The Trial

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANZ KAFKA

Kafka was born in Prague, the first of six children in a family of middle-class Jews. He preferred to speak and write German, as his family did, though most residents of Prague spoke Czech, a significant division both culturally and politically. He attended elementary school, gymnasium, and university within a few blocks of his birthplace. He studied law and got a job at an insurance company at age 24, though he resented having to work to pay the bills. Kafka's letters and journals reveal that he was tortured by a sense of his own inadequacy, sexually and socially, though to others he came off as quiet and intelligent. He had several passionate love affairs but never married. During his lifetime, Kafka is estimated to have burned at least 90% of everything he wrote, though he consented to publish *The Metamorphosis* at age 32. At 34, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which would lead to his death seven years later. When he died, he left a note for his friend, Max Brod, to destroy his remaining works. Fortunately, Brod disregarded this request, and published *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika*. Despite Kafka's relatively small body of work, he has become one of the titans of world literature, and the adjective form of his name, "Kafkaesque," has come to signify the frustrations of modern existence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kafka lived at a time of enormous tension in Austria-Hungary and in all of Europe. During his formative years, nationalism (a desire for independence and self-control along ethnic or national lines) was on the rise within the pan-national Austro-Hungarian Empire, leading to the hostility that exploded into World War I when Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated in 1914. Seventy million people participated in the war, nine million of whom died, and by its end in 1918, the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, German and Ottoman empires had ceased to exist. The war was also significant because so many technologies were used for the first time, such as tanks, airplanes, poison gases, and new forms of artillery, resulting in a previously unimaginable scale of destruction. Kafka did not fight in World War I, first because his job was considered essential, and later because of his tuberculosis, although he wanted to enlist. After the war, Hungary split off from Austria and became Communist. Scholars still argue about whether Kafka's writings support Communism or malign it, or even if Kafka is political at all. As for his religion, Kafka wrote that he felt separate from his Jewish heritage, though some scholars define him as an exemplar of Jewish literature. He died before World War II, but all three of his sisters perished in the Holocaust.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though Kafka never released *The Trial* for publication, parts of the work appeared in a short story he published in 1914 entitled "Before the Law." The story reproduces the parable of the doorkeeper that a prison chaplain delivers to Josef K. towards the end of the novel. Kafka's works also influenced a number of notable writers, most prominently the artists associated with the Existentialist movement. Existentialist works emphasize the human individual's need to create personal meaning in an absurd, unfair world, and are characterized by a prevailing sense of confusion and despair. Kafka was a seminal influence for Existentialist writing during and after World War II. Classic works from this period include *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and the play "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Trial*
- **When Written:** 1914-1915
- **Where Written:** Prague
- **When Published:** 1925
- **Literary Period:** World War I
- **Genre:** Absurdism/Expressionism/Existentialism
- **Setting:** An unspecified city, likely in central Europe, in the early 1900s
- **Climax:** Josef's confrontation with the prison chaplain in the cathedral
- **Antagonist:** The Law
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited omniscient narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Kafka on Screen. In 1962, *The Trial* was adapted into a movie by the legendary director Orson Welles. Some notable departures from the book include the use of dynamite in Josef K.'s execution.

Kafka in Space. Kafka's accomplishments are literally out of this world: the author is the namesake of the asteroid 3412 Kafka, discovered in 1983.

PLOT SUMMARY

On the morning of his thirtieth birthday, two policemen come to Josef K.'s boardinghouse and inform him that he is under arrest. Josef, a successful chief clerk of a bank, is not informed of his wrongdoing. After a confusing interrogation, he is told to go to work as usual. Late that night, he goes to the room of another boarder, Fraulein Burstner, whom he kisses unexpectedly.

Josef is assigned a date for his first hearing. He travels to his courtroom, located in a poor tenement building. At his hearing, he stands before a large audience and lambasts the legal system. As Josef leaves, the judge informs him that his conduct will deprive him of the benefits these hearings generally confer.

The next week, Josef is not notified of another hearing, but he turns up at the courthouse anyway. He finds it empty save for its young stewardess, who flirts with him until a law student carries her off to see a judge. Soon afterwards, her husband, a court usher, arrives. He shows Josef around the legal offices. The oppressive air in the offices stifles Josef, and he becomes so faint that he must be led to fresh air.

Josef tries repeatedly to contact Fraulein Burstner, but she ignores him. A few days later, Josef hears moaning sounds as he prepares to leave work for the evening. He opens a supply closet to discover the policemen who arrested him being brutally whipped. They claim they are being punished because Josef denounced their conduct in his hearing. Josef is deeply disturbed but shuts the door and leaves to avoid detection by a coworker.

Josef's Uncle Karl visits him at work. Karl is has gotten wind of Josef's trial and is concerned. He takes Josef to see Herr Huld, a friend of his who works as a lawyer. At Huld's house, they meet the lawyer, who is ill and bedridden. A high-ranking court official also happens to be present, but he ignores Josef, and Josef leaves the room to flirt with Huld's maid, Leni. Afterward, Karl tells Josef that his indecorous absence has damaged his case.

At work, Josef dwells on his trial and neglects important clients. Finally, he sees one, but is so absent-minded that Josef's rival, the bank's deputy director, takes over the case—a blow to Josef's career ambitions. The client, having heard of Josef's trial, recommends he meet a court portraitist named Titorelli. Josef takes the painter's address and leaves work, letting his rival take on his other clients as well. Josef finds Titorelli's apartment in a wretched cluster of tenements. The painter offers to help Josef and explains the types of acquittal Josef may receive. Titorelli's explanation reveals that no accused ever seems to gain a meaningful acquittal; trials either continue interminably or end in conviction.

Increasingly preoccupied about his lack of progress, Josef decides to fire his lawyer. He goes to Huld's, where he meets another of the lawyer's clients, a tradesman named Block. Block is obsessed with his legal proceedings, which have gone on for five years. When Josef tells Block and Leni that he plans to fire Huld, they try to restrain him, but he reaches Huld's office. Huld tries surprisingly insistently to win Josef back, but Josef is not swayed. At the end of their meeting, Huld summons Block, who grovels at the lawyer's bedside. It is revealed that the pathetic tradesman often sleeps at Huld's in the hopes of getting an audience with the lawyer.

Josef agrees to give a tour of the local cathedral to an important Italian client of the bank. However, the Italian does not show up. Instead, a priest climbs to the pulpit and addresses Josef by name. The priest reveals that he is the prison chaplain, and had Josef summoned to the cathedral to speak about his trial. The chaplain tells Josef a mysterious **parable** about multiple gatekeepers guarding the way to the Law, which is intended to characterize the Law.

On the eve of Josef's thirty-first birthday—one year after his arrest—two men come to his room. They escort him to a quarry on the outskirts of town, where they thrust a knife into his heart. Josef, ashamed of his own death, utters the final phrase, "Like a dog!"

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Josef K. – The novel's protagonist. Josef works as the chief clerk of a bank and appears poised for success—until an unexplained arrest and protracted trial consume his life, and eventually leads to his execution. Though Josef is an arrogant, calculating, and judgmental man, his failed struggle to understand a byzantine justice system provokes the reader's sympathy.

Fraulein Burstner – A young woman who lives across the hall from Josef's room in Frau Grubach's boardinghouse. Josef goes to her room one night for a brief conversation and ends up kissing her. Afterwards, Josef tries to contact her repeatedly, but she ignores his advances. Josef thinks he spots her when he is being marched to his execution, but he doesn't bother to speak to her.

Titorelli – A painter commissioned to make portraits of court officials. His position has given him an insider's knowledge of the judiciary, and he is willing to use it to help Josef. When Josef visits the painter's squalid apartment, Titorelli explains the court's hopelessly dysfunctional acquittal system, and the fact that no one ever gets acquitted. On the way out, Titorelli sells three identical landscape paintings to a bewildered Josef.

Block – Block is a client of Herr Huld's who has been on trial for five years. His obsession with his trial has led him to enlist the services of five different lawyers. Huld finds Block irritating and treats him contemptuously, rarely deigning to speak to him.

However, Block is so desperate to consult with the lawyer that he will grovel at Huld's bedside, and often sleeps in Huld's house in the hopes of being seen.

The Doorkeeper – A character in the **parable** Josef hears from the prison chaplain. The doorkeeper guards a gate to the law; behind him, more powerful doorkeepers guard other gates. A man comes seeking access to the Law, but the doorkeeper refuses to let him past, even though the man waits in front of the gate for his entire lifetime. When the man dies, the doorkeeper closes the gate and reveals that the gate existed for that man alone.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Frau Grubach – Josef's landlady. Josef is one of her favorite tenants.

The Deputy Director – Josef's main adversary in the bank where he works. Much to Josef's chagrin, while he is distracted by his trial the Deputy Director eagerly usurps Josef's responsibilities at work in order to gain a competitive edge.

The Prison Chaplain – The prison chaplain has Josef summoned to a cathedral towards the end of the book. He tells Josef that his trial is not going well, and recounts an important **parable** taken from the texts of the Law.

Uncle Karl – Josef's blustery uncle and one-time guardian. Karl is extremely anxious about Josef's case and demands that Josef contract the services of his lawyer friend, Herr Huld.

Herr Huld – Josef's bed-ridden lawyer. Though esteemed in his profession, Huld appears to do nothing to help Josef's case, and is eventually fired by Josef. While Huld treats Josef fairly deferentially, he mercilessly belittles another of his clients, Block the tradesman.

Leni – Huld's maid. Leni is extremely flirtatious with Josef, and the two appear to have a brief affair. It is later revealed that she is similarly attracted to all accused men.

Franz and Willem – Franz and Willem are the two policemen who first arrest Josef at the beginning of the novel. In court, Josef denounces their unprofessional conduct, and he later comes across the two men being whipped as punishment.

The Cane-Wielder – The man who whips Franz and Willem. When Josef attempts to pay him to stop whipping them, he refuses for fear that if he shirks his duty then he will get whipped.

The Examining Magistrate – The judge presiding at Josef's first appearance before the court, and who informs Josef that his haughty denunciation of the court has cost him the benefits that an arrested man can gain from a hearing.

The Court Usher – A functionary at the court who takes Josef for a tour around the premises and explains that the court only proceeds with trials it is certain to win.

Elsa – Elsa, a cocktail waitress whom Josef calls upon once a week, is the closest thing to a romantic partner in Josef's routine life.

Fraulein Montag – A friend of Fraulein Burstner who relays Burstner's dismissals to Josef.

Captain Lanz – A nephew of Frau Grubach who also lives in her boardinghouse.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

JUSTICE VS. THE LAW

The central conflict of *The Trial* is Josef K.'s struggle against The Law. He stands accused of an unknown crime, and his trial is supposedly required for justice to be served. However, there seems to be little justice in the treatment Josef receives. By most standards, he is denied anything resembling a fair trial: he is never informed of how he has broken the Law, he is forbidden from learning essential details of his case, and he is eventually executed without any deeper understanding of how his conviction was reached or what he could have done to oppose it. More than anything, the actions carried out against Josef seem to epitomize *in*justice.

Ironically, then, the very Law designed to ensure justice is what generates the greatest injustice. This is the opposition nested at the core of Kafka's judiciary. The lofty, unattainable goal of absolute justice is muddled by worldly attempts to enforce it: the human impulse to institutionalize the concept of justice has created a corrupt and actively counterproductive judiciary, a judiciary that perpetrates injustice. In *The Trial*, this uncompassionate bureaucracy is so pervasive that individuals have begun to mistake the *system* of justice for the *ideal* of justice. Josef is repeatedly given the paradoxical assurance that whatever treatment he receives from the system will be the just treatment; the system has become the arbiter of what is just, completely separate from any ideal of justice. The system conceives of itself as that arbiter, and therefore considers anything it does to be naturally just. This pernicious feedback loop moves human understanding continually further from the true apprehension and attainment of justice.

