In the Penal Colony Study Guide

In the Penal Colony by Franz Kafka

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Franz Kafka wrote the novella-length story "In the Penal Colony" while he was writing his novel The Tnalvn. 1914, and it was first published in 1919. The story of an explorer's tour of an island known for its unusual capital punishment machine, "In the Penal Colony" took just two weeks to complete, although Kafka was dissatisfied with the ending and rewrote it several times in later years. Since the story's publication in English translation in 1948, it has come to be seen, along with *The Metamorphosis*, as one of Kafka's most significant shorter works. Critical responses to the story have largely been concerned with interpreting its allegorical aspects, and with placing such interpretations in the context of Kafka's other writings and of certain biographical issues, such as his relationship with his father. There has been no agreement on the allegory it presents, and recent criticism has come to accept this fact. There is agreement, however, that the story's theme is religious, and that it is a story which sets out to examine a shift in the relationship between human existence and divine law. Accordingly, Kafka's Jewish heritage, and in particular the Jewish traditions of the parable and kabbala, have been considered important issues in interpreting the story. Kafka's detached narrative style—in which character description is minimal and the author's presence unobtrusive—is one of the admired qualities of this story, and it is a strong factor in its haunting effect. "In the Penal Colony" is considered by many critics to be an allegory comparing the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, with the officer's willing sacrifice serving as an analogy to Jesus Christ's suffering and death. Others have viewed the story as prophetic of the Nazi death camps of World War II.

Author Biography

Franz Kafka's father was a successful businessman in Prague, Czechoslovakia The city's elite was German-speaking, and for this reason the young Kafka was educated at German rather than Czech schools He eventually graduated with a law degree from the German University in Prague in 1906. He took a position in a workers' accident insurance firm which he held for fifteen years. Diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis in 1917, Kafka continued working at the company until ill health forced him to retire in 1922. He died two years later at a sanatorium in Vienna.

These brief facts of Kafka's life conceal much of the emotional turmoil he suffered. His diaries and correspondence show that he was obsessed with a perceived conflict between family life and artistic integrity. A diary entry from 1912 reads: "When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for ray being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed towards the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection, and above all music." Nine years later he was still reflecting, fatalistically, on marriage: "I do not envy particular married couples, I simply envy all married couples together; and even when I do envy one couple only, it is the happiness of married life hi general, in all its infinite variety, that I envy—the happiness to be found in any one marriage, even in the likeliest case, would probably plunge me into despair." Kafka was twice engaged to Felice Bauer, and the start to his failed relationship with her coincided with the writing of *The Judgment*, considered by most critics to mark the beginning of his writing career He had already completed several impressionistic sketches, but *The Judgment*, written in 1912, established both a key theme (a troubled father-son relationship) and what was to be a characteristic narrative technique for Kafka writing from the point of view of an unreliable narrator. Both *The Metamorphosis*, a story in which the central character wakes up to find that he has turned into an insect, and *Amerika*, his first novel, were written in the same year.

Kafka's second novel, *The Trial*, and the story "In the Penal Colony" were written in 1914. The works share common themes, both being meditations on guilt and punishment. In 1917 Kafka finished a series of stories known as the "Country Doctor Cycle." These are surreal tales told in a low-key, realistic style His third novel, *The Castle*, was published in 1922, the year in which Kafka retired from the insurance office. The last book to be published before his death was *A Hunger-Artist*, which contained stones about extreme cases of alienation, one of his most common themes.

Plot Summary

"In the Penal Colony" opens with an officer showing an explorer a remarkable apparatus, a capital punishment machine The explorer has been invited to witness an execution due to take place in a dry and desolate valley on a remote island. Four characters are present: the officer, the explorer, the condemned man, and a soldier. Also mentioned is a fifth character, a Commandant, who is responsible for inviting the explorer to witness the execution.

Although he has accepted the invitation, the explorer is unenthusiastic about the apparatus and initially indifferent to the plight of the condemned man. The officer busies himself making last minute adjustments to the machine. He is dressed in a heavy uniform, which the explorer considers quite unsuitable for the tropical climate. The officer agrees but explains that the uniform reminds him of home. He is a serving officer in a colonial military.

The officer explains the machine in great detail to the explorer. He also discusses that the present Commandant's predecessor was the machine's inventor. The plans, which he shows to the explorer, consist of an unintelligible "labyrinth of lines crossing and recrossing each other." The former Commandant is responsible for more than the execution apparatus. "The organization of the whole penal colony is his work," the officer tells the explorer. This is the first time, apart from in the story's title, that readers are made aware that this is a penal colony. The explorer has a hard time listening to the officer, who is speaking in French, a language which neither the soldier nor the prisoner understand. In this foreign tongue the principle parts of the machine—the Bed, the Designer and the Harrow—and their actions are explained. The Designer contains the cogs which drive the machine. The Harrow, made of glass, is set with needles designed to pierce the condemned man's skin in such a way that they write on his body the nature of his crime. The Bed. layered with cotton wool, is where the condemned man lies.

In the course of explaining the workings of the machine, the officer relates his dissatisfaction with the new Commandant, who shows little interest in the execution process and seems intent on seeing the machine slip slowly into disuse. No spare parts have been ordered for some time. However, the officer claims to have been appointed the penal colony's sole judge. "My guiding principle is this: Guilt is never to be doubted." In the case of the present prisoner, the reported crime is that he was found asleep on duty while in the employment of a captain.

The time comes for the prisoner to be placed upon the machine. By now the explorer, knowing the extraordinary nature of the machine, feels some impulse to intervene on the condemned man's behalf. However, he thinks to himself: "It's always a ticklish matter to intervene decisively in other people's affairs." He is further inhibited by the fact that he is a foreigner. Nevertheless, the officer sees the explorer as a potential ally. He continues to criticize the present Commandant, a man who surrounds himself with women and ignores the executions. In previous times, an execution was a great public spectacle, and children were given a place in the viewing gallery. He seems to think that

the sight of the present execution will persuade the explorer to lobby the Commandant for the machine's preservation. "Help me against the Commandant!" the officer implores.

The explorer eventually declares his disapproval of the procedure but also states, "Your sincere conviction has touched me, even though it cannot influence my judgement." The officer, having failed to procure an ally, abruptly releases the prisoner and takes his place on the bed after readjusting the machine to inscribe the sentence "BE JUST" on his body. The officer's self-execution does not go according to plan. Cogwheels begin tumbling from the machine, and the needles, rather than writing with slow but repeated pricking, jab uncontrollably, and soon the officer is dead.

When the explorer sees the face of the dead officer, "no sign was visible of the promised redemption." Leaving the valley with the soldier and the prisoner, the explorer is brought to a teahouse, one of many dilapidated buildings in the town. The soldier shows him the grave of the old Commandant, under a teahouse table. The patrons of the teahouse, poor laborers, move away to let the foreigner view the grave. An inscription speaks of a prophecy that the old Commandant will rise again. Having read this, the explorer passes out a few coins and then boards a ferry that takes him back to his steamship. The soldier and prisoner stand on the harbor steps, but the explorer refuses to let them board with him.

Characters

Colonel

See Officer

Condemned man

See Prisoner

Explorer

The narrative of "In the Penal Colony" primarily recounts the explorer's experiences. Typical of Kafka's protagonists, the explorer is a somewhat tenuous character, with little will of his own. .The explorer has accepted an invitation to view an execution. Initially, he is a disinterested bystander, but the means of execution and the officer's behavior lead the explorer to question the present Commandant's motives in issuing the invitation. He wonders if he is expected to play a decisive role in the execution process. The ambiguity of his role unsettles him.

