

Context

Because Franz Kafka has become the poster boy for twentieth-century alienation and disoriented anxiety, his work is often introduced in the context of Kafka's own experience of alienation. A Czech in the Austro-Hungarian empire, a German-speaker among Czechs, a Jew among German-speakers, a disbeliever among Jews; alienated from his pragmatic and overbearing father, from his bureaucratic job, from the opposite sex; caught between a desire to live in literature and to live a normal bourgeois life; acutely and lucidly self-critical; physically vulnerable--Kafka nowhere found a comfortable fit.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was born in Prague to middle-class Jewish parents. His father, the son of a village butcher, was a man of little education but strong entrepreneurial ambition. He rose from a traveling peddler to a successful retailer and wholesaler, and married the daughter of a wealthy brewery owner (a marriage above his station, in the eyes of the time). Kafka was the firstborn, followed by two brothers who died in infancy, and then three surviving sisters. Throughout his life, Kafka's memories of his childhood, and in particular of his childhood relationship to his upwardly-mobile, harsh father, remained bitter.

After an education in a typically draconian gymnasium for the time, Kafka entered law school and received a doctorate degree. While a law student, he associated with many members of Prague's burgeoning scene of young, German-speaking writers. One such companion, Max Brod, became a lifelong devoted friend and was ultimately responsible for preserving much of what exists of Kafka's writing.

Kafka knew writing was his vocation, but did not feel he could make a living at it--nor did he particularly want to try. It was something purer and more desperately personal to him--a "form of prayer" and a temporary respite from his demons. He took a law clerkship after graduation, and then, briefly, a job with a private insurance company. In 1908, with the help of a friend's father, he obtained an entry-level position with the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia. There he served as a diligent and respected functionary until his premature retirement in 1922.

In 1924, at the age of 41, Kafka succumbed to tuberculosis. The bulk of his work was published after his early death, just as many of the nightmares he described in his work were taking shape in Europe's new totalitarian states. His novels *Amerika*, *The Trial* (written during 1914-1915, published 1925), and *The Castle* were left unfinished. Yet he did have admirers during his lifetime. The collections of short stories and the novellas he published sold minimally, but were highly praised within a small but respected circle of German-speaking intellectuals. The developments of the twisted century itself brought Kafka's works--prescient accounts of the banality of terror--to the world's attention, and lent the word "kafkaesque" to hundreds of languages. (Fulfilling his pessimism, Kafka's three sisters and the woman who was likely the one true love of his life all perished in concentration camps.) Beyond this terrible prophesy, however, it is Kafka's description of the struggle to find meaning in a cosmos he knew to be meaningless that makes his work the gateway to modern literature.

Summary

resources are now devoted to his case. Although he has hired hack lawyers on the side, he is completely and pathetically subservient to Huld.

Titorelli, the Painter - Titorelli inherited the position of Court Painter from his father. He knows a great deal about the comings and goings of the Court's lowest level. He offers to help K., and manages to unload a few identical landscape paintings on the accused man. If the novel had been finished, we might have heard more from Titorelli.

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Chapter 1

Summary

When his landlady's cook does not bring his breakfast at the expected hour, Joseph K. rings for her. A man whom he has never seen before knocks and steps into his bedroom. Another waits in the next room. The men inform him that he has been arrested, and request that he return to his room. They can offer no explanations--they are mere underlings, his warders. K. does not know whether this is some sort of joke or not. It is his thirtieth birthday, and perhaps his colleagues at the Bank are playing a prank. But he doesn't want to be too rash or show his hand, especially with these fools to whom he feels superior.

He returns to his room and stews. Through the windows of the apartment across the way an old man and woman have been following the proceedings. With a startling shout, one of the warders summons K. to see the Inspector. The warders make him change into a black suit and walk him into an adjoining room. The room has recently been rented to Fraulein Burstner, a typist. Now it has been temporarily taken over by an Inspector and three young men. The Inspector can tell K. no more than that he has been arrested, and that his protestations of innocence are unbecoming. K. is infuriated, but unable to extract any useful explanation. The Inspector says that K. is free to go about his business for the time being, then departs.

K. goes to the bank, but foregoes his usual evening stroll, appearance at the beer hall, and weekly visit to Elsa, the cabaret waitress. He feels that the morning's events have caused an upheaval in the household of Frau Grubach, and wants to set things to right. Frau Grubach is darning socks in her room when K. returns. K. knocks, enters, and has a chat with her. She was not troubled by the presence of the warders or the inspectors. K. is her most valued lodger, and she will find no complaint with him. He asks if Fraulein Burstner has returned. Frau Grubach says no, the young woman is out at the theater, from which she always returns quite late.