THE ABSURD

The word "absurd" derives from the Latin word for "deaf," and, fittingly, the absurd universe of *The Trial* is utterly deaf to any character's attempts to

influence or understand it. Josef's protracted mission to understand the Law never culminates in any larger comprehension. The more Josef explores the system that holds him captive, the less that system appears to be undergirded by any logical, predictable structure whatsoever. Accordingly, there is nothing any individual—defendant, lawyer, and functionary alike—can do to influence the justice system. For the accused, every course of action is equally ineffective: Block's wretchedness shows that even the most obsessive devotion to one's trial provides no advantage. The absence of discernible logic forces defendants to seek meaning in bizarre rituals and superstitions, such as trying to foretell a defendant's verdict from the shape of his lips. Moreover, Titorelli's explanation of the three sorts of acquittal illustrates that the struggles of the defendant are almost certainly in vain. Of the three sorts of acquittal he explains, only one, "absolute acquittal," actually restores the defendant to the status he had before being accused—and this exoneration has never actually been granted. The plight of the accused is Sisyphean: defendants strive endlessly, but never achieve any progress.

THE UNKNOWABLE AND INTERPRETATION

The fundamental absurdity of Josef K.'s world is a consequence of its inscrutability: there is no decisive way to make sense of Josef's situation. Because there is no unequivocal truth in *The Trial's* universe, every fact can be recast in conflicting ways. Moreover, the facts themselves are often dubious or altogether inaccessible. This theme is evident from the very first words of the book: "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K." This vague and unsatisfying conjecture is the closest the text ever comes to explaining Josef's arrest. As Josef navigates (or fails to navigate) the judicial system, crucial information is withheld at every step. Court documents, legal proceedings, and even the text of the Law that determines his fate are all forbidden to Josef, and oftentimes to the officials or court functionaries that control and dominate him as well. Like the doorkeeper in the **prison chaplain's parable**, each functionary simply fulfills a role without regard for the purpose of that role or the logic of the larger system that contains it.

Indeed, the chaplain's allegory, which serves as a preface to the Law itself, illustrates the many possible interpretations of *The Trial's* world. The parable is so ambiguous that the chaplain can make equally compelling arguments for two opposing interpretations. Just as the chaplain's story lacks a definite interpretation, so does the Law itself. This obscurity is what disturbs Josef so deeply. At the close of the book, Josef voices a series of unresolved, and likely unresolvable, questions. Even in his last moments of life, Josef is unable to ascertain a definitive meaning to his story. Similarly, *The Trial* itself resists unequivocal readings. Is the novel meant as an idealistic indictment of oppressive governance, or a pessimistic characterization of humankind in general? Does Kafka aim to make a political point, an existential one, or both? It is very possible that the text deliberately frustrates these questions, so that *The Trial's* overall ambiguity complements Josef's vexing experience with the Law.

ALIENATION AND CONTROL

There is no collaboration or camaraderie in *The Trial*. Every individual acts as an isolated agent, and people are focused on controlling themselves and others in order to fulfill personal desires. Josef K.'s interpersonal interactions are governed by hierarchy and ambition. He obsessively tabulates his status relative to others, and calculates how he can use this positioning to his greatest benefit. Josef worries about how he may be manipulated and constantly devises ways to manipulate others to his advantage. Every decision he makes at work is a stratagem in his power-jockeying rivalry with the bank's deputy director. One of Josef's few uncalculated actions is his spontaneous kissing of Fraulein Burstner, and even this moment of passion only ends in alienation. Josef never speaks to the fraulein again, and when he sees her at the novel's close, he cares so little—or has been so ground down—that he doesn't bother to stop walking.

In spite of his efforts, Josef comes nowhere close to controlling his life. He is at the mercy of the Law, his business superiors, and anyone else who might gain some sort of leverage over him. And the ladder of alienation and control extends ever higher: even the individuals who hold power over Josef, like his judge, are in the end nothing more than powerless cogs in a larger machine. This fact is reinforced by the **chaplain's parable**: while the first doorkeeper may have authority over the man who seeks to access the Law, the doorkeeper himself is subject to other doorkeepers whose power lies beyond his understanding. Each of these doorkeepers is in turn subordinate to the next. In the same way, individual obsessions with control lead each character to conceptualize his interactions on a hierarchical scale, which in turn leads to further alienated individuals and more exaggerated power dynamics. Ultimately, then, no single person is autonomous or sovereign in *The Trial*. This is the ironic consequence of fetishizing individual agency and dominance.

SEX AND SEDUCTION

The Trial is rife with overt sexuality. A large fraction of the female characters, like Leni, try to seduce Josef or are regarded by him as potential sexual conquests, like Fraulein Burstner. However, this lustfulness is hollow and insincere. Just like nearly every other interaction in the book, romantic encounters are depicted as individuals' attempts to use others to achieve their goals, rather than as

moments of tenderness, vulnerability, and connection. Josef is obsessed with controlling his paramours, and the women he associates with seem drawn to him because of his power and status. The closest thing to a loving relationship in Josef's pre-trial life is his weekly engagement with his call girl, Elsa, which is undoubtedly more transactional than affectionate. For the women of *The Trial*, physical intimacy is something of a bargaining chip. The court's custodian, for example, obliges the sexual demands of the law student and the judge because she understands that they hold power over her livelihood. The impersonal nature of sex in the novel further affirms that *The Trial's* universe is devoid of any sort of meaningful interpersonal connection.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TITORELLI'S PAINTING OF THE JUDGE

When Josef visits Titorelli, the painter shows him a portrait of a judge that was commissioned by the courts. On the judge's throne, Titorelli has drawn a winged icon that is meant to depict the figure of justice combined with the figure of victory. The resulting figure, however, shows a justice that is in motion and thus unable to keep its scales balanced. When Josef asks why the drawing is the way it is, Titorelli explained he simply followed instructions and drew without having seen the images he's meant to depict. This drawing symbolizes the way that the bureaucracy has distorted the concept of justice, creating something mercurial and unreliable—much like the frustrating Law that oppresses Josef. Furthermore, the fact that Titorelli draws these figures from imagination, without having an understanding of what they truly look like, illustrates that human conceptualizations of justice are likely to misrepresent the ideal.

THE COURT'S OPPRESSIVE AIR

When Josef is in or near the court, he frequently finds himself stifled by a hot, poorly-ventilated atmosphere. In fact, on his first visit to the legal offices, the air weakens him so much that he can no longer walk unassisted. Josef's reaction to the air illustrates just how viscerally unnatural and uncomfortable the justice system is. The Law's toxic hold over Josef's mind is literalized by the miasma that pervades its offices.

THE PRISON CHAPLAIN'S PARABLE

In the cathedral, the prison chaplain tells Josef a parable taken from the opening pages of the Law. In the parable, a man from the country tries to gain access to the law, but is forbidden by a doorkeeper, who is just the first of many doorkeepers, each of which is more powerful than the one before. The man waits outside for years. Just as the man is about to die of old age, the doorkeeper closes the gate, telling the man it was meant just for him. This allegory symbolizes the absurdity of the legal system, the multiple gatekeepers suggests a connection to the bureaucracy and the fact that no one in the bureaucracy holds ultimate authority or can even access that authority, and Josef's unsuccessful attempts to decipher the meaning of the parable illustrate the unresolvable ambiguities of the Law.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Trial* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested.

Related Characters: Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The famous first sentence of *The Trial*immediately establishes an atmosphere of strangeness and confusion. The narrator introduces the main premise of the novel: Josef K., the protagonist, is wrongfully accused of an unknown crime for unknown reasons. Note the mix of vagueness and specificity in the sentence––Josef K.'s name is specified (although his last name is anonymized) and the fact that he was arrested "without having done anything wrong" is presented as a clear fact. At the same time, the first phrase, "Someone must have been telling tales," is completely indeterminate. Why is this the most likely explanation for Josef's mistaken arrest, when surely any number of factors could have been the cause? This question is left unanswered, creating a sense of uncertainty and suspense.

The opening sentence also conveys the impression that

there is corruption within both the society and justice system being described. The fact that the narrator assumes someone has lied in order to indict Josef indicates that this is a world in which people have duplicitous and mistrustful relationships with one another. Meanwhile, the suggestion that the lie about Josef was enough to warrant his arrest hints that the law is perhaps being used in an irresponsible and unfair manner.

> What kind of people were they? What were they talking about? Which department did they belong to? After all, K. had rights, the country was at peace, the laws had not been suspended—who, then, had the audacity to descend on him in the privacy of his own home?

Related Characters: Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Two policemen, Franz and Willem, have arrived at Josef's boarding house to arrest him, and have forbidden him from leaving his room. They have refused to tell him why he is being arrested, although they've promised he will find out soon enough. In this passage, Josef puzzles over who the policemen are, why they are arresting him, and why they are behaving in such a strange and unprofessional manner. *The Trial*is filled with instances of characters asking questions like these––sometimes aloud, or, as in this case, inside their own heads––that rarely receive a satisfying answer. These frustrated questions help convey the idea that the characters expect there to be a reasonable, knowledgable authority to which they can appeal, when in fact that is not the case.

Indeed, it is clear at this point that Josef still has faith in the system of governance under which he lives. He brings up the department Franz and Willem belong to and the rights and laws he is entitled to as a citizen, implying he believes these structures will ensure he ultimately receives fair treatment. Josef's trust in the bureaucratic operations of the government and law will soon evaporate as a result of the nightmarish, bewildering experiences he undergoes at the hands of these institutions in the rest of the novel.

> He [Josef] went out, grasped her [Fraulein Burstner], kissed her on the lips and then all over her face, like a thirsty animal furiously lapping at the water of the spring it has found at last. Finally he kissed her on the neck, over the throat, and left his lips there for a long time.

Related Characters: Josef K., Fraulein Burstner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Without her knowledge, Josef has waited for Fraulein Burstner to return home and has subjected her to a reenactment of his arrest, during which time he moves her furniture around and loudly yells. Fraulein Burstner is alarmed by both his yelling and a subsequent knock on the door, and Josef comforts her before unexpectedly embracing and kissing her. The description of Josef's kiss is comic, if a little disturbing. It focuses entirely on Josef's actions, implying either that Fraulein Burstner doesn't exactly reciprocate the kiss or rather that her reaction doesn't matter to Josef.

Indeed, the impression that Fraulein Burstner is merely an object upon which Josef acts is emphasized by the fact that before she comes home he admits he does not know her particularly well. His eagerness to see her seems to be based in a desire to have an audience––any audience––listen to the story of his arrest, rather than a particular interest in Fraulein Burstner as a person. This confirms the impression that Josef is a self-absorbed and rather unlikeable character, and highlights the way in which individuals in this society are alienated from one another and use each other—and in the case of the novel's women, this manipulation or oppression usually comes in a sexual form.

Chapter 2 Quotes

> He was annoyed that he hadn't been told precisely where the room was, the manner in which he was being treated was strangely negligent or offhand, a point he intended to make loudly and clearly. Finally he went up the first staircase after all, with the memory of something the guard Willem had said going through his mind, namely that the court was attracted by guilt, so that logically the hearing should be held in a room on the staircase K. happened to choose.

Related Characters: Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has been informed that his first hearing is on Sunday, although the time isn't specified. He has travelled to the suburb where the hearing is to take place, aiming to be there for 9 am, as that is when the courts open. When he arrives, he is unable to locate the room in which his hearing is to take place, and in this passage he describes his frustration at not having been told the exact location. He follows his instinct to take the first staircase, thinking this instinct may be born of guilt and thus correctly lead him to the site of his trial. This observation is curious, as there is supposedly no doubt that Josef is innocent.

However, part of what makes the world of the novel so disturbing is the way in which perversion of the law begins to blur distinctions between guilt and innocence. The position of being accused comes to make Josef feel guilty in itself, partly because it results in further acts of wrongdoing (such as showing up to the hearing at the wrong time) that Josef commits unknowingly. Willem's claim that "the court was attracted by guilt" also suggests that the law has become a self-perpetuating tool for condemning people that is alarmingly independent from the notion of justice.