The explorer is a foreigner, that is, he does not share the nationality of those who live in the penal colony. He may be French: French is the language in which he speaks to the officer. The explorer arrives at the penal colony with "recommendations from high quarters" and is known there as "a famous Western investigator." With this reputation preceding him, it is startling to observe how ineffectual he is. Ultimately, the injustice and inhumanity of what he witnesses compel him to voice his disapproval. He is "fundamentally honorable and unafraid," but he does not intervene during the execution or when the officer takes his own life. After viewing the grave of the old Commandant, he leaves the colony without comment and without offering assistance to the prisoner and the soldier who run after him to the water's edge, apparently hoping to leave with him.

New Commandant

Though he does not appear in the story, the new Commandant's presence is felt because he has invited the explorer to the island and because the officer speaks of him to the explorer. The new Commandant has inherited the penal colony's organizational structure and execution machine from the former Commandant, who originated the system. The new Commandant, however, shows signs of wanting to institute reform and has allowed the machine to fall into a state of disrepair Unlike the old Commandant, the new Commandant rarely attends the colony's executions and never explains the torture devices to visitors. According to the officer, the new Commandant has jeopardized the system of law and justice established by his predecessor. Critics who interpret the story

as a religious allegory often surmise that the new Commandant represents religious reform or the New Testament.

Officer

The officer was the technical assistant of the penal colony's previous Commandant, who was responsible for designing the execution machine— a "remarkable apparatus." Serving under the new Commandant, the officer continues to oversee the machine, but he also acts as the colony's judge, taking as his guiding principle the belief that "Guilt is never to be doubted." The officer tries to turn the presence of a foreign visitor to his own advantage, asking the explorer to make a public statement in defense of the execution machine. Much of the early part of the story is taken up with the officer's loving description of the machine's working parts. His devotion to this mechanical instrument of death is total.

After he fails to enlist the explorer's support in his desire to have the machine properly fixed and its continued use endorsed, the officer frees the prisoner, straps himself to the machine, and is killed quickly as the machine malfunctions. His self-chosen sentence, "BE JUST," is not properly inscribed on his body. Although he dies with a "calm and convinced" expression on his face, there is no trace of the "promised redemption" that other victims of the machine's justice have purportedly experienced.

Old Commandant

The old Commandant invented the execution machine as well as the organizational structure of the penal colony. During his time, he had many supporters and the colony seemed to thrive. The officer claims that the few remaining supporters of the old Commandant's ways are afraid to declare themselves, it is possible that the officer is the only one remaining. The old Commandant's gravestone lies under a table in a teahouse. The grave's unsigned inscription holds out the promise of his triumphant return. Critics who interpret the story as a religious allegory often surmise that the old Commandant represents orthodox religious tradition or the Old Testament.

Prisoner

The prisoner, or condemned man, is described in the story as being stupid and bewildered. He is entirely submissive and does not resist his impending execution. He cannot understand the explanation of the machine that the officer gives to the explorer in French, but is sufficiently curious to direct his gaze "wherever the officer pointed a finger." The prisoner has been arrested for disobeying and insulting an officer. After he fell asleep on duty, his captain lashed him across the face with a riding whip. When the prisoner fought back, the captain reported the incident to the officer. The machine has been programmed to engrave in his body the words: "HONOR THY SUPERIORS I"

When the officer realizes that the explorer does not intend to commend the method of execution to the new Commandant, he releases the prisoner from the machine and grants his freedom. The prisoner subsequently engages in horseplay with the soldier who had been guarding him, demonstrating his own ridiculous appearance in the clothing that the soldier had earlier cut from his body with a knife to prepare him for execution. After taking the explorer to the tea room beneath which the old Commandant is buried, and chatting there with some friends, he and the soldier chase after the explorer, apparently wanting to leave the island on his boat, but they make only a half-hearted attempt to escape and are left behind as the explorer is ferried to his steamship.

Scientist

See Explorer

Soldier

The soldier's role is to guard the prisoner and strap him onto the machine. He appears, however, to be somewhat incompetent. At one point, half-asleep, he allows the prisoner to lean too close to the machine during the officer's explanation and gets a handful of dirt thrown at him. The dexterity with which he slashes the prisoner's shirt and trousers so that they instantly fall off suggests he has been the officer's assistant for some time. The soldier does not understand the French spoken by the officer and the explorer, nor does he speak the same language as the condemned man. Nevertheless, he and the prisoner share a moment of joviality when he retrieves the prisoner's torn clothing from the pit with the point of his bayonet. Their relationship is further established when they spend time together at the teahouse after the prisoner is released and then both run after the explorer as he is ferried to his ship.

Traveller

See Explorer

Themes

Justice and Injustice

The story concerns the administration of justice in a penal colony. A time has recently passed when the operation of the colony's judicial system received popular support and approval. But this approval was gained by the popularity of the architect of the justice system and the execution machine, the Commandant. The new Commandant shows no enthusiasm for his predecessor's social order. Rather than trying to actively reform the system, it appears he is hoping to change things through benign neglect. In the meantime the old judicial system still operates, thanks to the dedication of the old Commandant's assistant, an officer who sees it as his duty to preserve the machine which inflicts the same fatal punishment on all who are charged, regardless of their crime. The colony's judicial system does not recognize the concept of injustice. Prisoners are not allowed to defend themselves. They are accused by word of mouth—in the case of the condemned man in the story, by Ms superior officer—and then executed without a judicial hearing or any chance to defend themselves. It is significant, and an example of irony, that when the guardian of the machine gives up his own life at the end of the story, the sentence which was supposed to have been inscribed on his body, had the machine worked properly, was "BE JUST."

Guilt and Innocence

The officer who oversees the execution machine considers one of the main merits of the colony's judicial system to be the fact that guilt is never questioned. "My guiding principle is this: Guilt is never to be doubted. Other courts cannot follow that principle, for they consist of several opinions and have higher courts to scrutinize them. This is not the case here." If the story were merely about the methods of dealing with isolated acts of criminal behavior—petty theft, for examples—the plot could be read as an exaggerated comment on the harsh and inhumane punitive methods of fundamentalist systems of law. However, the condemned man's crime is a fairly minor one: he fell asleep on duty and shouted back at his captain. His death sentence suggests that a point is being made about the inherent sinfulness of human nature. The execution machine becomes a symbol for the judgement that all people must eventually face. Due to the machine's twelve-hour cycle, victims become conscious of their sinfulness before the end comes. Guilt is written on the body while the body clings to life, and in the time remaining the prisoner must face his loss of innocence.

Punishment

Another feature of the colony's judicial system is that there is no gradation of punishment. The punishment—death—is the same no matter what the crime, except in one regard. The Harrow's needles inscribe a different sentence on the body of each

condemned person. The words comprise both a linguistic sentence (a series of words) and a penal sentence (the condemned person's punishment). This sentence is programmed into the machine at the start of the execution process by the operating officer. The prisoner is not told what it is before the machine is switched on. "He'll learn it on his body." The sentence is directly related to whichever commandment has been broken. Readers are given two examples. The prisoner who fell asleep on duty and shouted at his captain "will have written on his body: HONOR THY SUPERIORS!" The officer, in a bizarre act of sudden self-condemnation, selects his own sentence: "BE JUST."

Choices and Consequences

The explorer and the officer are the only characters in the story who act decisively, in accordance with their own beliefs. The soldier and the condemned man are submissive and merely play the roles assigned to them by the judicial process. They make a half-hearted attempt to take control of their lives at the end of the story, but they do not strongly assert their desire to leave the colony enough to make it happen. The explorer, as an outsider, is placed in the position of critical commentator. He knows this, and likewise the officer seeks his help because he sees the explorer's presence as one more ploy of the new Commandant in his efforts to destabilize the old order. The explorer's Western European background is repeatedly emphasized. The explorer chooses to declare his position to the officer, but also chooses not to report his views to the new Commandant. The officer, realizing that even without a formal and public declaration of criticism from the explorer that his efforts to prop up the old system of justice are doomed to failure. In light of this, he chooses to accept the consequences of his own system and throws himself at the mercy of the machine.

