



etruscan press

Variations in the Key of K

By Alex Stein

A Study Guide

Synopsis

Variations in the Key of K is a five-part romance teeming with Western European artists and writers, from DaVinci to Picasso, including cameos by Frida Kahlo, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Hélène Cisoux. Author Alex Stein frames the book inside the shell story of Saul and Lady Jane Doe, his collaborator, a down-and-out pair discovered by an editor who wants to publish their fanciful manuscript. Through this book march Guillaume Apollinaire, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, William Blake, André Breton, Albert Camus, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Leonardo Da Vinci, Gerard De Nerval, Carl Dreyer, Juan Gris, Michelangelo, Henry Miller, Pablo Picasso, Arthur Rimbaud, William Shakespeare, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Paul Verlaine, with Charles Baudelaire gliding at ground level like a gray ghost. The first third of the book is a poignant, somber retelling of the life of Franz Kafka, born in Prague in 1883 on the rising wave of nationalism and dead from complications of tuberculosis at age forty, unappreciated and almost unknown, who asked that his papers be destroyed at his death. Stein introduces Kafka, as a reticent, sickly, introverted, non-carnal insurance claims adjuster, suffocated in his respectable family, writing passionately in his cold room at night. But after Kafka and his extroverted friend, Max Brod, part, following a misunderstanding, the novel takes off, like Kafka's coal-bucket rider, and Stein gives us Kafka the athlete at the 1912 Olympic Games, now chummy with his father, or Kafka dead, his books delivered to a furnace by the wheelbarrow. Brod can rescue no more than a handful of papers. The middle third is a sweeping transition from Da Vinci to early twentieth-century Paris and explores artists and their muses. The last third is anchored in Picasso, with digressions to record the impressions of a novice museum guard. The novel is set in Prague and Paris with sojourns to Berlin, Stockholm and New York City. *Variations in the Key of K* is a meditation on the creation and reception of art, by a solitary viewer or by a world.

Author Bio

Alex Stein was born in Washington State and raised in Canada. He is the co-editor of *Short Flights*, the first ever anthology of modern aphorisms. He received a doctoral degree in Writing and Literature from the University of Denver. He lives in Boulder, CO, where he works as a research librarian at the University of Colorado.

Reasons to Include in the Classroom

Variations in the Key of K is a course in European surrealism and modernism. It is also an invitation to write and to tell stories, to discern a narrative within a casual encounter. Experienced readers will appreciate embellishments that enhance their sympathy for a character—or recognize places where the manipulation is less effective.

Study Questions & Writing Prompts

1. What does the title mean? In music, a variation repeats a theme with changes to the melody, harmony, orchestration, time signature, key. How is this book a variation? What theme does it vary, especially when none of the artists profiled is a musician, and there is no “K” in the musical scale?
2. Why does the author focus on Franz Kafka, if the framing narrator is preoccupied with Pablo Picasso? Why does the author juxtapose Kafka (who was relatively unknown during his short life) with Pablo Picasso (who was wildly famous during his long life)?

Study Questions & Writing Prompts (continued)

3. Pay attention to minor characters; e.g., Spanish painter Juan Gris; French poet and art critic Antonin Artaud. How do the sentiments that Stein has them express advance (or obscure) the author's purpose?
4. Stein wrote an earlier book called *Weird Emptiness*, a collection of aphorisms (short, pithy statements embodying a general or recognized truth) and short essays. Aphorisms spring like dandelions throughout *Variations in the Key of K*, usually in the speech or reflection of a character (rather than from Stein). Statements come from the framing narrator, Saul ("People . . . like the idea of Picasso"); Kafka/Stein ("We come into the world empty handed. Then all we do, all our lives, is gather and disperse, grasp and dispense . . . So where is the deeper understanding?"); Kafka/Stein ("What if? is a question one could ask, unendingly, if one chose to. What else? is another"); Stein ("Poignancy is a kind of nostalgia for our own (and for our lives) vacated or unused possibilities"); Kafka ("Without work there can be no honor"); Shakespeare ("All our names are written on water"); Picasso ("[T]he artist is nothing without the genius and can be nothing. But the genius without the artist is also nothing"); Picasso ("Great art is gathered, from the collective unconscious of human-kind, by clairvoyants"); Picasso ("Nothing ever is [as good as it has to be]. Heaven keeps getting higher"); Stein ("Every artist is a tyrant. Every tyrant is an infant. The moment a tyrant has been satiated, if the tyrant has no desire to mature, the tyrant may be overthrown"); Stein ("Art is a wound that bleeds and will not staunch, the school children are told. However, this caution does not stop them. . . . [A] few even carry on this foolish charade until they are old men and women"). Choose two or three aphorisms from above (or others, as you find them). How do particular aphorisms advance Stein's themes? Or do they interfere with a scene or interrupt your interpretation? Can you write a better aphorism or add one to enhance a scene where there is none?
5. Find and read a short story by Kafka. Some are only a few pages. Stein alludes in his novel to Kafka's creation of two short stories ("The Bucket Rider," which is very short; and "Metamorphosis" which is longer). Read some or all of these two stories. Does Stein's allusion to their creation enhance your appreciation or understanding of them? If not, can you make up a more effective story about Kafka to explain his inspiration for them?
6. Pay attention to a lesser character in the book, such as publisher Max Brod (in the Kafka section) or Spanish painter Juan Gris or critic and photographer Antonin Artaud (in the Picasso section). How do these characters' assessment of their central figure (Kafka or Picasso) differ from the central character's own assessment?