> The woman really did tempt him and, however much he thought about it, he could find no plausible reason why he should not yield to the temptation. He easily dismissed the cursory objection that she would tie him to the court. In what way could she tie him? Would he not still remain free enough to crush the court at one blow, at least insofar as it affected him? Could he not have confidence in himself to do that small thing? And her offer of help sounded genuine and was perhaps not to be discounted. Could there be any better revenge on the examining magistrate and his entourage, than to deprive them of this woman and take her to himself?

Related Characters: Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has arrived at the courthouse a week after his original hearing, unsure of when the second hearing is supposed to be; once there, he has again encountered the washerwoman, who it turns out is the court usher's wife, and who flirtatiously offers to help Josef with his case. At first Josef is suspicious of this offer, but in this passage he comes to believe that he might as well accept, reasoning that sleeping with the woman likely won't do any harm and would be a satisfying way of undermining the examining magistrate and other men involved with the court. Such reasoning is a typical example of the way in which all the characters in the novel are constantly seeking to gain power over one another. Note the way in which women are often used as instruments through which men assert their dominance.

Indeed, as with Fraulein Burstner, it is clear in this passage that Josef feels no particular attraction to the washerwoman as a person. Rather, her appeal lies in the fact that she may be able to help with his case and that seducing her will prove a form of revenge against the men who work at the court. Yet considering Josef harbors no great passion for this woman in particular, he seems oddly quick to dismiss the potential dangers that seducing her might involve—Kafka gives the sense that Josef is caught up in desire and not reasoning well. He insists that sleeping with her would not further tie him to the court and that he would "remain free enough to crush the court at one blow," a claim that highlights Josef's arrogance and misperception of the power of the law.

> He felt as if he were seasick, as if he were on a ship in a heavy sea. It was as if the water were crashing against the wooden walls, as if a rushing sound came from the far end of the corridor, like water pouring over, as if the corridor were rocking to and fro and as if the people sitting on either side were going up and down. It made the calm of the young woman and the man who were helping him to the exit all the more incomprehensible.

Related Characters: Josef K.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 56-57

Explanation and Analysis

The law student has carried the washerwoman away, and Josef has accompanied the court usher into the law office, which has an incredibly stuffy atmosphere, such that Josef begins to feel seasick. The dramatic description of the way

the office air makes Josef feel––as if he is on a ship in the middle of a stormy sea––is a peculiar contrast to the tedious, vague conversations he has had with another accused man about the man's case. This contrasts illustrates the way in which the stiflingly dull world of the court is actually severely oppressive, so much so that Josef feels physically sick and is eventually forced to leave. This experience is made worse by the fact that the others in the office seem completely fine, thereby increasing Josef's feelings of isolation.

❝ He felt anguish at having been unable to prevent the thrashing, but it wasn't his fault. If Franz hadn't screamed—true, it must have hurt a lot, but a man should be able to control himself at decisive moments—if Franz hadn't screamed then K. would, at least very probably, have found some means of winning the thrasher over.

Related Characters: Josef K., Franz and Willem, The Cane-Wielder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

While leaving the office at the end of a workday, Josef has heard cries behind a door in his office building, and discovered Franz and Willem about to be "thrashed" by a man wearing a leather executioner's outfit—a punishment for their behavior during Josef's arrest. Josef has attempted to bribe the thrasher into sparing Franz and Willem, but to no avail, and in this passage he attempts to assuage his feelings of guilt by telling himself that if Franz had not screamed he would have been able to successfully intervene. This reasoning reveals how flimsy Josef's sympathy for Willem and Franz really is; not only does he blame Franz in order to escape blaming himself, he judges Franz for not restraining himself from crying out.

The episode with the thrasher is characterized by the physical experience of shame. When Josef tries to bribe the thrasher he does so with lowered eyes, and in this passage he clearly experiences a sense of shame through association with Franz's audible pain. These details suggest that the feeling of humiliation, rather than creating empathy and solidarity, instead has the stifling, paralyzing, and isolating effect of driving people further apart. Yet Josef will not admit that his own behavior made him somewhat complicit in Franz and Willem's punishment; instead, he arrogantly claims that without Franz's screams he would "have found some means of winning the thrasher over"––a statement that seems unlikely given Josef's own ineffectual nature and the seemingly limitless power of the legal system.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Please don't ask me for names, but stop making this mistake, stop being intransigent, no one can resist this court, you just have to confess. Confess at the next opportunity. It's only then there's a possibility of escaping, only then, though even that's not possible without outside help. But you needn't worry about that, I'll provide the help myself.

Related Characters: Leni (speaker), Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has been visited by his uncle and former guardian Karl, who is worried about Josef's case and takes Josef to the house of his friend, a lawyer named Herr Huld. At the house, Huld's maid, Leni, smashes a plate in order to get Josef's attention, and privately urges him to confess to the accusation against him. She insists that this is the only means by which Josef can "escape," although even this is not guaranteed. Like the washerwoman, Leni is involved with the courts through her association with men who work in the law, and like the washerwoman, Leni flirts with Josef, offering to help him as a means of seduction. This again emphasizes the corruption of the legal system.

Leni's advice also adds another line to the contradictory chorus of voices telling Josef what he should do about his case. While at this point in the novel Josef remains confident that he will be able to escape the charges, it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not likely. Leni's claim that "no one can resist this court" is given a double meaning by her attempts to seduce Josef through helping with his trial, while further conveying the sense that Josef is trapped within a system that is labyrinthine and all-encompassing.

Chapter 7 Quotes

It was very important, because the first impression the defence made often determined the whole course of the trial. Unfortunately he [Herr Huld] had to point out to K. that it sometimes happened that first submissions to the court were not read at all. They were simply filed, and the officials declared that hearing and observing the accused was more important than any written material. If the petitioner was insistent they would add that, once all the material had been gathered and before a decision was reached, all the files, including the first submission, would naturally be reviewed as a whole. Unfortunately, he said, that too was mostly incorrect, the first submission was usually mislaid or completely lost, and even if it was kept right to the end it was hardly read, though he, the lawyer, had only heard rumours to that effect.

Related Characters: Herr Huld, Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

It is winter and Josef has started to feel increasingly consumed by his trial and worried that Herr Huld is not going to be of sufficient help. Feeling exhausted, he reflects that although Huld appears reluctant to listen to Josef, at least he has a lot of experience and has almost finished the first plea. Huld has advised Josef that the first plea is highly important, but that unfortunately this document is often lost by the court and never read at all. This passage is a typical example of the way in which bureaucratic incompetence can appear to be a relatively mild problem, but in fact has nightmarish consequences. It is also a good example of Kafka's dark humor: the passage starts out making one point, and then gradually undercuts it with frustrating, convoluted examples of contrary exceptions, until by the end of the passage the original intent has been entirely reversed—and then there is a final twist at the end, that the whole thing is just hearsay and probably not true.

In terms of Josef's case, part of the problem lies in the completely contradictory information Josef receives about the legal system. He knows that the first plea is important, yet is also being told that this first submission is almost never read; such inconsistency makes it impossible to know the truth, and decreases the likelihood that Josef will be able to successfully appeal against his arrest. To make matters worse, none of this knowledge is transparently available, but instead transmitted via "rumours." Although Josef has placed hope in the fact that Huld is experienced, this means little in a legal system where procedures are disorganized and opaque, and where information is dispersed through conjecture.

The essential thing was not to attract attention, to stay calm, however much it went against the grain, to try to understand that this great legal organism remained eternally in balance, so to speak.

Related Characters: Herr Huld

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has described what he has learned about the secretive, chaotic, and oppressive legal system, including the powerlessness of any individual to protest or change its workings. Josef admits that even if one were to indulge the delusion that he might be able to make an improvement, he would never be able to benefit from this himself, but would have to sacrifice his own case in the hope of improving the system for others––a hope that would almost certainly be in vain. As a result, Josef resolves "not to attract attention, to stay calm" in order not to jeopardize his own chances, and to accept that the law works as an "organism" that is "eternally in balance."

Once again, Josef proves himself to be a fundamentally self-interested character, whose resentment of the law is based entirely on how it impacts him as an individual, as opposed to the damage it does to society as a whole. Although Josef stresses the futility of any objection to the workings of the law, it is clear that his selfish desire not to risk harming his own case is a big part of the problem. Note that in contrast to Josef's unwillingness to empathize with others, the different components of the law are described as working so well together that the law becomes a single, living "organism... eternally in balance." Unable to achieve even a minimal level of connection and co-operation with others, Josef remains isolated and powerless before the legal system.

'Yes,' said the painter, 'it was in the commission that I had to paint her like that, it's actually Justice and the Goddess of Victory at the same time.' 'That's not a good combination,' said K. with a smile, 'Justice has to be in repose, otherwise the scales will wobble and a just verdict will not be possible.' 'I'm following my client's wishes,' the painter said. 'Yes, of course,' said K., who had not intended to offend anyone with his remark. 'You'll have painted the figure as it is on the chair.' 'No,' said the painter, 'I've never seen either the figure or the chair, but I was told what I was to paint.'

Related Characters: Titorelli, Josef K. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

One of Josef's clients has admitted that a friend of his named Titorelli has told him that Josef is on trial; Josef decides to visit Titorelli, a painter who paints portraits of court officials. Titorelli is confused about why Josef has come, though he still shows Josef his paintings, including a portrait of the judge, which features a depiction of the figures of Justice and Victory mixed into one. In this passage, Josef points out that the combination makes it looks as if Justice's scales are tipped, which would symbolize unfair judgment; Titorelli, indifferent, responds that he only paints what he is told to paint.

The portrait of the Judge is a perfect representation of the corrupt and skewed legal system. Titorelli's attempt to fuse the symbols for Justice and Victory show how far the law has strayed from the aim of delivering fair, unbiased judgment to citizens; after all, if the aim of the law is victory, this prohibits the courts from acting impartially. Furthermore, Titorelli's reason for painting the portrait in this way proves how the law came to be so unjust in the first place. When questioned by Josef, Titorelli responds that he simply follows orders, showing that when people mindlessly obey authority without using their own rational judgment, the outcome will be a system that is nonsensical and absurd.

Whenever I had the opportunity to go to the court myself, I always availed myself of it, I've listened to countless trials at important stages and followed them as long as they were held in open court, and, I have to admit, I have never come across a single genuine acquittal.

Related Characters: Titorelli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Having discussed his paintings with Josef, Titorelli asks Josef if he is innocent; Josef has responded that he is, and Titorelli says that this makes the situation "simple." Titorelli has told Josef that there are three kinds of acquittal, but then says that he has witnessed "countless trials" and has never seen "a single genuine acquittal." Titorelli's descriptions of the legal system throughout this scene are contradictory and bizarre. He claims to have extensive knowledge of how the court works, though his explanations are largely nonsensical. Even more disturbingly, Titorelli does not seem troubled by the bias he describes, and insists that Josef's innocence will make the trial easy, even though it is obvious from his description that people are always condemned whether they are innocent or not.

Chapter 8 Quotes

I don't know who the great lawyers are, and I presume you can't get to them. I know of no case where it can be said for certain that they took part. They defend some people, but you can't get them to do that through your own efforts, they only defend the ones they want to defend. But I assume a case they take on must have progressed beyond the lower court. It's better not to think of them at all, otherwise you'll find the consultations with the other lawyers, their advice and their assistance, extremely disgusting and useless. I've been through that myself, you feel like throwing everything up, taking to your bed, and ignoring everything.

Related Characters: Block (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 128-129

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has gone to Huld's house to inform him that he no longer wants Huld to be his lawyer; there he has discovered Block, another of Huld's clients, who tells Josef about his own case. Block has confessed that he secretly sees five different lawyers and has spent five years on trial. In this passage, he admits that "the great lawyers" only defend

some people and that he doesn't know who they are or how a person could access them; he advises Josef not to think about these mysterious great lawyers or else he will become too dissatisfied with his own lawyer, Huld.What Block does not realize as he gives Josef this advice is that Josef is already dissatisfied with Huld, to the point that he has decided to cease using Huld's services.