Science and Technology

The execution machine is a grotesque torture apparatus. Its workings are described in great detail in the story. Though it is not highly technical, it emphasizes the mechanical, no-room-for-error nature of the punishment process, as meted out by its operator, the officer. The explorer, who comes from a more enlightened background, seems at first uninterested in the machine. The officer, so proud of the old Commandant's invention, is apparently unaware that the machine, although horrifically efficient in its execution, is also comically grotesque. It is like the brainchild of a mad professor, as might be found in a traditional horror story, and Kafka provides it with the conventional demise for such machines. It breaks apart while in the process of dispatching its last victim, possibly symbolizing humankind's misplaced reliance on machines to perform perfectly. At the end of the story the explorer leaves the island by rowing to his steamer, another technical invention of the modern age, but one without the punitive overtones of the killing machine.

Style

Setting

The island colony is supervised by uniformed soldiers of various ranks. Although their heavy, ornate uniforms are unsuitable for the tropical climate of the colony, they are worn as reminders of home. "We don't want to forget about home," the officer explains to the explorer. The geographical and the political setting are only hinted at by Kafka. Readers know that the valley in which the execution machine is located is a hot and sandy place, surrounded by "naked crags." Readers know that the colonial force is probably not European, but that the officer is able to communicate with the explorer in French. However, there is much that is unexplained. Strictly speaking, a penal colony would be an outpost used by a governing country for the expulsion of criminals. The luxury of exiling wrong-doers to a faraway place is only an option for a great power. This particular colony seems to have an indigenous population. The women who surround the new Commandant and the dock laborers who sit at the teahouse tables may also have been imported by the colonial power. But their presence makes the island much more than simply a storehouse for convicts. It is a mixed society requiring its own codes of social behavior and own system of law and order. There is no reference to the customs and way of life of the home country, other than that they are not European and the Commandant is not bound by them. Indeed, the old Commandant set up the penal colony according to his own plan. "The organization of the whole colony is his work," the official tells the explorer.

Point of View

Kafka employs a detached, neutral narrative technique in which each character acts without comment from the narrator. The point of view, though third person, tends to be closely aligned with the explorer's experience. The story opens in the valley because that is where the explorer is. Readers accompany him to the teahouse at the end of the story, and it ends as he departs the island for his steamship Because of this relationship between the point of view and the explorer, readers identify with his intellectual and emotional predicament. Does he, as a guest of the colony, speak his mind about the execution process? Should he make a report to the new Commandant, or should he say nothing? The officer has the most to say, and spends much time trying to read the new Commandant's intentions. Until the very end of the story readers know about the old and the new Commandants from what the officer has said, and he cannot be considered a wholly reliable source of information. He claims to be "the sole advocate of the old Commandant's tradition." Others, called "adherents," he despises for their mealy-mouthed ambiguities and unwillingness to be open about their loyalties. Nevertheless, this "objective" point of view does not clarify the author's intentions. Kafka detaches himself from his characters in order to prevent being too obvious in his message.

Symbols and Symbolism

It is generally agreed that "In the Penal Colony" is a parable with meanings beyond the literal episodes described. Kafka was Jewish, and there is strong consensus among critics for interpreting the story as a commentary on orthodox versus reformed Judaism The officer represents the traditional orthodox wing of Judaism. The former Commandant's guiding plans—"my most precious possessions"—consist of "a labyrinth of lines crossing and recrossing each other" and symbolize the script in which the Commandments were written. The officer does not speak of laws being broken. He speaks of Commandments disobeyed. The number of biblical images that crop up throughout the story makes it impossible to determine a precise allegorical reading. Although the method is very different, the setting and the duration of the execution process certainly invite the reader to think about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This comparison is made more compelling by the imagery used—the blood and water being washed into the pit and the rice pap fed to the dying man. Finally, the officer sacrifices himself to the machine, and in doing so causes it to fall apart. By dying he destroys the very symbol of law and order he had purported to conserve.

Historical Context

The psychological discord evident in Kafka's writing was influenced in part by the chaos in Europe prior to World War I. Nowhere were the period's social, religious, and nationalistic conflicts greater than in his birthplace, Prague. By 1914 the Austro-Hungarian empire was coming to an end and World War I engulfed all of Europe. The war, which had been brewing for years, began when Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, members of the ruling Habsburg family of the Austro-Hungarian empire, were killed by a Serbian assassin protesting the Austro-Hungarian empire's claim over his country. The Austro-Hungarians declared war on Bosnia after they failed to comply with their demands for an investigation into the murders. This war's brutality was unlike anything the world had ever seen, and millions of casualties were caused by technical advances such as poison gas, guns mounted on airplanes, and trench warfare Militarism, hedonism, and nationalism reflected the attitudes of Kafka's day. The cruelty and futility of these events fueled Expressionism in art and increased Kafka's own anxiety and dread.

The key characteristic of Expressionism—a literary movement which spanned approximately fifteen years (1910-1925), the same period as Kafka's productive life—is said to be the shriek, an "expression" of interior terror. Kafka is not, strictly speaking, an Expressionist writer, but his work shares many Expressionist themes: hatred of authority and the father-figure; a belief that the universe and natural world are hostile to mankind; the knowledge, made graphic by the outbreak of World War I, that an old order was passing Max Brod's autobiographical novel, The Kingdom of Love, includes a portrayal of his friend Kafka as an Expressionist saint

Critical Overview

Although Kafka wrote "In the Penal Colony" in 1914, and it was published in German in 1919, there was no English translation until 1948. Accordingly, little criticism in English appeared before the 1950s. Austin Warren, in "An Exegetical Note on 'In the Penal Colony'," published in the Southern Review was one of the first critics to identify the allegory in the story as dealing with religion in the modern world. He theorized that the penal colony represents the whole earth where all people await judgement. In times past there was a systematic theology which meant that everyone knew his place. There was no question or argument about the fact that men and women were sinners and in due course they would be judged. The machine in the story stands for the religious framework that once held sway. The official is still faithful to this system, and he represents an orthodox theologian. The explorer represents secular humanitarianism. "In its tone," Warren wrote, "the story is a matter-of-fact description of an elaborate method of punishment, no longer believed in by the 'enlightened'." His reading of the story sees Kafka as sympathetic towards the machine, wanting to support the place of religion in the modern world. The machine is cruel, costly, and difficult to maintain, but these are prices which have to be paid if the religion is to survive.

In his 1962 book Franz Kafka, Parable and Paradox, Heinz Politzer agreed that the story is supposed to represent a universal view of life. "The lunar landscape surrounding [the machine] and the sea cutting off the island from the civilized world fortify this impression." Politzer was more inclined than Warren to see social and political resonances as well as religious ones in the story. "The machine ... is Kafka's prime symbol during these years. If his purpose was to concentrate in one universally valid image the process of dehumanization characteristic of the time of the First World War, then he found it here in this symbol of man's self-destructive ingenuity." Politzer's reading differs from Warren's especially in its application of the religious allegory. For Politzer the machine does not represent some highly developed religious structure but: "In its primitiveness the torture machine points to an archaic stage of religious development. ... The Bed of the torture machine is an altar, on which a man is slaughtered in honor of the monstrous idol___

In spite of its mechanical sophistication the apparatus seems to be a relic from the times of primordial savagery."

