The Trial Study Guide

The Trial by Franz Kafka

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Introduction

Franz Kafka is one of the greatest influences on Western literature in the twentieth century. He has inspired a whole range of artists from the creators of the detective story to writers of the television series *Twilight Zone.* He began work on *The Trial* in 1914 after a horrendous encounter with his fiancé, Felice Bauer, her sister, Erna Bauer, and Grete Bloch (a short-term lover). According to Kafka's friend Max Brod, he never finished the work and gave the manuscript to Brod in 1920. After his death, Brod edited *The Trial* into what he felt was a coherent novel and had it published, despite the German ban on Jewish literature, in 1925. The manuscript eventually passed from Brod's heirs to the German national literary archives in the late 1980s for several million dollars. Since then, new editions have been published and some textual integrity restored to the English version of the story.

Author Biography

The first of six children, Franz Kafka was born in 1883. His father, Hermann Kafka, was an industrious man; he owned a dry-goods store in the Jewish ghetto in the city of Prague. Hermann was ashamed of his Jewish heritage and tried, as much as possible, to appear German. He married into a higher social class when he married Julie Loewy, Franz's mother.

A bright child, Kafka was an excellent student at a prestigious German high school. When he grad- uated his parents rewarded him with a trip to the North Sea. Afterwards, instead of entering the family business, Kafka decided to go to university. As a student, his rebelliousness led to reckless living and deteriorating health. In 1902 Kafka met the writer Max Brod, and the two men became close friends. Kafka published his first work, *Description of a Struggle,* in 1904. In 1906, Kafka received his doctorate in law from the German university, Karls-Ferdinand, in Prague.

Armed with his law degree, Kafka entered the insurance business. Through a family contact, he began a successful sixteen-year career as one of a handful of Jews working in the semi-public German Workers' Accident Insurance in 1908. There he produced technical writings with a masterful lucid prose. He worked long hours and then managed his brother's factory. Seeing the obvious strain on his friend, Brod begged for help from Kafka's mother. She secretly hired a manager to take her son's place. During this time, Kafka lived at home, in a room between the living room and his parents' noisy bedroom. He gained some recognition as a writer when he was awarded the Theodor Fontane Prize in 1915.

Kafka never married. He had several long-term relationships but companionship troubled him and he wrote in his *Diaries* that he viewed "coitus as the punishment for the happiness of being together." Kafka sabotaged his long engagement with Felice Bauer in 1917. Two years later he was engaged to the daughter of a janitor. Kafka's father said that the shame of such a match would be so disastrous that he would have to sell his business and emigrate. In response, Kafka wrote the angry and self-lacerating *Letter to His Father* and gave it to his mother. She decided against giving it to her husband. Kafka broke off the relationship just after they had found an apartment together.

Not surprisingly, work and family strains began to take their toll and Kafka took restorative vacations for his health. Finally, in 1923, he retired from business in order to devote himself to writing. He also moved to Berlin. Missing the activity and tensions of home, he returned. His health problems persisted, however, and he traveled to find a kinder climate for his fragile condition. Kafka died of tuberculosis on June 3, 1924, in Kierling (near Vienna, Austria).

Plot Summary

The Arrest

At the start of *The Trial,* Joseph K. awakes on the morning of his thirtieth birthday. He is greeted by two warders, Franz and Willem, who tell him he's under arrest, and introduce him to the Inspector. He refuses to tell K. why he has been arrested. Confused, K. is surprised when they let him go with orders to come back for his trial. After work that evening, K. talks with his landlady, Frau Grubach, who is sympathetic to his plight. K. likes Fraülein Bürstner, whose room the Inspector had commandeered. When she returns late at night, K. insists on talking to her about his day, and then makes a grab for her.

First Interrogation

K. is told to present himself for a brief inquiry into his case. He goes to the address, only to find that it's a tenement house. A woman doing laundry directs him to the Court of Inquiry. The Court is sitting in a stuffy room, packed with bearded men in black. K. addresses the audience about the stupidity of the court. He is cut off by a man grabbing the laundry woman and shrieking.

The Offices

K. returns to the offices the following Sunday, but no one is there except the laundry woman. She is the wife of the Usher, and explains that the man who had grabbed her was a law student, Bertold, who has been chasing her. K. examines the books left on the table, only to find that they are pornography. The Usher's wife tells him about the Examining Magistrate, but Bertold enters and carries her off. The Usher returns and complains about Bertold, and he leads K. into the labyrinthine law offices in the attic to look for him. They pass through a hallway filled with accused men. K. feels faint and has to sit down. He makes his way out, carried along by a man and young woman, badly shaken.

Fraülein Bürstner's Friend

K. wants to talk to Bürstner again, but cannot find her. A commotion in the hall reveals that Fraülein Montag, a sickly teacher, is moving in with her. Joseph is upset, and goes to Fraülein Montag. She won't tell him why she's moving in, and says that Bürstner doesn't want to talk to him.

The Whipper

K. is walking to his office in the Bank when he hears a horrible scream. He finds the warders, Franz and Willem, being whipped in a storeroom. They plead with him to help them, but the whipper is adamant about doing his duty. K. tries to buy him off, and fails. The next week, still troubled, he goes back to look at the room, only to find the whipper and the two warders there again.

K.'s Uncle

K.'s Uncle Karl, upset over the case, comes in from the country. They go to see one of his uncle's friends, Dr. Huld, who is very sick but knows all about K.'s predicament. K. is distracted by the Lawyer's nurse, Leni, and sneaks off to visit her in the middle of the conversation. Leni shows him her webbed fingers, and tries to seduce him, giving him a key so he can return at any time. He returns, and his uncle berates him for fooling around when he should be resolving his case.

The Painter

K. obsesses over the case, which has dragged on for six months. One of his work clients, a manufacturer, knows about his situation and tells him that a painter, Titorelli, might be able to help. K. goes to see Titorelli. The painter explains that things are never as they seem and elaborates on the nature of the plea system. K., disheartened, leaves after buying three identical pictures from the painter, only to find that this building too has law offices in its attic.

Block

When K. decides to dismiss Dr. Huld, he finds a half-naked man, Block, with Leni. Block describes his own case, which has been going on for five years. Block tells him that it is widely believed that K. will lose his case. K. consults Huld, who tells him that Leni sleeps with all of the accused men. Dr. Huld, to illustrate the nature of the law to K., makes Block abase himself.