K. waits for Fraulein Burstner to return. When she does, he goes with her to her room and apologizes for its being used by strangers on his account. He explains to her what happened, and in his re-enactment of the morning, gives a shout that rouses Frau Grubach's nephew sleeping in an adjoining room. Fraulein Burstner is startled. K. rushes to her to comfort her, and ends up covering her in kisses. He returns to his room in good spirits, though he's concerned that the

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captain might make trouble for Fraulein Burstner with the landlady (she is concerned about running a respectable establishment).

Commentary

Joseph K. is ambitious, successful, demanding, curt--a man of business and no nonsense. He is arrogant, calculating, intolerant of his perceived inferiors, and yet (at least in the larger question of guilt, innocence, and civil liberty) wholly in the right. A typical Kafka protagonist, he achieves the difficult and separate balances of complexity and unreality, sympathy and aversion. But what is he guilty of? What would warrant his arrest and prosecution (not to mention persecution)? Ostensibly nothing. As the novel bears out, the Court that has claimed him is thoroughly vile. Yet no one is free of guilt. Tempted as he is to laugh the whole thing off, to call the warders' bluff and declare the whole event a practical joke, he cannot. In part this is because he calculates it to be unwise to show his hand, or to force that of his opponents', but also because there is a lingering question in his mind of whether somehow, in some way, he has been remiss. Is it his inherent apolitical nature? He has always taken law, order, and justice for granted. They have been a steady and invisible framework within which he has achieved his success, without ever having pause to consider them. He is not a man who contemplates the larger questions. Is this inability to "think outside the box," his susceptibility to the machinations of the machine into whose path he has been thrown, the basis of his eventual, inevitable guilt?

K.'s experience with the warders and the Inspector sets the tone for his various encounters with representatives of the Law. Most are friendly enough with him, if not always decorous. Almost all of them strike him with their small-mindedness. They are functionaries, robots, far down on the totem, following orders and fulfilling duty without understanding or attempting to understand underlying motive. The Court is unimpeachable; the Law is its own justification and the only one these underlings need.

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Chapter 2

Summary

A phone call informs Joseph K. that a brief inquiry into his case is to take place the following Sunday. He is given the address where he is to go, but not the time. When the Assistant Manager of the bank, with whom he has not gotten on well, makes the overture of inviting him to join him Sunday on his yacht, K. must refuse the invitation.

Resolving to arrive at the appointed destination at nine a.m.--presumably a logical starting time for court business--K. sets out Sunday morning on foot. He does not want to involve anyone in his case, not even a taxi driver. And he does not want to lower himself before this Court of

Inquiry by being too obsessively punctual. The street runs through a poor neighborhood of tenements, which on this weekend morning is alive with inhabitants, their calls, shouts, and laughter. When he reaches the building, K. is annoyed to find that it is a large one with several separate stairwells, multiple floors, and no indication of which might be the correct apartment. He chooses a stairway and ascends, maneuvering around children and pausing for their marble games. In order to gain a peek at each room, which he hopes will indicate to him where the inquiry is to take place, K. invents the ploy that he is looking for a joiner named Lanz. Door after door, floor after floor, he finds poor families who do not know Lanz but recommend other joiners or men with names similar to "Lanz." Finally, on the fifth floor, when he is exasperated to the point of giving up, a woman washing children's clothes in a basin opens the door and tells him to enter and go through to another door.

K. enters the second room--a meeting hall with a gallery, all quite packed with people. He is led by a small boy through the throng up to a crowded platform at the other end of the hall. There, a man whom he takes to be the Examining Magistrate rebukes him for being over an hour late (it is now past ten a.m.). K. gives a cool reply that he is here now, and at this half of the crowd bursts into applause. Emboldened by this, but concerned that the other half of the crowd remains stonily silent, he sets out to win over the entire audience. The Magistrate asks him if he is a house painter, to which he replies that he is the chief clerk of a large bank. K. then proceeds to dominate the meeting. He impugns the secret policy that is evidently at work here. He seizes the Magistrate's notebook and holds it up with disdain before dropping it onto the Magistrate's table. He gives a long speech describing his arrest. He sees the Magistrate apparently giving some sign to someone in the audience, and calls him to task for it. There are rumblings in the audience, then silence. Old men's eyes fix intently on him as their owners stroke their white beards. Just as he finishes condemning the entire system that has brought him here, he is interrupted by a scream from the back of the hall. The woman whom he met at the door and a man are in the corner causing some sort of commotion. The stark division that had previously existed between the two factions in the room disappears. The people move together. K. has the urge to move toward the disturbance, but hands restrain him. He leaps from the platform down into the crowd and at last perceives that all are wearing identical badges. So, these are all the corrupt officials of whom he has been speaking! They have egged him on, he declares, by pretending to be factious, when in fact they were merely amusing themselves with the declarations of an innocent man. He heads for the door, but before he can exit, the Magistrate waylays him with these words: "I merely wanted to point out that today. . . you have flung away with your own hand all the advantages which an interrogation invariably confers on an innocent man." K. claims all those who were in the audience to be "scoundrels" and heads out. The chamber comes to life behind him as the badged men begin to analyze the case.