Kurt J. Fickert, in a 1965 essay on this short story, took issue with Warren's tightly allegorical interpretation. For Fickert "In the Penal Colony" is an existential story following the same pattern of presentation of a crisis and dilemma followed by a decision, which is to be found in Kafka's other work. "The machine's function in the story is to precipitate a crisis, to lure the mind into a trap, a decision." An existential reading focuses attention on the explorer and his predicament and provides a commentary for the characters' speedy departure from the island. "The traveller flees, like all mankind, with the instinct of self-preservation," in response to a fear-and-flight syndrome brought on by a perceived hostility in the environment.

Wilhelm Emrich, in his critical study of Kafka's writings published in translation in 1968, gives a reading which is more in tune with Warren's tightly allegorical interpretation. He believes the story is about the "total guilt of existence," not about a crucial moment when a decision is called for. Like Warren he sees the story as being critical of the new order. "The new law is the law of the Devil. The old order, for the sake of redemption, sacrificed man; the new order, for the sake of man, has sacrificed redemption."

In The Terror of Art, Kafka and Modern Literature, Martin Greenberg argued that the story is essentially about the conflict between morality and spirituality. The story is disturbing because of the central character's flight from the conflict. "Before this conflict between the moral and the spiritual, the explorer retreats into a neutrality which has nothing to do with his old scientific detachment His neutrality now expresses the troubled state of mind of someone who has had a glimpse into hitherto undiscerned depths."

Kafka was dissatisfied with the ending of the story, and his papers contained variant endings which have been taken into account by some critics. These critics have written about how such variant endings might affect the basic allegorical meaning of the story.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Thorn is the author of Tennyson (1993), a biography of the English poet, and a reviewer for the Times Educational Supplement. In the following essay, he examines "In the Penal Colony" and asserts that "first and foremost the story is a dream or a parable."

For most of his life as a writer Kafka was employed at a workers' accident insurance company He wrote at night, on weekends, and on the holidays. It was a routine which made the writing of a novel an arduous business. He did not enjoy writing novels. Indeed, he never succeeded in finishing one. But he did enjoy writing short stories. In 1912 he confided to his diary, having just completed a story called "*The Judgment*" in a single sitting, writing from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning: "with my novel-writing I am in the shameful lowlands of writing. Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul." It was a similar opening out of body and soul, two years later, that produced "In the Penal Colony," written quickly during a two-week holiday while he was in the middle of writing *The Trial*.

"In the Penal Colony" has the ghoulish intensity and enigmatic atmosphere of a dream. Immediately before Kafka wrote the passage quoted above in his diary, he stopped to consider the appearance of his undisturbed bed, "as though it had just been brought in.1' It is as if all the tossing and turning, all the normally secret brain activity of the night, has found an outlet onto the written page. By "coherence" he means a creative coherence, a flow of ideas, which he found it nearly impossible to achieve in the stop-start nature of novel-writing.

"In the Penal Colony" has been considered a difficult story. Some have argued that it is too difficult to teach, and that its underlying meanings are either too arcane or too incoherently presented to make them accessible to anyone but the most sophisticated reader. This may well be the case if one approaches the story in a stern endeavor to unravel its secret and establish the key to its allegorical meaning. Those who read Kafka in the original language have been more inclined to consider him a comic writer than those who read him in translation. Probably a degree of wit and wordplay is lost in translation, but there are surely sufficient comic touches, even in a story such as "In the Penal Colony" to make us aware that we are not dealing with a dry, message-oriented allegorist.

First and foremost the story is a dream or a parable. A parable is always open to a number of interpretations, and a dream does not follow human logic The beings which people dream about are sometimes recognizable as people they know, but they are rarely fully rounded characters, and they do not behave as if they inhabit the real world. Their motives are inexplicable, or barely explicable. In the final paragraph of this story the soldier and the condemned man, having been chatting away to some people that they each know at the teahouse, suddenly decide to run along to the harbor in pursuit of the explorer. "Probably they wanted to force him at the last minute to take them with him." Kafka's use of the word "probably" in this sentence indicates a double meaning to

the story. The sentence describes what is going through the explorer's mind as he sees them coming after him. "Now, what do those two want?" But the sentence can also be read to mean that Kafka, the author, is unsure why they are pursuing the explorer. He compounds this narrative uncertainty by writing: "the two of them came headlong down the steps, in silence, for they did not dare to shout." Similarly, the explorer does not call out to them, but he lifts a "heavy knotted rope from the floor boards, threatened them with it and so kept them from attempting the leap." There is something uncanny about this noiseless denouement. Something which makes the blood run cold more than any of the blood-thirsty machine descriptions which have filled the earlier part of the story. In just such a silent tableau do many dreams and nightmares end, on a note of narrow escape.

The atmosphere of dreams is evoked by a good number of short story writers. What makes "In the Penal Colony" so unsettling is its air of menace— that quality which has become known as "Kafka-esque," having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality. Several years after the original draft of the story was finished, Kafka began to play around with the ending, particularly with the role of the explorer. Of several experimental paragraphs which he wrote into his 1917 diaries, the following pose certain questions for those who interpret the story as an allegory:

The explorer felt too tired to give commands or to do anything. He merely took a handkerchief from his pocket, gestured as if he were dipping it in the distant bucket, pressed it to his brow, and lay down beside the pit. He was found in this position by the two men the Commandant had set out to fetch him. He jumped up when they spoke to him as if revived. With his hand on his heart he said. "1 am a cur if I allow that to happen." But then he took his own words literally and began to run around on ail fours. From lime to time, however, he leaped erect, shook the fit off, so to speak, threw his arms around the neck of one of the men, and tearfully exclaimed, "Why does all this happen to me!" and ihen hurried to his post.

As though all this were making the explorer aware that what was still to follow was solely his and the dead man's affair, he dismissed the soldier and the condemned man with a gesture of his hand; they hesitated, he threw a sione at them, and when they stii! deliberated, he ran up to them and struck them with his fists."

What?" the explorer suddenly said. Had something been forgotten. A last word? A turn? An adjustment?

Who can penetrate the confusion? Damned, miasmal tropical air, what are you doing to me' I don't know what is happening. My judgement has been left back at home in the north.

In the story as it was published the explorer is simply "greatly troubled" when the machine begins to go to pieces. "Almost against his will" he has to force himself to look into the face of the corpse, while putting the soldier and the prisoner into position, ready to lift the officer's dead body off the needles of the Harrow. It is clear from the above alternatives that Kafka thought the explorer's agitation needed greater emphasis. The

story is much better for not being altered. The explorer's coolness is in keeping with his character in the earlier part of the story. Would a man who can say plainly, and without any high-handedness or sense of bluster, "I do not approve of your procedure," later run around on all fours, or even throw stones and punches?

The explorer is consistently humorless and colorless. Earlier in the story when the officer is in full flight about the glory days of the former commandant the reader is treated to a typical example of Kafka's ironic black humor. Speaking about the public executions, and the previous clamor for good viewing positions, the officer explains: "The Commandant in his wisdom ordained that the children should have the preference, I, of course, because of my office had the privilege of always being at hand; often enough I would be squatting there with a small child in either arm." At the end of this effusion, creepily amusing in its "suffer the little children to come unto me" connotations, the officer "had embraced the explorer and laid his head on his shoulder." The explorer, embarrassed, does nothing but stare straight over the officer's head. Kafka's sense of humor as expressed in this passage has its roots in Jewish lore.

Kafka's fiction examines the fate of individual characters subjected to humiliating, embarrassing, bewildering, or sinister situations. The explorer is the quintessentially Kafkaesque character in "In the Penal Colony." Hence, the author's later alterations. It is the explorer who is discomforted, who is made to feel he has lost his senses. It is the explorer who takes flight.

