

Life and Times of Michael K Study Guide

Life and Times of Michael K by John Maxwell Coetzee

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Contents

Life and Times of Michael K Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	11
Chapter 3.....	14
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	19
Themes.....	21
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	24
Topics for Discussion.....	25



Plot Summary

Michael K, the simple-minded son of Anna K, is raised in a state institution and finds work as a gardener in the city of Cape Town. When his mother becomes ill, he quits his job and tries to move her back to her birthplace in the country, Prince Albert. After failing to untangle the bureaucracy required to get a travel permit (and with his mother's health declining), "K" builds a cart out of scrap and begins the journey on foot (pushing his frail mother in the cart). After being turned back once at a checkpoint on the edge of the city, K succeeds in getting out of town, but his mother dies soon afterwards. K is given her ashes and he proceeds towards Prince Albert. En route, he is detained for not having travel papers and he is assigned to a work detail on a train. When the job is finished, K leaves and continues on to Prince Albert.

K finds what he believes is the farm his mother spoke about. It is abandoned and K soon learns to live off the land. When one of the relatives of the real owners of the farm arrives, he treats K like a servant and K retreats up into the mountains. There, K becomes very aware of his surroundings, but seldom eats and grows malnourished. K eventually staggers back into town and is picked up by the police and sent to a local work / refugee camp, Jakkalsdrif.

At the camp, K soon finds that the so-called "free" camp really isn't free. He meets a friend named Robert who explains why they are tolerated by the locals of the town (for the cheap labor). When saboteurs attack Prince Albert, the camp residents are blamed. When the police captain takes over the camp and clamps down on its residents, K escapes back to the farm.

K finds that he feels "trapped" in the house and builds a shelter out in the open, where he can watch his new garden. K sees a group of rebels come out of the hills and use his garden, but he stays in hiding. K then grows sick again and he stops eating. K becomes delirious and he is picked up by a group of soldiers who eventually take him to the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp in Cape Town. He is accused of aiding the rebels.

The doctor at Kenilworth takes a liking to K and realizes that he is a simpleton who is being unfairly accused. K refuses to eat the camp food and grows more and more emaciated. The doctor tries to understand the reasons behind K's stubbornness. The doctor tries to get a release for K, but in the meantime K escapes.

In Sea Point (the Cape Town suburb where he lived with his mother for a time), K meets up with some nomadic townspeople who feed him. Eventually, K returns to the old apartment and wonders about his garden in Prince Albert.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Michael K was born with a "hare lip" that repulsed his mother right from the beginning. The pink line ensured that his mouth would never close completely. He had trouble feeding from both her breast and a bottle, which frustrated her even more. The only thing that worked was feeding him from a spoon. The midwife had said that the lip would close over time, but it didn't. Anna K (his mother) took Michael K to work with her and isolated him from the other children. She polished floors while he sat in silence. Michael was not judged smart enough to attend regular school so he was sent to a special state institution, Huis Norenius. There, Michael K not only learned reading and writing; but he also did manual labor such as sweeping, scrubbing, and digging.

"K" left school when he was fifteen years old and went to work as a gardener for the parks and gardens department at Cape Town. After three years there, he went to work as a night attendant where he cleaned public bathrooms. Following an incident where he was attacked and badly beaten late one night, he went back to working days at the Parks and Gardens. After awhile, K became head gardener. He liked working in solitude because people had never liked him due to his face. Michael always visited his mother on Sundays.

When Michael was thirty-one, he started taking care of his mother Anna full time. She had been in declining health for some months and had just left the hospital. Michael found the facilities at the hospital to be terrible and the hospital would not give him a wheelchair for his mother, even though she couldn't support herself. She sat by the road with him waiting for the bus, which was almost an hour late. The weather was getting colder and it was affecting Anna.

Anna K had worked as a servant for eight years in Sea Point (a Cape Town suburb), at the Cote d'Azur apartments. Her employers had given her own room in the five-room apartment "flat." When she started to become ill, the Buhrmanns let her go on light duty, but Anna was terrified that she would get fired and forced to move back to her "home." Her room was a small, stuffy area under the stairs. Michael would spend his evenings with her every night after work; the room was very cold. He would then catch a bus so he could get to work early the next day and repeat the process. Michael did not mind the extra burden as he felt it was his duty to take care of his mother.

In desperation, Anna decided on a plan to leave the cold, crowded city and return to the place of her birth, Prince Albert. She remembered growing up in the small town, far from the city. When Anna proposed the plan to Michael, he accepted it without hesitation (much to her surprise). Anna had saved some money to get them to their destination. "K" went to the train station the next day instead of going to work. He found that the clerk would not sell him a ticket without a state permit. Pleading due to his mother's health did him no good. The clerk insisted that the process would take at least two



months. K went to the police station and spent two hours filling out forms. Spending the damp nights in his mother's room was making him sick as well. He was very anxious, having nothing to do during the day.

