist sarin-gas attack on the Tokyo underground led to a shift in Murakami's writing. He returned to Japan, having lived in America since the late 1980s, and spent a year listening to survivors' stories. During this time he says he began to "tap into the darkness found in society and history," rather than the individual darkness of his early work. Either way, as a writer Murakami has to embrace, cope with,

and harness the inevitable solitude as he opens the door to that dark room: "...this sense of isolation, like acid spilling out of a bottle, can unconsciously eat away at a person's heart and dissolve it."

Murakami mixes humor with darkness, the mundane with the fantastic, the real with the surreal. He blends stark biological detail with the ethereal: "Somewhere in his body—perhaps in the marrow of his bones—he would continue to feel her absence." (*Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman: 24 Stories*; 2006). He writes about memories and the essence of human existence: "Body cells replace themselves every month. Even at this very moment. Almost everything you think you know about me is nothing more than memories" (*A Wild Sheep Chase*; 1982). Murakami writes about love in all its shapes and forms, often using the surreal to illustrate it: "How much do you love me?" Midori asked. 'Enough to melt all the tigers in the world to butter,' I said" (*Norwegian Wood*; 1987).

HARUKI MURAKAMI

EXERCISES

068

ONOMATO- POEIA

When spoken aloud, onomatopoeic words imitate the sound they are describing. This enables the reader to “hear” what is happening and can bring them further into the writer’s world. Onomatopoeic words fall into five categories relating to water, air, collisions, voice, and animals. Here are some examples:

“He saw nothing and heard nothing but he could feel his heart pounding and then he heard the clack on stone and the leaping, dropping clicks of a small rock falling.”

—Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

“Her earrings jiggle back and forth...”

—Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

Exercise: Write some onomatopoeic words relating to each of the five categories below. Then create a sentence using one or more of the words you have written.

1. Water
2. Air
3. Collisions
4. Voice
5. Animals

069

MURAKAMI METAPHOR

In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Haruki Murakami uses metaphor to describe loneliness: “The pages of a book in my hands would take on the threatening metallic gleam of razor blades.” Murakami gives the book a sinister edge with the unexpected association of page and razor blade.

Exercise: Think of an everyday object, perhaps a door, and create a metaphor that will make the door more sinister, associating it with loneliness, anger, or despair. Then write a sentence using this metaphor to bring out strong emotion.

070

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Does a narrator have to be a person?

Exercise: Try writing from the perspective of a building, a boat, or a tree. Let them describe as a first-person narrator the things that go on around them. What have they witnessed in their history? Who has lived or died in the building? Has the tree witnessed emotional moments that have long since passed?

071

WORLD RECORDS

Writing the fantastical in mundane tones is one of the marks of magical realism.

Exercise: Make up some world records that might appear in the *Guinness World Records*. Think of extremes: the smallest, tallest, highest.... Write about the records, and the people, actions, and things involved, as if they are facts.