The Cathedral

K. is asked to escort a client around the cathedral. While there he meets a priest who tells him he is the prison chaplain, and that his case is going badly. The priest relates a parable called *Before the Law.* A man from the country comes to the door seeking admittance to the Law, but the guard says he can't enter. The man sits and waits by the door for years, trying to find a way to make the guard let him in. Finally, when he is about to die, he asks why nobody else ever came to the door. The guard says that the door was only ever meant for him, and now it will be closed. K. and the priest discuss

the parable. Is the doorkeeper subservient to the man or vice versa? Did the man come of his own free will? Is he deluded? The priest says that it is not necessary to accept everything as true, only to accept it as necessary. K. counters that the world must then be based on lies.

The End

On the evening before his thirty-first birthday, two men come to Joseph's apartment and take him away. At an abandoned quarry they take off his coat and shirt and lay him down. Taking out a butcher knife, they pass it to each other over him. He is supposed to take it and plunge it into his own chest, but he doesn't, instead looking over at a house across the way. Someone is standing at the window on the top floor. Joseph wonders who it is, and where the Judge is, and the High Court. He holds out his hands and spreads his fingers. One of the men takes the knife and stabs him, twisting the knife twice. K.'s last words are, "Like a dog!"

Characters

Uncle Albert

K.'s Uncle Albert rushes into town after hearing from his daughter, Erna, that K. is on trial. He is extremely annoyed that K. is unconcerned with his predicament, "Josef, you've undergone a total metamorphosis; you've always had such a keen grasp of things, has it deserted you now?" K.'s uncle impresses upon him that the honor of the family is at stake. Albert represents the accomplished man and exposes the collective nature of K.'s actions.

Bertold

The "first student of the unknown system of jurisprudence" that K. meets is Bertold. "This horrible man" with bandy legs and a scraggly red beard, is in pursuit of the Usher's wife. At first it appears that he is pursuing her for himself but he carries her off to the Examining Magistrate.

Rudi Block

"Block, Block the merchant" is a little man. Before he divested all his holdings, he tells K., so as to focus himself entirely on his case, he was a successful grain merchant. When he meets K., he has illegally employed five petty lawyers, called hucksters, to his cause. His crime is unknown too. His relationship with Dr. Huld, however, is strange and masochistic. Mr. Block, from K.'s viewpoint is a dog with no self-respect.

Fraülein Bürstner

Bürstner is K.'s neighbor. She is a single, independent woman making her way in the world.

As such, she is K.'s ideal of femininity but the traditional Frau Grubach is suspicious of her morals for the same reason. When K. stops by to apologize for an event she was never aware of, he learns that she too is "fascinated with court matters. The court has a strange attraction □ " She also tells K. that she will "start next month as a secretary in a law firm." With a possible intelligent female ally before him, K. launches into a noisy summary of that morning's events that ends with a strange declaration of love in the form of an unwanted sexual advance. This assault is a symbolic arrest of Bürstner's equanimity with the world, which she acknowledges by carrying her head bent at the neck back into her room.

K.'s failed attempt to create a positive relationship with a decent woman is indicative of his actions at large. He believes himself to be good with details and negotiating, but he

is boorish and heavy-footed in his approach. As a final reproach to K., she is the last person—other than his wardens —that he sees on the way to his execution.

The Chief Clerk

When the Chief Clerk emerges from the corner of Dr. Huld's room, he represents the obscurity of the Law.

Elsa

K. pays a weekly visit to Elsa, a waitress in a wine house who receives daytime "visitors only in bed." Leni says she is too tightly corseted in her photo. K. chooses, on one occasion, to see her instead of going to court. This preference for a distraction doesn't help K.'s standing with the court.

The Examining Magistrate

Although he writes all night in a school exercise book and sits in court all day, The Examining Magistrate never reveals the charges against K. The one time The Examining Magistrate has a role, he says, "You're a house painter?" This apparent mistake sets K. off on a defiant speech. The Examining Magistrate appears to seek solace in his notebook while K. talks. Throughout the rest of the novel, The Examining Magistrate is referred to in hushed tones though he is "so small he's almost tiny." He chases the Ushers wife and reads pornography.

Franz

The first guard K. sees, after he rings his bell for Anna, is Franz. He is a young man with a wife who pleads with K. to save him from the whipping. Along with Willem, Franz asks K. for a bribe and for his clothes. To K.'s protestations, Franz says, "You see, Willem, he admits that he doesn't know the Law and yet he claims he's innocent." The two guards eat his breakfast; K.'s complaints about their actions lead to their punishment.

Frau Grubach

"The only person I can discuss [my case with] is an old woman," K. says to himself while looking at Frau Grubach. To her the trial "seems like something scholarly." Frau Grubach is K.'s landlady and she is very fond of him, though, like most everyone else, she avoids shaking his hand. Grubach also owes K. a large sum of money. She suspects K. is guilty.

Hasterer

See Prosecuting Counsel

Dr. Huld

The ailing Dr. Huld is a famous lawyer although he is not a great lawyer. K.'s uncle introduces him to Dr. Huld. Huld is important enough that court officials pay him visits and, in fact, when K. and his Uncle enter, the Chief Clerk is sitting, unseen, in the corner. K. is frustrated by Dr. Huld's style as it does not match with his own financial sense of efficiency. He bemoans the fact that Dr. Huld takes forever with the first petition.

The Inspector

The sole purpose of the Inspector is to inform K. that he is under arrest. His very presence, however, as a high functionary of the Law, causes K. to talk in a guilty manner. Having performed his duty, he departs from the house unseen.

The Italian Colleague

K. is volunteered by the President to show an important client from Italy around the city. The Italian's presence reminds him that there is a whole world out there. The labyrinths of the trial are reflected in the convoluted Italian that this man speaks. K. can not follow him but the President can. Even in this instance, K. is left out of the information loop and, therefore, simply accepts the President's directions as to the place and time for the tour.

Josef K.

The novel begins with the protagonist, Chief Financial Officer Josef K., asleep in bed on his thirtieth birthday. "Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested." K., however, is incapable of accepting his new situation because, as he admits to his guards, "I don't know the Law it probably exists only in your heads." Eventually, the court renders its verdict and sentences K. to death on his thirty-first birthday.