Block's story of struggle and frustration is similar to what Josef has endured. Indeed, Block's description of wanting to throw up and hide in bed shows that Josef is not alone in experiencing a physical reaction to the stress of his trial (although in Josef's case, he feels stifled by the court's air). However, like many other characters in the novel, Block seems somewhat resigned to the inevitability of the injustice of the law. In contrast to Josef, who has decided to fire Huld as his lawyer, Block claims it is best to simply ignore the possibility that more effective lawyers exist. This willful ignorance creates a claustrophobic, stagnant situation, as people refuse to resist or protest against the absurd legal system.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Then the priest shouted down at K., 'Can't you see even two steps in front of you?' It was shouted angrily, but at the same time as if by a person who can see someone falling and shouts out automatically, throwing caution to the winds because he is horrified himself.

Related Characters: The Prison Chaplain (speaker), Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has been assigned to give a high-level partner of the bank a tour of the city's cathedral; however, having arrived, he finds out that this story was a ruse designed by the prison chaplain, who collaborated with the bank to lure Josef to the church. The chaplain tells Josef his case is going badly, and when Josef insists that there is still hope, the priest angrily shouts "Can't you see even two steps in front of you?". This is one of many instances when authority figures furiously reprimand Josef for his behavior, implying that his conduct is naïve. Yet it remains frustratingly ambiguous whether or not this is true.

On the one hand, Josef's refusal to accept that his trial is going badly shows he is deliberately ignoring almost everything he has learned about the legal system. It certainly seems that Josef is indulging in arrogance by believing that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, he has a chance of being acquitted. At the same time, the alternative option would be resigning himself both to his own fate and to the unfair and unchecked power of the law, as Block has done. Josef has witnessed that taking a position results in a kind of relentless stagnation.

The chaplain's accusation that Josef can't see "even two steps in front" of himself therefore conveys both the naïveté and necessity of Josef's continued hope. It may be unwise and even arrogant to retain a sense of optimism, yet the alternative is even worse.

❝ I am only accepting this so you will not think there is something you have omitted to do.

Related Characters: The Doorkeeper (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has thanked the prison chaplain for his apparent kindness, to which the chaplain has responded that Josef should not deceive himself about the nature of the court. The priest then begins to tell Josef a parable from the introductory writings about the law. In the parable, a man from the country tries to get access to the law, but is prevented by a doorkeeper who tells him he cannot enter. The man asks if he might be able to enter later; the doorkeeper says it's possible, so the man waits for years and bribes the doorkeeper, who, when taking the bribes, says he only accepts them "so you will not think there is something you have omitted to do."

The bribes given by the man from the country symbolize the efforts of Josef and other accused characters to act in a way that pleases the court, whether by performing well at hearings, composing convincing pleas, or hiring an experienced lawyer. Like the doorkeeper, the court accepts these efforts in ambivalent terms; on the one hand, the doorkeeper's words suggest that if the man did not bribe him it would have been an omission, but at the same time, he implies that the bribes will not actually influence his

decision. Furthermore, the doorkeeper emphasizes that he only accepts the bribes for the man's own peace of mind. This point indicates that the efforts of the accused really only matter insofar as they reassure the accused that they are doing everything they can, even if this is ultimately in vain.

> No one else could be granted entry here, because this entrance was intended for you alone. I shall now go and shut it.

Related Characters: The Doorkeeper (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

The prison chaplain has now come to the end of his parable. The man from the country has waited for so many years that he has become senile and deaf, and eventually asks the doorkeeper why no one else has come along and tried to get through the door. The doorkeeper replies that the door was intended for the man alone, and then shuts it. The strange and frustrating end to the parable makes it difficult to see what the moral of the story might be. Indeed, the man from the country's failure to get through the door seems only to reinforce the futility of understanding the law, and to discourage people from trying.

The fact that the parable concludes in this manner indicates the importance of coming to the realization that––although the law is supposed to unite citizens by applying to all of them equally––in reality it divides and isolates them. At the same time, the acceptance of this reality seems to only further prohibit access to knowledge of the law and to justice, as after the doorkeeper delivers this message he closes the door.

> The court does not want anything from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go.

Related Characters: The Prison Chaplain (speaker), Josef K.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

The prison chaplain has finished his parable, and Josef has remarked that it conveys a distinctly depressing view of the world. Josef asks if the chaplain wants him to do anything else, to which the chaplain replies that the court doesn't want anything from Josef; "it receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go." This comment echoes Josef's own observation earlier in the novel that the law is like an organism that is "eternally in balance," immune to the actions of any individual. Both descriptions turn the law into an organic, living being, yet portray it as completely indifferent, making any interaction with the law a distinctly one-sided experience that only isolates and alienates people further.

The chaplain's statement that "the court doesn't want anything from you" also contradicts common sense understandings of what the law is and does. The law ostensibly exists in order to encourage certain kinds of behavior and discourage others; thus the notion that the law is self-sufficient and uninterested in human behavior shows just how far from the idea of justice the law has become.

Chapter 10 Quotes

> Then Fräulein Bürstner appeared in the square, coming up a small set of steps from a lower street. It wasn't quite certain that it was her, though the similarity was great. But K. wasn't bothered whether it was definitely Fräulein Bürstner or not, it was just that he immediately became aware of the futility of his resistance. There was nothing heroic about his resistance, about making things difficult for the two men, about trying to enjoy the last semblance of life as he defended himself.

Related Characters: Josef K., Fraulein Burstner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

It is Josef's thirty-first birthday, and he has been forcefully taken from his apartment by two well-dressed men and marched into a town square. In the square, Josef notices a woman who appears to be Fraulein Burstner, although he

isn't sure. As he looks, he realizes he doesn't care whether it is her or not, and is suddenly overwhelmed by a more general feeling of indifference over what happens to him. He decides that "there was nothing heroic about his resistance," which is completely futile and only makes life more difficult for him. This marks a shift in Josef's attitude. Not only has he completely lost all optimism and desire to influence his trial, he finally seems able to "see two feet in front of him" and accept that he is being slowly marched to his death.

On the one hand, Josef's indifference to Fraulein Burstner's identity can be seen as the result of a year of exhaustion, struggle, and frustration which has led him to accept the inevitability of defeat. At the same time, recall that during his interaction with Fraulein Burstner at the beginning of the novel he did not seem particularly concerned with who she was as an individual either. He admitted that he did not know her very well, and seemed more excited by having an audience for the reenactment of his arrest than by engaging with Fraulein Burstner as a person. It is therefore possible to interpret the events of the novel as simply confirming Josef's pre-existing alienation and disinterest in others, rather than creating it.

> I'm grateful that I've been given these two half-mute, uncomprehending men to accompany me on my way and it's been left to me to tell myself everything that is needful.

Related Characters: Josef K. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Still being forcefully walked along by the two men, Josef has given up all hope of resistance, and vowed only to cling onto his logical understanding of the world until he dies. He tells himself he is lucky to be accompanied by two men who aren't saying anything, so he can think everything over. This passage presents the experience of solitude in ambiguous terms. Throughout the novel, people have been depicted as profoundly alienated from one another, unable to properly empathize or connect. Meanwhile, Josef's experience of his trial has further isolated him from others. While so far this has been shown to be almost wholly negative, in this passage Josef finds solace in his own mind and in fact feels grateful to be left alone with his thoughts, a detail that suggests there may be some positive sides to isolation.

> His eye fell on the top storey of the house beside the quarry. Like a flash of light, the two casements of a window parted and a human figure, faint and thin from the distance and height, leant far out in one swift movement then stretched its arms out even farther. Who was it? A friend? A kind person? Someone who felt for him? Someone who wanted to help? Was it just one? Or all of them? Was help still possible? Were there still objections he'd forgotten? Of course there were. Logic may be unshakeable, but it cannot hold out against a human being who wants to live. Where was the judge he had never seen? Where was the high court he had never reached?

Related Characters: Josef K.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Josef has continued being marched along by the two well-dressed men, at one point even helping them to evade an encounter with a policeman. The men have led him to a quarry next to a single house and politely asked him to remove his coat and shirt, before handing him a knife. The police want Josef to stab himself with the knife, but he hesitates, noticing a person in the house with outstretched arms and briefly wondering if they could be "a friend" or "a kind person."

Although up until this point Josef has been determined to accept the reality that the court is all-powerful and not to die clinging to the mistaken delusion that there is any hope of justice, in this passage he relents and finds himself hoping that someone will help him or that he might finally understand the law. He observes that no matter how committed he is to logical thinking, this desire cannot withstand the desperate situation he has found himself in, of wanting to live while knowing he is about to die.

Like many other parts of the novel, it is ambiguous whether this last glimmer of hope represents a positive interpretation of the nature of humanity or not. On one hand, perhaps the fact that despite everything, Josef still manages to retain a tiny sliver of optimism about the possibility of justice and solidarity shows the resilience of the human spirit. Alternatively, however, this moment can be seen as a final, resounding failure, as Josef has not managed to achieve the only consolation he found within his terrible fate, which was his vow to die without deluding himself about reality.

‘Like a dog!’ he said. It seemed as if his shame would live on after him.

Related Characters: Josef K. (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

On a rock by the quarry, Josef has been stabbed in the chest by one of the well-dressed men while the other grasps his throat. He begins to lose consciousness, but can see the men looking at his face as he dies. Josef exclaims "Like a dog!" and, in the final line of the novel, expresses the thought that his shame will live on after him. The ending of the novel conveys an unequivocally dark view of Josef's character and fate. He dies alone, with no witnesses apart from his executioners and no indication that anyone really cares about the injustice of what has happened to him. Indeed, his death is so undignified that Josef himself proclaims he has lost his humanity and been reduced to the status of a dog.

There is no moral or meaning to be found in Josef's death; it is both absurd and assumedly unexceptional, due to the seemingly limitless power of the law over the lives and deaths of citizens. Indeed, the only legacy Josef leaves behind is his shame, implying that he is connected to the rest of the world only through his degradation and humiliation.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

One morning, Josef K.'s breakfast does not arrive at the usual time. He is surprised by this unprecedented change in routine, and he rings for his landlady's cook. Immediately, an unfamiliar man arrives and instructs Josef to remain in his room.

From the very outset of the book, its theme of the unknowable is prevalent. Josef's arrest appears startling and aberrant, rather than a fulfillment of justice, but its most distressing aspect is its inexplicability.

Josef exits his room anyway, hoping to speak to his landlady, Frau Grubach. He finds a second man sitting in the living room. This man tells Josef that he and his companion, Franz, have arrived to arrest Josef. They assure him that he will be informed in due time of the charges against him.

Although Josef's experience runs counter to the basic principles of law and order, none of his captors seem to mind. Instead, they are confident that the system will manage to sort things out beyond their understanding.

The policemen continue to talk, and Josef tries to analyze his position, calculating the costs and benefits of each possible response. Because it happens to be his thirtieth birthday, K. imagines that this could be a practical joke by his colleagues.

Josef's strategizing reveals him to be obsessed with social dynamics and gamesmanship. He is intent on retaining every bit of control he can, because he is unable to control or understand his current situation.

Josef asks the men to produce an arrest warrant. The men respond that they cannot answer his questions because they are only low-level functionaries, but insist that they are simply acting in accordance with the law. Josef, indignant, returns to his room, but not before noticing that an elderly couple has been watching the altercation from their window.

The policemen display an attitude that is widespread in The Trial*: they act not as accountable individuals, but as ignorantly complicit cogs of a controlling, impersonal system.*

Suddenly, the men yell to Josef that their supervisor wants to see him. The police insist that Josef put on his best black suit, and lead him into another room of the house that is rented by a typist named Fraulein Burstner. The supervisor is seated at the desk, and there are three young men in the room with him. Josef demands more details of his arrest, but the supervisor forcefully replies that he knows nothing of Josef's crime—only that he is under arrest. Josef protests louder and louder; he also notices that the old man and woman watching from their window have been joined by a third man. He yells at these spectators to leave him alone.

