

## A Study of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*

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### ABSTRACT

The novel has to be seen as some kind of an allegory or a parable. The sustained situation of Joseph K in *The Trial* stands in some way for man's condition in the world itself. The novel has to be apprehended as a poetic image. Though the contours of the allegory are clear and stable the significance there of has been variously interpreted. In Aristotelian terms the novel has a simple episodic plot. Unlike the traditional novel, *The Trial*, in fact, it will be no exaggeration to say, has no plot with its ups and downs. The episodes in the novel are loosely put together and are not bound by cause-and-effect relationship. Similarly, there are many incidents that defy the logic of realism. For what does K.'s "arrest" mean if he is free to do his routine work in the bank? How is it that court offices are located in the shady part of the town and are always so stuffy? How is it that K. never comes to know the charges against him? All these questions prove one thing and that is that *The Trial* should not be read as a realistic novel. It has neither a well concatenated plot nor credible incidents. The whole novel centers round K.'s condition under arrest and his final death. This article attempts to examine Kafka's famous work especially in terms of humanistic issues such as guilt, freedom, alienation, etc.

**Keywords:** Kafka, *The Trial*, Consciousness, Unconsciousness, Guilt, Freedom, Alienation.

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Trial* was one of Kafka's favourite works, which was written in 1912, and published after his death in 1925 by his friend Max Brod. In this novel, the reader meets a man witnessing an absurd form of justice a legal system without logic. *The Trial* represents a common theme. In Kafka's stories all people are guilty of something and the punishments are in inverse proportion to the sin. In this novel, which is based on a mystery story, psychologically and philosophically, Joseph K. desperately tries to discover the nature of his guilt. In every sense, our attention should be focused primarily on the court of justice the invisible force whose presence is felt throughout the book. There are, in simplistic terms, two streams running through the book, but going in opposite directions. One is the attempt by the court to convince Joseph K. of his guilt. The court does this by attempting to make inroads into Joseph K.'s conscience. Another is to make him realize his guilt, and atone for it. On the other hand, he attempts to get right into the court, and by so doing, reach some degree of understanding about the nature of his guilt. It is as if both are desperately pursuing each other but never meet. All this is done with something that is intangible and surrealistic, but a deliberate artistic form of realistic view. In this context, Roy [1] says: Kafka's primary concern in his works is to expose the raw nerves of human experience to our scrutiny, or abstractions must never detract from the essential truth that he is dealing with the human situation. After going through even the bald summary of the "events" in the novel, the question that comes first to the reader's mind is: what does it all mean? For all that we know from the novel is that a man called Joseph K. is arrested under charges he never comes to know and is finally executed. The action moves in a straight, linear fashion from arrest to execution.

### Joseph. K versus Conscious and Unconscious World

*The Trial* is a symbolic presentation of Kafka's awareness of the unconscious which accuses, tries, and condemns the conscious. As Joseph K. the protagonist of the novel, experiences the critical accusation by an inner voice which is represented in the story by the police inspector whose name is Franz: "you are under arrest, certainly but that need not hinder you from going about your business. You won't be hampered in carrying on the ordinary course of your life." [2] the inspector cannot even confirm that Joseph. K. is charged with an offence, or rather does not know whether he is. Instead he is advised to think less about his intruders or about what is going to happen to him, and more about himself. In the very first chapter a correlation is established between Joseph. K.'s state of consciousness

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and some enigmatic powers from the unconscious responding to it. "In fact, as far as I know them," says one of the warders, "... never go hunting for crime in the populace, but as the law decrees and draws towards the guilty." [2] With these claims of the warders, some questions are posed in our minds. Is Joseph K. guilty? Or if Joseph K. is guilty, by what law has he been judged and found to be guilty? Who are his judges? These questions are the same ones which Joseph K. attempts to answer. But despite his attempts, the secret nature of these questions remains impenetrable and undefined, as the nature of his arrest remains ambiguous for his land-lady: "It gives me the feeling of something abstract which I don't understand, but which I don't need to understand." [2].

The first image which takes us to Joseph K.'s unconscious world is the image of breakfast which may be considered as a sign of completing the waking process. In *The Trial*, the second sentence of the opening chapter refers to Joseph K.'s breakfast and that, it is only this morning that the land-lady's cook does not bring Joseph K.'s breakfast. "That never happened before." [2] Joseph K. also emphasizes the importance of the breakfast when he talks to Frau Grubach.

