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The Trial

by

Franz Joseph Kafka

1925



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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting is the early twentieth century urban atmosphere in offices, courtrooms and furnished drawing room premises. The major part of the action takes place in the maze of courtrooms with its corridors and passages. The cathedral also functions as an important part of the plot. Nature is occasionally the backdrop with sunshine and rain, daylight and darkness.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Joseph K. - The chief clerk in the bank is the protagonist. He seeks justice constantly from the corrupt and lethargic courts. In the process he is faced with his own faults and weakness.

Minor Characters

Franz and William - They are the warders who place K. under arrest at his residence.

Rabensteiner, Kaminer, Kullich - They are subordinate employees working under K. in the bank.

Frau Grubach - The landlady.

Fräulein Bürstner - The lady staying at Frau Grubach's place, K.'s neighbor and friend. After his arrest, K. is greatly dependent on her opinion.

Lanz, The Captain - The captain is Frau Grubach's nephew who becomes Fräulein Bürstner's friend replacing K.

Herr Hastier - K.'s lawyer. He does not come into the picture at all.

A young woman - She is the usher's wife. She lives in the courtrooms. A student and the examining magistrate have an affair with her, bribing her with gifts.

The Usher - The usher is the man announcing the people entering the.....

Many additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist and the antagonist are both K. himself. Since the conflict is internalized, K.'s feelings are antagonistic. K.'s attempts to bribe the court officials and letting himself be.....

Antagonist - At the realistic level K. is the protagonist fighting the system and.....

Climax - The climax is the scene at the Cathedral where the prison chaplain indicts K.; preaching from the pulpit, to K. as an individual, There is no gathering. The priest tries to make.....

Outcome - The novel is a tragedy. K. loses his urge to resist. The guards kill him.

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Joseph K. is staying in rooms rented out by the landlady, Frau Grubach. The story begins with the unexpected arrest of Joseph K., the bank clerk. It is a strange kind of arrest. He is told to dress in an unimpressive manner. His breakfast is served not by the housekeeper, but by the warder, Franz. Willem is another warder. K. meets the inspector and questions his manners. But K. is allowed to make telephone calls. K. constantly inquires the

reason for his arrest. He is permitted to contact his lawyer, Hasterer. An old couple and a younger man with a red beard are observing the spectacle from the window across the street. He is also allowed to go to work in the bank. Three of the bank officers, clerks, subordinates of K. are already there to accompany him. They are, the rigid Rabensteiner, the fair complexioned Kullich and Kaminer whose smile appears to be false. K. has been totally unaware of their presence all this time.

K. meets Frau Grubach, the landlady when he returns from the Bank. She is apologetic for not meeting him in the morning. She is sorry for him but K. is too arrogant to accept her apology. Next, K. wants to meet Fräulein Bürstner. Frau Grubach does not approve of Fräulein Bürstner's late homecoming. K. defends Bürstner.

Fräulein Bürstner comes in late at half past eleven. Bürstner is not interested in his arrest. But K. insists on telling her his version of the story. He also presumes that Fräulein Bürstner has no knowledge of legal matters. Bürstner says she is going to join the law office, as a clerk. There is a captain who knocks at the door. He is Captain Lanz, and Frau Grubach's nephew. K. tells her that Frau Grubach has borrowed some money from him, and he respects her. He talks to her for an hour and a half. While leaving her room he grabs her and kisses her outside the Captain's room.

K. pays a visit to the courts on Sunday. He makes his way through a maze of streets into the poorer sections of the town. He is searching for a 'joiner' official named Lanz, recollecting the Captains' name. A young woman washing clothes directs him. Finally he reaches the court of inquiry conducted by an examining Magistrate. The court is filled with a lot of bearded old men. K. is impatient, arrogant and insulting to these old men and walks out in disgust. An unusual incident takes place in the courtroom. A man drags in the washerwoman. This man forces himself on her. K. rushes to protect her and finds that the court is full of officials in disguise wearing badges. The court officials had staged the entire proceeding.

K. is never summoned to the courts in the next few weeks. One Sunday he goes to the courtroom and finds dusty, unused law books. The washerwoman is the only one there. She is the usher's wife and lives in one of the rooms. The examining magistrate uses her room to complete his work. On the pretense of expressing his gratitude to her, the magistrate presents the washerwoman with a pair of silk stockings. Suddenly the student who forced himself on her in the courtroom barges in. K. gets a sudden urge to drag the woman and keeping her as his mistress. Even though he punches the student, K. is not able to stop the.....