K.'s plight is that of every person who attempts to understand the intricacies of life. Each person, like the man in the Priest's parable, has his or her own gate to enter. K. wants, very much, to enter with success. A very detail-oriented person, he tries to ferret out the rules of his trial so that he may best deal with them in a dignified manner. Against his will he shows signs of resistance, "the pressure of the crowd behind him was so great that he had to actively resist." Doing so, however, lends him an air of resistance that is

interpreted by others as a potential source of salvation, "Do you think you'll be able to improve things?" asks the Usher's Wife. But K.'s appearance as a Christ-like figure is a stretch. In fact, he is unable to deal with real life with the same brilliance with which he handles financial transactions. He is unable to go with the flow because he needs to understand his situation. Therefore, much like the truthseeker in Plato's parable of the Cave, he is executed.

Kaminer

Kaminer always wears a smile due to a muscle twist and is repulsively modest. He is a witness to K.'s arrest and hands K. his hat when they finally set off for the bank.

Kullych

Kullych is one of the three low-level bank assistants present at K.'s apartment when he is brought before the Inspector. Later, when K. is leaving the bank in order to visit his mother, Kullych pursues him. This assistant is a "dull-witted □ big-headed blond fellow" who doesn't seem to understand that K. is asserting his right as a highpowered bank official to wave off his responsibilities. Kullych wants to consult K. about a letter but K. tears it into pieces, though he wishes—in an obvious allusion to spanking—to give the Aryan "two loud slaps on his pale round cheeks."

Captain Lanz

Captain Lanz is the nephew of Frau Grubach who happens to be sleeping in the living room while K. is talking to Bürstner. When Montag moves in with Bürstner, he moves into her room. He stands nearby when Montag confronts K.

Leni

Dr. Huld's maid and nurse is a young woman named Leni who is sexually attracted to men involved in trials. She promises to help K. but only introduces him to Block. Leni has a webbed hand and this deformity attracts K. In the only instance of affectionate display in the novel, K. tenderly kisses Leni's "claw."

The Manufacturer

A businessman with whom K. has done business with in the past seeks K.'s help again. The Manufacturer also offers K. some information, which he hopes will be useful in his trial. He gives K. a letter of introduction to the court painter.

Fraülein Montag

Fraülein Montag moves in with Bürstner soon after K. assaults her. It is Montag who answers K.'s protestations and tells him to stay away from Bürstner.

The Priest

Instead of finding the Italian in the cathedral, K. meets a Priest who turns out to be the court's chaplain. It is the clearest exchange in the work and the Priest reveals that K.'s case is going very badly. The Priest puts K.'s position into perspective with the parable of the Gatekeeper. The Priest represents religion in the novel and his presence, and his speech, leads to an easy interpretation of the novel as a theological commentary.

Prosecuting Counsel

K. strikes up a wonderful friendship with a well-regarded prosecuting counsel named Hasterer. They have long conversations and hold court in a tavern. Due to the high regard in which Hasterer holds K., many lesser figures seek audiences with Hasterer through K. Despite Hasterer's standing in the court, he is no help to K. Hasterer and K. become so inseparable that Hasterer's girlfriend, Helene, becomes jealous and eventually she leaves.

Rabensteiner

"Wooden, arm-swinging" Rabensteiner is the first of the three lowly clerks that K. recognizes. To K., Rabensteiner is the epitome of lethargy.

Titorelli

Titorelli is the painter of the court. K. is introduced to him by The Manufacturer. In one of the fragments, the encounter between K. and the painter is wrought with sexual tension. Titorelli is more informative about the practical workings of the court than Dr. Huld. Titorelli represents the art world and reveals the way in which the law spills over into all other aspects of life. In the same way that only a man versed in the law can be an advocate, only a man who knows all the rules of art can be a painter. Titorelli is fortunate enough to have grown up learning the rules of painting.

The Usher

The Usher takes K. on a tour of the Law offices while asking him to bring his wife back. Though in the service of the court, he is not unaware of its brutality. He answers K.'s comment about stumbling over a step, saying, "they show no consideration of any kind."

The Usher's Wife

The Usher's Wife cleans the courtroom. K. believes that she is offering herself to him. But when Bertold takes her away, K. realizes "he had suffered defeat only because he had sought to do battle." From the Usher's Wife, K. gains an insight into the industrious character of the Examining Magistrate. He doubts the image as soon as she allows him to see the Examining Magistrate's books—a pornographic book and a novel.

The Vice President

K.'s trial occurs when it is essential for him to be at his professional best. The President is in decline and his subordinates are jockeying for position. The Vice President views K. as his rival. Consequently, he takes advantage of K.'s distraction to siphon off K.'s clients.

Willem

Willem is the other lowly employee paid to watch K. for ten hours a day. He is older than Franz and has seniority. He reminds K. that, in comparison to K., he and Franz are free men.

Themes

Religion

A central element of Judeo-Christian theology is the belief that humans are guilty of original sin. There are various ways to deal with this situation but in many theological doctrines, redemption and entry to heaven depend upon people leading moral lives. For Protestants, salvation is gained when the individual confesses to God. Assistance in this task comes from the Bible as well as through the teachings of those who spend their lives studying the Bible. In Judaism, the book of God is the Torah, and literally speaking, God is the Law.

K.'s story takes place in a world familiar with this theology; yet this theology is changing. For example, the Calvinists' theory of predestination, which is the belief that what you do in life does not matter since people have already been selected by God (before birth) for salvation, is evoked by K.'s situation. K. has been predestined for a judgment. In religious terms, this means he should accept his guilty nature and seek redemption in whatever form the court decides. Block has done so and has avoided death but has paid a humiliating price: he must forever run on all fours before a representative of the law.

K. resembles a character from the Old Testament named Job. Job is a wealthy man who steadfastly believes in God. One day, the devil makes a bet with God that, if allowed to do so, he can put Job's faith on trial so that he curses God. The bet is on but despite all the pranks and hardships of a trial by faith, Job doesn't curse God. Instead, it is Job's faith that sees him through. K., who has been similarly slandered by someone, undergoes a trial but he has no faith in the Law to see him through. K.'s predicament is neatly summed up, "I don't know the law."