Although Josef's cooperation with the police is designed to expedite the process of law and order, it in reality reinforces his anxieties and subjugates him to the authority of the court. Josef may voice outrage, but he nevertheless complies with the investigation, and this is what legitimatizes the absolute authority that the court exerts over him. Moreover, Josef's rage at being watched by the three spectators shows that he is ashamed of being perceived as powerless or, perhaps, guilty. Even though he is sure that he is not guilty it makes him upset to think that others might think he is.

The supervisor tells Josef that he may leave for his job at the bank. They tensely part ways, and Josef goes to the bank with the three young people who were in Fraulein Burstner's room, whom Josef has realized are colleagues of his.

Josef's arrest has so alienated him from his everyday routine that he did not even recognize his coworkers until his normal workday context is restored.

After work, Josef usually takes a walk and goes to a pub with his colleagues; once a week, he calls upon a cocktail waitress named Elsa. After this workday, however, Josef heads straight home. He apologizes to Frau Grubach about the morning's disturbance. She is unwilling to find fault with him because he is her favorite tenant, although her manner betrays some anxiety.

Daily routine appears to be a source of comfort for Josef. His arrest has so disturbed him because it has made him unable to immerse himself in this routine. Notably, however, the system of law and order disturbs him in part because *of its very routineness: the policemen and supervisors simply fulfill their roles and assure Josef to trust the system simply because it is systematic.*

On his way out of Frau Grubach's room, Josef asks about Fraulein Burstner's whereabouts. Grubach tells him that the young woman hasn't yet returned from one of her late nights at the theater. The landlady also insinuates that Burstner fraternizes with men in an immodest way. Josef snaps angrily at the landlady for impugning Burstner.

Josef's impassioned defense of Fraulein Burstner is out of character, and likely arises more from anxiety about his own arrest—his own innocence despite the charges being made against him—than from genuine indignation about Frau Grubach's remarks.

Josef waits until 11:30, when Fraulein Burstner arrives. She invites him into her room, where Josef explains the day's events and apologizes for disturbing her space. While reenacting his encounter with the supervisor, Josef lets out a yell that startles Fraulein Burstner and wakes Frau Grubach's nephew, who sleeps in a nearby room.

Frau Grubach's description of Fraulein Burstner appears to have motivated Josef to seek her out, perhaps with the aim of seducing her. This may be Josef's way of rebelling against societally-prescribed standards after feeling particularly constrained by the Law.

Josef comforts Fraulein Burstner, who is concerned about the disturbance he has caused. Impulsively, he showers her with kisses. He returns to his room surprised by, but satisfied with, his behavior, and he worries whether his conduct will raise trouble for Fraulein Burstner.

Josef's lusty but impersonal encounter with Fraulein Burstner is an indication of his isolation, and a desperate need for meaningful interpersonal contact. This need is so acute that Josef's outburst defies his ordinarily calculating nature.

CHAPTER 2

At work, Josef receives a phone call informing him that the first of many frequent cross-examinations of his case will take place the coming Sunday. He makes note of the address, which is in a faraway suburb he has never visited, and resolves to attend the hearing. He is confident it will be the only one necessary to clear up his case. Immediately after the call, the bank's deputy director attempts to improve his tepid relationship with Josef by inviting him sailing on Sunday morning. Josef has no choice but to decline.

Though he is determined to keep it compartmentalized, Josef's trial has already begun to interfere with other aspects of his life. However, Josef is unable to go sailing only because he feels obligated to play by the justice system's rules. In other words, Josef himself is the person who gives legitimacy to the justice system and allows it to encroach on his personal affairs.

That Sunday, Josef awakes groggily; he had been out drinking the past night. Though he does not know when his appointment is, he aims to arrive at the address by nine o'clock. He travels on foot out of a desire not to rely on any strangers. He arrives at the address, which is in a loud, bustling neighborhood full of tenements for the poor.

The hearing's unknown start time represents yet another key piece of information that is withheld from Josef. His determination not to rely on others further reinforces the image the reader has been given of his solitary, isolated lifestyle.

The building itself is a sprawling complex. There are many stairwells to choose from, and Josef is irked that he was not given more precise directions to the room of his hearing. He picks at random, wondering if his unknown guilt might somehow lead him to come upon the correct room by chance.

Josef's situation appears to be designed so that he cannot fully understand how to handle it. By considering that his guilt might lead him to the correct room, Josef shows that he is beginning to believe that the workings of the Law should remain beyond him, as they seem designed to do.

Josef works his way up the stairs, walking through a group of children at play. As a pretense to look into each of the rooms, he pretends to be in search of a joiner named Lanz. On each floor, families in cramped rooms offer a barrage of confusing suggestions on where Josef might find the man he might be looking for. Josef reaches the fifth floor, tired by the chaos.

The hectic tenement building creates a bizarre and de-familiarizing environment for a court hearing. Importantly, Josef's individualistic pretense of looking for Lanz—intended to save him the embarrassment of being publicly exposed as an accused man—actually make his task of finding the hearing much more difficult.

Josef knocks on a door, and a young woman washing children's clothing motions him into a stuffy, crowded room that is overlooked by a gallery. A young boy leads Josef past throngs of people, many of whom are dressed in long, black coats and have their backs turned to Josef. Josef is led to a man on a podium who informs him that he is one hour and five minutes late for his appointment. Josef decides not to defend his lateness, and simply replies that he is here now. After he makes his statement, the right-hand side of the room breaks into applause.

The courtroom atmosphere is decidedly unfriendly and, more importantly, largely incomprehensible. The audience's applause seems entirely arbitrary, and there is no clear way for Josef to discern how he is expected to act. This destabilizing uncertainty represents the hostile inscrutability of the legal system as a whole.

The man, who appears to be a judge, informs Josef that he no longer has an obligation to hear his case, but that he will do so anyway. The judge asks Josef if he is a house painter, and Josef assertively replies that he is the chief clerk of a large bank. The people on the right side of the room burst out in laughter, which the judge seems powerless to silence. Meanwhile, the left side of the room remains quiet.

Josef's hearing is filled with signals that are difficult to interpret unequivocally. Do the audience's differing reactions signify contempt or sympathy? Does the audience's opinion signal anything about Josef at all? Josef at this point seems to think that the power of his position will impress the court and help his cause.

Josef tells the judge that his uninformed question suggests that the proceedings against him are careless and unsubstantiated. This rebuke comes across more harshly than Josef intended, and the room falls silent. The judge seems surprised, and Josef asserts himself further: he picks up the judge's notebook, flips through it, and drops it back on the table. Josef pontificates about how he has been wronged, though a group of silent spectators in the front row rattles his composure slightly. He gives a dramatic account of his arrest. At a break in his story, Josef notices the judge appearing to signal into the audience, and calls him out for this mysterious signing.

The audience's indecipherable reactions set Josef off balance, and make him behave uncharacteristically hotheadedly. He has no way of knowing whether his passionate speech is helping or hurting his case. Again, it is important to note that Josef is not directly coerced or provoked at any point during his hearing: rather, it is his own interpretations of his baffling surroundings that motivate his rash actions.

In response to Josef's insolence, the judge rocks back and forth in his chair. The previously divided crowd has begun to mingle, and some members gesture at Josef and the judge. Josef announces defiantly that he has no time for this affair, and that he will soon be leaving, and the room falls silent again. He launches into another screed against his pointless prosecution, but is interrupted by a sudden screech from the rear of the hall. The washerwoman who met Josef at the door is being pressed against the wall by a man, who is screaming. The crowd does not intervene, and a hand grabs Josef by the collar to hold him in place.

The crowd's intermingling implies that their division was a largely meaningless one, and this erodes whatever sense of order was present in the room previously. It is likely this breakdown in order that unsettles Josef enough to attempt an exit. Whatever inkling of the crowd's logic he thought he possessed has been revealed to be a misconception. Meanwhile, this court of law stands idly by while a woman appears to be sexually assaulted.

Josef jumps down from the podium. He looks at the crowd anxiously and begins to doubt himself. The somber, bearded men who surround him are all wearing at least one of an assortment of badges. Josef turns around and notices a badge on the judge's collar. He then impugns the crowd as cronies of the judge's corrupt system and walks briskly towards the door. When he reaches the exit, Josef finds the judge standing before him. The judge calmly tells Josef that his haughty conduct has led him to forfeit the benefits that such a hearing usually confers to the arrested. Josef calls out an insult and leaves in a huff, while the room behind him erupts in lively discussion.

The badges present yet another menacing and indecipherable system to Josef, and the unpredictability of this environment is beginning to rattle him. The judge's cryptic and uninformative warning reinforces a reader's perception of the judiciary as an unforgiving, arbitrary body that is governed by an inaccessibly logic all its own. The court clearly sees itself as important, as being owed deference and respect. Yet the "benefits" of a hearing are never explained or described, just as the accusations against Josef are never described.

CHAPTER 3

Josef spends the next week waiting for another court summons, and is aghast when none arrives. The next Sunday, he assumes he is supposed to report to the same place. When he arrives, however, the same washerwoman from the week before tells him that there is no session that day. She shows him the room his hearing had been held in, and it is empty. A few books have been left on the judge's table, but the woman tells Josef he cannot consult them.

Josef has submitted now to the power of the court. He lets it dominate his Sunday morning even when it does not demand his time. This illustrates the way in which the judiciary's hold over Josef is legitimized and strengthened mostly through his own voluntary behavior. He thinks he can beat it or outsmart it, but all attempts to do so mean that he is giving it power over him. Furthermore, the inconsistent schedule makes the court seem irritatingly unsystematic, and Josef's inability to consult the books represents still more obscurantism within the Law.

The woman explains that her husband is a court usher, and that the two are allowed to inhabit the space for free in exchange for their work there. Josef seems indignant that the woman is married, but she explains that the man who assailed her the week before is a law student who has long pursued her. Her husband tolerates the advances, because the student will one day wield power.

The washerwoman's predicament illustrates how she, like Josef, is largely at the mercy of a system more powerful than she. However, Josef is remarkably unsympathetic to her, despite their similar situation. Instead, he takes advantage of his social station to pass judgment.

The woman flirtatiously offers to help Josef with his trial. He asks her to show him the judge's books, and she obliges, but Josef finds that they only contain pornographic drawings and novels. Josef recognizes that the woman is trying to seduce him, and tells her he doubts she can help him fight the disorganized and sinister system. The woman responds that the judge is interested in her, and, judging from his constant report-writing, likely holds some influence.

Even when Josef manages to view information about the court's methods, it is completely meaningless—and almost insultingly nonsensical—to him. The Law does not appear to be something any individual can understand alone, and Josef certainly treats it that way by initially dismissing the washerwoman's ability to help.

The woman then warns Josef that the amorous law student, Berthold, is watching them. Sure enough, the man stands in the doorway, stroking his beard. The woman tells Josef that she must go speak to the student, but promises to return quickly and let him do whatever he wants to her. Josef wonders whether or not the woman has been sent to entrap him. He finds both the woman herself and the prospect of undermining the judge quite attractive.

Josef views his relationship to the washerwoman as a game of power-brokering, rather than a romantic endeavor. He is just as interested in subverting the judge's control as he is in exercising sexual control himself. This strategizing reveals Josef's arrogant assumption that his own interpretations of the proceedings will be most likely to help him find freedom, as opposed to the helpful perspectives of others.

Josef lingers in the room while the woman and the student talk. After some time, the student snaps at Josef and asks him to leave. Josef offers a retort, but the student physically picks the woman up and leaves. The woman explains that she has no choice but to go along, as the judge has demanded her. When Josef asks if she would prefer to be liberated, she responds with a fearful denial.

The fact that the washerwoman finds oppression less objectionable than liberty may explain why the system exerts such power over her. It also articulates Josef's predicament: he is so desperate for routine and structure that he accedes to the court's commands, thus affirming its authority.