Commentary

The interrogation scene is distinctly surreal, unfolding in a dreamlike fashion. The location itself is unreal: the top floor of a tenement, in a poor family's back room. Add to this the murmuring masses, the applause, uproar, and stony silences, the beards and badges, the secret signs, groping hands, and most glaringly K.'s own intemperate and ill-advised outburst. Are they goading him? Is his aggression a useful tactic? Does his conduct even matter? This is an alternate world of

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anonymous tribunals where K. does not know the rules of engagement. His initiation does not bode well. Yet he still feels it is best not to take the case too seriously.

Throughout the book, the Court is associated with dankness, dust, staleness, suffocation; K. repeatedly suffers from the lack of fresh air. Here we have the first hints of it. In the streets, in the hallways and stairwells of this poor neighborhood there is life and vitality. K. manages just fine. The moment he steps into the Court meeting hall, K. feels the air "too thick for him" and steps out again. Later K. tries to make out faces in the gallery through the "dimness, dust, and reek." If K. is not physically sickened by the atmosphere (as he will be in succeeding chapters), his judgment and faculties do seem addled, which perhaps explains the dream quality of the scene.

Chapter 3

Summary

K. awaits a second summons but does not hear from the mysterious Court. He returns to the address on Sunday morning. The same young woman opens the door, but informs him that there is no sitting today. Indeed, the meeting hall/courtroom is empty save for a few curious books left on the table.

K. learns that the young woman (who cleans) and her husband (an usher for the court) live in the room without charge in exchange for their labor. The woman explains that the disturbance last week was caused by a certain law student who is always after her. But she entered the courtroom in the first place because she took an interest in K. She is clearly attracted to him, and offers to help him. He is doubtful that she can, and does not want her to jeopardize her job merely to influence a sentencing that he ultimately intends to laugh off. But, she offers, perhaps she can sway the Examining Magistrate in some way, since that man has recently begun to notice her.

Just then the bandy-legged, scraggly-bearded law student enters the courtroom and motions for the woman. She excuses herself to K., says she must go to him briefly, but will return soon, and then K. can have his way with her. As the woman and the student speak in hushed tones at the window, K. reflects that he would very much like to possess her--both for the obvious reason and for the measure of revenge it would extract from the Magistrate.

K. grows impatient as the conversation wears on and the student kisses the woman. He and the student exchange words. The student lifts up the woman and begins to carry her off. K. offers to free her--which he could easily do, as the scrawny student is no match for him--but she declines. She says the Magistrate has sent for her--she is obviously not in much distress. The student labors at carrying her up a narrow flight of stairs that would seem to lead to a garret. K. watches furiously. He has been defeated, but only because he entered into a fight. The key, he realizes, is to go about his own affairs and so to remain above all this.

This resolution does not last long. The woman's husband, the usher, returns. This man complains to K. about his wife and the law student. The usher cannot throttle the student as he would like to, for fear of losing his job. But perhaps a man like K. could do him the favor. K. points out that

the student might be in a position to influence the outcome of his case. Usually, says the usher, the cases are foregone conclusions.

The usher is heading upstairs, to the Law Offices, and he invites K. to accompany him. K. hesitates, but, curious to see the workings of the Court, agrees to go. They climb the stairs and enter a long, narrow lobby where various accused men wait. K. tries to have a conversation with one of them but the man is confused, demoralized, and uncomfortable. K. grows impatient with this pitiable individual. As he and the usher walk on, K. suddenly begins to feel very tired. He asks the usher to lead him out, but the usher is reluctant to do so. K.'s raised voice attracts the attention of a woman in a nearby office, who asks his business. K. feels faint and is unable to respond. The woman offers him a chair and assures him that the stuffy air similarly affects many people on their first visit to the offices. K.'s swoon intensifies to a near-paralysis. The woman suggests to a smartly-dressed man who shares her office--and who turns out to be the Clerk of Inquiries--that they take K. to the sick room. K. manages to request that they instead help him to the door. He is scarcely able to walk, even with the two officials half carrying him. He is ashamed as they pass before the accused man with whom he had been impatient before. That man meekly makes excuses for his presence to the Chief of Inquiries.

At last, K. is at the threshold of the offices. The air from outside revives him. He shakes hands with the man and woman who assisted him until he notices that the fresh air seems to have on them the debilitating effect that the office air had on him. Rejuvenated but bewildered by his body's betrayal, K. bounds down the stairs and resolves to find a better use for his Sunday mornings.