THEMES

Major Themes - The trial is a crisis in the life of the chief clerk, Joseph K. The unrest within him impels him to seek justice. Symbolically this is a divine challenge to man. The officials' routine order of everyday life has been disrupted by the chaotic world of the law courts. The trial makes.....

MOOD

The mood is of unrelenting seriousness and involvement with K.'s trial. K.'s introspection, stumbling and his reactions are briefly interspersed with climatic changes in the weather. Other peoples' lives.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

The inhumanity and absurdity of the modern age are mirrored in Kafka's writing. The stubbornness and inflexible attitude of the bureaucracy in every profession, including court proceedings or visa facility. The obvious, liberal democratic systems of the world blocking the individuals right to seek justice forms the background.

Author Information - Kafka's mastery is evident in 'The judgement' which came to light on the night of September 1912. The theme of guilt dealt with in 'The Trial' already has its genesis in 'The judgement'.

Bureaucracy, which is the ultimate refuge for the common man's survival and retribution for any loss that he might face is the subject of his books. Kafka is extremely concerned with

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

There is considerable seriousness of his work, Kafka is also a social satirist, a fine craftsman, crafting his grotesque picture with the eye of the humorist drawing out the farcical and slapstick elements. Even the execution in the *'The Trial'* has touches of a circus. Kafka was influenced by the *'Comediana Humane'* of Balza C, the caricatures of Danmier with its depiction of judges, advocates and slumbering judges, we have replicas of Jarndyce us Jarndyce in Dickens' *'Bleak House'*. The clerk's self.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Joseph K. is a bank clerk staying in a rented room with the landlady, Frau Grubach. He's immediate neighbor is Fräulein Bürstner. On a fine spring morning K. is arrested without any specific reason. The warder selects his clothing and he is told to dress in formal manner. There is an inspector and two guards, Franz and Willem to take care of him. K is upset with the Inspector's attitude, which he thinks is rude. His breakfast is served by the warder. It is peculiar kind of arrest for he is allowed to call up his lawyer, Hasterer. K. constantly questions the reasons for his arrest. An old couple and a younger man with a red beard are observing the spectacle from the window across the street. He is also permitted to go to work in the bank. All the time K. is unaware that three subordinate officers of his are waiting to accompany him. They are the stiff Rabensteiner, the fair Kullich and Kaimer with his false smile.

K. meets Frau Grubach, the landlady when he returns from the bank, she is apologetic for not meeting him in the morning. She is sorry for him, but K. is too egoistic and does not listen to her. K is anxious to meet Fräulein Bürstner. Frau Grubach does not hold a very high opinion of Fräulein Bürstner and her late nights but K. defends Bürstner.

K. is arrested in the beautiful spring on his 30th birthday. When the warder knocks at his door K. presumes that he is a neighbor, a tenant and questions their right to intrude into his privacy. K. produces his birth certificate as his identity sensing he is still free. But the guards have no use for those papers. He even thinks of producing Frau Grubach as a witness to prove his innocence. He is surprised and interrupted by the harsh military command by the first guard. K. is told to change into a simpler dress as otherwise the department would seize his belongings.

Notes

Frau Grubach is described with a photographic eye for detail, extremely cinematic. As the lens eye moves across the furniture, it hovers around, focussing on the change with the officer seated here.

The chapter is also full of descriptions of his apparel, which will gradually become insignificant. While K. thinks that the Inspector is a fine man who would later realize that the arrest is a mistake, the Inspector in the meantime looks keenly at all the articles in the room, photographs, matchsticks et. al. The seriousness of the situation is contrasted with the mundane reality and orderliness of everyday existence. Though the inspector confirms that all the tenants are taken into confidence to execute the arrest, K. initially feels that the arrest does not confirm his offense.

K. resents his being told to behave properly by a younger man. K. is also sensible enough to think freely and ring up his lawyer, Hasterer. The Inspector asserts that the phone call would be futile. K. drops the idea and

responds like a man under arrest.

The inspector's casual attitude admiring his long fingers, the guards sitting on an embroidered cloth on the chest in the lady's room these are fine descriptions, minutely detailed. The contrast highlights the seriousness of the situation. The ordinary and simply furnished room has the "*atmosphere of a deserted office*", Kafka has transformed the simple room, at the same time the impression on us is that of an official authority.

