

Undergraduate Program in Central European Studies

CERGE-EI and the School of Humanities at Charles
University

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Literature and Society: Central European Writers

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OUTLINE OF THE COURSE:

This course of selected works in English translation will sample significant contributions of 20th Century writers from the former Czechoslovakia (and its successor states). It will introduce students to the major ideas and themes that have made Czech literature a distinct and vital genre in the pantheon of world literature, one that in particular has left a lasting mark on modern consciousness via-a-vis the moral answerability of individuals and societies.

GRADING POLICY:

The students will be required to participate in the seminar work (40 %) and to write a short essay (approx. 5 pages, spacing 1.5) on one of the topics we will be dealing with (60%).

The selection of topics is individual (but should be consulted with the instructor): it may include comparative approach (a comparison between two Czech writers, or a Czech one and an American one), analytical approach (Human Labour and Human Nature in Capek's R.U.R., for ex.), but the final paper should not be based on biographical information about the author in question.

REQUIRED READINGS:

Zbyněk Havlíček: Poetic Image as a Schizophrenic Symptom
F. Kafka: The Metamorphosis or Blumfeld, the Elderly Bachelor
J. Hašek: The Good Soldier Švejk (extracts)
M. Kundera: Hitchhiking Game
B. Hrabal: Too Loud a Solitude (extracts)
K. Čapek: R.U.R.
L. Klíma: The Suffering of Prince Sternenhoch
J. Patočka, Heretic Essays (especially the final essay)

WEEK:

TOPICS:

- 1 Introduction: Czech Literature at the Beginning of the 20th Century. Avantgarde and the traditionalist current of Czech Literature.
- 2 Z. Havlíček: Poetic Image as A Schizophrenic Symptom. J. Švankmajer: The Conspiracy of Pleasure (video projection)
- 3 F. Kafka: Life and Work. Questions of authority, animality and human nature in Kafka's work. Seminar: Metamorphosis.
- 4 J. Hašek: Life and Work. Questions of irony and politics. Seminars: Excerpts from Good Soldier Švejk (and possibly some earlier short stories)
- 5 Czech expressionism: Jakub Deml and Ladislav Klíma. Seminar: excerpts from The Suffering of Prince Sternenhoch.
- 6 Czech poetic prose: Vladislav Vančura. Seminar: The End of Good Old Days (video projection)
- 7 The Literature of the second half of the 20th Century: an introduction.
- 8 Milan Kundera: questions of political engagement and literature. Seminar: Hitchhiking game (questions of identity and gender)
- 9 Videoprojection: The Shop on the Main Street (with introduction)
- 10 Bohumil Hrabal: poetic prose after the 2nd world war. Time and narrative in Too Loud a Solitude. Seminar: Excerpts from Too Loud a Solitude.
- 11 Literature and Philosophy: the work of Jan Patočka. Seminar: Patočka's Heretic Essays.
- 12 Summary and discussion.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

B. Hrabal: I Served the King of England
M. Kundera: The Joke
K. Čapek: Hordubal, The Meteor, An Ordinary Life