

The Castle Short Guide

The Castle by Franz Kafka

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Characters

The central character of *The Castle* is once again a figure simply called by the letter, K. He arrives in a small town claiming to have been hired by the local landowners as a surveyor and announcing that his assistants will follow the next day. Communication with the castle does not support K.'s assertions but before the townspeople can react to K.'s falsehood, the castle confirms K.'s appointment. The rest of the novel involves the attempts by the new surveyor to gain admission to the castle; he eventually dies, largely of neglect, amidst the townspeople among whom he has been living.

As with Kafka's other protagonists, K. remains a shadowy figure possessing neither a past nor an interior and yet he is controlled both by history and ideas. The secondary figures in the novel instruct and obstruct K. in his efforts to gain the attention of the powerful official Klamm who seems to possess the means of overcoming the bureaucracy which thwarts K.'s efforts.

Frieda momentarily appears to be able to provide an entree to Klamm since she had once been his mistress, but this proves another of K.'s evanescent opportunities. Despite the fact that granting favors does not seem to materially better Frieda's lot in life, the story Olga tells of her sister's refusal to sleep with another castle official reveals how devastating a lack of cooperation can be. One refusal ruins the entire family forever.



Social Concerns

If there is a connection between *The Castle* and the life lived by its author it must be located in two biographical facts: Because of his worsening tuberculosis Kafka was forced to reside increasingly in the countryside away from the city of Prague, and since this is his last novel, his last large prose piece of any kind, he may have pursued in the fiction his thoughts on the end of life. That these are social concerns is only a secondary result of a broad interpretation of the novel.

As with *The Trial*, the reader certainly can see in the central image, the castle itself, intimations of such subjects as: the impenetrability of political power, Hapsburg perhaps; some ultimate goal, whether social or religious or personal is impossible to say; or even an emotional quest ever eluding, ever closed. To have lived in Prague as a Jew during the waning years of the Hapsburgs must have been an unnerving experience especially for one as diffident and withdrawing as Franz Kafka. It is possible to imagine Kafka embedding a political message in *The Castle*.

There is also a rural element contained in this last novel which he dealt with earlier in some of the fragments and the country doctor tales. But during his last few years Kafka actually experienced country living. The sojourns into the countryside provided an escape, from work, from ill health, and from racial oppression which, when coupled with Kafka's study of Hebrew and his increasing interest in the wanderings of the Jews, may suggest within *The Castle* a muted search for what one critic has described as "Canaan:" and the freedom of a homeland.

Techniques

One of the broadest techniques used in *The Castle* is that of satire, directed both at the governmental bureaucracy and at the petit bourgeois. Both subjects had been attacked by Kafka before but here the strokes seem broader, less subtle, more savage. The bureaucracy which was obstructionist in *The Trial* becomes malevolent; the punishment meted out by bourgeois fathers against wayward offspring appears here more savage and heartless. Kafka's irony is also broadened, opening the prose more easily to interpretation, yet without promoting easy answers.

Kafka's prose, always so lucid and clear, is never more so than in *The Castle*. It is one of the great achievements of his style that he manages to promote such ambiguity of interpretation with such clarity of detail. Even the fragmentary nature of the manuscript, the incompleteness of the tale, does not prove an obstacle to the work's ability to convey its meaning.

The point of the fiction is made even if the story remains unfinished. The text is complete in its incompleteness.

Themes

The variety of interpretations of *The Castle*, both of its central symbol and of its ultimate meaning, are bewildering in their variety and multiplicity.

One central interpretation has the village representing the norms of society—healthy, life-giving and secure, containing the blessings of human and bourgeois society — and the novel a chronicling of Joseph K.'s attempt to integrate himself into that world. Another critical stance sees the book containing a chronicle of Jewish loneliness and K.'s failure to attain admission into the community being prompted by a subtle anti-Semitism in which he is neither ejected nor welcomed, neither thrown out nor accepted. Yet another reading defines the conflict between the castle, which stands for God, and the hero, who cannot attain God, with the villagers in between. It is a problem of divine grace. One variation of this theme is to see the castle as being empty, void of a resident head, God is dead in other words, which makes the universe devoid of sense.