Study Questions & Writing Prompts (continued)

7. Stein attributes to Henry Miller the statement, "[T]he only thing you can't do, in fiction, is lie." Can a writer of fiction bend historical facts and still reach the meaning or essence of a character? Try thinking of what a book wants to tell you as "meaning" or "essence," rather than "truth," which can imply a certainty, rigidity and dominance that stifle the conversation between writer and reader. Can Stein be factually inaccurate but still faithful to the meaning or essence of a character or circumstance? Find a place in which Stein's bending the story about Kafka's or Picasso's character is effective and makes him more sympathetic to you. Find another place where Stein's embellishment is not effective.
8. Kafka says that he writes "stories about failed humans, human failures, who live without resentment. What I do write are inscrutable fragments—each one . . . itself a failure" (26). From the novel, choose a minor figure that has intrigued you (or alienated you) and write an expanded story (not more than 500 words) to tell the reader more about this character, springing from how you see him behave in Stein's novel.
9. Note the recurrence of Stein's homely images, particularly in the Kafka section. How does the author's recurring treatment of green beans and ducks develop Kafka's home life and personality? Picasso drinks lustily but wastes nothing, dabbing the last drop of wine from the bottom of a glass and licking his fingertip; he begins to pay his bar tab by leaving the manager a signed sketch on a napkin ("He was literally his own mint for printing money. A signed Picasso . . . had more value than a bank note.") How does Stein's including these common habits enhance (or degrade) his portrait of Picasso?
10. How do Stein's imaginary scenes (particularly for Kafka) enhance (or not enhance) your appreciation of Kafka? Consider particularly "An Alternate History of the Kafka Notebooks," in which Stein imagines nearly all Kafka's work burned in a furnace by Kafka's father; or "Kafka the Athlete," in which Stein imagines Kafka winning an Olympic silver medal in track and field in 1912 just behind American champion Jim Thorpe in Stockholm, Sweden and places Kafka in an affectionate, bantering relationship with Kafka's own father. (According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Jim Thorpe, a Native American, was born in Prague, Oklahoma, and becomes a plausible double for Kafka, who is aroused by the heroic Thorpe in a swimming pool). Look at Max Brod's biography of Kafka; if that is accurate, then even Stein's plausible statements about Kafka are questionable (e.g., Kafka had many lovers and was not the sexual recluse that Stein portrays).

Study Questions & Writing Prompts (continued)

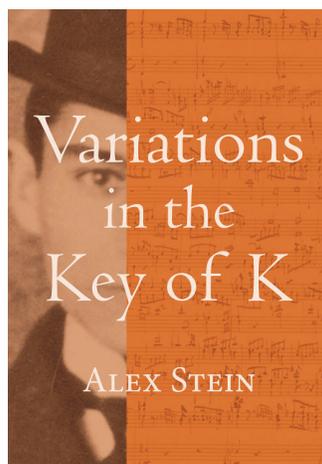
11. Stein particularly contrasts what Picasso's contemporaries say about him (genius, overrated, too homely to be so attractive to women) with what Picasso mused about himself. Picasso deems himself only "pretty good" and a "genius" to the extent that he can make a living and be free based on the work of his hands and his imagination. Stein places a long rumination in Picasso's mind: "Praise and blame alike fell unheeded on his head. . . . [H]is art was crying out to him for birth. . . . If he'd stopped to respond to any of this he would have missed out on a moment of creativity that could never be returned to him." When Picasso is age eighty-five, Stein causes him to react to superlatives about his Protean artistic output by reflecting, "To Picasso, it was simply a matter of having ceaselessly put one foot in front of the other." How do these contrasts contribute to your understanding of Picasso and of Stein's themes? Or are these contrasts confusing or ineffective?

12. What ideas does Stein want to convey about how readers and viewers understand works of art? Toward the end of the Picasso section, Stein introduces Sydney, a young museum guard, who communes with the paintings (which speak out loud to her). Sydney affirms that the paintings speak from and for a collective sensibility and understanding. Sydney (or Stein) muses that damage to or loss of a few Picassos by a museum vandal is irrelevant: "The artists were profligate. If today was bad, tomorrow can still be good. The important thing is to create with what is at hand . . . and let future thoughts and ideas, images and themes, take care of themselves."

13. Between Kafka and Picasso, Stein places an interlude, "Da Vinci's Entourage," a rich set of fantasies about artists from the Renaissance through the mid-twentieth century yearning to hear a voice, including the following: Michelangelo releases an angel from Carrara marble and sits on the floor to play games with it but accepts the protection of a venal Pope who turns art into cannon; Antonin Artaud (who "conflated the realm of madness and the realm of poetry") answers the devil on the third call; William Blake presses all his valuable watercolors on doctor of his beloved Catherine to try to stay her death; William Butler Yeats waits patiently for his wife, Georgiana, to return from her trance bearing the secrets that he needs for his poetry; and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an opium addict, is rude to an itinerant knife-sharpener trying to make a living, then returns to his own writing to the sensation of lightning and thunder in his brain, the signs of "the remainder of his visionary poem disintegrating." Pick one or more characters from this section and examine their relationship to their artistic work. How does this relationship compare with Kafka's or of Picasso's relationship with his artistic work?

Standards for the English Language Arts (compiled by NCTE and IRA)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
5. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
6. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
7. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.



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