Many of the essential ingredients of this story are lifted from horror tales of the nineteenth century, but stripped of Gothic trappings and placed in a sun-scorched dreamscape, they are reinvented by Kafka and injected with a sense of anxiety and of the essential ingredients of this story are lifted from horror tales of the nineteenth century, "but stripped of Gothic trappings and placed in a sun-scorched dreamscape, they are reinvented by Kafka and injected with a sense of anxiety and alienation."

"In the Penal Colony" has few trappings which tie it to a particular historical period, and those that there are—the steamer, for example—can be used to date it at least half a century earlier than 1914. Yet it is clearly a twentieth-century story, one which asks questions that have not been resolved in the last decades of the century.

Who stands in judgement over us? If it is to be neither God nor machine, are we to judge one another? If left to judge ourselves, might not the verdict, as it was in Kafka's own case, be mercilessly harsh?

Source: Michael Thorn, "Overview of 'In the Penal Colony'," in Short Stories for Students, Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Greenberg offers his interpretation of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," claiming that the story, although powerful, is not successful due to its lack of subjectivity and inability to reach the truth.

Kafka failed in *Amerika* for lack of a suitable narrative mode, the subjective mode of the dream story. In the short novel "In the Penal Colony," which he wrote in the fall of 1914, about the same time he began *The Trial*, again he seems to me to fail to master his material. Now, however, the failure is not due to artistic immaturity—now it is the failure of the mature artist to stick with sure instinct to the formal requirements of his own vision. Failure however is too strong a word here. One cannot call such a powerful story a failure. But neither is it a success.

Ideas obtrude in the story with unusual distinctness and in the end the reader is confronted with an intellectual dilemma rather than a living mystery— but not for want of a unitary image through which to tell the story. The image is there, and a very powerful one it is, in the shape of the penal island with its dreadful execution machine squatting in the middle of it—the image of a world under *the judgment* of the law. Nevertheless, as Austin Warren observes, "this story [is] pretty persistently and consistently allegorical"; that is, it refers one directly to ideas. If we examine what the allegory consists in and how it is presented, I think we shall find that the power of the story to disturb is not only due to its artistic power.

The world discovered in the story is in a state of schism, a world divided between the Old and the New. That is the essential allegory. On one side stands the traditional machine of judgment under the law, invented and built by the patriarchal old Commandant, now dead. By an ingenious mechanism of vibrating needles it writes a condemned man's sentence deeper and deeper into his flesh till at the sixth hour "enlightenment comes even to the most dull-witted"; at the twelfth hour he dies. The priest of this cruel rite is the officer-judge, a disciple of the old Commandant; he describes the workings of the machine with enthusiastic pedantry to the visiting explorer. On the other side stands the new Commandant, "always looking for an excuse to attack [the] old way of doing things"; his "new, mild doctrine" prefers humane judicial methods, but he hesitates to affront a venerable institution directly and therefore tries to subvert it by harassment and deliberate neglect.

The old law judged according to the principle that "guilt is never to be doubted"—the guilt of mankind was never to be doubted. Therefore no trial needed to take place. "Other courts cannot follow that principle, for they consist of various opinions and on top of that have higher courts over them." The old court then was absolute—the highest court. In the new, liberal order there is no highest court, only "various opinions."

The old law aimed at being eternal law: "We who were [the old Commandant's] friends," says the officer, "knew even before he died that the organization of the colony was so perfect that his successor, even with a thousand new schemes in his head, would find it

impossible to alter anything, at least for many years to come." But the new Commandant cares nothing about eternity; what he cares about, as a man of progress and the times, is "harbor works, nothing but harbor works!" A womanizer, he swims in the atmosphere of a crowd of admiring females; through the "women who influence him" the world is womanized. The old Commandant had "his ladies" too, but there was no petticoat government.

The condemned man vomits when he is strapped down in the machine and takes the felt gag in his mouth, because "the [new] Commandant's ladies stuff the man with sugar candy before he's led off. He has lived on stinking fish his whole life long and now he has to eat sugar candy!" The "new, mild doctrine" is effeminate and, by causing the condemned man to vomit over himself, degrading. But the condemned man vomits too because the felt gag has been chewed by hundreds rather than being changed for every execution as it used to be. So the new regime is callous as well as sentimental.

"How different an execution was in the old days!" exclaimed the officer-judge. Then the whole island gathered together in the true ceremony of belief and the Commandant himself laid the condemned man under the Harrow.

No discordant noise spoilt the working of the machine Many did not care to watch it but lay with closed eyes in the sand, they all knew Now Justice is being done. In the silence one heard nothing but the condemned man's sighs, half muffled by the felt gag. Nowadays the machine can no longer wring from anyone a sigh louder than the felt gag can stifle; but in those days the writing needles let drop an acid fluid, which we're no longer permitted to use. Well, and then came the sixth hour! It was impossible to grant all the requests to be allowed to watch it from near by The Commandant in his wisdom ordained that the children should have the preference often enough I would be squatting there with a small child in either arm. How we all absorbed the look of transfiguration on the face of the sufferer, how we bathed our cheeks in the radiance of that justice, achieved at last and fading so quickly1 What times there were, my comrade'

Under the old law, Justice was done. All shared ritually in the redemption which the condemned man found under the law in death. All stood under the same law and could look forward to the same redemption. Death redeemed. Of course, all this is according to the officer's point of view. But the point is that his is the point of view that excludes "points of view"—he lives the conviction of absolute justice.

That is how things were in the old days. Now, however, the sea of faith has ebbed. When the officer is unable to persuade the explorer, who remains convinced "that the injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable," to side with him against the new Commandant, he lies down with devout determination in *the judgment* machine to execute himself. But execution according to the old law is no longer possible, a new dispensation has succeeded; the machine can no longer "do Justice." Negated, it spits out its parts and goes to pieces, murdering the officer indecently instead of executing him: "... [T]his was no [ceremonial] torture such as the officer desired, this was plain murder." Death no longer redeems:

[The face of the corpse] was as it had been in life, no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found; the lips were firmly pressed together, the eyes were open, with the same expression as in life, the look was calm and convinced, through the forehead went the point of the great iron spike

As Professor Emnch comments, "The age of redemption is no more. The dead man remains stuck in life. He no longer can cross the boundary into the liberating Beyond. Man is consigned entirely to the earth."

Lawless sentimentality takes the place of implacable judgment, turning with satisfaction how the officer takes his place in the machine.

So this was revenge. Although he himself had not suffered to the end, he was to be revenged to the end. A broad, silent gnn now appeared on his face and stayed there all the rest of the time.

Justice no longer holds sway, but revenge—an internecine warfare of each against each, in a never-ending pursuit of the upper hand

In the cavernous, blackened interior of the teahouse, which makes on the explorer "the impression of some historical memory or other," so that he feels "the power of past times," the old Commandant lies buried. All that remains of the old order is a prophecy, written on his gravestone, that he "will rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait!"

"In the Penal Colony" takes place in historical time—the colony is a more or less recognizable possession of a European power of the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century—rather than in the timeless subjective dimension into which the protagonists of Kafka's dream narratives awaken out of historical time. Its subject matter is the religious history of the world, which it recapitulates in terms of the old times and the new times of a penal colony. Like most of Kafka's stories, it is concerned with spiritual need, but it treats this subject in historical terms rather than through an individual who experiences the despair of spiritual darkness in the timelessness of his soul. It is an historical allegory.