The student carries the woman away. Josef understands this altercation as the first genuine setback he has suffered thus far, and realizes that it only came because he sought a fight. He decides that the proper course of action is to resume his normal life and thus remain superior. From the doorway, Josef watches the student carry the woman up to an attic. She looks ambivalent, and Josef concludes that she deceived him.

At this point, Josef remains faithful that individualism and devotion to routine will help him navigate his unfamiliar predicament. He is also becoming increasingly less able to trust his interpretations of external facts: the washerwoman he initially thought benign now strikes him as a deceiver.

The court usher enters the room and introduces himself to Josef, whom he recognizes as a defendant. The usher confesses that his superiors constantly abuse his wife, and that their authority is the only thing that stops him from fighting back. The usher indulges in a violent fantasy of harming the student, and suggests that Josef carry out the deed. Josef says that he cannot because the student might influence his trial; the usher responds that the trials themselves rarely affect an individual's sentence.

The court usher's insider knowledge is disturbing: it implies that Josef's fate is entirely out of his control. The usher himself seems to have adopted this fatalistic view: he, unlike Josef, views himself as completely subjugated by the legal system's corruptions. He is unable to resist because the system controls vitally important aspects of his life.

The usher has to report to the law office, and asks if Josef would like to join him. Josef comes along, and the usher leads him into a dimly lit corridor. Josef walks past a group of accused men. Josef asks one of them, a dignified-looking man, what he is waiting for, but the man can only stammer a few words in response. The other men in the corridor try to gather around, but the usher shoos them. Josef asks the man a few more questions, and the man can only give vague, pathetic answers about how his trial is going.

Josef's first run-in with fellow accused men is a disheartening omen of his future. However, instead of being sympathetic, he superciliously interprets their behavior as a sign of their own weakness, and acts as though he is above their status.

Josef continues along the corridor, with the usher following behind him. Suddenly, he begins to feel very tired, and asks the usher to lead him to the exit. The usher reproachfully tells Josef that he cannot. A woman hears Josef's exchange with the usher and emerges from an office to ask what Josef's business is. Josef is overcome with dizziness and is unable to respond. The woman gets him a chair and assures Josef that he will get used to the **stifling atmosphere** after a few visits.

The legal offices' oppressive air is a literal manifestation of the overwhelming power that the institution has over Josef. His willing entry into the bureaucratic world has ended up rendering him too weak to leave voluntarily.

The woman tells Josef that he cannot stay sitting where he is, and asks a well-dressed man to bring him to a sick room. Josef tries to stand on his own but cannot. The well-dressed man recognizes that Josef wants not to go to the sick room, but simply to leave the building. Josef responds enthusiastically to this suggestion, but the man simply laughs at him.

These legal officials seem to understand Josef's problem, but do not seem at all interested in helping him—yet another indication of an unfriendly justice system. Moreover, unlike Josef, they seem to have the power to correctly interpret others' behavior.

The woman introduces the man as the official information-giver, and together, the two lead Josef out of the offices. On the way, the woman explains to Josef that neither she nor the information-giver has bad intentions. The trio passes the pathetic man whom Josef had spoken with before, and Josef is embarrassed by his own weakness.

Josef's obsession with hierarchically comparing himself to others makes him acutely embarrassed to show weakness before other defendants. This is an ironic inversion of the haughtiness with which he regarded these men just minutes earlier.

Finally, they reach the door to the outside, and Josef is so weak that he hardly realizes that he can leave. He is revitalized by the fresh air, and notices that the information-giver and the woman who helped him seem as enervated by the outdoors as Josef was by the office's oppressive air.

The bureaucrats have become so comfortable in their stifling environment that they are viscerally disturbed by the air outside. This suggests that liberty is anathema to the judicial bureaucracy.

CHAPTER 4

Josef goes to great lengths to find Fraulein Burstner, but is unsuccessful. He even writes her a letter to justify his behavior, but it goes unanswered. Then, the following Sunday, he sees a different tenant moving into Fraulein Burstner's room. The new occupant is a French teacher named Fraulein Montag.

As he loses control over his legal proceedings, Josef also appears to lose control over his personal life: he cannot even convince Fraulein Burstner to acknowledge him.

Sunday marks the fifth day since Frau Grubach angered Josef, and he has not spoken to her since. That morning, Frau Grubach brings Josef his breakfast, and he curtly questions her about the new tenant. She is relieved that he is speaking to him, as she understands it to mean he has forgiven her somewhat. Frau Grubach explains that Fraulein Montag is simply moving in with Fraulein Burstner, and she breaks into a tearful apology for slandering Fraulein Burstner. Josef consoles her, and the two make amends.

Josef's frustration at being ignored by Fraulein Burstner is likely what fuels his hostility towards Frau Grubach. The landlady bears the brunt of Josef's anger because he can get away with treating her as his inferior. Yet again, Josef takes advantage of the same rigid social structure that constrains him, so that he may displace these anxieties onto someone of lower stature.

The maid informs Josef that Fraulein Montag has sent for him. He goes to Montag's room, and she tersely explains that she is speaking to him on Fraulein Burstner's behalf. Fraulein Burstner, her new roommate continues, does not think that a meeting between her and Josef would be beneficial to either party involved. In a clinical tone, Fraulein Montag adds that she convinced Fraulein Burstner to allow her to speak on her behalf.

One of the only spontaneous, uncalculated actions Josef has taken in the entire book has ended up alienating him from his peers. This implies that while routine and rules are what fetter Josef, he cannot meaningfully subvert them on his own, because they still constrain the rest of society.

Josef thanks Fraulein Montag and gets up to leave. Just as he reaches the door, Frau Grubach's nephew, Captain Lanz, enters through it. Lanz is a graceful, middle-aged man, and he greets Fraulein Montag with a deferential kiss on the hand. This chivalrous behavior contrasts sharply with the treatment she received from Josef. Josef notices that Fraulein Montag seems interested in introducing him to Lanz, but he has no interest in socializing with them and leaves the room with hardly a word. All the while, he analyzes their treatment of him, and convinces himself that Fraulein Montag's goal is to hinder his inevitable seduction of Fraulein Burstner.

As Josef sees things, Fraulein Montag and Captain Lanz are of no use to him, so he calculates that it is not worth his time to treat them civilly. He conceptualizes their motivations solely in terms of his own goal of seducing Fraulein Burstner—a goal he remains arrogantly certain of achieving. In other words, Josef's interpretations are inappropriately colored by his fleeting anxieties and biases.

After he leaves Fraulein Montag and Captain Lanz, Josef realizes that he has an opportunity to confront Fraulein Burstner alone. He checks to see if anyone can see him, and, convinced nobody is watching, knocks on Fraulein Burstner's door. He knocks repeatedly, but receives no answer. He decides to enter, even though he has a sense that doing so is futile and inappropriate.

Josef's morality seems more determined by what he can get away with than by rules of right and wrong. This is an ironic disjunction, because he objects vehemently to this same flexibility as manifested by the justice system. There is an implication here that Josef, in fact is not innocent. This is not to say he has committed a crime, but rather simply that he is flawed, capable of morally poor behavior. And if one sees the judicial court as something more akin to a "court of the soul" where you are put on trial for your nature or internal goodness or badness, then one can come to the conclusion that Josef is in fact guilty to some degree. At the same time, if you follow that logic, then this particular "court of the soul" is one that itself lacks any kind of clarity or fairness or goodness, a court of heaven with no God. Speaking more generally, it is worthwhile to think about the court in The Trial as existing on multiple interpretive levels at the same time.

The room is empty, and has been completely rearranged. As he leaves Fraulein Burstner's room, Josef notices Fraulein Montag and the Captain conversing in the dining room. They glance at him absentmindedly, and Josef is convinced that they have seen his trespass.

Yet again, Josef's paramount concern is his status relative to others. He is more ashamed of having been witnessed walking into Fraulein Burstner's room than of having committed the act itself. In a moment that recalls Josef's embarrassment at being watched during his interrogation, his concerns of guilt here pale in comparison to concerns of public shame.

CHAPTER 5

Several days later, Josef prepares to return home after staying at the office well into the evening. As he walks down a corridor of his office building, he hears human voices crying out from behind a closed door. He decides to open it, and inside he finds Franz and Willem, the policemen who first placed him under arrest. They are about to be beaten by a third cane-wielding man who wears a leather executioner's outfit.

This disturbing encounter is one of the story's first truly sinister moments. That these men were in some random closet at Josef's office suggests that his trial is further encroaching on his personal life, and also that the court is everywhere, judging everyone.

Franz and Willem explain to Josef that they are being punished because Josef condemned their behavior during his hearing. Josef counters that his complaints were factual and justified, but the policemen reply that they were simply desperate for money to support themselves. Josef tells them that he reported their conduct as a matter of principle, but never intended to see them punished. The cane-wielding man responds to this, saying that the policemen's punishment is "both just and unavoidable."

Once again, Josef is blamed for something out of his purview. He had no way of knowing how his words in court would have been interpreted, and just as importantly, he did not have knowledge of the policemen's desperation. Moreover, the cane-wielding man's notion of justice is worryingly devoid of transparency—instead, it treats the system's rules as self-justifying: it assumes the court is just, and therefore assumes all its actions must be just.

Willem protests against the cane-wielder's words, saying that he is only being punished because of Josef's complaints. Moreover, Willem adds, Josef has ruined the policemen's career prospects. Willem's interruption is punished by a blow from the cane.

The policemen's punishment is framed by the punisher as a consequence of the system, but framed by Willem as Josef's fault alone. Mystifyingly, no other individual considers himself responsible—the entire system seems to run itself based on blind assumptions, fear, and compliance.

Josef offers to pay the cane-wielder not to hit the policemen, but the man declines on the grounds that Josef could then report *him* for bad conduct. Josef tries to explain that he thinks the overall system is really the problem, but the cane-wielder shrugs him off and commences beating the policemen.

Every person—even the cane-wielder—is subject to the court's punishment, and the fear sparked by that punishment drives conformity and compliance. Josef begins to see that the issue is the larger system, but this insight drives no action, as he is still gripped within the system, unable to escape—just like everyone else. Following this logic, there is a hint here of the trial operating also as a metaphor for life and death—everyone is sentenced to death, everyone struggles to avoid it, and yet no one can. Life, in other words, is a rigged "system," just like the court.

Franz begins to make horrible noises as he suffers under the cane, and Josef promptly leaves the room. He tells a coworker not to worry about the noise, and blames it on a dog yelping outside.

Just as in Josef's surreptitious entrance to Fraulein Burstner's room or his embarrassment at being watched during his interrogation, the prevalence of socialized insecurities over morals is again illustrated here. Josef is willing to overlook injustice in order to avoid public humiliation.

Josef stews with anxiety about the policemen's predicament, but convinces himself that Franz's screaming forced his hand. He had to make sure the group went undiscovered by his coworkers.

In much the same way as the cane-wielding man uses the rules of his system to absolve himself of personal culpability, Josef deliberately constrains himself with rationalizations about social convention in order to excuse his tolerance of injustice.

The next day, Josef's thoughts are dominated by the anguished policemen. That evening, he revisits the room where they were being whipped, and to his great surprise he finds the same three men in the same arrangement as the night before. Franz and Willem cry out for help, but Josef quickly shuts the door. Distraught, Josef orders some of his subordinates to clean out the room, and then heads home for the night.

The policemen's horrifyingly prolonged suffering characterizes the justice system as somehow beyond the temporality that governs Josef's day-to-day affairs. The judiciary is beginning to seem ubiquitous and omnipotent in ways that lie beyond human power and comprehension—and, again, by pushing these boundaries the story is able to make the court operate on the level of a real-world but exaggeratedly horrifyingly out-of-control court; a court that judges one's worth rather than one's deeds; the "court of public opinion" in which everyone is always judging everyone else; a metaphor for the "court of life" in which all people are sentenced to death. And it is certainly possible to find other interpretations of the court as well.