... I judged the whole thing still more severely. There's nothing learned about it. It is completely null and void. I was taken by surprise that was all. If immediately on waking I had got up without troubling my head about Anna's absence, and had come to you without regarding anyone who tried for my way, I could have breakfast in the kitchen for a change and could have got you to bring me my clothes from my room; in short, if I had behaved sensibly, nothing further would have happened, all this would have been nipped in the bud. But one is so unprepared. [2] This image appears to us as a sign of the unconscious again in the second chapter, when Joseph K. is summoned to the court:

.... Sunday was dull, Joseph K was tired ... in a great hurry, without time to think or coordinate the plans which he had drawn up during the week, he dressed and rushed off, without his breakfast, to the suburban place which had been mentioned to him ... [2]

Joseph K is unable to have his breakfast except one apple: "A fine apple which he had laid out the night before and two glasses of fine brandy for his breakfast." [2] This episode reminds us of the original sin of man which resulted in his expulsion from the innocent paradise, which gave rise to a sense of guilt. This sense of guilt does not come to us from the world of senses, as Kafka believed but from the spiritual world which embraces the world of senses as the Evil. Therefore any attempt to attach the spiritual to the tangibly concrete is the business of art. On the other hand, the world of senses is the world of the consciousness which has been trapped by the world of unconsciousness which Kafka has interpreted as the spiritual one.

The next image which appear to us from Joseph K.'s unconscious is the time of his arrest on the morning of his thirtieth birthday, a time of heightened self-awareness. This awareness is the result of his confrontation with the prospect of his death which happens to him with a cruel irony on the very day of his birthday. Just after his thirtieth year Joseph K.'s guilt becomes more of a preoccupation and he searches for relief, so man also becomes immersed in guilty feelings at maturity. These feelings provide man the best opportunities to make more attempts in quest of his unconscious world under the assumed name, 'court'. The first attempt to deal with 'court' was made by a lawyer who was called Dr. Huld, who claims that: "unlike other lawyers who merely lead their clients by the hand, he lifts his client on his shoulders from the start and carries him bodily without once letting him down until the verdict is reached and beyond it." [2] But the humiliation of Block by Huld is evidence that shows the absurdity of this claim. In this context Block says: "The client finally forgot the whole world and lived only in hope of toiling alone. This false path until the end of his case would come in sight. The client ceased to be a client and became the lawyer's dog." [2] By Block's expression the lawyer's advice appears to him virtually meaningless. The second attempt to deal with guilt is Titorelli's wonderful offer of various types of acquittals available to Joseph K. The painter's description of the kinds of judges and the barrenness of the "heathscapes" implies that there is nothing there for a man who seeks release from his burden of guilt (unconscious burden). Art can describe but not enact.

The last attempt to deal with K.'s guilt was made by the priest, who is also the prison chaplain and informs Joseph K. that he has been found guilty. He tells the parable 'Before the Law'. This is the world of unconscious which was portrayed by Kafka in the name of a parable. A world which opens up the ocean of nothingness, slammed doors which are protected by thousand doorkeepers who are all agents of man's unconscious. Within this world, man wants a door, a door through which he can never pass or never enter and every effort comes to nothing. This is the same situation which comes to Joseph K. in the name of an unknown court, as Titorelli points out: "the highest court is quite inaccessible to you, to me and to all of us." [2] The world of unconscious is not accessible to everyone. In the waking process, the unconscious can traverse the world of the frontiers into the realm of conscious like, and dictates its patterns as it occurs to the country man and Joseph K in the frame of death. But the tragic event that happens to Joseph. K. is to die under the butcher knife 'like a dog.' [2]. This is the death of the conscious by the

world of the unconscious in which Joseph. K. meets after the long process of futile striving. This is the message, if there is any, with which the novel concludes.

### **Death and Freedom from Unconsciousness**

The conclusion which the novel brings us is nothing but a freedom from the trap of unconsciousness which has been the source of Joseph K's anxiety. In this regard, Heidegger says:

The whole of my being seems to drift away into nothing ... my death is what I suffer most. . . and if I take death into my life, acknowledge it and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life and only then I will be free to become myself. [3]

Death is the only solution for man to become himself and make himself free of the trap of the unconscious, perhaps the last choice, as Joseph K makes it: "The only thing for me to go on doing is to keep my intelligence calm and discriminating to the end." [2] In addition to these images, there are other images of the unconscious which are as follows:

- a. In *The Trial*, there is the image of Sunday, a holiday, which represents the unconscious. Joseph K.'s nightmares happen on Sundays and during nights. In this context, Dauvin explains: "they happen only when the pressures of the day's work do not guard the unconscious mind. So the court would expect Joseph K on Sunday." [4]
- b. The labyrinthine boarding house also represents the unconscious mind.
- c. The telephone calling in *The Trial* symbolizes a call from the unconscious. It refers to the fact that *The Trial* may be in Joseph. K.'s mind. The first sentence informs K. that "he should go to the court the next Sunday. Joseph. K. was informed by telephone that next Sunday a short inquiry into his case would take place." [2]
- d. The court in *The Trial* is placed in an 'outlying suburban street' where Joseph. K. has never been before. The suburban or the downtown also refers to the unconscious. Joseph. K thought the court would be recognizable, but there was no sign, so he penetrated deeper into the court.
- e. The thickness of air in the court which psychologically represents pressure is another symbol of Joseph K.'s unconscious.

### **Psychological and Philosophical Interpretations of Sense of Guilt**

Freud [5] calls the nature of the sense of guilt as "the problem of culture". May be an existential philosopher and psychiatrist claims that guilt is an "ontological characteristic of human existence." But Kafka called it the riskiest moment, which happens to man in the awakening process. Within this process the repressed wishes come out of the unconscious in an uncontrollable way. So, this time is the crucial moment, which shows man a reality which he tries to conceal under his illusions. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. experiences this mode, when he is under arrest and his predicament appears to him in the shapes of intruders, who make him one of the puppet-like figures. They also motivate him to struggle within his inner court in confrontation with totality of his own existence not outside himself. So, the concepts of "guilt" or "arrest" belong to a world within and not without. In this context, Hedayat [6] argues: "...in Kafka the reader goes to a world which is between sleep and awakening, it is like a nightmare ... it is a second before awakening." Kafka's world is a world of dream within dream which carries itself the vague concepts including, "guilt," "arrest," "court," "law" and "parable." And for activating the reader's mind within the world of the unconscious, he employs the world of images, which can help us comprehend it better, especially, in relation to the message he conveys.

### **Alienation in *The Trial***

The theme of alienation in the context of philosophy has already been commented upon. It is quite revealing to see how the same theme pays rich dividends when seen in the context of psychology. Alienation is an expression of 'man alone' in the world of the Other, a cry for freedom as an impotent act in a meaningless human world and the cry for the greatness, and dignity of the authentic self which is confined by the world of man. Kafka in *The Trial* shows this state of alienation in the darkest form, the alienation of an existential man like Joseph K. is accosted by the invisible Other. That is, although it is unquestionable that he is under arrest and that law which, as a purely essential thing independent of human judgment, is representative of the Other which has summoned him, he does not know who has filed the charges or even what the charges are. Only, he is told, he will soon be subjected figuratively to the 'trial' of chronic anxiety. He is forced to endure while he awaits his trial. He is subjected to an anxiety that begins the instant he learns that some charges are made against him by someone. It is the result of the dehumanizing atmosphere created by the moral irresponsibility of bureaucracies, along with an existential alienation so terrible that death was to be preferred. This kind of alienation has been dropped upon his self like some great net from which he

will never escape, sensing only that behind that net there looms a great and shadowy bureaucracy, an entity as remote and powerful and incomprehensible as a cage in search of a bird.

### **The climax of *The Trial***

The climax of *The Trial* comes from an informal invitation to Joseph K.'s self on his 31<sup>st</sup> day of his birthday. You are "under arrest", but in a normal state of affairs, it "need not hinder you from going about your business." [2] This is a kind of informal hospitality from man's inner court towards his 'self.' This is the source of all man's anxiety, terror and the main refuge for self to hide itself from the other selves: "to think less about his intruders or about what is going to happen to him, and more about himself" [2] It is his own emptiness which conditions his alienation in relation to others. In this condition, Joseph K.'s self loses the ability of contacting outside world and even cannot distinguish between himself and the place where he stands with regard to the law or with others. The exact nature of this incompatibility is made clear, while Joseph K. is being interviewed by the inspector. Three employees from his bank are also present in the room Joseph K. is in. Although he is aware of their presence, he does not recognize them until the inspector brings their identity to his notice:

Then Joseph K remembered that he had not noticed the inspector and the warders leaving, the inspector had usurped his attention so that he did not recognize the three clerks, and the clerks in had made him oblivious of the inspector. [2]