It would be a mistake, however, to read too-specific references into the allegory. The old regime of the old Commandant does not, for example, pointedly refer to Old Testament days, it only embraces them in its meaning, along with all the other old regimes that based their authority on a transcendent religious absolute. As an ancient idol which is at the same time a piece of modern machinery, the execution machine reaches from the present all the way back to the most barbarous times of Dagon and the other stocks and stones in whose name our worshiping fathers did absolute justice. The old ends and the new begins at the point at which justice based on supreme authority yields to justice based on "various opinions."

So far I have said little about the explorer, yet as the one through whose eyes the story is narrated and the embodiment of its moral point of view, his role is crucial for the way

in which the allegory is presented. A dispassionate observer of the "peculiarities of many peoples," an enlightened modern relativist and naturalist, from first to last he condemns the injustice and the inhumanity of the old law—so much so indeed that he is moved to abandon his attitude of scientific neutrality for once and intervene against the execution. Mixed, however, with his disapproval of the old judicial procedure is a growing admiration for the officer, even though he cannot but deplore his narrow-mindedness. Touched in the end by the officer's "sincere conviction," the explorer decides to do nothing to hinder the operation of the old law, although, by refusing the officer's plea to join forces with him against the new Commandant, he will do nothing to help it either. When the officer lies down under the Harrow to execute himself, he can only approve his decision: "the officer was doing the right thing; in his place the explorer would not have acted otherwise."

What the explorer is confronted with on the penal island is a moral choice between the old law and the new—the story arranges itself as a kind of contest between the two regimes to win his concurrence. The old law is primitive and cruel, yet the explorer must admire the spiritual unity and conviction it begets in its adherents, a conviction which is able to attain ultimate spiritual knowledge in redemption through final judgment under the law. On the other hand, it is just precisely ultimateness that the new law lacks. He despises its effeminate sentimentality, laxity and shallow worldliness. Nevertheless, he must approve its superior humanity: "The injustice of the [old] procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable." So actually it is not a moral choice that the explorer is faced with, since there is never any question of what his moral judgment is. The choice he faces is between morality and spirituality. The two have come apart. Before this conflict between the moral and the spiritual, the explorer retreats into a neutrality which has nothing to do with his old scientific detachment. His neutrality now expresses the troubled state of mind of someone who has had a glimpse into hitherto undiscerned depths.

And yet the glimpse he gains is historical rather than religious. It is not insight into religious truth but into the religious past. The explorer does not and cannot believe in the truth of the old law; what he sees is the way it was when mankind was ruled by the idea of supreme truth. The execution machine is an historical demonstration to him of the primitive unity of absolute justice and human society, spirit and the world. But that unity explodes under his very eyes when the officer dies unredeemed ("murdered") in the disintegrating machine—redemption under the old law is an exploded (literally exploded!) religious idea. What the explorer feels toward the old law is a mixture of horror and nostalgia: horror at its cruelty, nostalgia for its spirituality. The story is painfully divided between the moral and the religious (or rather between the moral and the religious regarded nostalgically) and in the end the explorer must flee the dilemma the colony presents him with in dismayed haste.

"In the Penal Colony" is not about the conflict between the moral and the religious; it falls victim to that conflict. The explorer's dilemma is only a dilemma because the question of the old law's truth has been left aside. Leaving aside the question of truth casts an obscurantist shadow over the whole story, introduces a moral and intellectual equivocation. When the question of truth is not left aside there can be only one choice:

we can only choose to be modern and go on from there. There is no going back to the old law, even if only to the extent of choosing to be neutral toward it as the explorer does. One of the reasons why the story is disturbing is this negative one: because it is morally and intellectually equivocal. The allegory teeters on the edge of a familiar snobbery, which was so strong in Prague among the sons of the Jewish middle class at the beginning of the century—the snobbery, as Werfel puts it in a quotation already cited, of "those ... who run around as mystics and orthodox believers only because every tailor, schoolteacher and journalist is a believing atheist." But working against the impression of snobbish obscurantism is the mute, unpalliated horror of the execution machine. Never do we lose sight of the fact that "the injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable." The positive power of the story to disturb is owing to the image of the execution machine; its finicky details testify incontrovertibly to injustice. The authentic power of the story lies in its image of a religiosity which is as wicked and destructive as it is spiritual.

In the more or less historical framework of the story, on its level of rational consciousness, the old Commandant's religion, as a relic of the past, can only move the explorer nostalgically, it cannot compel him at the center of his being. An outside observer, an onlooker rather than a participant, he is impressed by the old law's spiritual appearance— aesthetically. The explorer does not face a true dilemma in the penal colony, he is spectator at an allegorical confrontation.

The failure of the story is a failure to be subjective—and through subjectivity to reach the truth.

Source: Martin Greenberg, "The Failure to Be Subjective," in The Terror of Art: Kafka and Modern Literature, Basic Books, Inc., 1968, pp 92-112

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Fickert discusses the protagonist's escape at the end of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," and contends that his escape "reveals his inability to deal with the paradoxes of truth; but more importantly, the traveler flees ... with the instinct of self-preservation."

At the end of Franz Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony" the protagonist, variously called traveler, explorer, scientist, is in full flight "When they [the soldier and the condemned man] arrived down below, the traveler was already in the boat, and the boatman was casting off from shore. They could still have leapt in the boat, but the traveler picked up a heavy, knotted rope from the bottom of the boat, threatened them with it and thus kept them from jumping." Explanations of the traveler's escape and indeed of his entire role have not been completely satisfying; e g., Satish Kumar identifies the traveler with Kafka himself and interprets his retreat to the boat as "nothing else but the transition from dream life to reality." ("Franz Kafka: In der Strafkolonie," DeutschunterrichtfurAuslander, Xm (No. 5/6, 1963), 154; my translation.) An earlier explication by Austin Warren depicts the traveler as a convert to the machine and the religion it represents , "he excludes from his boat those who wish to escape from the penal colony." (See Cleanth Brooks and Robert Perm Warren, Understanding Fiction, New York, 1943, p 391.)

The difficulty with these surmises lies in the fact that they fit too readily into the over-all pattern, the allegory, which the interpreters insist upon finding in "In the Penal Colony." Of the several kinds of unity in Kafka's stories, however—method, purpose, style—a consistency in the use of symbols seems most conspicuously lacking. The heavy, knotted rope, for example, will not necessarily recur elsewhere. On the other hand, the theme of "In the Penal Colony" is not appreciably different from that in most of Kafka's stories and novels' man in a dilemma, called upon to solve the insoluble. For the protagonist here has no name but a philosophical label: scientist, explorer, traveler. He is called upon to make a decision in the matter of the execution machine; he must be either for it or against it. But the machine, described with apletho-ra of realistic detail, remains insubstantial and can actually be seen only as a number of philosophic tenets, the horns of the protagonist's dilemma. The machine's function in the story is to precipitate a crisis, to lure the mind into a trap, a decision.

With this framework, "In the Penal Colony" follows the pattern of the existentialist literary work, deftly traced by Helmut Kuhn in Begegnung mit dem Nichts (Munchen, 1950): "The word cnsis is derived from a Greek verb which means to separate (as with a sieve), to choose, to test, or to judge. Through the crisis man is tested. Testing, however, requires a standard—no crisis without a criterion The only philosophically valid cnsis is the crisis of criteria. Philosophy is this crisis. But this crisis itself demands a criterion, and if we omit it, we dissolve the crisis itself. Existentialism, which claims to be a philosophy of crisis, destroys the crisis" (p 173; my translation). Thus the execution machine faces the protagonist with the problem of injustice (also a religious problem, of course), but since the problem occurs in an existentialist framework, it predicates

insolubility. The nature of the machine is such that no basis exists on which it may be judged, and Kafka abandons the problem; the traveler flees. Helmut Kuhn analyzes this kind of retreat as the usurpation of the role of conscience by primitive fright (p. 156).