Calvinism, Protestantism, and Judaism are not the only theologies under assault. The descriptions of the court's personnel evoke the cosmology of Catholicism with its levels of angels, its history of Inquisitions, and its secret tribunal of Cardinals. Also, Catholic degrees of grace are transformed into degrees of guilt. There is, of course, innocence and guilt, the discussion of which always involves a statement that K. must know some law. With Bürstner, he discusses being guiltless and "not as guilty as they thought." Much later, Titorelli describes the states of permanent guilt: actual acquittal (heaven), apparent acquittal (purgatory), and protraction (hell). Catholics believe that sins can be dealt with through the sacrament of confession. In this sacrament, the guilty person discusses his or her sins with a priest and he gives counsel, as well as a set number of prayers to be recited. That is how the person may cleanse his or herself of the sin. This practice was abused during the time of the Inquisitions when torturers forced people to confess to all sorts of crimes—like witchcraft. In Catholic fashion, K. is constantly told that "all you can do is confess. Confess the first chance you get."

Language and Meaning

K. views his trial as "no different than a major business deal" in which he must pay close attention to details such as how people exit or how people use words. The Inspector notices this obsession with details and cautions him. K. disregards the advice and berates himself whenever he loses focus. The scene that exemplifies K.'s failure to understand what is happening to him, despite his best efforts, is the conversation with the bank president and the Italian client. Despite his knowledge of Italian, K. cannot understand the client's dialect and he is bothered by the client's lips being obscured behind a mustache. To K., the client's words "literally poured from his lips" and all K. can see are "various difficulties."

Another example is when K., who knows something about art, thinks he will understand a portrait but does not. He misreads a portrait as that of a great judge, but Leni tells him that the subject of the painting is actually a small man and an examining magistrate. When confronted by Titorelli's work in progress, K. needs guidance immediately, "It's the figure of Justice," says the painter. "Now I recognize it," says K., as he traces out what he knows as the allegorical image of law. His assessment is incorrect and the painter reveals that the court allows only those paintings done according to a code that only Titorelli knows. In other words, art, like the Law, can only be known by its priests. Finally, K. enters the cathedral where he intends to show the client the famous religious artworks. The lighting inside, however, makes it impossible and he is unable to tell a column from a statue. Clearly, outside of financial numbers—and even the trial ruins his ability to help the manufacturer—K. is lost.

Justice

Block reveals to K. that "a suspect is better off moving than at rest, for one at rest may be on the scales without knowing it, being weighed with all his sins." Unfortunately, K. later sees a painting at Titorelli's wherein the allegorical figure of Justice is also the winged and mobile figure of Victory.

Sex Roles

Women, for K., perform the impossible and mysterious acts which keep life functioning. "A woman's hand indeed works quiet wonders, he thought he might have smashed the dishes on the spot, but he certainly couldn't have carried them out." Women are also capable of great influence on the unknowable court: "Women have great power. If I could get a few of the women I know to join forces and work for me, I could surely make it through." However, this dream is as unlikely as the idea of flogging a judge. The reason is that women, in the novel, have their particular doors to guard. They are somewhat like Gatekeepers. They also have a defect. For example, Leni has a claw and Elsa is confined to a corset. The exception to this rule is Bürstner. She is not a Gatekeeper but someone who works and learns. She will not help K. because he is incapable of respecting her or the Law.

The Universe vs. The Individual

K., except for a brief friendship with Hasterer, prefers his own company. In the matter of his trial, "he didn't want to enlist anyone's aid and thus initiate them in the matter even distantly." To do so would be to initiate another person into himself. This is an act he cannot even do in the form of a petition. This is as it should be since the trial is his own, it is his guilt, and no matter what he does or where he goes, that is where the inquiry will be located: "he is certainly being treated with strange carelessness."

As much as K. desires it, he is not alone. Everyone who knows him also knows about his trial. From his point of view, the entire universe finds him guilty from the casual observer to the men who kill him like a dog.

Style

Parable

Parables are familiar teaching devices that reveal moral lessons through short and simple stories. A parable's simplicity lends it a timeless quality. For this reason, parables thousands of years old hold relevance today. Parables can also be enigmatic sayings or tales, which obviously contain a message though the precise meaning is anyone's guess.

Kafka intentionally set out to write parables, not just novels, about the human condition. *The Trial* is a parable that includes the smaller parable of the Gatekeeper. There is clearly a relationship between the two but the exact meaning of either parable is left up to the individual reader. K. and the Priest discuss the many possible readings. Both the short parable and their discussion seem to indicate that the reader is much like the man at the gate; there is a meaning in the story for everyone just as there is one gate to the Law for each person.

Defamiliarization

The Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovski, formulated the term *ostranenie* in his 1917 article, "Art as device." This term has been variously adopted in the West as defamiliarization or, more popularly, by way of Bertold Brecht, as "the alienation effect." Quite independent of both, Kafka employs defamiliarization with unrivaled mastery. This process works by making the reader/audience perceive familiar, everyday reality in a new and unsettling way, hence the term "defamiliarization." The result, the artist hopes, is a newfound sense of appreciation or reconsideration by the perceiver of the norm.

The world is presented in a strange way so that the viewer sees things as if for the first time. Shklovski conceives of the device as operating in an artwork on three levels. First, at the level of language, words, or linguistic rhythms, not normally associated with each other can be brought together to expose new meanings (examples can be found in the poetry of the Dadaists or the work of John Cage). Second, at the level of content, accepted concepts and ideas are distorted to reveal new perspectives on the human condition. Finally, at the level of literary forms, the canon is departed from and subliterary genres (like detective and crime stories) are elevated to high art.

Kafka accomplishes defamiliarization on all three levels with a crime story whose suspect's reality becomes so distorted as to approach the absurd. The story's language is precise even at the moment where it is circumventing the key to understanding. As a result the basic concept of law is newly perceived. At the linguistic level, Kafka uses words like "assault," "guilt," and "trial" in different contexts but in such a way that the meaning of the term is just as useful (and is interchangeable) with another.

An explicit example of Kafka using everyday understandings to defamiliarize the reader occurs in the form of the tools employed by the Inspector. The Inspector takes great pains to make the announcement of K.'s arrest look official by rearranging a bedroom to look like a court in the way a child arranges furniture to play house. Instead of a gavel and a law book, the Inspector has a random book, a pincushion, and matches. Finally, by simple and almost legalistic attention to wording, Kafka causes a constant air of doubt to cover anything said or thought. Phrases like, "could he really rely so little on his own judgment already?" are always double entendres where K. refers both to his slip of the tongue with the Manufacturer as well as the greater judgment he awaits.