K broke into his old work shed and stole a wheelbarrow and some hand tools. He spent his time working on a hand cart to push his mother (he was not optimistic about the permits). Although reluctant at first, Anna soon became used to small trips in the homemade cart. After an accident on the street with a military vehicle, there was a riot during which K and Anna hid in the apartment. Riot troops cleared the area by shooting indiscriminately. After the riot the police restricted travel to the outlying areas. K went up to the Buhrmann's apartment above them and found it abandoned and in disarray. He convinced Anna to move upstairs after he cleaned up. K salvaged all the food that he could and he tried to cover the broken windows. But there was electricity and hot water, so they stayed. K paid his rent at the hostel where he had been staying and told them he wouldn't be back. He spent more time improving the handcart.

One morning, men came and cleared out all the furniture in the apartment without explanation. K realized that they were wasting their time waiting on the permits and eventually convinced Anna to let him take her by cart. He was hopeful that they could get a ride once they got to the main road. It was only 5 hours by car to Prince Albert. K put his mother in the cart, which was packed with blankets and provisions. He had also fitted a canopy on top of the cart, to protect his mother from the worst of the weather. They left at dawn and K soon found the effort of pushing the cart exhausting. There were many other people moving about with bikes, carts, and even tricycles. They stopped for lunch by the side of the road. A military convoy came by and a soldier warned K to stay well off the road or he could be shot on sight. At the checkpoint, K was turned back after pleading to be allowed through. The soldiers would not allow him through without a permit. Devastated, K pushed his mother back to their apartment.

Two days later, they tried again and this time they left well before dawn. K stayed to the side roads this time. He also managed to get a short ride from a passing truck, who took them to the far side of town. K realized it might take days to get to Prince Albert. At nightfall, they slept in some dense undergrowth near the road. It rained at night and even under the tree, they were soon soaked. In the morning, K had to fend off two would-be robbers with a pipe. They walked the side of the expressway with many other people-some dressed for church. K would pull well off the road when he saw a military convoy approaching. That night they entered the town of Stellenbosch. K and Anna slept in an alley. Anna was getting sicker.

In the morning, Anna was feverish and could not sit up. K took her to the local hospital, where he left her to be attended to. Hours later, he saw that she was still in the hallway and had not been looked at. He could not hear her breathing. The nurses threw him out and he came back at night, when a new shift had started. The nurses would not allow him to sleep at the hospital. K found Anna in a hospital ward, the next day, with a tube up her nose. She was unresponsive and would not eat. The next day, when he returned and could not find his mother, he was told she had died. The staff asked him questions but he refused to sign their papers. The next day, K was given Anna's possessions,



some supplies, and Anna's ashes in a parcel. K spent the next several days in shock, milling around the town. He could not get any garden work so he slept under the railway bridge with some other vagrants. K ate once a day, using the money his mother had given him. He grew despondent and he slept more and more. When his cart turned up missing one morning, he didn't care. One day a horse-drawn cart pulled up beside him on the road and K had an impulse to hitch a ride. K walked past the next town of Paarl after he was dropped off by the cart. He was careful to avoid towns and checkpoints. He went several days without eating, but he noticed that he still had his strength. A soldier stopped him near an accident on the road and took most of his money after searching his belongings (including his mother's ashes). Disgusted, K abandoned his suitcase and started to travel overland. K slept in an abandoned shack and ate some rotting fruit on the ground after getting dizzy. K found a vegetable garden and ate until he was sick.

The next morning, K had joined a line of people on the road to Worcester, when he walked into a roadblock. Because K was without papers, the police arrested him and put him in a train car with thirty other prisoners (although he was finally fed). A man on the train told K that they were being taken to Touws River. The train stopped at a mountain pass, where the hillside had collapsed and covered the tracks with rocks. K was put on a work gang to help clear the tracks. K found the work difficult in his weakened condition and he collapsed, but he was forced back to work. The men worked until midnight, when they collapsed, exhausted, on the train floor. The train reached Touws River the next day, where the guards unexpectedly left them alone in the rail yard. K immediately ducked through a broken fence and entered town. K slept on the street and bought some supplies the next day before leaving town. Walking across the countryside again, K felt elated and relaxed all at once. He was growing to love the country. At Laingsburg, K was given a room for the night by some strangers. He was fed, but the family's children stared at his lip during the meal. K set off the next day for Prince Albert. He made the journey by foot in four days.

K inquired for a Vosloo or Visser in town (names his mother had given him). He was told of an abandoned residence that had been owned by the Visagie's far out of town. K walked all day, reaching the farmhouse at the base of the foothills just before dusk. It seemed different than his mother had described so K wondered if he was in the right place. Part of the roof was damaged, but otherwise, the house was intact. K had to break a windowpane to get into the house. He slept on a feed sack the first night. K found goats the next morning, running free behind the house. He decided that he had to kill one to survive so he spent all of the day and most of the night trying to kill a goat before he managed to drown one in the mud. The next morning, K was disgusted by what he had done. After struggling to clean the muddy animal, K ate "without pleasure." He felt sick and came down with a fever. K spent three days in a delirious state before he began to recover.