When Fräulein Bürstner comes in late at night she is totally disinterested in K.'s arrest. K. is so keen on winning her approval that he relates his version of the arrest. He also feels that Fräulein Bürstner is not intelligent enough to comprehend legal matters. Bürstner assures him that she will soon join a law firm. In the meantime captain Lanz, Frau Grubach's nephew seems to be eavesdropping and suddenly bangs at the door.

K. informs Fräulein Bürstner that Frau Grubach respects him and that he has lent her money. K. postpones visiting the cabaret girl, Elsa whom he normally meets once in a week. The captain peeps in when he hears voices. K. grabs Fräulein Bürstner and kisses her impulsively, surprising her.

The mundane orderly world of the chief clerk is disrupted. He is pushed into the world of chaos, which is really the court of law, here. The disorderly law court is housed in attics and slim tenements. The officials are corrupt. They do not follow the natural order of life. The law-abiding man who has achieved success in life thinks he has mastered the rules. Here the actions of the court officials are not based on public justice. The sudden presence of the warders in his room, is actually a threat to K.'s individual freedom. The novel cuts across the modern democratic ideals of individual freedom and liberty. K. feels the change in his situation when he is asked to put on a '*not so good*' a shirt. But he has no use for his property though it is secure now. The warders too are corrupt and want to swindle him. He is suddenly thrown into a fearful world of wolves.

The novel has a parable like quality. Parables are not known to keep track of time measured by chronometers. In the novel every stroke of every hour is counted. It emphasizes the empty course of outward life contrasted with the court's contrary demand. The warders though servants of the court have a great deal of power to control men's lives. They create a sense of fear. It is a sign of the spirit's restlessness, it's actualities, realities of the mind. From these confusing conditions Kafka's narrative humor is playfully developed. K. wonders what could prevent him from committing suicide when he is allowed to wander around freely.

Kafka's employs subtle narrative techniques. The narrative presence is felt throughout. There is already a narrative voice in the beginning telling us of "*someone must have been talking lies about Joseph K.*" But for the inspector it is another round of his usual experience.

The arrest has a negative effect on K. He suddenly becomes withdrawn and others retreat likewise. The inspector and later even Frau Grubach refuse to shake hands with him. The withdrawal of handshaking has the reverse effect, influencing his behavior in the evening. He needs to be reassured and seeks Fräulein Bürstner friendship Frau Grubach is wise as becomes her age. She sees through K.'s appearance of calm and tries to restore confidence. She understands him more than he does himself he seeks a definitive opinion.

Though K. waits a longtime for Fräulein Bürstner he cannot remember what she looks like. What is most striking about the novel is the unreasonableness of the arrest. As he draws his narrative to a close with Fräulein Bürstner he draws Joseph K. initiating the inspector. It resounds with Captain Lanz's response. His sudden act of wooing Fräulein Bürstner is also to give vent to his eroticism. The self-conceited man suddenly wants company. But he still considers her a little typist. His relationship with her could not continue. Though she is a neighbor she becomes alienated. He withdraws into his self-righteous ego.

The reader is arrested and fascinated with the text. One also tries to emerge seeking justice from the

jurisdiction of "The Trial". Like Joseph K. we swing from fantasies of absolute power to the reality of absolute arrest. Characters in this novel continuously prejudge each other. K. seeks Frau Grubach's opinion as "*the judgement of a sensible woman*." Frau Grubach feels "K. is innocent". K. considers the warders to be "*coarse*" and "*degenerate ruffians*". He is keen on impressing Fräulein Bürstner, though she is disinterested in his story, she is alert to the condition of his arrest.

The novel also proves that it is not possible to live outside the jurisdiction of the courts. K. is like the reader of fiction and the other characters are like those who pass hasty judgements on one another. The criticism is grounded in structure. K.'s dream of living beyond the jurisdiction of the court seems to be distant. K. reflects "*What authority is conducting those proceedings?*" "*What authority could they represent?*"

Kafka's 'windows' are like most windows in romantic poetry. In the, "The Trial"-'windows' suggest the shifting process between the adjusted framing of reading and writing and the shifting of narrators. The act of the creative process and that of the interpretation are brought into focus. The distinction between the exterior and interior the basic fiction of so much of our thought process and the fiction which makes up great literature depends on this framing.