Symbolism

Every element of the story is pregnant with allegorical significance. The position of bodies and their size symbolize a person's value before the Law. The men of the court sit with their heads bent up against the ceiling of an attic because they are so close to heaven. An arrested person, however, hangs their head. A strong and free person stands tall and straight. Furniture exaggerates this body language. K. points out whether there are chairs for him to sit on and how this strips him of power.

K. awakens, like Adam, from sleep to the customary comfort of his bedroom where he waits for Anna. Instead of Anna, he finds himself under arrest by guards from a department which does not seek the guilty, rather, "as the law states, is attracted by guilt and has to send us guards out." After wandering about the room, he returns to his bed and eats an apple—the allegorical fruit from the tree of knowledge—and, thereby, becomes aware of his being on trial. The Apple signifies original sin and eating the apple ends innocence.

Tone

One of the keys to Kafka's success is his consistent employment of atmosphere. He uses a clear prose style at all times. Even when Dr. Huld is imparting the intricacies of law, the sentence structure is not complex. The rooms are fastidiously described in terms of where the air may enter and the risk of soot and dust this entrance holds for the human lung. His use of shadows and obscurity cause both K. and the reader to redouble their efforts to pay attention. Shadows are attributed with intelligence as they seem to intentionally obscure the object of K.'s vision.

Historical Context

Bohemia

The earliest known inhabitants of the mountainrimmed nucleus of the Czech Republic were the "Boii" people. Not much remains of them but the name, Bohemia, or, "home of the Boii." They integrated completely with a Slavic tribe called Czechs around the fifth century AD. By the fourteenth century, Bohemia was the most prosperous kingdom in Europe. In the next century, Jan Hus made Bohemia the center of Protestantism.

In 1526, Ferdinand I's marriage transferred Bohemia to the Roman Catholic Austrian House of Hapsburg. Despite Protestant grumbling, Ferdinand kept the peace and the Austro-Hungarian Empire thrives. The situation is fine until discontent with Roman Catholic rule boils over. The Protestant uprising that led to the disastrous Thirty Years' War involving all of Europe began in Bohemia. The Protestants are finally defeated at White Mountain in 1620 and Bohemia again came under Austrian rule. This situation lasted until a Serbian terrorist named Gavrilo Pincip assassinated Archduke Francis Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo. Austria decided the assassination was a good excuse to declare war on Serbia.

World War I

There was no singular event that caused World War I. Several factors contributed to the conflict. It started when Austria-Hungary bungled relations with the Balkan States and, together with Germany, antagonized Russia. In addition, Britain was anxious about losing control of its empire and eager to cement an alliance with France.

In 1908 Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina exacerbated the situation and angered Serbia. Austria-Hungary could have dueled with Serbia in 1909, when that nation was weak. Instead, Serbia emerged, in 1913, prepared to attain its dream of a greater Serbia. Austria-Hungary responded with the creation of Albania in the path of Serbia. Germany, meanwhile, declared itself a friend of Turkey and threatened Russia's use of the Straits of Constantinople over its grain exports— from which Russia derives 40% of its income. Consequently, the nations of Europe mobilized their armies for an inevitable war. The assassination of the Archduke provided the final act.

Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on July 28th, 1914, activated the two alliances that existed in Europe. Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary comprised the Triple alliance, or Central Powers. England, France, and Russia made up the Triple Entente Powers, or Allies. Russia, now in the mood to protect Serbia and the Balkan States, sided with Serbia. France and Britain followed. It was a gruesome war.

Hoping to win early, each side went on the offensive. The death toll was huge: of the sixty million men mobilized for war, 8.5 million died, and twenty-one million were wounded. Every city and town in Europe has its memorial to World War I. When the

offensives failed, Europe hunkered down into a deadly trench warfare; disease killed more men than bullets. Finally, the Americans were drawn into the conflict on the side of the Allies in 1917 and the simple introduction of new energy turned the tide. The Allies won in 1918 and the Austria-Hungarian Empire was dismantled. Bohemia became the central province of the Republic of Czechoslovakia.

Anti-Semitism

The ghetto was an invention of Pope Paul IV, who, in 1555, decreed that all the Jews in Rome would live in a particular area of the city. Such decrees spread throughout Europe as anti-Semitic fervor waxed and waned. Many ghettos were abolished in the late nineteenth century.

Alhough the Nazi program of genocide is several decades away, anti-Semitism was as natural in Eastern Europe as Jim Crow laws in the American South. Jews, by economic social circumstance, were forced to remain in the ghettos. Such a concentration of Jews in one place made them vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Early in the twentieth century, anti-Semitism flared up in the form of the Russian and Romanian pogroms. In 1903 and 1905, thousands of civilians—mostly Jews—were tortured or murdered. At the time, Germany was appalled and offered refuge to many. One million Jews fled the pogroms to New York City.

Kafka's Works

Although written against a backdrop of war, Kafka's writings do not depend on the events of the time. The reason is that Kafka's aesthetic intent was to create timeless parables about the human condition. Gas jets being the exception, there are few details that allow the novel to be dated. Clothes, for example, are nondescript and described in terms of function and wear rather than style. In fact, the condition of a man who deals with money being under investigation by a court could happen at any time. Due to this timeless quality, innumerable artists have borrowed Kafka's technique. Many see a prophecy of totalitarianism in Kafka's novels. Kafka, they say, foresaw the era of hidden courts and death squads.

Critical Overview

Kafka has inspired many of the great novelists of the twentieth century. Consequently, there is an incredible amount of literary criticism devoted to his work. The critical material discussing *The Trial* falls between two poles. On the one hand, Kafka is viewed through a psychological or religious lens that sees the tensions of his work as derived from an Oedipal complex or the heritage of the Judaic law. At the other extreme, where few tread, are the positivist approaches of Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari. This latter approach finds a new philosophy, a new politics, in Kafka that is as yet unexplored. Whatever the approach, there is general agreement that Kafka should be praised for his deft depiction of twentieth-century alienation and bureaucracy at the universal level.