K made a sling to kill birds. He fixed the pump and dam on the edge of the property and began to cultivate a garden. He had found pumpkin seeds in the shed, which he planted and watered. K spent his days working the garden and living off the birds he killed with his sling. K also buried the ashes of his mother down by the dam. As time went on, K felt more and more uncomfortable in the house and he spent many nights sleeping by



the dam, under the stars. K loved opening the dam and watering his plants at sunset. He worked to keep from feeling depressed. K realized that farming was his passion. K lived by the passing of the sun and soon forgot all about the outside world and the war.

One morning, a young man came to the farmhouse claiming to be Visagie's grandson. K was frightened so he told the man he worked at the farm and the grandson assumed that he had been hired by his relatives. K hoped the man's stay was only temporary because K resented the intrusion into his life. The grandson admitted that he was a deserter from the army. He ranted against the war and made suggestions as to what K should plant. The grandson questioned K about his wages and why the house wasn't stocked (K spoke vaguely of getting paid two rand a week). The grandson began treating K like a servant. K watered his pumpkins for the last time and walked towards town, but instead of going into town, K went up into the mountains until he found a cave. K tried to forget about his experience with the Visagie grandson and that his plants which were already dying without him.

K ignored his body's cries for food and stayed in his cave. He dreamed and enjoyed the silence around him. K saw the people, who looked like dots from his cave, moving in the village far below, but he could hear no sound. K then found a new cave higher up the mountain near the snow line. K had been told what to do his whole life so left on his own K just spent his days sitting and thinking. K ate less and less. The only food he had to eat was roots and grubs. The hunger pangs eventually stopped and K "emptied his mind," up in his cave. K wandered the mountain in a stupor, even water made him sick. K finally crawled down towards the village after he began shivering uncontrollably. The police found him delirious and assumed that he was drunk. K was sent to the hospital, where he again found he could eat. After several days of recovery, K was driven to a "resettlement camp" several miles out of a town called Jakkalsdrif. K realized he had seen the camp from his cave far above, but he had had no idea people lived there.

The camp was lightly patrolled by "Free Corps" which were police with blue berets. Jakkalsdrif consisted of several huts, surrounded by a nine foot barbed wire fence. K was given a bunk and he mingled with the refugees. There were many families in the camp. K soon found he had to work for his food. The camp wasn't a jail, but he wasn't free to leave either. Some women in the camp would let K have their scraps after eating. K asked a man why people didn't escape and was told that it was a camp, not a prison. If any one left camp without permission and was caught, he would be sent to a hard labor camp called Brandvlei. K told his story about his mother and his journey. He met a man named Robert who had been kicked off his farm job and detained with his family. Robert spoke of men in the mountains, who came out at night to disrupt the government villages, called saboteurs.

K went out on work detail with Robert the next day. He found himself exhausted after only a few hours of clearing brush and digging holes. Robert spoke of how the town of Prince Albert despised the refugees in the camp but they still relying on the cheap labor of the refugees. On Sunday, K noticed that the gates were opened so that people could walk to church or go into town for supplies. K went for a walk, but returned to camp. He gave half his wages to Robert to help him support his children. The women still gave



him scraps so K never went into town. K slept many days and he skipped his work assignments. After the details went out for the day, K asked the guard if he could leave the camp. The guard refused and they argued. Finally, the guard told K that he would be shot if he attempted to climb the fence. K spent his time over the next few days talking to the same guard. The guard asked K about his face and shared his lunch with K.

K was pushed to work the next morning by Robert, who explained that the work detail that day was a special job for a relative of the police chief (Captain Oosthuizen). The relative, a farmer, drove K ruthlessly the entire day. Then, one night, there was an explosion from the direction of Prince Albert. The welding shop in town had mysteriously exploded and the fire had spread through the town. Two men were later seen heading towards the camp. The following morning, the local police raided the camp. Tents were collapsed and detainees were herded into lines and searched with dogs. All belongings were confiscated and scattered in a pile. K comforted some crying children. The captain berated the former free corps guards and screamed at the detainees that they were ungracious criminals and that they would starve. Captain Oosthuizen took over the camp and cracked down on all privileges. Army troops were posted at the gates with orders to shoot anyone outside the wire. All outings were cancelled. Dazed residents took hours looking for their belongings in the rubble. Fights broke out over ownership. The next day, the usual food supply did not arrive. K wondered if they were really going to let them die. But a work truck arrived the next morning and K spent the day fixing fences. There was a roll call now when leaving and entering the camp. One of the old guards was stabbed. K had had enough so he slipped over the fence that night and went back to the farm.