Windows also suggest a frame up of the character. "*Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.*" Is that someone the novelist who has framed the standard "K." by writing about his arrest and trial and framed his fiction?

As readers, we continuously respond to this frame up. Windows in "The Trial" are associated with shifting perspective and point of view. Both K. and the reader lose their sense of perspective. The act of framing lends us closer to the perspective. Kafka's 'The Trial', is defended by interpretation and slander and prejudgment without which "The Trial" loses its perspective.

'Windows' in "The Trial" are also associated with reading and story telling. They erase the margins between the two. K. gazes out of the windows at his uncle's car, while telling his story. He enters Frau Grubach's living room on the morning of his arrest. He sees "*a man who was sitting at the open window reading a book, from which he now glanced up*". The inspector snaps at K., "*You should have stayed in your room! Didn't Franz tell you that?*" The reader's mind could likewise be wandering around every where, unless one is alerted to the gravity of the situation. K. is charged more than once for this offense. The Inspector tells him "*Think less about us and of what is going to happen to you, think more about yourself instead*". We are as guilty as the abused.

As Joseph K. peers out of the window on the novels' first page through the ancient figure, framing art, which creates maning, K. is matched by the voyeuristic reader. That is "*the old lady opposite, who seemed to be peering at him with a curiosity unusual even for her*". She is the first of many figures of the reader in Kafka, word, later the old woman shifts rooms and perspective. K. now sees her from the living room window while she, "*with truly simile inquisitiveness had moved along to the window exactly opposite, in order to go on seeing all that could be seen*". In the chapter, she is joined first by "*an even older man,*" then by a tall "*man with the shirt open at the neck and a reddish, pointed beard which he kept pinching and twisting with his fingers*." They do not go but seem to return unobserved. They reflect the Voyeuristic reader who becomes troubled when challenged by the gaze of another. While K. seeks Frau Grubach's company for comfort, she is moved to tears, but does not shake his hand, K. cannot remember how Fraulein Bürstner look life.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

Character Analysis

Joseph K. - The protagonist faces a crisis in his life when a mysterious court charges him with an offense. Neither he nor the reader is aware of any specific charge right till the end of the novel. But he senses unrest

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within himself, to clear his name and to seek justice. In the innermost recesses of his mind he understands this as the *divine challenge to man*. He listens to this inner voice and he runs all over the city of Prague, superficially to extricate himself from the trial seeking escape and withdrawal. He is torn between two realities - one of the well-ordered official post at the bank and the disorderly, chaotic world of the court of law. Though he seems to be completely in charge of his existence in the modern world, the power of the court is dependent on the spiritual urges within K. himself. His unknown guilt and "*bad conscience*" drive him repeatedly to the court.

The court is powerful in the sense that its law is inaccessible to K. in shaping his desired destiny. This is representative of the divine court demanding that he justify his right to.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot is spread over the protagonist, K.'s arrest and his attempts to extricate himself from an aging, totalitarian bureaucratic system. This is at the conscious surface level. Kafka is also the social chronicler very much like Dickens, commenting in monotonous detail on the Czech legal system - which is symbolic of any organization that is governmental even in democratic countries. The story is also crowded with Dickensonian characters, each with his own identity, but who fall into the system whether they like it or not. A hierarchy of characters, starting from the judge and leading to an isolated painter, is.....

THEMES

The theme is based on the protagonist's inability to reach his own self. The court's summons is symbolic of a call of a higher spiritual existence. The protagonist resists submitting to this force. Instead he holds on to laws in conscious life. The 'Trial' also deals with totalitarian politics and the illogical beaurocracy, which is evident in modern living. It is evident in professions, visa litigators and seemingly democratic.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

AUTHOR'S STYLE

There are motifs of a Judaic kind. The debate with the priest and parable described by him is a Judaic style, which confuses and places the possibility of a solution. But finally K.'s problem.....

SIGNIFICANCE OF "THE TRIAL"

The Trial is an expansive view of the constant strife of the chief clerk and land surveyor, Joseph K. stretching over the orbit of an entire human life. There are constant parables, metaphors and the truck of 'illusion' interrupting the maze of descriptive passages. The meaning of the plot gets embedded in this maze. The parable approach validates and clarifies Kafka's point of view. The expense of K.'s life at two levels - one at the conscious and the other at the spiritual are revealed despite the.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the two levels at which the novel operates?
2. What is K's guilt? Why does he consider himself guilty?....

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