"The Trial: What a strange, exciting, original, and delightful book this is □ a web of gossamer, the construct of a dream world," wrote Herman Hesse after reading Max Brod's version in 1925. "In short," Hesse continues, "this "trial" is none other than the guilt of life itself." So Hesse begins the predominant theme of critical approaches to Kafka; he is responding to Judaic and Calvinist philosophers (especially Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth). Hesse was not far from Brod's own opinion of his friend's writing. In *Frank Kafka: A Biography,* after relating the joy Kafka derived from reading chapter one of the novel aloud, Brod asserted that *The Trial* should be viewed as the old parable of Job. In general, continued Brod, "Kafka's fundamental principle: pity for mankind that finds it so hard a task to do what is right."

The religious interpretations were not always so exact. Instead, critics compare Kafka to the Calvinists indirectly and couch their critique in terms of absolutism or, as Albert Camus put it, "[his] work is probably not absurd □ His work is universal." R.O.C. Winkler, in "The Novels," stands as an example of the religious approach:

In Kafka's view, there is a way of life for any individual that is the right one, and which is divinely sanctioned. So much is perhaps admitted by most of our moral novelists; but to Kafka this fact itself constitutes a problem of tremendous difficulty, because he believes the dichotomy between the divine and the human, the religious and the ethical, to be absolute. Thus, though it is imperative for us to attempt to follow the true way, it is impossible for us to succeed in doing so. This is the fundamental dilemma that Kafka believes to lie at the basis of all human effort.

Philip Rahr, in "Franz Kafka: The Hero as Lonely Man," echoes Winkler with a comparison to Gide, "in Kafka's catastrophic world there is no escape for the protagonist □ Kafka never assumes an unmotivated act on the part of his heroes, as Gide does in some of his novels, but invariably an unmotivated situation." Thomas Mann, in "Homage," summed up this religious approach by labeling Kafka a "religious humorist."

The autobiographical approach characterizes Kafka's work as merely the enactment of a struggle with his father. This approach is based on Kafka's *Letter to His Father.* Ernst

Pawel takes this approach in his *The Nightmare of Reason: A Biography of Franz Kafka,* and Ronald Hayman in *Franz Kafka.* Yet even from a biographical viewpoint, Kafka is a very contradictory persona who appears personally incompetent yet wrote professional pieces of high sophistication and technical accuracy. As a result, autobiographical approaches have lost popularity through time.

In addition to that, says Ralph Freedman in "Kafka's Obscurity: The Illusion of Logic in Narrative," "an exclusively psychological explanation leaves vast areas of Kafka's obscurity unexplained. We need not dwell on the obvious psychoanalytic motif which recurs in his fiction [where, for example] *The Trial* can be diagnosed as an enactment of his relationship with his father and with the authoritarian society he found so intolerable." Freedman prefers richer veins, "for, as we shall see, the shadowy characters who appear to his heroes are independent entities, through which manifold relations are explored."

Edwin Muir, in "A Note on Franz Kafka," also prefers to enjoy Kafka's literary genius. He writes that, "the logic of Kafka's narrative is so close that it builds up a whole particularized system of spiritual relations with such an autonomous life of its own that it illumines the symbol rather than is illumined by it. It is almost certain, moreover, that Kafka put together this world without having his eye very much on the symbol; his allegory is not a mere re-creation of conceptions already settled; and the entities he describes seem therefore newly discovered, and as if they had never existed before. They are like additions to the intellectual world."

With Benjamin, who strongly identified with Kafka at a personal level, analysis of Kafka enters a whole new realm. In *Illuminations* Benjamin writes, "there are two ways to miss the point of Kafka's works. One is to interpret them naturally, the other is the supernatural interpretation. Both the psychoanalytic and the theological interpretations equally miss the essential points." However, Benjamin could only go so far due to his own ideological position. Deleuze and Guattari, however, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* took up where he left off. "We believe only in a Kafka politics that is neither imaginary nor symbolic. We believe in one or more Kafka *machines* [and in] Kafka *experimentation* [resting] on tests of experience." In other words, instead of locking Kafka into an Oedipal complex, or a show of technical mastery, Deleuze and Guattari explore Kafka at his prophetic word. "By making triangles transform until they become unlimited, by proliferating doubles until they become indefinite, Kafka opens up a field of immanence that will function as a dismantling, an analysis, a prognostics of social forces and currents, of the forces that in his epoch are only beginning to knock on the door."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

McIntosh-Byrd is a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay she examines the extent to which Kafka's The Trial *can be read as a parable about the history of European Christianity.*

The body of critical commentary on the works of Franz Kafka is huge enough to have warranted the description, "fortress Kafka," and the extant criticism on *The Trial* is no exception. Readings of the novel have spanned the range from Calvinist to postmodernist, by way of Marxism, feminism and post-structuralism. In many ways, the seemingly endless series of commentaries and perspectives is highly appropriate to the subject matter of *The Trial.* Both within the novel and by nature of the body of critique which surrounds it, *The Trial* raises insistent questions about the nature of meaning, interpretation and reality which ultimately remain unanswered and unanswerable. Joseph K.'s inability to find or understand the High Courts and the Highest Judges is directly analogous with a basic inability to pin the book down to simple interpretations.

Like the parable that Joseph hears at the cathedral, *The Trial* is capable of withstanding extended and divergent exegetical commentary without ever offering up a clear or essential lesson. In doing so it serves as a meta-commentary—a critique of the shortfalls of critique itself, which has much in common with Medieval Christian mystic writing. In both Kafka's novel and the work of such mystics as Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen, 'Truth' and supreme authority are unknowable— capable only of being grasped at by metaphor, diffusion and analogy. Indeed, Kafka's text perhaps works best as a commentary upon religious commentary —a critical analysis told through fable and analogy of the impossible psychological burden imposed on humanity by western Christianity. The fact that the essence of *The Trial* remains unknowable thus becomes a structural reinforcement of the central theme. Just as God's ways are all important but forever mysterious to the 'Everyman' of Christian Europe, so the reading experience pulls 'Everyreader' into textual authority, only to refuse access to essential textual meaning.

The perfect paradigm of the text's machinations can be found in the first page of the novel. From the opening line of *The Trial,* we are thrown into a bewildering profusion of textual meaning that is as puzzling to us as it is to Joseph K. We begin in media res, thrust into a confusing lack of narrative explanation in the same way that Joseph is thrust into his case without understanding what the facts of it are:

Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.