K approached cautiously, looking for any sign of the Visagie grandson. He found no sign of anyone. He avoided the house and slept out by the dam and his dead plants. He built a small shelter between two steep cliffs, which gave him a cave-like structure which was open at both ends. Although K realized that a hard rain would wash through his dwelling, he wanted a "home" that he was not bound to and that would not outlast him. K disguised the entrance so it could not be seen from the dam. K started his pumpkin patch anew and looked forward to the day when he could eat them. K began eating intermittently again and when he did it, he ate mostly bugs and roots. K's clothes tattered around his thin frame. Occasionally there would be a passer-by on the road and K would freeze in terror; only to see them move on. K watered only at night and sparingly because he worried that a green acre in the dry hills would look conspicuous. He also guarded the fields from the wild goats, which would eat his crops. K began to sleep in the day and tend to his fields by night. He soon learned to navigate the area in total darkness. "He avoided the farmhouse as a place of the dead, except when he had to visit it to hunt for necessities." K despised modern tools and made his own out of the objects at hand.

One morning, the front door to the farmhouse was open, K found evidence that someone had been in the house. K thought it was soldiers hunting rebels. Then as K awoke one morning, he spotted eight men on donkeys in the valley below his shelter. They were armed and they were milling about by the dam, using the water. He realized that they were the saboteurs who had terrorized the town. He wondered if they would



embrace him if he walked out to greet them, but K did not go to them. The men left the next morning.

K went down to survey the damage. About half of his crops had been eaten by the donkeys or trampled during the night. He saw a helicopter overhead and he grew worried that his pumpkins would be spotted. K fought back an urge to flee back to the mountains, but he grew more confident everyday when no one came. He watered his crop meagerly now, tending to them at night. A heavy rain washed out his "house" but he quickly rebuilt. When he ate his first pumpkin, it was better than he had hoped. K cried with joy as he chewed. But he grew worried as they grew larger and camouflaged them with grass.

It was growing colder and K had to wear his coat. He began to sleep more. The daylight hurt his eyes. By now his eyes could remain unfocused for hours in the blackness. He began to see idleness as a joyous part of freedom. K was free from the forced labor of the camps. He could work or not work; it made no difference. K tried to picture his mother living at the farm long ago. The pumpkins were ripening at once and he had no way of storing them. K grew weak so he ate more of the pumpkins, but it did not make him feel better. K stacked the pumpkins and covered them with mud to disguise them.

Then K awoke one day with no sense of hunger. He lay in a stupor and felt far away from himself. He dreamed and watched more days pass. Then another storm hit and again the water surged through his shelter, reviving him. He emerged shivering and thought, "one cannot live like this." He wandered deliriously towards the dam and sat down. K heard a vehicles but he could not stand. The soldiers found him and asked him questions to which he mumbled strange answers. They gave him food, but he could not keep it down. The soldiers found his shelter and accused him of helping the rebels. The soldiers searched the area, looking for food and weapons. They found nothing but K's pumpkins. Captain Oosthuizen arrived and recognized K's face. He knew that "Michaels" had escaped from Jakkalsdrif a few months before. They beat K, but he was too weak for interrogation. The soldiers demolished the house and mined the field by the dam. K was taken away by truck.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Once K realizes the isolated manner in which he chooses to live his life, he becomes paranoid about anything which could get him caught (with valid reason). K intuitively knows that he has no "rights," and with no papers he would be victim to the whim of anyone who discovered him. Therefore, K decides he will take extreme measures not to be found. K sees the Visagie grandson as a threat (even before he tries to make K a servant) because, as an army deserter, it is possible the grandson will draw an army search patrol to the farm. The cave far above the city would probably have kept K "safely" away from the army, if only he could have found (or wanted) enough food to sustain himself while there. K's gulley "home" allowed him to be hidden, while watching the surrounding area for intruders. K's greatest dilemma was his garden. It was his greatest joy and hope, but also his greatest fear. He was vulnerable while out in the



open, watering and tending his plants which is why K switched to a night schedule. But the ever-growing pumpkins stood out against the dry grasslands, "like a sore thumb." This gave K the idea to cover the pumpkins with grass and mud, to disguise the bright orange color. K was caused much anxiety by his pumpkins. His garden was his reason for being and also his greatest risk of getting caught.

The chaotic atmosphere of the military police and work camps makes K realize that even though the military is supposedly "assisting" people who "play by the rules," there are no rules anymore. K tries to live within the constrictive structure of the camp, but he soon sees that they are all at the mercy and whim of the camp commander and the guards. When Captain Oosthuizen takes over with his "iron hand," K escapes. He does not consider the risk of getting shot because K knows intuitively he can not survive within the camp for long. In reality (which comes to play out in Chapter 2), the longer K is "free," the harder he finds it to live in captivity. His time at the farm and in the mountains makes it extremely difficult for him to adapt to the constrictive camp life.

Apartheid-era South Africa (on which the story is based) was a very tumultuous, especially for civilians. The government used violence to maintain its rule over the increasingly unhappy masses. Many innocent civilians were caught in the middle. This caused a backlash against the government, which merely escalated the situation. The author takes the stressful environment and expands it to the scenario of an all out civil war (which did not, in reality, take place).



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

K is weighed in at less than ninety pounds when he enters the medical ward at the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp in Cape Town. The doctor was told that he was running a staging ground for rebels in the mountains. K had collapsed during physical training and had labored breathing signs and a low heartbeat. The doctor asked why someone in such obviously bad shape would be forced to do strenuous exercise. The guard said that K hadn't complained.