Fear in the face of the inexplicable and resultant flight appear again and again in Kafka; e.g., Karl Rossmann in *Amerika* finds refuge in an illogical Utopia and never grows up; in "Die Verwandlung" the escape is the entire story. Although the flight of the protagonist may have been an obvious device, since Kafka assumed that man's dilemma had no solution, he nevertheless exposed a deep root in man's emotional network in an act of psychological probing which makes his work compelling in spite of its self-defeating argumentativeness. Constant fear and incipient flight have been described in an article by Heini Hediger ("Die Angst des Tieres," Universitas, XTV, No. 9, September, 1959) as the primary motive force in animal life (before hunger and sex); "quick and purposive flight of the individual is the first duty toward preservation of the species" (p. 929; my translation). The dissolution of the existentialist's philosophic pretensions in panic flight becomes a key to an understanding of man's true nature: his fear of an ever-present though concealed hostility in his environment and his one weapon against the dark unknown—flight. When the traveler escapes at the end of "In the Penal Colony" he reveals his (and Kafka's and anybody else's) inability to deal with the paradoxes of truth; but, more importantly, the traveler flees, like all mankind, with the instinct of self-preservation.

Source: Kurt J. Fickert, "Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony'," in The Exphcator, Vol.XXTV.No. 1, September, 1965,item#ll.

Critical Essay #4

Brooks and Warren were central figures in the New Criticism movement in America in the 1930s and 1940s. In the following excerpt, the critics use Austin Warren's interpretation of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" to demonstrate that the story is "an allegory concerning the state of religion in the modern world."

One realizes that this story is not intended to be a realistic account of events which are to be judged by ordinary notions of probability. It is a fantasy. The strangeness of the situation, the unusual behavior of the condemned man and the soldier, the mysterious nature of the machine, all indicate that we are dealing with fantasy, just as we are in "The Lottery."

But are we to take the story to be merely fantastic? Do we not, rather, expect that the unrealistic and fantastic elements in such a piece of fiction as "In the Penal Colony" shall have some bearing, finally, on real human experience? The violation of our ordinary notions of probability, which is characteristic of fantasy, seems to promise an imaginative escape from ordinary experience, but in the end we discover that the intention of the creator of the fantasy is not to provide us with an escape from our ordinary experience but to provide us with an interpretation of our experience. In other words, fantasy as a type of fiction differs from other types of fiction merely in method and not in its basic intention.

The specific method employed by "In the Penal Colony" is allegorical In an allegory, one finds a surface narrative the items of which— characters, objects, and events—stand for ideas and relations among ideas. That is, in so far as the allegory is strictly maintained, there is a point-to-point equating of the surface narrative with the background meaning This method of communicating meaning is essentially different from that of ordinary realistic fiction. For instance, in "The Lament" the persons do not stand for ideas, and events do not indicate relationships among ideas. The old man does not stand for grief, for example, but is simply himself, an old man who is suffering from grief and loneliness. The meaning of the story, then, does not come from our grasp of particular concepts and relations as exemplified, item by item, in the narrative, but as a result of the total story: in so far as the character and situation of the old man work on our imagination, we become aware of the unthinking callousness of the world, and our comprehension of, and our sympathy for, the lonely and outcast are awakened. That is, we arrive at the meaning of a realistic story much as we arrive at the meaning of an event in real life.

This leads to a second distinction between allegory and realistic fiction. In realistic fiction, we are convinced by the logic of character and event, by our notion of probability. But in allegory the principle of organization does not finally depend upon the logic in the surface narrative, but upon the logic of the relationships among the ideas represented. Though the surface narrative may be more or less realistic, and in so far as it is realistic possess an independent logic, the emphasis is always upon the logic of the background.

"In the Penal Colony" as interpreted by one critic, Austin Warren, is an allegory concerning the state of religion in the modern world. We know that the characteristic beliefs of the modern world are primarily founded on science. Science is concerned with the realm of the natural and not with the realm of the supernatural. Its assumption is that the events of the world are in accord with natural laws, and that by the use of his reason man may become acquainted with natural law and can, in so far as his knowledge of that law is perfect, predict the course of nature. It pictures a completely rational world, in which there is no place for the irrational, the miraculous, the supernatural. It assumes that miraculous and supernatural manifestations would, if man's scientific knowledge were adequate, be seen to be merely natural phenomena. Associated with this belief in science is the belief in progress: as man learns more his control of nature increases and he can improve his world. That is, perfect knowledge, in the scientific sense, would bring perfect control of nature, including human nature. And associated with this purely natural or secular view of the world we find the belief in humanitarianism. Pain is the great evil, according to such a belief, and the conquest of pain becomes the greatest good. Furthermore, the idea of natural law as applied in human affairs leads to an emphasis on the idea of determinism—people are good or bad as a result of heredity and environment and not as a matter of responsible moral choice. Over against these beliefs which are characteristic of modernism as it is popularly understood are the traditional religious beliefs: that there is a supernatural realm, that God's will is finally inscrutable and that man must have faith, that the salvation of the soul is the greatest good, and that men are free moral agents. According to Austin Warren's interpretation, "In the Penal Colony" is an allegory of the conflict between these two sets of beliefs:

"The earth is a penal colony, and we are all under sentence of judgment for sin. There was once a very elaborate machine, of scholastic theology, for the pronouncement of sentence, and an elaborate ecclesiastic system for its administration Now it is in the process of disappearance the Old Commander (God) has died, though there is a legend, which you can believe or not, that He will come again Meanwhile the 'machine' seems antiquated and inhuman to ladies, who are sentimental about criminals, and to the new governor, who is a humanitarian.

"Important is the setting of the machine's draughtsman The first victim suffers under 'Honor your Superior,' the moral law which he has broken this is a law appropriate to his caste of servant. For his own use, the old officer adjusts the sentence to 'Be just' Has he violated this injunction" Not consciously, but a judge of his fellowmen should be 'j'ust' and no mortal man can be- 'none is Good save God': the old officer can be sure that, whatever his intentions, he has been unjust in the sight of Justice.

"At the end of the story, the explorer has become converted to the doctrine of the machine he excludes from his boat those who wish to escape from the penal island. 'Converted' is too strong if really converted, he would stay on the island—at least if the machine still operated But at least he makes no report to the new commander, and he takes the Prophecy of Return seriously when the men about him ridicule the inscription, he does not join in their laughter the Prophecy may be true Like Pilate, he refuses to judge; he finds no fault in the just manipulators of the machine.

"In its tone, die story is a matter-of-fact description of an elaborate method of punishment, no longer believed in by the 'enlightened.' kept going a little longer by the devotion of an old man who doesn't understand it very well and can't repair it Narration is from the point of view of, through the eyes of, the explorer, who is shocked by what he sees and yet who, unlike the present management of the penal colony, can understand the possible use of the machine in what is, after all, a penal colony, and who becomes increasingly sympathetic as he sees that the operator of the machine believes in it for himself as well as for others. But it is essential to Kafka's purpose that there shall be no suppression of the difficulties in accepting the gospel of the machine1 itis cruel, it makes errors; it is costly to keep up, people have ceased to believe in it; its inventor has died, and it is generally thought ridiculous to credit the pious legend that he will come again. 'My ways are not your ways, neither my thoughts as your thoughts,' saith the Lord___Kafka, fearful of softening religion, wants to present it in all its rigor, its repellence to the flesh—in its irrationality and inscrutability and uncertainty, too We must put up with the professional pnde and the pedantry of the old officer: religionists are always forgetting ends in absorption with means, taking human (and impious) pnde in the details of their theological and ecclesiastical systems Nothing is simple, nothing unmixed. We never get reality straight, but always through a veil of illusion If we are determined to be scrupulously posiuvistic and 'accept no illusion,' then we shall have to content ourselves with no more than statistics' we shan't find reality."

