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The Difficult Passage

The Mystery of the Law

The Trial by Franz Kafka is a novel that follows one man's experience with the law, beginning with his arrest and ending with his execution. This man, K., insists he is innocent and attempts to fight the accusations against him. However, the broken and inconsistent legal system makes it impossible for him to reach a higher official and understand the charges against him. All details about the case are concealed from K. and the reader, leaving much up to interpretation. The novel lacks many details, contradicts itself constantly, and does not follow a strict timeline. One reason for the seemingly random sequence of events is that the novel was never finished. It was published a year after Kafka's death, with some chapters more complete than others. This disconnect between the chapters and overall storyline makes it difficult to understand Kafka's message. However, examining a complete portion of the text gives the reader insight into the concepts Kafka proposes. When K. visits the Cathedral on work business he is approached by a priest who works for the law. This priest explains to K. how the law functions with the parable of the door and doorkeepers. This parable in *The Trial* demonstrates that the law maintains power through the restriction of knowledge, the fear of the unknown, and the powerless state it imposes on the accused.

Throughout the legal process, K. never discovers the cause of his arrest. He asks everyone involved with the law—the guards, lawyers, and a court painter—but no one will reveal

the nature of his alleged crime. He is unable to understand the legal system or how the law is working against him. The priest's parable demonstrates the importance of this barrier between the accused and the legal system. The priest begins the story by saying "In front of the law there is a doorkeeper. A man from the countryside comes up to the door and asks for entry" (Kafka 242). Kafka immediately establishes that there are two barriers to the law: the doorkeeper and his door. He does not say these are means to reach the law but specifically points out that they stand "in front" of the law. The image of the doorkeeper emphasizes that the only way into the law is to get permission, not through brute force or by searching in the right places. The requirement of permission takes away any power the accused has to access the law on their own. They must wait until the system decides they are fit to enter, implying that the law deems some people fit and others unfit. Needing permission makes the denial to the law seem personal, forcing the accused to reflect on why they are not allowed in and doubt their credibility. The doorkeeper says that "he can't let him into the law right now" (Kafka 242). Without giving any justification the doorkeeper refuses this man, similar to how the guards never reveal the grounds for K.'s arrest. This missing information makes it impossible for the accused to disprove the allegations and forces them to rely on the law to provide the reasons for the arrest. The parable demonstrates how the withholding of information is one way that the law maintains power. By barricading the accused from the law and requiring permission to access any information, unjust legal systems continue to function by causing confusion and forcing the accused to rely on the system for an explanation.

Another important aspect of the legal system in *The Trial* is the mysterious hierarchy of judges. The judges hold all of the power, however, K. only interacts with one. Even though K. never meets the higher judges, every character emphasizes the threat and power of these figures.

The idea of an unknown higher power is present throughout *The Trial*. The priest's parable explains the significance of this presence. When the man attempts to peek behind the door, the doorkeeper warns: "Careful though: I'm powerful. And I'm only the lowliest of all the doormen. But there's a doorkeeper for each of the rooms and each of them is more powerful than the last" (Kafka 243). Once the doorkeeper realizes his command is not enough to keep the man from entering, he introduces the presence of other more powerful doormen. It does not matter if the other doorkeepers are real or not; the idea of an unknown and powerful doorkeeper is terrifying to the man. The man's future is in the hands of a being he cannot contact or reason with. This loss of control instills fear in the man, as he has no say in the outcome of his case. To ensure the man does not attempt to enter the door, the doorkeeper adds "It's more than I can stand just to look at the third one" (Kafka 243). The doorkeeper protects the secret of the doorkeepers by leaving out a description of them. He only emphasizes how terrifying they are. Therefore all the man knows about the doorkeepers is that he should fear them. The law maintains power by promoting the existence of these higher beings and using these figures to instill fear in the accused. Kafka emphasizes in this parable that the law uses the fear of the unknown to keep people from the law, to maintain the obscurity of the system, allowing an unjust system to function.

Finally, the priest's parable uses darkness to demonstrate how being consumed by the obscurity of the law causes one to lose sight of everything around them. K. slowly loses his identity as he becomes more and more obsessed with his case. He is no longer passionate about work and loses any hope of winning his case. His optimistic attitude about his case completely disappears by the end of the novel. He becomes paranoid that everyone is out to get him and even begins to question his own innocence. The parable demonstrates this destructive effect the

law has on the accused. After waiting by the doorway for many years the man's "eyes grow dim, and he no longer knows whether it's really getting darker or just his eyes that are deceiving him" (Kafka 244). The man losing his sight physically demonstrates how he is losing a part of himself to the law. The accused become so focused on their case that they lose sight of everything else around them. Also the man's "eyes grow dim" and any hope he still has leaves his body. This represents what the legal process does to its victims. By keeping the accused in limbo, the law crushes all hope and causes the accused to doubt themselves. The phrase "his eyes that are deceiving him" demonstrates how the process turns the accused on themselves. The law slowly forces its victims into submission. Because there is no knowledge of how to prove one's innocence and no access to the higher judges, the accused have no choice but to admit their guilt. This acceptance of guilt signals that the man is at the end of his journey: "but he seems now to see an inextinguishable light begin to shine from the darkness behind the door. He doesn't have long to live now" (Kafka 244). The door giving off an inextinguishable light through the darkness demonstrates how the law has completely consumed the man's life, as it is the only thing he can see. Additionally, "inextinguishable" emphasizes that there is no avoiding this judgment. The only way to escape the darkness is through the judgment of the law. It is implied by the parable that the man dies shortly after seeing this light, just as K. dies at the end of the novel. Kafka demonstrates the drastic consequences of an inaccessible legal system; it is impossible to win a case without knowledge of the charges or how the law functions.

The Trial demonstrates the power of knowledge in society. By hiding how the law works and limiting people's access to information, unjust systems continue to function. Kafka demonstrates the consequences of unchecked power, urging us to fight for a say in the laws that govern our lives.

Bibliography

Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Schocken Books, 1999