Neither K. nor we will ever receive satisfactory answers to the causes of his arrest, and we are even more at a loss than he since his essential identity will remain hidden from us throughout the novel. He will always be a linguistic cipher to us, his last name known only 'through a glass, darkly' with the single letter, 'K.' The period marks it as an abbreviation instead of a generic signifier, both creating and undermining our ability to

read it as a parable. In other words, Joseph K. is both Everyman and a specific character—his namelessness makes him a cipher, even as the period implies specificity and invites guesswork. Such guesswork will, of course, remain unconfirmable, just like every other aspect of *The Trial.*

The essential similarities of Joseph K.'s initial plight and the basic premises of Judeo-Christian theology are obvious and have been frequently commented upon. In the former, Joseph awakes to find himself guilty of a crime he is sure he has not personally committed, but for which he will suffer and eventually die. In the latter, man 'wakes up' guilty—born with the burden of an original sin which he has not committed, but for which his days will be a trial to him. Essentially, both K. and the Judeo-Christian subject are forced into a world where existence consists of awaiting judgment for sins that they cannot comprehend. The "fine apple" that K. eats as a replacement for his stolen breakfast underscores the parallel. The essential symbol of the Fall of Man that the apple serves here—as it does in *Metamorphosis* to signify the existentially guilty fate of the protagonist.

From this initial re-staging of the Fall of Man, the actions contained in *The Trial* can be plotted onto a trajectory that describes the development of Christian theology in the West. The first stage is Catholic—a system of religious signification that is firmly based on a top-down hierarchy of power in which intercession and removal from the sources of authority are essential aspects of the power infrastructure. Like the Church officials who enforce a Papal Bull, the Warders who come to arrest K. are serving a remote 'Law' to which they are un- thinkingly obedient, but whose workings they do not understand. Further, this very 'unknowability' is taken as proof positive of its untouchable, almost sacred nature. In this way, neither the warders nor the Inspector are privy to the actual facts of the legal system which they represent, and since K. cannot learn which law he has broken, he is *de facto* incapable of proving that he hasn't broken it. As Franz says, "See, Willem, he admits that he doesn't know the Law and yet he claims he's innocent."

In this cosmology, power and meaning are continually deferred and removed. The Warders are following the orders of the Inspector, who is following the orders of the Court, who in turn are following the orders of a higher Court. Above it all is the Law—the Papal Bull that is yet another step removed from the source of power, since the Pope too receives meaning from an unknowable higher Authority.

The intercessionary motif is elaborated throughout the first half of the novel, and its association with Catholicism is strengthened by K.'s relationship to women. Just as Catholic tradition draws heavily on the intercessionary role of woman in the guise of the Virgin Mary, so K. is drawn to a series of women from whom he seeks reassurance and aid with his Case. As he says to the Priest:

Women have great influence. If I could move some women I know to join forces in working for me, I couldn't help winning through.

The first is his landlady, Frau Grubach, who is present at his arrest and to whom K. looks for comfort and explanation. His next impulse after he has realized the

implications of the situation is to go to another woman—Fraulein Burstner—and explain his woes. Neatly, K.'s need to 'make a confession' about the horrors of his situation is tied to the symbolic role of women in Catholic theology. The fact that Fraulein Burstner is of dubious sexual moral- ity points to the other Mary, the Magdalene, and K.'s sexual reaction to her is perhaps a commentary on the deeply conflicted role of the Goddess/ Whore binary in the history of European thought.

The next intercessionary women to whom K. turns are again sexually active ones—the Usher's wife and Leni, the Lawyer's nurse. With each woman that K. turns to, he gets closer and closer to the authority of the court, and the women would seem to be more and more capable of playing an active role in the mitigation of his circumstances. Leni especially seems to be able and willing to help him, both in her ability to give him valuable information about the legal system, and in her role as the first port of entry to the Lawyer's services. In this reality of deferred meaning, the Lawyer is, of course, a stand-in for Priesthood—the church's first representative.

K. comes to realize that the power of the Lawyer is limited after the painter describes for him the Byzantine complexity of the legal hierarchy, of which the lawyer and his friends are but the smallest cogs. In the style of the Protestant Reformation, K. revolts against the hierarchy—deciding to represent his own case. Just as Protestantism rejected the intercessionary authority structure of the Catholic Church and placed its emphasis instead on personal salvation, so K. rejects his lawyer—the established means of communicating with 'the Law'—and attempts to take his fate into his own hands. With his rejection of this 'priesthood' comes a rejection of the intercessionary female. K.'s realization that the Lawyer can do nothing for him occurs simultaneously with his realization that Leni has no real power to help him; that her relationship with him is not special, but instead symptomatic of her fetish for condemned men. Again, this is in direct parallel with the massive drop in the power status of the Virgin Mary—and women in general— in Protestant Christianity.

Following his decision, however, the essence of K.'s situation remains unchanged. He is still incapable of understanding the crime he has committed, and—most importantly— equally incapable of escaping the looming judgment. His nature still condemns him, as Block suggests when he informs K. that:

you're supposed to tell from a man's face, especially the line of his lips, how his case is going to turn out. Well, people declared that judging from the expression of your lips you would be found guilty, and in the near future too.

Here K. is 'guilty by nature.' His physiology marks an essential condemnation that is as inescapable as Augustinian original sin even while he is switching to a 'theology' that would seem to promise hope for the individual soul. Again, this hopelessness directly parallels the history of European Christianity. This time it is the bleak doctrine of Calvinism that is at play. In this theology the doctrine of predispensation decrees that individual souls have been judged guilty or not guilty before they are born, and are as powerless to alter their fate as they are to know which sentence has been passed upon them. As the parable in the Cathedral shows, the issues surrounding free will and

determinism are as opaque and unknowable as those surrounding direct intercession. In the final line of the novel, K. dies—an end that has proved to be inescapable no matter which style of theological maneuvering he has chosen. If the Law is God, this would suggest, then, the very fact of God condemns man to misery, condemnation and guilt. By accepting and believing in the power of the Law, K.'s society has allowed itself to be structured by nothing more or less than guilt.

