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Literature and Society: Central European Writers

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Outline of the course:

In this course, we will focus on reading a variety of excerpts (or full works) by the 20th century Czech writers from Kafka and Hašek up to Bohumil Hrabal. The main focus will be to situate their works in the political and social context of different political regimes (Austro-Hungarian Empire, The First Republic, Communism) but no less important will be to engage in a properly textual analysis (different narrative strategies used by different authors, stylistic particularities of the authors in question). As a result, the students will be provided with a solid overview of how social and political situation of the Central European region came to be reflected in the works of literary fiction and vice versa, i. e. how the literary fiction itself became shaped by social and political conditions. The course will consist of two parts: a lecture by the lecturer, presenting the work of the given author, and a seminar, based on the discussion of the author's texts. As a part of the class, we will also watch two or three movies based on the works of the authors discussed.

Course requirements:

- Attendance (one unexcused absence is allowed) and active participation in the discussions.
- At the beginning of the seminars, students will present a short summary of the readings and raise questions that may possibly become the basis for collective discussion (10-15 minutes). After the presentation, the students will be required to produce a written version of the presentation (approx. 1000 words), which may serve as a preparatory version of the final paper.
- During the midterm exams, students will be required to take a small test concerning the work of the writers dealt with during the first half of the semester.
- The students will be required to write a final paper (3000 words). They have a variety of subjects to choose from: either a detailed analysis of one of the texts dealt with during the semester, a comparison of two Czech writers of their choice, or even a comparison of a Czech writer and an author of their own preference (American or other). The students, however, are discouraged to give a biographical information about the author(s) of their choice (unless absolutely necessary) – the paper should involve some kind of "textual" analysis. The lecturer, of course, is available for individual consultation of the topic of the final paper.

Grading Policy:

- Regular attendance and participation in the in-class discussions: 30%
- Presentation of the readings: 10%
- Written version of the presentation: 20%
- Midterm exams: 10%
- The final paper: 30%

Readings:
All required readings will be available in advance in the form of the course reader.

Weekly schedule:

Week 1

UPCES Orientation Lecture Series
Lectures and site visits on subjects of history, culture, politics, and the economies of the Czech Republic and Central Europe in order to establish a common interdisciplinary background and vocabulary for all courses.

Week 2

General introduction to the history of Czech literature. We will focus in particular on the 19th century "National Revival", which represented an important background for the rise of modern Czech literature. A brief introduction to the Czech avant-garde in general and Czech surrealism in particular.

Week 3

Czech Surrealism. Our discussion of the Czech surrealism will be based on the discussions of the excerpt from an important theoretical essay by Zbyněk Havlíček: "Poetic image as a Schizophrenic Symptom". Havlíček's provocative – and debatable – comparison between poetic (or literary) image and schizophrenic symptom will represent a good basis for a discussion of the nature of modern literature in general. As a part of the class, we will watch a movie by the Czech surrealist film-maker Jan Švankmajer, that may be viewed as an excellent illustration of Havlíček's thesis.

Readings
Zbyněk Havlíček – "Poetic Image as a Schizophrenic Symptom".

Week 4

Franz Kafka. In the lecture, some basic information will be provided of Kafka's narrative strategies and poetics (humour, irony, alienation), as well as on the political context of his work. In the second part of the class, we will focus on the reading and interpretation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Readings
Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Week 5

Franz Kafka continued. We will examine two of Kafka's rather mysterious short stories – *Blumfeld, the Elderly Bachelor* and *The Hunger Artist* – and compare them to *Metamorphosis*. We will also watch Orson Welles' film adaptation of *The Trial* and discuss the nature of Welles' "visualisation" of Kafka's novel.

Readings
Franz Kafka – *Blumfeld, the Elderly Bachelor*, *The Hunger Artist.*

Week 6

Jaroslav Hašek. The students will be provided with a basic overview of Hašek's political attitudes and the way it became reflected in his well-known novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk*. The seminar will be based on reading several excerpts from *Švejk* (the novel being obviously too long to be read in its entirety). The long-debated question of Švejk as representing the Czech "national" character will also be discussed.

Readings
Jaroslav Hašek: *The Good Soldier Švejk* (excerpts).

Week 7

Midterm exams

Week 8

Karel Čapek. The work of Karel Čapek will be dealt with as an example of "humanist" literature written by an "engaged intellectual". In this respect, we will have a closer look at Čapek's famous theatre play "R.U.R.".

Readings
Karel Čapek – *R.U.R.*

Week 9

Karel Čapek continued. Čapek's *R.U.R.* will be contrasted with his avant-garde novel *The Meteor*. The difference between the two works will be examined: *R.U.R.* as a rather straightforward "political/utopian" work; *The Meteor* as a complex literary experiment using different narrative perspectives.

Readings
Karel Čapek – *The Meteor*.

Week 10

Milan Kundera. Kundera's early novels and short stories. His communist period and transition towards a more critical stance. We will focus on one of the short stories from *Laughable Loves*, as well as on the excerpts from *The Joke*.

Readings
Milan Kundera – *The Hitchhiking Game*, *The Joke*.

Week 11

Milan Kundera continued. Kundera's "French" novels. Reading the excerpts from *The Ignorance*.

Readings
Milan Kundera – *The Ignorance*.

Week 12

Bohumil Hrabal. Hrabal's indirect political engagement as an alternative to Kundera's politically engaged literature. The discussion in the seminar will be based on his short novel *Too Loud a Solitude*.

<u>Readings</u>
Bohumil Hrabal – *Too Loud a Solitude*.

Week 13

Bohumil Hrabal continued. Hrabal's short stories as a comic counterpart of his "tragic" novels. As a part of the class, we will also watch *The Snowdrop Festival*, a movie by Jiří Menzel.

<u>Readings</u>
Bohumil Hrabal – "Jumbo", "Fining Salami".