CHAPTER 6

Josef is visited at work by his uncle Karl, a landowner from the country. Josef had been expecting his uncle for some time, and, because Karl is Josef's former guardian, feels obligated to house him on his visits. Karl tells Josef he heard about Josef's trial from his daughter Erna. Josef is touched by his cousin's concern and makes a note to send her gifts.

Josef's relationship with Karl is not one of familial devotion—it is one of reluctant obligation. Because Karl was Josef's guardian, Josef feels beholden to him. Evidently, Josef's calculating nature extends even into his deepest personal relationships, making his relationships transactional rather than authentic human connections—though there is a suggestion here that perhaps Josef isn't alone in this regard, that perhaps the idea of deep relationships is itself just a pretty myth.

Karl is extremely worried about his nephew's trial. Not least of his concerns is the possibility that it will disgrace the family. Karl offers to help however he can, but Josef dismisses his uncle's concerns calmly. This nonchalance only agitates Karl further.

Karl appears to be just as controlled by social insecurities as Josef is. His intervention comes out of concern for his own reputation as much as concern about Josef's well-being.

Karl takes Josef to meet his friend, a defense lawyer named Herr Huld. At Huld's house, his maid, Leni, informs the visitors that the lawyer is ill. They visit Huld on his sick bed, and Karl commiserates with his friend. Karl hostilely asks Leni to leave the room, and after some resistance, she does so at Huld's request. Huld is introduced to Josef, whom he greets surprisingly energetically. Huld remarks that he has already gotten word of Josef's trial. When Josef inquires about the lawyer's relationship with the court, Huld introduces the director of the legal office, who had been sitting in the room unnoticed.

Huld's familiarity with Josef's trial gives the impression of an omniscient legal sphere, from which Josef can hide nothing. The unnoticed presence of the court official underscores this impression. The Law appears to be constantly watching Josef without his knowledge, and to be cozy and conspiring with the very people who are supposed to be helping and guiding defendants. The game seems rigged, with everyone else profiting somehow from the miser of the defendants (with the additional point that perhaps everyone, at some point, will end up a defendant).

The office director enters the conversation but speaks only to the older men, ignoring Josef completely. Josef thinks he recognizes the director from the front row of his hearing.

The office director's conduct is a disheartening sign of the justice system's disregard for Josef or any other individual. However, this account is given exclusively from Josef's point of view. It is not clear that the director acted as hostilely as Josef interpreted—perhaps Josef's limited perspective has yet again obscured his understanding, or perhaps Josef didn't actually recognize the official.

Suddenly, the conversation is interrupted by the sound of shattering porcelain. Josef leaves to investigate the noise. He finds Leni, who confesses that she destroyed a plate simply to get Josef's attention. She takes him into the lawyer's luxurious office and flirts with him. Josef asks questions about her knowledge of the legal world; Leni coyly tells him that his behavior in the courtroom is too "unyielding." He will need to confess his crime in order to have a chance at freedom.

In what is a recurring textual theme, Josef once again finds himself the object of seemingly unprovoked sexual advances. Both Leni's romantic interest in Josef and her advice to him are marked by a fundamental inexplicability—any understanding of her motivations or of her paradoxical advice must necessarily be a tenuous one, especially given that no advice given to Josef has been helpful.

Leni asks Josef if he has a lover, and he shows her a picture of Elsa. Leni criticizes Elsa's appearance and asks if she has any "physical defects." Josef is puzzled by this question until Leni reveals that two of the fingers on her right hand are webbed. Josef admires her hand, then kisses it. Leni leaps upon Josef in excitement and the two kiss passionately—and possibly engage in more intimate acts as well.

Leni's line of questioning reduces romance to an impersonal, physical affair, and her determination to supersede Elsa brings to mind the competitiveness of Josef's pursuit of Fraulein Burstner. Leni's seeming belief in the fact that her defects make her more alluring—and Josef's seeming agreement—is interesting, and can be taken many different ways—one being that "defects" can be seen also as offering individuality, or are what make us human. One could look at Josef's behavior here as a kind of personal rebellion against the court.

When Josef leaves, Leni gives him a key and tells him to return whenever he wishes. Outside, Karl excoriates Josef for running off with Leni, and says that Josef's behavior will harm his case. Karl, Huld, and the office director spent hours trying to make conversation while they awaited Josef's return. When it became clear that Josef was not coming back, the office director left, unable to assist with the case.

At the same time, Josef did just sneak off with a maid he didn't know to have sex for hours while his uncle, lawyer, and a court official were waiting for him. Josef's "rebellion" was also profoundly stupid, selfish, crass, and self-destructive (as people's "rebellions" so often are). Josef's counterproductive behavior along with his unsympathetic character traits combine to make him seem somewhat deserving of punishment. This furthers the paradoxical impression that Josef is responsible for the treatment he receives from the Law, but at the same time entirely guiltless by all knowable measures.

CHAPTER 7

On a winter morning, Josef worries that his lawyer, Herr Huld, is doing nothing to help him. Josef has come to learn that the judicial system is a bureaucratic morass, in which documents are often kept secret or misplaced entirely. The entire system is biased against the defendant, and even Josef's right to counsel is unclear. Fortunately, Herr Huld has a great deal of personal connections to high-ranking officials, which are an accused's best chance at beating a charge. Josef meditates at length about different aspects of this sinister, convoluted judiciary, which no individual can hope to understand or influence.

Josef is further realizing that the justice system that dominates him seems to be entirely inhuman—beyond the control or understanding of any individual—and largely arbitrary and based not on guilt or innocence but rather connections. The workings of the judiciary appear random; Josef cannot discern whether or not any action of his matters at all. However, even though his conduct seems to make no difference, Josef is unable to stop obsessing over its minutiae. In a vicious cycle, his anxiety heightens the harmfulness of the judiciary, which in turn heightens his anxiety still more. Again, there is an aspect of the court that seems like a metaphor for life, while at the same time the court also resembles an exaggerated version real judicial systems where connections really can matter more than justice or facts.

Although Josef is extremely tired, he realizes that he must play a more decisive role in his own trial. It is no longer an isolated part of his life, and has steadily begun to affect his work and relationships. Josef resolves to make the effort to prepare his legal documents himself, but instead of acting, he continues to daydream.

Josef's bewildering entanglement with the legal bureaucracy has paralyzed him in every aspect of his life. The absurd system has conditioned him to think his behavior is meaningless. Josef's trial is toxic: his resolve to influence the system has, paradoxically, simply made him unable to control all other areas of his life, as well.

As Josef grows more disheartened and more distracted, he realizes that he has kept a number of important clients waiting. He at last meets with one of these clients, a manufacturer who monologues about business problems to Josef, but Josef remains unable to focus on anything but his case. The manufacturer is perturbed by Josef's inattention.

When Josef was first arrested, he was able not only to challenge the system in theory but in practice, by leaving his room when instructed not to. Now, however, Josef cannot resist in action or even in thought. His thinking is dominated by the trial.

The deputy director of the bank enters Josef's office. The manufacturer criticizes Josef's unwillingness to conduct business, and Josef can only stare pathetically from his desk as the two men converse. The deputy director condescendingly takes over Josef's responsibilities.

The deputy director symbolizes the way in which Josef's professional environment will punish an individual for the slightest form of weakness or distraction. The justice system, however, operates on a slightly different principal: the weakness and distraction it causes appear designed to be part of the punishment itself.

Now alone, Josef worries about the burden he has assumed by taking responsibility for his own defense in his trial. He putters around his office, absent-minded but anxious. The manufacturer reenters. He comments to Josef that he seems preoccupied and confesses that he has heard that Josef is on trial. Josef is taken aback and imagines that his rival, the deputy director, has revealed this to the manufacturer. The manufacturer explains that he got word of Josef's trial from a friend of his named Titorelli, who makes a living painting portraits of court officials. The manufacturer offers to introduce Josef to the painter, in the hopes that this connection could help his case.

The powerlessness Josef experiences in the legal world is in turn making him powerless in his professional life. Josef's trial is gradually beginning to dominate his existence. Importantly, Josef is beginning to be defined to others *by his status as a defendant. The manufacturer no longer sees him as a meaningful business partner; instead, he is simply an accused man in need of charitable help.*

Josef accepts a letter of recommendation and Titorelli's address from the manufacturer. He decides to visit the painter straightaway. In the lobby, he encounters three businessmen who had been waiting to meet with him for hours. Josef's dismissal of these clients leaves them dumbfounded. The deputy director arrives yet again to usurp Josef's role. He handles the clients, and Josef fears his professional reputation will be irreparably damaged.

Earlier in his trial, when he was determined not to seek the help of others, Josef would never have left work prematurely to meet Titorelli. Josef's willingness to hinder his career ambitions in order to follow a tenuous lead illustrates the degree to which his trial has taken over his life.

Josef makes his way to Titorelli's neighborhood, which is located near the courts. The painter's building is utterly squalid. Josef ascends a staircase and is surrounded by young teenage girls who look at him in a "depraved" way. Titorelli, shabbily dressed, lets him into his tiny apartment. The girls peer in and jeer from outside.

Interestingly, now that Josef has resolved to seek out and accept the help of others, many no longer seem willing to offer that help. Instead of the well-intentioned inhabitants of the tenement he met at his first hearing, he comes across disrespectful teenagers. He feared earlier in the novel being seen as someone accused by the court. Now it is shown that his fear wasn't groundless!

Titorelli reads the letter from the manufacturer, but still does not seem to understand why Josef has come. The painter asks Josef if he is interested in buying paintings, and Josef realizes that the letter could have said anything—he had not bothered to read it himself. The painter shows Josef some of his work, including a court-commissioned **portrait of a judge**. On the judge's chair is a combined rendering of Justice and Victory, which shows a deity flying on winged heels. Josef observes that this is not a faithful representation of Justice and instead looks more like the God of the Hunt, but Titorelli responds that he simply paints as instructed.

The figure in the portrait that is on the judge's chair is a clear symbol of the way the judiciary distorts the pure concept of justice. Instead of a sturdy, impartial figure, justice to the court is winged and ever-changing. By comparing it to the God of the Hunt, Josef unwittingly characterizes himself as prey for the justice system. Meanwhile, Titorelli, an artist who is supposed to explore truth or beauty or the world as he personally sees it, just paints what he is told. Art, too, is co-opted by the judicial system.

Titorelli explains his knowledge of the court. If Josef is to be acquitted, the painter says, it can happen in one of three ways: "absolute acquittal, apparent acquittal, and deferment." Absolute acquittal is the most favorable outcome for a defendant, but rarely, if ever, occurs. Josef is frustrated to hear this. The painter says such acquittals may occur, but are unknown to him because rulings are kept secret.

Titorelli's explanation shows the workings of the court to be entirely nonsensical and fundamentally unjust. However, the system is designed to offer a glimmer of hope in the form of the theoretical possibility of absolute acquittal. This forces defendants to feel like they themselves are somewhat in control of their fate and impels them to obsess over trial proceedings, to try to work through the court, and therefore entangles them completely in the court proceedings. What if the defendants just didn't engage? But asking that question is also like asking: what if people just truly didn't care what other people think; what if people didn't care or think about death? Asking the question opens a door to a beautiful possibility that in reality no one will ever reach because it is beyond possibility.

As Josef grows increasingly uncomfortable in the **stifling air** of the poorly-ventilated apartment, Titorelli explains the apparent acquittal. This acquittal is temporary and can be reversed at any time by higher-ranking judges. Finally, deferment simply halts the trial in its earliest stages, and requires the constant attention of the defendant to sustain.

The legal system appears to be organized in such a way that prevents an accused man from ever breaking free of its clutches. As Josef learns of this systemic oppression, the very air of the apartment starts to oppress him, further symbolizing his inability to escape the system.

Josef is disappointed to hear that it is essentially impossible for a defendant to regain his freedom. He leaves Titorelli's apartment in a rush, but promises to let the painter know what sort of acquittal he would like to pursue. As Josef leaves, Titorelli badgers him into purchasing three identical landscape paintings.