One must finally face the fact that *The Castle* is open to widespread interpretation, as are Kafka's other works.

It was designed that way, left deliberately exposed to multiple readings both to stave off simple-minded, closed interpretations and to more closely approximate the realities of the modern world with its lack of stability and fixed philosophical, religious, and aesthetic ideas.

Adaptations

The Castle, a German-Swiss co-production of 1963 directed by Rudolf Noelte, may have had some distribution in Europe, but it received very little exposure in the United States except to be released for television viewing, one presumes on a late show.

Described as an "appropriately vague" film version of the novel in a popular movie reference book, the film's only recognizable star was Maximilian Schell who played "K.", the surveyor.

Although the movie received decent critical response on its release, as a foreign film it would have received less than decent public response since American movie-goers are notoriously put-off by having to wrestle with the complexities of subtitles.

By the very nature of the prose style of Kafka's fiction his works do not make easily translatable properties for filming. The elliptical and evasive prose is hard to put on the screen, not impossible but just difficult, and without retaining at least some of the style of Kafka's prose any film of his fiction would be artistically inadequate and one could assume basically pointless.

The fact that two of the novels have been filmed probably says more about the general popularity of Kafka's name than it does about the accessibility of his writing. That his works should attract the attention of movie makers at all is astonishing.



Key Questions

The Castle has come to represent for many critics the image of state-controlled power, the abuse of which characterized the many dictatorships which ruled European countries both before and after the Second World War. Considering that Kafka wrote the novel without experiencing directly this sort of grindingly-oppressive, widespread state oppression suggests that perhaps he had something much more personal in mind. The issues of freedom and responsibility once again take a central place in the narrative and help shape the story. All of Kafka's novels remained unpublished at the time of his death so he was denied the opportunity to see them through the final stages of their composition. This may help to explain the incomplete nature of the works. It is something any reader must take into account when reading and trying to interpret Kafka's longer fiction.

1. In what ways does the "castle" represent the "state," some religious institution? Historically, what does a "castle" suggest?
2. Who are those who inhabit the "castle?"
3. Why must the central character visit the "castle" in the first place?
4. What sorts of other "Kafka" themes are raised by the various elements of the narrative?
5. During the course of his fiction Kafka often has his central male character encounter one or more females characters who guide or impede him from his quest. Do we see evidence of such female figures in The Castle?
6. What is the role of the past in this novel? How much influence does it have over the present? How does it direct the future?
7. How does language, broadly defined, work in the novel on both stylistic and thematic levels? In what ways does the language restrain or facilitate communications among the characters?
8. What is the place of "power" or control in this work? How is K. controlled or made to feel the constraints of power?
9. What do you make of the ending of the book? What do you think Kafka had in mind with such an open-ended conclusion?
10. Why designate the central character of the book with just the letter "K."? What does this do to our identification with him or alienation from him? It has not passed notice that "K."

may reflect Kafka's own wish to be considered the hero of his own fiction.

Literary Precedents

Obviously, *The Castle* in setting at least comes out of the romantic tradition of the gothic with its excessively expressive settings and strange, often cavernous, castles and morbidly evocative country houses. And certainly there is more than a hint of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in Kafka's work. But while the gothic traditions can be read as psychological metaphors, their surface realism partakes of a different literary world. Kafka's *Castle* is largely rendered through K's internal responses to it and therefore lacks many of the particulars associated with the gothic tradition.

As with *The Trial* (1925) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915), it is the strangeness of the prose which creates much of the atmosphere, an atmosphere that avoids the excesses of the melodramatic often associated with the mouldering dwellings and haunted inhabitants of the classic horror or supernatural tale. The characters, especially K., experience a disassociation often present in such fiction, but that otherworldliness is derived more from the psyche of the protagonist than from the trappings of the environment.

Related Titles

The story of K. continues in *The Castle* and links this novel with *The Trial* and *Amerika*, Kafka's earliest, fragmentary long prose work. The sense of alienation which characterizes K.'s adventures in the castle also characterize his experiences in the labyrinth of the law courts of *The Trial*.

And with the exception of the unfinished and much more lighthearted, *Amerika*, Kafka's prose remains here as dense and baffling as in his other writings.

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