Of course, this reading is reductive. To draw a coherent system of meaning from Kafka's text, more must be excluded than is included. To create a meaningful narrative to describe this most elusive of texts is to be reminded again and again that *The Trial* is a novel about the failures of narrative— a text about extra-textuality, as it were, that cannot be reduced to a simple trajectory. The acts of reading and analysis thus become part of the text itself —another part of the ongoing meditation on the nature of language, reality and meaning which the novel represents. In the final analysis, the most intelligent —and intelligible—thing that can be said about *The Trial* is that it is intelligently unintelligible.

Source: Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kronenberger reexamines The Trial *almost fifty years after its initial publication.*

When the late Franz Kafka's *The Castle* was published in this country some years ago, it created no general stir, but it was immediately seized upon by a few people as a very distinguished book. Time has passed, and other people—though still not many—have concurred in that conclusion. I must confess that I have not read *The Castle,* but I mean to, for I have read *The Trial,* and not in a long time have I come upon a novel which, without being in any vulgar sense spectacular, is more astonishing.

The Trial is not for everybody, and its peculiar air of excitement will seem flat enough to those who habitually feed on "exciting" books. It belongs not with the many novels that horrify, but with the many fewer novels which terrify. It does not trick out the world we know in grotesque and fantastic shapes; it is at once wholly of our world and wholly outside it. It keeps one foot so solidly on the ground that you can think of few books which stay there more firmly with both feet. But its other foot swings far out into space, conferring upon the literal action of the story a depth of meaning—or if meaning is often elusive, a power of suggestion—which can best be called visionary.

Something of the book's quality may be guessed from a brief mention of its plot. Joseph K., a young bank official, gets up one morning to find that he has been arrested. He knows he has committed no crime, and he is never then or later told what his crime is supposed to be. He is permitted his freedom, except that periodically he must go to court. Court is a weird place, full of other accused people and innumerable petty officials. There K. is allowed to assert his eloquence, but the business of his trial never makes any progress.

There is more to the story than an account of K.'s "trial." We are told much about his life at the bank, about his relations with his landlady and with the young woman who has the room next to his. In all these things K. is made to feel just as uncertain and frustrated as in the matter of his trial and this frustration contributes most of all to the dream character of the book. It is exactly the sensation we have during a lingering nightmare.

No summary can convey the atmosphere which Kafka cunningly distills—the atmosphere of some idiotic and hellish labyrinth where Joseph K. is forced to wander. The more he tries to control the situation, the more stranded he becomes. On psychological grounds alone the story has a peculiar force and distinction. But the impact of The Trial is much more moral than psychological. Kafka is at bottom a religious writer, with a powerful sense of right and wrong and an unquenchable yearning toward the unrevealed source of things. His story then is a great general parable. It is a proof of Kafka's other talents as a novelist, a humorist, a psychologist and a satirist that he does not leave his parable a bald one, but works into it every kind of human gesture and lifelike detail. The man who can, while writing symbolically, make a hilarious stuffed

shirt out of K.'s advocate, and then —in a later scene—express his religious feeling in the richest organ tones, was a writer in whose death literature suffered a real loss.

Source: Louis Kronenberger, "Special K," in *The New York Times Book Review,* October 6, 1996, p. 44.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the several editions of *The Trial* (Brod's-if possible, Muir's and Breon Mitchell's-based on Pasley's German edition). How do interpretations of single words affect the story? What is the importance of the chapter order?

Whether in literary forms, science fiction, movies, or television shows, Kafka has proved to be an infinite source of inspiration. Select a work which you feel is Kafkaesque and defend your choice.

What do you think Kafka would think of the Internet? Or, more narrowly, how would Josef K. handle himself inside a Multi-User-Domain?

Kafka's novel has often been interpreted as a religious commentary. How far do you think such a critique is supported by the text? Pick one creed-Calvinism, Catholicism or Judaism- and discuss the possible textual evidence for its influence in *The Trial.*

Does the knowledge that *The Trial* was written by a Jewish author in pre-WWII Europe add an extra dimension to our understanding of the legal nightmare K. is dragged into? Discuss the novel as what George Steiner has called a "prophetic statement" about the holocaust.

What Do I Read Next?

Kafka's 1915 story, *The Metamorphosis,* begins: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect."

Published in German in 1919, Kafka wrote *The Penal Colony* in 1914. Some see a reflection of trench warfare in this story about law and punishment told by a traveling anthropologist.

Kafka wrote the *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* while spending a happy vacation with his favorite sister, Ottla. This work is a book of proverbs, reflections, and literary sketches.

Written in 1922 but not published until 1926, *The Castle* tells the tale of a surveyor (K.) who answers a work summons. He arrives at the town below the Castle but the town officials do not know what he is talking about. K. tries to catch the attention of a Castle official named Klamm but fails.

Kafka agreed to the publication of the *The Hunger Artist* in 1924 as he was dying. The story is about a circus entertainer whose trick is to not eat. He sits in a cage and fasts alongside the other attractions.

There are some striking echoes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The poem is the tale of a sailor who unthinkingly shoots down an Albatross-an omen of good luck—and suffers cosmic punishment as a result.

Kafka learned how to write about courts and the law from reading *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, published in book form in 1853. The book criticizes the English court system through an account of those involved with the never ending suit of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce.

The greatest criminal psychology thriller is Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment.* This 1866 novel concerns the tale of Raskolnikov's crime of murder. This work is another influence on *The Trial.*

Further Study

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale,* Anchor Books, 1998.

Using Kafkaesque devices, Atwood satirizes society's obsession with reproductive rights. In a strange future, women are valued only if their ovaries function.

Terry Gilliam, *Brazil*, Universal Studios, 1985.

Named as the best film of the year by the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, *Brazil* is the story of a bureaucratic cog named Sam Lowry and is often compared to Kafka's *The Trial.* Lowry's life is destroyed when an insect bug causes a typo on a print- out. Due to this accident, he is labeled a miscreant by the bureaucracy he works for.

Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka,* Noonday Press, 1992.

This book is held to be the best biography of Franz Kafka.

Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead,* Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1979.

Ayn Rand presents a different view of the individual than Kafka in this story from 1949. Her individual is an architect who successfully meets the challenges of the world and his rival. In Rand's work, good wins and the individual is triumphant.

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Introduction

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The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS 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 Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels 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 NfS 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.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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:

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