Commentary

In keeping with the disjointedness of the narrative, the washer woman, apropos of nothing, throws herself at K. and then disappears from the novel. She apparently sets the behavior pattern for young, working-class women when in K.'s presence (Leni will act similarly, and the lawyer will later give an explanation of her actions). She also manages, indirectly, to induce K. to ascend to the Law Offices, and perhaps this is her purpose. K.'s calculations of sexual conquest--as a tool of power against the magistrate and thus the Court--lead to his first admitted defeat in this mental chess match in which he sees himself and the Court engaged. His second defeat must then be his debility in the Law Offices.

Stale, suffocating air is once more the hallmark of the Court and all its doings. While at the interrogation the atmosphere may have affected K.'s judgment, in the Offices it physically incapacitates him. He is rendered speechless and powerless, utterly at the mercy of the Court. How far does this association go? Is the Court like bad air in a closed room? The two seem ineffably linked; perhaps they are interchangeable. Like the air, the court seems to be everywhere, invisible, insidious, known by its effects.

There is a slight parallel between the final scene of this chapter and Chapter Ten that should be pointed out. In both cases, K. is lead away by Court functionaries who hold him by the arms. In this chapter, K. requests the escort and the support. In the last chapter, K. cannot escape it.

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Chapter 4

Summary

K. spends several days unsuccessfully trying to speak with Fraulein Burstner. She manages to avoid meeting him, despite the considerable measures he takes to encounter her. He sends her a letter, offering to make amends for his behavior and to follow any dictates she might provide for further interaction between them. He will wait in his room on Sunday for some sign from her. His letter is not answered. On Sunday he notices that another boarder, Fraulein Montag, is moving into Fraulein Burstner's room.

His landlady, Frau Grubach, who has been tortured by his silence this past week, is relieved when K. finally speaks to her. Though K. is not particularly kind to her, it is at least a sort of forgiveness.

Fraulein Montag asks to speak with him. He goes and sees her in the dining room. She tells him that Fraulein Burstner thought it best for all parties that the interview he requested not take place. Fraulein Burstner had not intended to respond in any way, but Fraulein Montag prevailed upon Fraulein Burstner to allow her to act as intermediary and explicitly inform K. of Fraulein Burstner's opinion. K. thanks Fraulein Montag for the information and rises to leave. The Captain (Frau Grubach's nephew) enters and greets Fraulein Montag with a respectful hand-kissing. K. senses that the two of them are both exaggerating Fraulein Burstner's importance to him and trying to impede his conquest of the girl. He leaves the dining room but cannot resist knocking at Fraulein Burstner's door. There is no answer. He goes in, feeling that he is doing something pointless and wrong. Fraulein Burstner must have left while Fraulein Montag was talking to him. He leaves the room, but sees that Fraulein Montag and the Captain are conversing in the doorway of the dining room. They have clearly witnessed his indiscretion.

Commentary

The action and narrative direction of Chapter Four are never really taken up again in this unfinished novel. Fraulein Burstner reappears ephemerally in the final chapter, but the sub-plot of K.'s pursuit and her reluctance is never fleshed out. True, many characters in *The Trial* appear briefly and quickly disappear, like so many evaporating figures in a dreamed landscape. But one feels more attention might ultimately have been paid her, especially considering the significant symbolic role she plays in K.'s final thoughts.

The Captain's and Fraulein Montag's suspicions do not seem related to K.'s case, nor does K. seem to link the two in any way to his legal difficulties. Neither of these characters has any bearing on the rest of the book.

Chapter 5

Summary

A few days later, as K. is readying to leave the bank for the day, he hears "convulsive sighs" coming from behind the door of the lumber room. He opens the door and enters. The two warders who first appeared in his apartment are at the mercy of a man dressed in leather--the Whipper. The Whipper is preparing to do what Whippers do best. The men are being whipped because K. complained about their conduct at the first interrogation. K. is horrified. He explains that he had merely described the men's behavior, did not hold them responsible for their actions; he had no idea that they would be punished, and has absolutely no desire to see them punished. He offers to pay the Whipper not to whip the pitiful, supplicating men. But a Whipper must do what a Whipper must do. The whipping commences, and one of the warder's lets loose a blood-curdling shriek that sends K. out of the room and into the hall. He reassures the clerks who come to investigate the noise that it was merely a dog howling outside.

K. feels terrible about the warders. He would have been willing to increase the bribe, or to offer himself as their replacement--an option that the Whipper must surely have refused--if only one of the warders had not screamed, making it necessary for K. to leave the room and explain away the situation to the clerks. All the next day the warders weigh on K.'s mind. He stays late to catch up on work, but, when he walks past the lumber room he cannot help looking in. There are the warders and the Whipper, just as they were the previous evening. The warders begin again to call to him. K. slams the door shut, beats on it with his fist, and, near tears, rushes back to where the clerks are. He orders them to clear out the lumber room. They promise to do so the next day. He goes home with a blank mind.

