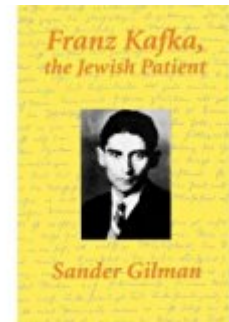


**Sander L. Gilman.** *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995. xi + 328 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-91177-1.



**Reviewed by** Thomas Kovach

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Sander Gilman's project in *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient* is at once quite modest and sweepingly ambitious. On the one hand, Gilman writes: "This present study does not claim to provide a 'reading' of Kafka's creative work, but rather a small attempt to see what is unobscured or only partially masked in his *oeuvre*" (p. 7). At the same time, in his effort to reconstitute the antisemitic discourses of the *fin-de-siecle* as they were internalized by a young German Jewish writer in Prague, Gilman opens up for the reader a universe of discourse which not only sheds new light on much of Kafka's work, but which also shows how this discourse not only is, but necessarily has to be, transmuted into the universalist High Modernism of Kafka's texts. Put more concretely, Gilman offers an explanation for the anomaly of Kafka's intense sense of his own Jewishness, expressed in his correspondence and diaries and confirmed by virtually all his biographers, in contrast to the almost total lack of explicit references to Judaism, Jews, or Jewishness in his "literary" texts. The Jewishness which he saw in his father's body, and which he felt to be inscribed on his own, marked him as ineradicably different, even

diseased; Gilman shows how the tuberculosis which was to kill Kafka came as no surprise to him, but rather appeared to him as the fulfillment of his anxiety about "becoming that which he fears he must become" (p. 8), to use the phrase that is repeated with almost obsessive frequency in Gilman's book.

Gilman suggests certain markers for organizing the vast world of discourse he reveals--language, nationality, race, gender, illness--but shows that these categories are all so intertwined that one cannot keep them apart. In the first chapter, "On Difference, Language, and Mice," he establishes a connection between the pejorative term *Mauscheln*, used to designate the Yiddish-inflected German of the imperfectly assimilated, and the mice in the story "Josefine die Saengerin, oder Das Volk der Maeuse" (Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk"). The image of mice is related in turn to the Jew's self-image of his body as diseased. The Jewish ritual of *metsitsah* (the sucking of an infant's penis by the *mohel* or ritual circumciser) is shown to be associated in the contemporary discussion with the spread of diseases.

The second chapter, "Kafka's Body in the Mirror of His Culture," explores at length the ways in which antisemitic stereotypes of the Jew's body are internalized by Kafka and condition his self-image as diseased, and his resulting hypochondria. Of particular interest is Gilman's discussion of the Dreyfus case, which he suggests "is the event which more than any other focuses the anxiety of assimilated Jews about their physical integration into the world where they find themselves" (p. 68). The physical degradation of the sturdy soldier as a result of the tortures to which he was subjected on Devil's Island is seen as the fulfillment of the nightmare of Kafka and other assimilated Jews of turning into the "essential," that is the weak and sickly Jew. If the trial of Dreyfus forms the essential background for Kafka's novel *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*), his physical degradation forms the background for Gregor Samsa's transformation into a cockroach in "Die Verwandlung" ("The Metamorphosis") and the torture machine illustrated in the German edition of Dreyfus' memoirs becomes the model for the grisly execution machine in the story "In der Strafkolonie" ("In the Penal Colony").

The third chapter, "Males on Trial," ranges widely from the Dreyfus trial to blood libel trials in exploring the problematic status of Jewish masculinity in the fin-de-siecle. The motif of blood--both the allegedly tainted blood of Jews and the Christian blood which they are accused of spilling--is related to contemporary discourse on the question of Jewish ritual slaughter or "shehitah," which forms the background for a reading of the story "Schakale und Araber."

The fourth chapter, "Tuberculosis as a Test Case," deals exhaustively with contemporary discussions of the disease, which is revealed as being nothing less than an obsession of the age. Robert Koch's discovery of the tuberculosis bacillus in 1882 would seem to have settled the question as to the etiology of the disease, but this did not prevent a vast speculative literature from arising

which associated a propensity (or a resistance) to the disease with racial or ethnic factors. Remarkably (or not, considering the co-existence of negative stereotypes of the Jewish capitalist exploiter and the Jewish communist underminer of the established order), Gilman shows that theories arguing for a particular Jewish vulnerability to the disease existed side-by-side with arguments for a special Jewish resistance to it. All of this is intertwined with a portrait of Kafka's own reflections on the disease as his "preordained" condition worsened in his final years.

In the fifth and concluding chapter, Gilman shows how all the complexes discussed in the preceding chapters converge in Kafka's self-consciousness during his last days, and in a particularly unsettling final twist, he shows how Kafka's confinement to a tuberculosis "camp" reflects the 1920s move to physical removal of those infected with tuberculosis, and prefigures the deportations of the *Shoah*.

Though not a work of literary criticism in any narrow sense, the work will nevertheless be of most interest to those in literary and cultural studies. Those in the social sciences may find themselves growing impatient with the vast world of discourse in both word and image (the book is lavishly illustrated) which Gilman documents, which seems never to be measured against any conceivable objective standard. For example, even this reviewer, whose field is literary studies, found himself becoming exasperated with the continuing accounts of the claims of Jewish vulnerability to tuberculosis coexisting with claims of Jewish resistance to the disease; after all, surely there are some available statistics which could settle the matter beyond dispute?

But on reflection I must admit that this is precisely Gilman's point--namely, that these discourses exist and take on a life of their own quite independent of any "objective" reality. As one reads the book, one not only learns about, one is actually drawn into, the nightmare which constituted

Franz Kafka's inner world, and which prefigured the greater nightmare from which that writer was saved by his early death.

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