K could not keep food down, but said that there was nothing wrong with him. He was placed on a food drip (which he was too weak to fight off). K claimed to be thirty-two, but he looked like an old man. He was familiar with the Cape and he knew the area where the camp had been built. K made strange statements that make the doctor believe that his mother was dead. K did not seem interested when he was told that a very simple operation would fix his mouth.

Captain Noel explained to the doctor that K was accused of being an arsonist, supplying rebels with food, and escaping from a refugee camp. The doctor didn't understand how "Michaels" could have been running a garden to feed rebels while starving to death. K tried to explain his name was Michael, not "Michaels." Noel wanted the doctor to speed up the discharge process. "Michaels" loved spending time basking in the sun when allowed. He spoke of his childhood at an institution and he looked out the window a lot.

The camp had been built on the old racetrack on the edge of town. The signs announcing race information had not even been removed. K made no sign of recovering. He liked to lie on the bed and look out the window, smiling. He held a packet of pumpkin seeds against him. K got cold at night and complained about being made "fat." The doctor found himself spending an inordinate amount of time on K's case.

There were more attacks on Prince Albert and the police chief asked for "Michaels" to be interrogated again for more information. Noel and the doctor took K in the storeroom for questioning. K was unresponsive and he enraged the doctor when he said that he was not in the war. The doctor explained that everyone was in the war, whether they wanted to be or not. K seemed unimpressed with the threats of punishment. Noel asked about the garden and K explained that it belonged to no one but the earth. The interrogation went on but K responded less and less. The doctor and Noel left to discuss their progress. The doctor maintained that K was innocent because he was too stupid to have done what he was accused of. He pleaded with Noel to make up a story and let him go. Noel protested. The doctor said that, "He is not of our world. He lives in a world all his own." So they agreed to make up a story and drop the charges against K.

Unfortunately, K was put in with the regular refugees and returned after two days unconsciousness. He had refused to sing with the men and had collapsed in the middle



of punishment exercises. He woke up soon after being readmitted and pulled the feeding tube from his nose. He looked like a stick figure yet he refused to eat. Infuriated, the doctor asked what kind of food he wanted and if he was fasting. K replied that he, "never asked for special treatment." Later, K simply said that he wasn't going to die; he just couldn't eat camp food. The doctor pressed Noel for a discharge to get him out of the camp to die somewhere else. He explained what K had said about not eating camp food and added, "maybe he only eats the bread of freedom."

K looked more like a skeleton with every passing day. The doctor explained to K that he would die if he didn't start eating. But K seemed indifferent; he hadn't eaten anything since removing his feeding tube. The doctor tried to get him to eat a squash he bought at the market, thinking it was close to pumpkin. The doctor was obsessed with how K came to be involved in the war. He thought that K's big mistake was in not seeking independence far earlier, because he was chained to his mother. He saw K's mother as feeding off K's life and the doctor thought that K now wanted to join her in death. The doctor also wanted to know what K lived off of for a year in the wilderness and why food was tasteless to him now. He thought K should have hidden much better, because there was no place in the civilized world for him and it would destroy him now.

The war was getting worse. The doctor and Noel talked of what was to happen. The remaining rehabilitation camps were to be converted immediately to internment camps. Lights and guard towers were to be added to the camp.

K escaped from the camp one night by climbing the wall. The doctor urged Noel to write him off as dead instead of filing an escape report. The doctor assumed he has gone off somewhere to die. K had eaten nothing for two weeks. Noel agreed to sign the death certificate after the doctor checked the outside perimeter, looking for a body. The doctor went back inside the camp and stood on the old racetrack, looking up at the sky. Then four hundred new prisoners arrived and the doctor was shaken out of his old reverie. Several prisoners had died en route and their facility was not set up to house them all. The doctor found out that Kenilworth was scheduled to be upgraded to high security and that five hundred more beds were to be added. The doctor debated getting out while there was still a chance. He considered taking Noel and moving out to the mountains. The doctor thought that he might be able to catch Michaels if he acted quickly and he could beg Michaels to let him tag along. The doctor understood Michaels at last. He saw that Michaels had wanted to live but his will was so strong that it would not allow him to change his nature. Michaels had to be free. The doctor imagined what he would say if he ever found K again.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Beginning as an enigma to the doctor, K's case grows into an obsession. K claimed as he became more and more skeletal that, "he was fine." Only after K's escape did the doctor truly understand that he had not understood that K's spirit was still strong despite his physical weakness. The doctor finally saw K's need to be free as so unbendable that K would die for if necessary. After realizing that his life was about to become

considerably worse as the camp was "upgraded" to a prison, the doctor envied K and wanted to feel real freedom as well.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