If Mr. Warren's interpretation of "In the Penal Colony" is acceptable, then one sees that the allegory of the story is strict rather than loose—that most of the details of the surface narrative have specific parallels at the level of ideas. One sees also that here we have a contrast between the fantastic surface—which cannot be judged in terms of the logic of actual experience—and the represented argument—which can be judged in terms of actual experience. That is, the argument in the background is a possible view of the subject under discussion, and is held by many intelligent people. There is an ironical contrast between the fantastic way of representing the ideas and the ideas themselves, which are not fantastic, which are one way of interpreting an actual situation; in other words, the fantasy may, ironically, be logical after all.

A similar irony is indicated in the contrast between the fantastic events and the style in which they are narrated. The style is a rather bare, factual style—the style of a person who is trying to be scrupulously accurate and does not wish to color the truth by indulging in any literary and rhetorical devices. It implies that the narrator is willing to let the case rest on the facts alone. It does not try, we might say, to provoke the reader to horror or sympathy.

This contrast between the fantastic events and setting and the particular style is commented on by Mr. Warren: "Its [the story's] powerful effect is indeed produced by its complete absence of fantasy in detail: The story offers, by its method, the sense of a fact which you can interpret as you like, of which you can make what you will: I'm telling you, as a sober scientist, what I saw " The style, then, has a dramatic function, in connection with the total story, just as it does in "The Killers" or "I Want to Know Why" or any other successful piece of fiction. It here indicates a fusion, an interpenetration, of

the fantastic and realistic elements of experience, an idea which is to be associated with the basic meaning of the story.

Source: Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, "Franz Kafka," in *Understanding Fiction*, second edition, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Appleton-Centu-ry-Crofts, Inc., 1959, pp 368-93.

Topics for Further Study

In literature, irony refers to an instance of something happening that is the opposite of what is expected. How is the official's death an example of irony?

From information in the story, produce a diagram of the execution machine.

Gershom Scholem, historian of Jewish mysticism, has identified Kafka as a neo-kabbalist. Find out what you can about kabbalah and identify two ways in which it could relate to Kafka's story.

Imagine that in his old age the explorer writes his memoirs and looks back at his own behavior at the penal colony. Which, if any, of his actions does he affirm or regret?

Why do you think Kafka was dissatisfied with the ending to the story? How might it be improved?

Compare and Contrast

1914: World War I begins in eastern Europe with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, members of the ruling family of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Following the assassination by a Serb, Austro-Hungarians declare war on Bosnia

1990s: Bosnia is torn by war between Muslims, Croats, and Serbs Turmoil continues following the 1992-95 war in Bosnia, with the country divided between Serbian and Muslim-Croat zones.

1900s: A penal colony is essentially a prison. In the early 1900s, prison rates in the United States range from a rate of 121.2 per 100,000 people in 1910 to 99.7 people per 100,000 people in 1923.

1990s: In the United States, the prison rate is 311 per 100,000 people in 1990 and 429 per 100,000 people in 1995. Rates vary among European nations. For example, in Austria in 1990, 68,092 adults and 3,630 are convicted. In 1997, the prison rate for the Russian Federation, 700 per 100,00 people, is considered to be the highest in the world.

1919: The gulag, the Soviet system of forced labor camps, is established in Siberia. Prisoners include common criminals, thieves, murders, as well as political and religious dissidents. Death rates are high, due to the prisoners' lack of clothing, food, warmth, and shelter.

1998: Following glasnost, Mikhail Gorbachev's new policy of openness, the gulag system is dismantled. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, all remaining prisoners are freed and the camps are destroyed.

Prague, A Divided City

Kafka was a German-speaking Jew. For centuries, Jews had lived in a ghettoized area of Prague. As a result, the tight-knit community gave rise to its own legends, the most famous being that of the Golem, a man made of clay who comes to life to destroy the enemies of the city's Jewish citizens. Living in Prague, Kafka thus felt doubly different from the Czech-speaking, non-Jewish population. His diaries and letters reveal a personality that was deeply neurotic and self-analytical. His family and personal relationships were difficult. Internalizing much of his surroundings, Kafka began to write his own tales of horror in which the monsters were modernity, bureaucracy, and the alienation caused by an industrial, mechanized age. Martin Seymour-Smith wrote, "Kafka was above all a realist: the most precise realist of his century. Of course he is a symbolist. But those who cannot find their unhappily true selves in the not unaggressive bewilderments of his protagonists are insensitive indeed." Kafka's dying wish was that his work be destroyed. The image of the self-destructing and disintegrating execution machine in "In the Penal Colony" is therefore suggestive of both a toppling social order

evident in the destruction caused by World War I and Kafka's own will to destroy his legacy.

What Do I Read Next?

The Trial, the novel Kafka was working on in the same year that "In the Penal Colony" was written, concerns a man, Josef K., who is arrested, tried, convicted, and executed, though he never learns what his crime is.

Jewish Folk Tales (1989), selected and retold by Pinhas Sadeh, contains over two hundred stories which document the Jewish tradition of humor and magic in fiction

The Book of Lights by Chaim Potok (1981) is a contemporary novel which concerns the conflict between age-old secrets of Jewish mysticism and the new scientific horizon of nuclear physics.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984) by Milan Kundera, a Czechoslovakian writer based in Prague during the 1960s and influenced by Kafka, concerns the hardships and limitations that can result from commitment and the meaningless of life without responsibility.

The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer (1982) contains stories colored by an East European tradition, all originally composed in Yiddish. Kafka and Singer are, on first consideration, very different writers. Examining the nature of their differences will help clarify the characteristics of Kafka's work which stem from his Jewishness and those that stem form his individual personality.

Further Study

Brod, Max, trans, by G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston, Franz Kafka. A Biography, Schocken Books, 1960,267 p.

An important work by Kafka's personal fhend Brod preserved and edited Kafka's manuscnpts after his death

Hayman, Ronald. Kafka- A Biography, Oxford University Press, 1982, 349 p.

A experienced biographer provides insights into Kafka's personal and family relationships

Kafka, Franz, ed. by Max Brod. The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910-23, Schocken, 1948-49.

Kafka kept extensive diaries throughout his life. The entries for the period during which he wrote "In the Penal Colony" focus on his difficulties in writing his novels

Neumeyer, Peter "Do Not Teach Kafka's 'In The Penal Colony '" College Literature.Vdl VI, No 2, Spring, 1979, pp 103-112.

Neumeyer makes several forceful criticisms of the John Muir translation of Kafka's works.

Tauber, Herbert. Franz Kafka An Interpretation of His Works, Haskell House Publishers, 1968, 252 p.

This book provides accessible readings of all Kafka's major texts.

Bibliography

Bloom, Harold, editor Gershom Sckolem, Chelsea House, 1987,240 p.

Brod, Max, editor. The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-23, Schocken Books, 1948-49.

Emnch, Wilhelm "The Construction of the Objective World and the Binding Law," in Franz Kafka. A Critical Study of His Writings, translated by SheemaZebenBuehne, Fredenck Ungar, 1968, pp. 268-75

Politzer, Heinz "Parable and Paradox- 'A Country Doctor' and 'In the Penal Colony'," in Franz Kafka Parable and Paradox, Cornell University Press, 1962, pp. 83-115

Seymour-Smith, Martin The Macmillan Guide To Modern World Literature, 3rd edition, Macmillan, 1985,1396 p.

Warren, Austin "An Exegetical Note on 'In The Penal Colony,'" in The Southern Review, Vol VII.No 2,1941, pp. 363-369

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535