Commentary

This incident seems orchestrated precisely to facilitate an eventual mental breakdown, the signs of which many of the accused men seem to exhibit. It is one thing to have one's own case to worry about, but it is another to be saddled with the guilt of being, however unintentionally, the source of these poor fools' misery. Those who look to *The Trial* as a harbinger of totalitarian atrocity note that this chapter evokes the interrogation-torture (and it is not always the interrogated who is tortured) and psychological oppression that have been the calling cards of a depressing number of twentieth-century regimes.

The Court apparently has access to every place--it can set up shop in a company's closet, or in a tenement attic--yet it still conducts its business in dark, sealed, uncomfortable, makeshift or out-of-the-way places (such as the examples just given). This is surely not coincidental; rather it is an essential characteristic of an impenetrable and unaccountable bureaucracy.

Chapter Five maintains the relationship between K., the Court, and air. After witnessing the whipping, and realizing he cannot prevent it, K. steps over to a window and opens it, as if the fresh air will dispel the presence of the Court.

Chapter 6

Summary

Joseph K.'s impetuous country-dwelling Uncle Karl comes to see him. The uncle has caught wind of the case and is very concerned, both for K. and for the family's sake. K. is taking the whole thing far too lightly for his uncle's satisfaction--the case calls for energetic action. Uncle Karl prevails upon K. to accompany him on a visit to an old lawyer friend.

Herr Huld, the lawyer, is on his sick bed when they call. He becomes much more animated when K. is introduced. K.'s uncle verbally abuses the man's nurse until she leaves at the lawyer's behest. It turns out the lawyer already knows of K.'s case from his movements in court circles. In fact, the Chief Clerk of the Court is in the room, waiting in the shadows. He has come to pay the lawyer a visit; K. and Uncle Karl have not noticed him. The Chief Clerk joins the three and begins to speak eloquently while pointedly ignoring K. K. wonders whether this man might have been in the crowd during his interrogation.

A loud sound of breaking cookery comes from the entrance hall. K. volunteers to see what has happened. It is Leni, the lawyer's nurse. Apparently burning with desire for him, she caused the commotion to bring him out of the room. She leads him into the lawyer's study. In the study K. notices a large portrait of a man in a judge's robe depicted as if ready to spring from his throne-like seat. He asks Leni about this man. She knows him--he is only an Examining Magistrate. She also knows about K.'s case, and implores him to be less unyielding. Foreplay ensues, etc. etc.

Leni gives K. a key and tells him he is welcome any time. He goes out into the street where his uncle lambastes him. According to Uncle Karl, K. has badly damaged his case by disappearing for hours. The Chief Clerk waited until K.'s absence became glaring and the conversation awkward, then left. Uncle Karl has been waiting for hours, by his own account.

Commentary

Leni is the third woman to want Joseph K. Who are the women of *The Trial*? Maids, secretaries, and poor housewives, all accustomed to playing, or eager to play, the role of mistress. Kafka's biographer describes pre-World War I Prague as a place where young professionals--a banker such as K., a lawyer or bureaucrat such as Kafka--would marry women of their class but habitually go to poorer women of a lower social class for sex. Prostitution was, for some women, not so clearly defined as a profession--the lines between lover, mistress, free-lancer, and professional were not so strictly drawn. Certainly, this reflects the relative powerlessness--economically, socially, politically--of women low on the social scale. Young men did not complain, and perhaps the young women with whom they consorted got more out of the bargain than was otherwise available to them within the strictly prescribed boundaries of their social world. The mores of the time and place tacitly approved of the arrangement.

That said, Leni seems to adore K. beyond all reason or promise of potential benefit. K. himself has no idea why he has suddenly become so attractive, but he is conceited enough not to trouble himself too much about it. Still, for someone so ambitious and punctilious in his work, and so

determined not to give the Court any hold over him, K. acts at times quite recklessly. The first instance was his insolence during the interrogation. And now, he snubs the Chief Clerk of the Court. Such, apparently, are the charms of Leni. Or such is K.'s underdeveloped sense of gravity at this point in his case.

Chapter 7

Summary

Joseph K. sits in his office on a wintry morning thinking about his case. He goes into a sixteen-page reverie in which he inwardly expresses his frustrations with his lawyer and recounts all the information his lawyer has conveyed to him about the tangled workings of the Court. K. has grown weary of his lawyer's endless talk and seemingly minimal action. The lawyer defends himself by saying that in these cases it is often better to do nothing overt, at least not at this stage. K. is intensely exhausted and recognizes in himself the symptoms of mental strain due to worrying about his case. He can no longer pretend to take the high road and ignore it.

K. is incapable of concentrating on his work. Several important people are kept waiting for excessive periods while he thinks about his case. At last he sees a client, an important manufacturer. K. again is unable to pay attention to the matter at hand. His chief rival, the Assistant Manager, comes in and takes over the case. K. returns to his thoughts. The manufacturer has a few words with K. on his way out. He has heard of K.'s case (it will soon be commonplace for K. to encounter people who know about his situation, but it is still a shock at this point) and has a friendly recommendation to make. The manufacturer knows a lowly painter, called Titorelli, who paints portraits for the Court. This painter informed him of K.'s case. He suggests that K. visit this man, find out what he knows, and see if he might be of any service.