"Michael K sat on a bench beside the miniature golf course on the Sea Point esplanade, facing the sea, resting, gathering his strength." Michael K listened and waited. K felt at peace and relaxed for some time on the bench. Many more buildings were boarded up than he had remembered. He felt strange, since he was naked inside his overalls. K entered the old Cote d'Azur building, looked around, and then, he went back to the beach. In a public toilet near the beach, K was asked to leave by a man accompanied by another man and a woman (looking to use the privacy for sex). One of the men guarding the door spoke to K at length. The man saw that K was naked under the overalls and noticing K's physical condition, the man offered him some food. K ate some bread and condensed milk. The man kept calling him, "mister treefeller." Another woman joined them and K offered to carry her bag, but she refused. Sitting under some pines, K had more food and some wine which made him very dizzy. The man explained that they had lived in an abandoned business for several months, but that they had a decent life because they had food and money. K explained his time at Kenilworth and he told them about his travels before the camp. Before they went to sleep under the pines, someone found a sheet of plastic for K to keep warm. One of the men took K's seed packet during the night, but K retrieved it in the morning.

K walked on the beach and he found his mother's old apartment. K then went back outside to lie on the sand and he felt that something inside him was "letting go." K stumbled into the public toilets again looking for water. One of the men from the night before found him and offered him brandy. He became numb as soon as he took the drink. One of the women came in and gave him oral sex. They sat in the sand talking for some time. K found out that the man went by the name December (but that it wasn't his real name). Then the man told K that he would be taken to a party that night and to enjoy Sea Point.

K walked out to the beach at sunset, ashamed at what had happened with the woman. He felt sick and drank heavily from a working faucet he found by the Cote d'Azur apartments. He urinated as he kept on drinking. He was very lightheaded and walked into his mother's old room. Furniture was stacked all around, from floor to ceiling. He found a blanket in the corner to lie down on, but he could not sleep. K thought about his life. He realized that he was a gardener for himself and he never would have figured that out if events hadn't transpired as they had. People saw him and took pity on him because they expected to hear of his life in a cage. But in reality, K was the one that was free. "I am a gardener," he said. He had no shame in being simple. K thought that his one mistake was in not having more seeds to spread around over more land. K had discovered that his time was his own out in the countryside.

Michael K laughed at the thought of someone putting him in a cart and taking him back to the farm, where he could live.



Chapter 3 Analysis

K found inner peace as he lay near death in the apartment (the story leaves it up to the imagination whether he actually dies or not). K saw himself as lucky because he had found freedom in a very "unfree" world. He realized that many of the passersby in his life that took pity on him would never know the freedom that he had known. Emaciated and sick, K thought ironically that it would have been funny if someone could put him in a cart (like he did for his mother) and take him back to the dam to start repairs. The destruction of the house did not concern K; it was the dam and its water (with the properties of life) which obsessed him. K knew that if he could still get water, it would all be all right again. K's only regret was in not having more seeds to plant more.



Characters

Michael K

A simple man who was born with the deformity of a "hare lip" and despised by his mother. Michael K was institutionalized at a government school and later found work as a gardener for the city (where he learned to enjoy isolation). When his mother became ill and needed his help (she had no one else to turn to), K knew it was his place to take care of her. After his mother's death, K wandered aimlessly before finding his mother's old farm and realizing the joys of gardening. K soon found happiness in isolation and living his own life. He realized freedom for the first time in his existence.

When his freedom was encroached on by a relative of the owners of the farmhouse who tried to make K his servant, K fled farther still from society, up into the mountains. K lived in the mountains in solitude, until he stopped wanting food and grew sick. K escaped from both a government refugee camp and a rehabilitation hospital because he wanted to be free.

At the rehabilitation camp, K came under close scrutiny by the camp doctor who had difficulty understanding K's refusal to eat. After escaping, K went back to his mother's apartment and thought of his freedom and the farm.

Anna K

Michael K's birth mother who disliked her child once she saw his disfigurement. Anna put K in a government institutional and only asked for his help when she had no one else to turn to. Anna was a rather cruel woman but her son was dedicated to taking care of her. Anna lived her life in fear. She feared of losing her job, getting sick, or being put out on the street. Anna didn't consider the sacrifice her son would have to make to accomplish her dream of returning to Prince Albert.

Anna became ill and was forced to ride in a hand cart which was pushed by K. Anna died en route to Prince Albert and was cremated. K returned her ashes to the farm in Prince Albert.

Robert

Robert is a refugee who had lost his farm job and been displaced along with his family. Robert was turned in by his ex-employer, picked up by the police, and taken to Jakkalsdrif refugee (detention) camp. He became friends with K and shared many of his thoughts about camp life and the town's attitude towards the camp. Robert is a very jaded individual who realized he had no real options in life because of his responsibilities to his family. He told K that the camp residents were merely a means to



an end. The government only kept them alive because bodies would look bad for the government.

Robert was assisted by K at the camp (K gave him a portion of his wages for his family). In turn, Robert make sure that K knew which work details he could not skip. He also helped K keep his perspective when he felt overwhelmed by the masses of people at the camp and the hard work, which he was not healthy enough to accomplish.