The implication here is that the incompatibility of the officials from the court with things and characters from Joseph K.'s everyday life comes from the protagonist's self and cannot take them on all at one time. This incompatibility is the result of man's self which alienates itself from the other selves and keeps itself in an existential dilemma. The root for this uncompromising dilemma is the entity of the court and the essence of the law. The law as a bureaucratic system puts all beings on trial by its external unfathomable forces as they never understand for what crime or sin they are institutionalized, bureaucratized, or even killed. They are witnesses to their Being. Man seeks a form of redemption but there is no redemption waiting for him, just a more insane copy of this human world of endless searching. We must become our own law and open the door with our fundamental sign on it - a sign that points not to God but to he who questions God's being. The Law is the shielded god of the bureaucrat and justifies the execution of he who questions it. Man as self-cause is a contradiction of all logic. Before the Law we are held in isolation. In this system, man must not trust others, he should be alienated even from himself, especially, in the world of impossibilities, a world which is inherently wrong and evil and gifts man nothing but corruption, violence and bribery, as Joseph K describes:

There can be no doubt that behind all the actions of this court of justice that is to say, in my case behind my arrest and today's interrogation there is a great organization at work. An organization which not only employs corrupt warders, inspectors and examining magistrates of whom the best that can be said is that they recognize their own limitations, but also has at its disposal a judicial hierarchy of high, indeed of the highest rank, with an indispensable and numerous routine of servants and clerks.... [2]

This is a dark picture of an ambiguous future for a victim of a system which prevents man from struggling more or even stops him to learn of the charges against him. In this situation, he never knows who his judges are, what their criteria may be. Yet the silence of his opposition drives him into a frenzied activity. He eventually becomes so aggressive in his struggle to reach and identify the self through the higher official as an important factor for self's alienation that he seems to be pulling destruction down upon himself. More and more his fight resembles shadow boxing, as his prosecutors retain their silence and anonymity. Their invisibility works increasingly on his imagination, forcing him to become more and more involved as each day fails to bring any news of progress. At first annoyed by the mystery of his trial, he is later haunted by it and finally plagued by it, until it becomes the sole concern of his life. He is trapped in a void by his own imagination, tormented by his own intelligence and defeated by his human nature.

### **Joseph K and the Other World**

The problem of choice which comes to Joseph K.'s self is the pressure of the Other world which is imposed upon him. Therefore, the matter of choice is meaningless, especially, in determining his destiny, as the court officials who "do not have any right understanding of human relations, since they are confined day and night to the working of the judicial system," [2] and "they were forced to restrict themselves to that stage of the case which was prescribed for them by the law, and as for what followed, in other world, the result of their own work, they generally knew less about it than the defence" [2] This position hinders man's self to unify with other selves because of a force above it,

which is the reflection of the inherent ambiguity of the law's force itself. This is the same situation which is described by Titorelli in posing three forms of judgment: absolute acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement, but it turns out to be finally meaningless. It does not help man's self to seek compromise with the unknowable world but reveals only the terror of an existential alienation so terrible that death was to be preferred. K. can not possibly accept it:

No doubt it was a task that meant almost interminable labour. One did not need to have a timid and fearful nature to be easily persuaded that the completion of the plea was a sheer impossibility. Not only because of laziness and obstructive malice, which could only hinder Dr. Huld, but because to meet an unknown accusation, not to mention other possible charges arising out of it, the whole of one's life would have to be recalled to mind, down to the smallest actions and accidents, clearly formulated and examined from every angle.[2]

This ending is not acceptable to Kafka's hero. Kafka does not try to answer Joseph K.'s question in terms of self-examination through the other selves. Each self should test it alone and not by the help of the other. This is the same solution, which was prescribed by the priest in the end of the story in the shape of a parable. In this situation the self is held "before the Law," in isolation and continually on trial, in which if one man wants to be a self as a separate entity, he should be allowed by doorkeeper or social system. If you trust the Other you delude yourself: the priest says, "don't be deluded," asks Joseph K. "how am I deluded?" "You are deluding yourself about the court," [2] says the priest. And now the priest quotes the parable to prove it. The parable sums up Joseph K.'s situation from the beginning of the novel, as the doorkeeper becomes the abstract equivalent of the inspector, the lawyer, the painter - the parallels become more and more striking as the parallels progress, until the court seems to embrace all the institutions which are not comprehensible to the self as an indistinguishable parts of the court itself. Thus the result is the alienation of the self itself which happens to it in a tragic ending which let the knife come to its breast "like a dog".

## CONCLUSION

The most significant conclusion from the article is that we have to recognize the futility of trying to work with the world of the Other (court) that simply will not relate to self's faculties. Life is only a nightmare, because there are such inscrutable forces beyond our control that no way of solution can protect the self from them. Annihilation is not a choice but a fact of alienation which has been left to us, whether we accept it or continue to struggle against it.

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