K. takes the advice. After an uncomfortable encounter with the businessmen waiting in the lobby to meet with him (which is resolved--though to K.'s distinct disadvantage--by the appearance of unctuous Assistant Manager), K. goes to call on the painter. The painter lives in a section of the city even poorer than the one K. visited for his interrogation. K. finds the building, climbs stairs, runs a gauntlet of nosy teenage girls, and meets the painter in the latter's tiny studio room. The girls remain outside the door, peeping and listening.

The painter is indeed an official Court painter--a position he inherited from his father. He provides K. with more information about the Court. He offers to use his connections to aid K.'s cause. He describes the three possible acquittals that may be hoped for: definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement. The first is the stuff of legends, and has never occurred in the painter's experience. The second is a non-binding acquittal granted by the lower judges, which may be revoked at any time should another judge or a higher level of the Court demand action. This acquittal requires a fatiguing flurry of petitioning and lobbying, but little effort thereafter--that is until the case is revisited, at which point the efforts must begin anew. Thus the possibility of the case's resumption--of arrest at any moment and a return to square one--hovers perpetually over the accused. Indefinite postponement requires constant attention and contact with the Court but keeps the case in its initial stages. It avoids the perpetual anxiety of

possible arrest, but requires constant activity. The advantage to be gained from both ostensible acquittal and indefinite postponement is that they prevent the case from coming to sentencing.

While the painter talks, K. finds the stuffy room more and more unbearable. He is hot and barely able to breathe. At last he takes his leave, without instructing the painter which of the options he prefers. Before allowing him to leave, the painter induces the desperate K. to buy several identical landscapes. As the nosy girls are still outside the door, the painter lets K. out through another door in the tiny room. This leads to a hallway that looks identical to the lobby of the law offices K. visited in Chapter Three. The air is even worse in this hallway. K. is taken aback. The painter informs K. that there are Law Court Offices in nearly every attic. K. holds his handkerchief over his face as an usher escorts him out.

Commentary

Chapter Seven dumps on K. (and the reader) a windfall of information, all of which comes to nothing. Or, rather, all of which leads to a few simple conclusions: the Court is inscrutable and irredeemably corrupt. Both the lawyer and the painter would have K. believe that the only thing that really matters is good relations with subordinate officials. Yet this is the case only because no one knows who the higher officials are. They are unreachable, so naturally all wheedling, supplication, and influence peddling goes through the lower courts. Yet, as the painter makes clear, the stakes are low. No one can really influence the outcome of the case--at most they can tinker with the trajectory, to drag out the proceedings indefinitely while the mantle of guilt hovers above the accused.

Justice delayed, of course, is justice denied. But justice clearly cannot be hoped for. Ultimately, the Court is corrupt not because of the pathetic influence peddling that occurs in its lower levels. It is corrupt because it is not accountable to the society it serves. Perhaps the Law is internally consistent, but those outside its ranks and to whom it applies will never know. Allegations are never disclosed; evidence is never disclosed; ultimate judicial power is invisible; the word of law is available only to those who stand in judgment of the accused. Who can defend himself when he does not know the accusation? Who can defend herself when she does not know the Law? Defense is distinctly frowned upon. The accused is generally considered to be guilty.

The Trial is generally thought to be, among other things, a condemnation of the intractable Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy--which Kafka, ensconced as he was in the State's insurance establishment, knew well. If the book offers a prescient portrait of the manipulative, unjust regimes that would begin to dominate Europe and Asia a decade after the author's death, it is not because the author offers a specific prophesy. Yet he does describe the seed: a society that accepts unaccountable governance in the name of necessity, which regards the law as divine Law because it declines to show itself.

Chapter 8

Summary

Though it is not an easy decision, K. resolves to dispense with his lawyer's services. He goes to the lawyer's house one evening past ten o'clock. The door is opened by a somewhat pitiable figure--a wasted, bearded little man in his shirt-sleeves. K. catches sight of Leni rushing to another room in her nightgown. He demands to know of the little man whether he is Leni's lover. The man assures K. that he is not. He is merely Block, the tradesman, and a client of the lawyer. Block leads K. to the kitchen where Leni is preparing the lawyer's soup. K. is still mistrustful, but the other two manage to allay his suspicions. Block is simply too pathetic a creature.