Oosthuizen

Oosthuizen was Prince Albert's brutal captain of the police. He routinely used the local work camp as cheap, forced labor for his own purposes. Oosthuizen ravaged the camp after an explosion in town that was blamed on refugees. He replaced the regular camp guards with his own troops and ended all camp privileges. At one point while accusing the camp population of being "ungrateful," he threatened to let them all starve. Oosthuizen's arrival precipitated K's escape from the camp.

The Doctor

The infirmary doctor at Kenilworth rehabilitation camp in Cape Town was responsible for taking care of K when he was brought it. The doctor came to believe that K ("Michaels") was an innocent being unfairly prosecuted for being in the wrong place at the wrong time so the doctor convinced his friend Captain Noel to let K off the hook. The doctor became obsessed with K and struggled to discover the reasons K wouldn't eat the camp food.

The doctor thought initially that K wanted to kill himself, but he came to understand that K did want to live; he just wanted to live on his own terms. After K's escape, the doctor realized that the camp was coming under more strict military control and he was envious of K. The doctor fantasized about following K and begging K to let him live a life like his.

Noel

Noel was the Captain of the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp in Cape Town. Noel worked closely with the doctor at the infirmary to deal with K ("Michaels"). Originally Noel believed the army report that K was a rebel collaborator, but he was persuaded by the doctor that K was an innocent. Noel was also persuaded by the doctor to drop the charges against K and to sign a fake death certificate after K's escape.

Noel was not a strong believer in the war and he looked forward to a time when the war would be over. Noel contrasted himself with the brutal officer who previously held his position at the camp and he took pride in his kinder approach. Noel believed that showing kindness would come back to help him if there were war crime trials (which meant he believed that rebels might win).

December

December was the leader of a criminal band in war ravaged Sea Point. He was intrigued by K and felt pity for him. December fed K and got him intoxicated immediately after K's escape from Kenilworth. December was a rogue who continually changed his name to stay "unrecognizable" by the police. December dealt in prostitution and theft.



Objects/Places

Huis Norenus

The state run institutional "school" where Michael was raised.

Cote d'Azur

The apartment complex where Anna worked and lived with the Burmanns.

Cape Town

Cape Town is a large coastal city in South Africa.

Sea Point

The suburb of Cape Town where Anna had her apartment.

Prince Albert

Prince Albert is an outlying town 200 miles east of Cape Town in the Karoo district. It was the place where the farm Anna was raised on is located. K found "his" own farm near Prince Albert.

Cape Peninsula

The greater Cape Town area.

Karoo

Karoo is a high, grass plateau located in upland South Africa, approximately 200 miles east from Cape Town. Karoo is the district where Prince Albert is located. It was also a term synonymously with phrase, "the country." (Wikipedia, 2005)

Jakkalsdrif

Jakkalsdrif is the Refugee / Detention Camp near Prince Albert where K was "held" for some time.

Veld

Slang for Bushveld, the term *Veld* refers to African field or grassland quite similar to American prairie. (Wikipedia, 2005)

Kenilworth

Kenilworth is the rehabilitation camp in Cape Town where the doctor tends to K.

Rand

The Rand is the South African unit of currency. At the time of the story, one Rand was equivalent to approximately \$1.50USD. (Wikipedia, 2005)



Themes

Freedom / Police State

Loosely based on reality, the author makes the country of South Africa into a police state in order to set the story. The military (government) is fighting rebels and all the civilians are caught in the crossfire. A tangle of papers and signatures is needed just to travel around the country. K's desire to be left alone (his cry for freedom) does not impress the doctor at the rehabilitation camp. K says that it wasn't his war, but the doctor replies that it is everyone's war. K holds out by sheer force of will and refuses to eat the camp food. K wants to eat, "the bread of freedom." The doctor eventually comes to understand and even to envy K.

There is no traditional "happy ending," in the story. Michael K ends up near death in his mother's old apartment, thinking about farming (it could be inferred that he was about to die). But the point was that he knew he was free and was lucky to have found freedom in his life. K also realized that many of the people who had pitied him over the years weren't free and never would be. Even as a very simple man, K experienced freedom and decided that it was not worth living without it. As simple a pleasure as growing pumpkins in solitude meant the world to K. All he wanted was to live this simple life. It proved much more difficult than he had hoped to live freely. K had to almost starve himself in the hospital to be free.

Farming and the Simple Life

K originally discovered the joy of gardening as a career, working for the Parks Commission. K did enjoy the solitary work, but he rediscovered gardening on the farm. He saw true happiness when he had to farm for himself and later realized it was his choice instead of being just a chore he had to perform. This fact made the simple act of growing his own crops very meaningful to him. K cried when he tasted his pumpkins for the first time and knew that they were the results of his labor.

K felt bound to the earth, he told his interrogators that it belonged to no one. K believed that even his crops, "belonged to the earth." K's goal in life was to see his fields grow. His only disappointment at the end of the story was that he didn't carry more seeds with him to plant more crops. K wanted to plant a variety and spread them out over miles of "free" countryside, moving nomadically from place to place to tend for them all.