Leni takes the lawyer his soup. K. takes a seat and questions Block about that man's case. Before telling K. his secrets, Block extracts from K. a promise to reciprocate. The lawyer is vindictive, and Block has not been entirely faithful. Block's case is more than five years old and has consumed the poor man's energy and resources. He has discreetly engaged five hack lawyers in addition to Herr Huld, and spends nearly every day in the lobby of the Law Court Offices. In fact, he was there the day K. first visited. There is a foolish superstition among accused men, says Block, which maintains that the outcome of a man's case can be read in the expression of his lips. The accused men waiting in the lobby declared that K.'s lips revealed a guilty verdict. The man who lost his composure in K.'s presence did so because he thought he read a sign concerning his own fate when he looked at K.'s lips. But all this is nonsense, says Block.

Block also mentions the "great lawyers," about whom every accused man dreams, but who are entirely inaccessible and unknown. Leni returns; K. treats her with his usual curtness. She reveals that Block sleeps in the house, in a tiny maid's chamber, because the lawyer never consents to see Block unless he feels like it. Block must therefore always be at the ready, in case the lawyer should suddenly agree to a meeting. The lawyer apparently finds Block annoying.

As K. gets up to see the lawyer, Block reminds him of his promise to share a secret. K. obliges: he announces that he is going to dismiss the lawyer. Both Block and Leni try to prevent him from committing this rash act, but K. slips into the lawyer's chamber and locks the door behind him.

The lawyer informs K. of a peculiarity of Leni's character. She finds all accused men extraordinarily attractive. K. informs the lawyer of his decision. The lawyer asks K. to reconsider. He admits a fondness for K. K. explains his frustrations with the way the case is being handled, and asks what measures the lawyer would take if he were to continue. Herr Huld claims he would continue with his current activities. K. is not interested. He is puzzled, however, as to why a seemingly wealthy and invalid lawyer should care so much about keeping a client.

The lawyer makes one more attempt to convince K. He wants to demonstrate to K. how accused men are normally treated, so that K. might realize how well he has been treated (or to what degree he has been ignored by the Court) thus far. Huld sends Leni to fetch the tradesman. K.

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watches how the two humiliate the man, how he fearfully allows himself to be humiliated. The lawyer seems to have absolute power over Block.

The chapter was never completed.

Commentary

Block is another willing informant on the doings of the Court, as well as another stranger who knows a fair amount about K.'s situation. He is five years into his case and seems a shell of a man. He's described physically as "dried up"; psychologically he has subjugated himself entirely to the lawyer. That he also clandestinely consults five hack lawyers behind the lawyer's back makes him that much more craven and pathetic. Is this the future life K. has to look forward to? Is this the sort of freedom the painter claims he can help K. win? K. likens Block's behavior (and his treatment at the hands of Huld and Leni) to that of a dog. Indeed, when Leni catches the genuflecting Block worrying away at the rug, she grabs him by the collar just as one might a misbehaving household pet. Block, once a respected tradesman, has been reduced to doghood. This observation repulses and horrifies Joseph K.; it is a particularly resonant one in light of his dying utterance in Chapter Ten.

Chapter 9

Summary

An influential Italian client is coming to town and K. has been charged with escorting the man to the city's cultural points of interest. K. has been assigned, or rather offered, many missions of late that take him away from his work. He wonders whether there might not be a plot afoot to keep him elsewhere and occupied while someone--the Assistant Manager, perhaps--goes through his papers or otherwise looks to damage his standing. He wants to concentrate on his work. It is the only way to solidify his standing at the bank, and he must be doubly on guard for the errors that have begun to creep into his efforts since his case began to tax his energy. Yet he accepts every special commission. Not to do so would be to refuse an honor and possibly to admit weakness or fear.

K. arrives at the office early and exhausted from having studied Italian grammar the night before. The Italian has also arrived early. The Manager, who speaks Italian, makes the introductions and helps K. to understand the visitor's meaning. The Italian has business to attend to and cannot see all of the city's sites. He proposes that K. meet him at the cathedral at 10 o'clock.

K. devotes the intervening hours to studying the Italian verbs he will need in order to be able to say anything intelligent about the cathedral. As he is about to leave the office, Leni calls. He tells her what he is doing, and she replies, "They're goading you." This annoys him, but as he hangs up he can't help but agree with her.

He goes to the cathedral and waits. The Italian is late. K. gives him a half-hour, then more, but the man does not come. It is raining outside, so K. waits longer, walking around the cathedral and leafing through a picture album he has brought with him. A caretaker catches K.'s eye and

motions for K. to follow him. K. does for awhile, but soon desists and returns to the nave to sit. He notices a small, unusual pulpit that looks as if it would be an uncomfortable place from which to preach. A preacher climbs up into the pulpit. It is an odd time for a sermon, and apart from K. and the caretaker, there is no audience. K. feels he should return to the office; realizing it would be difficult to leave once the sermon begins, he rises and walks toward the exit. A voice behind him calls out, "Joseph K.!" For a moment K. considers pretending not to hear or understand and continuing on his way. But he turns, and so must engage the priest.