K had a lot of stresses in his life, but he didn't live in fear like his mother did. She worried about where she would live and, eventually, she died worrying. K simply acted and did what he thought had to be done. K didn't worry. K faced his obstacles and overcame them. K was much more clever than he appeared (which worked to his advantage numerous times).



Isolation and Starvation

K simply wanted to be left alone to live his life in peace. While working for the parks commission K discovered that he loved working by himself. Once he was out on his own, K sought out isolation whenever he could. The farmhouse out of town provided him with independence until the owner's grandson turned up. When that situation became unbearable, K withdrew further from society all the way to the mountain cave. Unfortunately K could not sustain himself physically on the mountain because he had only bugs and roots to eat. Eventually, K became so sick he couldn't even drink water.

K realized that, "no one should have to live like this," so he returned to "society." K later struck a compromise by living near the old farmhouse, but living outdoors instead of inside the farmhouse.

Several times in the course of the story, K suffered from severe malnutrition, either purposely or because of sickness. K went through periods of being naturally hungry, which then faded to the typical "euphoric" feeling usually associated with the middle stage of starvation. K was able to maintain this euphoria for some time so he experience the world in a dreamlike state, where he would sleep at will and stare into the distance, as if in a trance. Luckily, he came out of his "trances" in time to get help.



Style

Point of View

The "Life & Times of Michael K" is told in the second person for most of the story (with the exception of parts of Chapter 2 which are written in the first person voice of K's doctor at Kenilworth). The point of view mostly presents Michael K's view of the world along with his perceptions, thoughts, and actions.

Setting

The main setting of the story takes place in apartheid era South Africa, sometime in the 1960's-1970's. The story moves between places such as the urban wasteland of Cape Town to the rural town of Prince Albert. All towns referenced in the book are real (the author lives in South Africa). During the novel, K travels from Cape Town east, through Paarl, Worcester, Touws River, and Laingsburg and finally arrive at Prince Albert. At the end of the story, K returns to Cape Town.

Language and Meaning

The majority of the story written through K's perception of the world. K simply wants to be left alone. K does not understand why people do not understand his wishes. K becomes indifferent to the cruelty he sees at the camps, but he still helps people out. He realizes that he must be free at any cost, even if the cost is his life. In Chapter 2, which is written from the doctor's perspective, the doctor struggles to understand K, and eventually he does.

Structure

The "Life & Times of Michael K" is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 details the birth of Michael K, his escape from the city, the death of Anna K, and Michael K's arrival at the farm near Prince Albert. Chapter 1 also covers Michael's detention at Jakkalsdrif, as well as his flight to the mountains and his return to the farm. Chapter 2 delves into Michael's stay in the infirmary at Kenilworth. Michael escapes to Sea Point in Chapter 3 and returns to his old apartment.



Quotes

"What do you think the war is for? Thief. Watch it. You could be lying in the bushes with flies all over you. Don't you tell me about war." Chapter 1, pg. 58

"I needed more warning. I should have been told I was going to be sent back amongst people." Chapter 1, pg. 117

"You get a choice and you choose Jakkalsdrif. Because we are not going to have people wandering around being a nuisance." Chapter 1, pg. 126

"You climb the fence and I'll shoot you. I swear to God I won't think twice, so don't try." Chapter 1, pg. 134

"You appreciate nothing! Who builds houses for you when you have nowhere to live? Who gives you tents and blankets when you are shivering with cold? Who nurses you, who takes care of you, who comes here day after day with food? And how do you repay us? Well, from now on you can starve!" Chapter 1, pgs. 144-145

"Your friends from Prince Albert have been misbehaving. They are making a nuisance of themselves. We need to catch them, have a talk to them. We don't think you are giving us all the help you can. So you are getting a second chance. We want you to tell us about your friends: where they hide out, how we can get to meet them." Chapter 2, pg. 218

"You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weight of you." Chapter 2, pg. 230

"It was a mistake. In fact his life was a mistake from beginning to end. It's a cruel thing to say, but I will say it: he is someone who should never have been born into a world like this. It would have been better if his mother had quietly suffocated him when she saw what he was, and put him in the trash can. Now at least let him go in peace. I'll write out a death certificate, you countersign it, some clerk in the Castle will file it away without giving it a glance, and that will be the end of the story of Michaels." Chapter 2, pg. 245

"Well, you may not be a pole-vaulter, Michaels, but you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees: I take my off my hat to you!" Chapter 2, pg. 263

"Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground." Chapter 3, pg. 283



Topics for Discussion

Why did Anna put K in the state institution?

Why did Anna choose K to help her if she truly resented him?

What is the difference between the fictional South African culture and the culture as described in the novel?

Were the refugees really "free" at Jakkalsdrif Camp? Explain.

Explain the symptoms of starvation and how they affected K's state of mind.

What methods did K use to grow and tend to his garden "stealthily"?

Why did K refuse to eat at the rehabilitation camp?

Was the doctor right about K's mother being a terrible burden on him?

Did K die at the end of the story (or was he about to die)? Explain.

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