The priest is in fact the prison chaplain, connected with the court. He has had K. summoned to this place. He tells K. that his case is going badly. It may never even get beyond the lower courts. K. believes the chaplain's intentions are good, and hopes that the chaplain might be able to give him some advice that will point a way "not toward some influential manipulation of the case, but toward a circumvention of it... a mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the Court." K. asks the chaplain to come down from the pulpit; the chaplain agrees.

The two walk together up and down the aisle. K. tells the chaplain that he trusts him more than anyone else connected with the Court and feels he can speak openly. The other replies that K. is deluded, and describes an allegory that is supposed to be illustrative of this delusion. This brief tale, drawn from the writings about the Law, tells of a man from the country who tries to gain admittance at an entrance to the Law, is always denied by the doorkeeper, and yet learns as he dies that this entrance was meant only for him. The chaplain and K. discuss several possible interpretations of this story--who is deluded, who is subservient to whom. At last the two pace in silence. K. says that he should probably go, but is disappointed when the chaplain simply dismisses him. K. asks why the chaplain was recently so friendly and helpful and now so indifferent. The chaplain reminds K. that he (the chaplain) is connected to the Court, and that "the Court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go."

Commentary

Kafka's parable of the entrance to the Law is as luminous as it is opaque. It seems to contain some essence of truth about the relationship between the citizen and the Law, or perhaps the human condition in general, but what--other than tragedy of one man's futile efforts--does it really relate? It is a Kafka story in miniature: a gnomic genesis of interminable commentary and speculation. The chaplain offers K. the outlines of several prominent interpretations, but clearly he is only scratching the surface.

Is the man from the country meant to represent K.? Is the Law truly unreachable? Does the doorkeeper speak the truth? Is the doorkeeper, by way of his connection to the Law, beyond reproach. K. remarks that to consider the doorkeeper unimpeachable is to accept everything he says as the truth despite the fact that at least one of his statements is untrue. Perhaps the chaplain's most salient comment comes in his response: "...it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary." This seems to be the *modus operandi* of the Law, the dynamo within the great machine of the Court, the divine principle before which the functionaries--and eventually the accused men--prostrate themselves. It is, as K. declares, a "melancholy thought" because it "turns lying into a universal principle." That universal lie of

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necessity--the mother of detention--keeps the mechanism moving forward and squelches potential challenges to the system. When the Law takes necessity as its model, justice is doomed. The terrible fact of *The Trial*, and of the parable, is that the men seeking justice eventually accept this warped universal principle and its skewed criteria; they submit to the necessity of their own exclusion or death.

Chapter 10

Summary

On Joseph K.'s thirty-first birthday, two men in coats and top hats come for him. K. finds them to be ridiculous creatures, but goes with them. In the street, they take his arms in an unbreakable hold and the three of them move as one. At a deserted square, K. suddenly decides to resist, to force these warders to drag him. Then he sees Fraulein Burstner, or someone who looks reasonably like Fraulein Burstner, walk across the square. He realizes the futility of resistance, and instead strives to keep his mind clear and analytical until the end.

Once, on their journey, a policeman is on the verge of stopping them. They walk quickly past him, and K. himself leads the trio in running out of range from the officer. They walk out of town to a deserted quarry situated near an urban-looking house. There the two warders strip K. to the waist and awkwardly prop him against a bolder. One of the men removes a butcher's knife from his coat. The warders pass the knife back and forth, and K. realizes that he is meant to grab the knife and do himself in. He does not. In the window of the house, in the distance, he sees a figure with outstretched arms at the window. He wonders feverishly who it could be, what it could represent. K. makes a final gesture, raising his hand and extending his fingers toward the figure in the window. One warder holds K. while the other stabs him in the heart. He sees them watching him, and makes a dying exclamation: "Like a dog!" he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him."

Commentary

Some novels seem to peter out in a trail of ellipses, most of their good ideas spent or their plots and sub-plots resolved. *The Trial* ends with a full stop. The emotional and symbolic charge builds up fast through the final pages, culminating in a veritable thunderclap. Yet, more than anywhere else in the book (excepting, perhaps, the end of Chapter Eight), one feels acutely that this is an unfinished novel. What has K. done since his meeting with the chaplain? We want desperately to know. Surely he has struggled, explored new avenues, considered leaving town. Was he already so resigned to this ridiculous fate in Chapter Nine? How is it he comes to expect some sort of official visitor on his birthday? On a different note, the appearance of Fraulein Burstner reminds us of how entirely unresolved that whole affair was left, way back in the first half of the book. *The Trial* was written during 1914-1915 and then abandoned--for whatever reason, Kafka moved on to other projects. It is not quite whole; yet, as in all of Kafka's best work, *The Trial* is marked by the contradiction of hermetic clarity, of utterance that has the ring of truth and internal consistency, even if we cannot quite make out the note.