Titorelli's characterization of the legal system further emphasizes its absurdity and irrationality. In addition, Josef's inability to distinguish between the paintings he purchases insinuates that he lacks a perspective essential for understanding his situation, much in the same way he has been unequipped to make sense of the judiciary. It also shows how Titorelli, too, finds a way to profit from Josef's despair and bad situation.

To avoid the girls outside, Titorelli leads Josef out the back door. Josef is shocked to discover that this door leads to a corridor of court offices just like the one he visited for his hearing. The painter matter-of-factly explains that most attics contain court offices. A civil servant escorts Josef through the corridor, and Josef **finds the air so stifling** that he covers his mouth with a handkerchief.

As Josef learns more about the justice system, it seems to dominate his life further and further. He cannot avoid the offices of the law in his mind, and now, he seems unable to avoid them in space as well—the offices are a seemingly ubiquitous part of his landscape.

CHAPTER 8

After much deliberation, Josef decides that he will no longer retain his lawyer. Late that night, Josef goes to the Huld's home to announce his decision in person. The door is answered by a small, bearded man whom Josef does not recognize, and behind him Josef spots Leni scampering away in her nightgown. Josef notices that the man is not wearing an overcoat, and, to the man's embarrassment, points this out. Feeling as though he has the upper hand, Josef asks the man if Leni is his lover, which the man denies vehemently.

Josef's choice to fire his lawyer shows his desperation to exert some control over his situation. Furthermore, the insinuation that he is not Leni's only love interest shows yet another aspect of his life that he cannot control. Josef displaces these anxieties of impotence by treating the man who answers Huld's door with aggressive condescension—he engages in the very behavior toward others that the court seems to direct toward him.

The two men walk towards the lawyer's office, and the bearded man introduces himself as Block. He is a tradesman and a client of Huld's. Josef's control of this conversation makes him feel like he is speaking with an inferior person in a foreign country, and he commands Block to take him to Leni.

Because he feels so unable to control his legal, professional, and romantic affairs, Josef feels compelled to control others at every opportunity.

The men come upon Leni making soup in the lawyer's kitchen. Josef interrogates Leni about her relationship to Block, but she flatteringly assures him that he has no reason to envy the tradesman. Leni leaves to deliver the lawyer's soup, but not before telling Josef to speak to her less harshly.

Leni's apparent sexual involvement with Block makes Josef jealous—it shows that he does not control her. However, his high opinion of himself allows Leni to sell him on an interpretation of her actions that leaves him in control.

In the kitchen, Josef asks Block about his case. Block begins to prattle about his business and his trial. Before Block gives away any of his secrets, he makes Josef promise to disclose some of his own in return. Josef agrees, and Block reveals that he is consulting with five small-time lawyers in addition to Huld—a process that is forbidden. Block continues, explaining that he spends much of his time in the legal offices, and was even present during Josef's unfortunate visit. Josef replies that he will soon be spending much more time in the court offices, and doubts he will get the respect the other defendants showed him on his last visit. Block clarifies that the defendants already knew Josef was on trial and were in fact only showing respect to the court servant who walked with him.

Block's account of Josef's encounter with the defendants illustrates that Josef incorrectly interpreted his situation in the legal offices. This further unsettles Josef's universe: not only is he increasingly unable to decipher the byzantine workings of the court, but he is also coming to learn that what he previously took as fact was actually a fabrication of his biased, fallible interpretations. This highlights one of the story's core themes: no situation has a definitive truth to it, and everything can—and will—be interpreted in different ways by different people.

Block also explains that because the court cannot be understood rationally, many defendants rely on superstition. One superstition states that a defendant's verdict can be ascertained by looking at his lips, and that Josef's lips indicated a swift conviction. Block, however, thinks this superstition is nonsense.

Once more, a force beyond Josef's understanding delivers a foreboding omen about the outcome of his trial. Ironically, this ridiculous superstition seems as reasonable and intelligible as the workings of the court itself.

Block reveals that he has spent five years on trial. Most lawyers cannot influence a case, he says, and often submit nonsensical documents full of Latin phrases and flattery. The court has designated an almost mythic group of "great lawyers," but these legal powerhouses are unknowable and unreachable.

Block's years on trial have given him no more insight into the functioning of the justice system. If anything, his experience further reinforces the image of the judiciary as entirely arbitrary and absurd. The lawyers—those who are supposed to understand, supposed to help—are describes as being as clueless as everyone else. And true knowledge in the form of "Great Lawyers" is unreachable. All of this again can be read in highly metaphoric ways. If you substitute life for the trial, then doctors are actually unable to stave of death, gurus and others are in fact only spouting pretty nonsense, true understanding in the form of gods or prophets or other supernatural figures is beyond actual reach, etc.

Leni returns to the kitchen to tell Josef that Huld is waiting for him. Josef presses Block to continue speaking, but he seems reluctant to do so in Leni's presence. Leni tells Josef that he should feel honored that Huld will receive him at eleven o'clock at night—Block frequently sleeps in the lawyer's house in the hope the lawyer will deign to meet with him. Huld is irritated by the businessman and often makes him wait days for a meeting.

The revelation that Block sleeps in Huld's house shows just how fully the tradesman has been consumed by the justice system. Block has made an existential commitment to his trial, even though none of his efforts seem to have influenced it in the slightest. This Sisyphean struggle highlights the absurdity of the judicial system.

Leni shows Josef the cramped room that Block sleeps in, and the merchant's pathetic presence is suddenly too much for Josef to bear. Before Josef leaves to see Huld, Block makes him tell the secret he promised. Josef reveal that he plans to fire Huld. Upon hearing this news, Block goes berserk, and Leni tries to chase Josef down before he can reach Huld's office. Josef makes it into the office and locks the door behind him.

Josef is distressed by Block's presence because Block's submission to the judiciary symbolizes a wretchedness that Josef fears he could come to embody as well. Leni and Block likely object to Josef's decision to fire Huld because it invalidates the hierarchy to which they have wholly devoted themselves.

In his office, Huld chastises Josef for keeping him waiting. Josef responds coldly. Noticing his maid's behavior, Huld tells Josef that Leni has a mysterious attraction to accused men—even Block.

Huld's admission shows that Leni's interest in Josef was entirely impersonal, and simply a result of his status as an accused man—an insulting reversal of the calculating logic Josef himself brings to his relationships, that he is attractive and impressive because of his powerful job.

Josef announces his plan to withdraw Huld's representation. The lawyer is taken aback and even gets out of bed to tell Josef how valued a client he is. Josef responds curtly by articulating his frustration with the lawyer's inaction. The lawyer expresses disappointment. Josef is bemused to see a successful—and physically ill—lawyer make such an impassioned appeal retain a client, and Huld's protestations only make Josef more impatient.

Josef's move to fire Huld seems highly unorthodox. The lawyer's bizarre reaction illustrates yet again that Josef is unable to properly predict how his actions will or will not influence the legal system. The lawyer's imploring speech is still more confusing because it exposes the artificiality of the hierarchy that placed Huld above Josef.

Josef asks Huld what action he would take if Josef retained him. Huld simply replies that he would continue his efforts as usual, which does not satisfy Josef. Huld makes one last attempt to persuade Josef: he shows him how much worse other defendants are treated. As if to prove this point, Block is summoned, and the lawyer browbeats him mercilessly.

Huld never gives Josef any positive information as to how he might help him. Instead, he simply highlights the negative by showing Josef how much worse things could *be for him.*

Josef protests Huld's treatment of Block, but Block is insulted and lashes out at Josef. Block then returns to groveling before Huld. Josef is struck by the servility with which the wretched man defers even to his lawyer's maid. Huld continues to express his contempt for Block. *Note: The Trial was never officially released for publication during Kafka's lifetime, and the manuscript was never fully completed. This chapter was left unfinished.*

The interaction between Huld and Block deepens Josef's understanding of just how debasing a criminal trial (or life, or society, or any of the "systems" the trial could be taken to represent metaphorically) can be. The hierarchical, domineering nature of the Law has gotten out of hand: Block approaches his legal higher-ups in much the same way as someone might prostrate himself before a deity.

CHAPTER 9

An important Italian partner of the bank is visiting the city, and Josef is assigned to show him around. Though this would ordinarily be an honor to Josef, he is anxious to miss still more time to work in the bank offices. However, he accepts the assignment unconditionally, as he has accepted other recent assignments—to do otherwise would betray weakness.

Josef's unwillingness to display weakness simply renders him weaker still. This illustrates that Josef's inflated sense of self and misguided attempts to be independent actually make him less able to act on his own. He is as controlled by his job as he is by the trial.

The day before the tour, Josef reviews Italian grammar late into the night. The next morning, Josef arrives early, hoping to take care of some of his work. However, the Italian has also arrived early, and Josef must attend to him. The Italian is an animated speaker whom Josef finds difficult to understand, but the bank's director subtly assists Josef. At the Italian's suggestion, Josef agrees to give him a tour of the cathedral at ten o'clock.

Josef's every attempt to control and comprehend his surroundings is undermined. His extra professional responsibilities prevent him from getting work done even when he comes in early for that specific purpose. On top of this frustration, he is unable even to understand the man whom he needs to show around the cathedral.

Through the morning, Josef struggles to learn the vocabulary he will need to tour the cathedral. He receives a call from Leni and, when he explains his work at the bank, she tells him that he is being harassed. He hangs up quickly, but has no choice but to agree.

In a rare instance of two individuals interpreting an event in the same way, Leni recognizes that Josef's professional obligations seem designed to thwart him and keep him from controlling his work.

Josef is worried that he may arrive late, but reaches the cathedral at the stroke of ten. The Italian is nowhere to be found. To shelter himself from the cold rain outside, Josef walks around the candlelit cathedral. A cloaked church employee gestures at him, and Josef begins to follow the man, but soon loses interest and returns to the nave.

The Italian's unexplained absence highlights Josef's lack of control over his situation. The mystifying gestures of the church employee hint at still another form of communication that Josef cannot apprehend or properly interpret.

As Josef studies a small pulpit in the corner, he notices a priest preparing to give a sermon. Josef thinks it a bizarre time of day for a sermon, especially given that he is the sole congregant. He gets up to leave, but as he approaches the exit, the priest's voice calls out to him by name. Josef considers ignoring the command but decides to acknowledge the priest. The priest beckons, and has Josef stand directly below the pulpit.

Josef now seems to be targeted not only by human institutions, but by divine ones as well. This appropriately comes after the judicial system has consistently revealed itself to be more and more powerful and extensive, and less and less understandable. The system seems less like a bureaucracy than a religious faith. Another way to look at it would be to say that the judicial system on display in the story seems to be constantly revealed as bigger than Josef thought—perhaps so big that it should not even be described as a judicial system by merely as "the system," encompassing everything.

The priest reveals that he is the prison chaplain, and that he had Josef summoned to the church in order to speak with him. The chaplain tells Josef his case is going badly, and that many think him guilty. He asks Josef what he plans to do next, and Josef explains that he still can seek more help. The priest tells him he already seeks too much assistance, especially from women. Josef responds that women might help influence a judiciary of philanderers, and the priest responds with pointed silence, and finally screams at Josef: "Can you not see two steps in front of you?"

The chaplain's collusion with Josef's employers suggests a conspiracy against Josef that encompasses every aspect of his life. Furthermore, the priest's remark to Josef implies that Josef lacks the ability to perceive essential details for understanding his predicament. This is the archetypal nightmare of the accused: to fail to take helpful action out of ignorance.

Josef asks the chaplain to descend from the pulpit, and the priest agrees, having fulfilled his initial obligation to speak from a distance. The two men pace the aisles, and Josef tells the chaplain that he appreciates his friendliness. The chaplain tells Josef not to fool himself.

While this interaction superficially seems like one of the most sympathetic Josef has experienced, the chaplain is quick to remind him that he can rely on no one. Thus, in a disturbing reversal, Josef's arrogant self-reliance has changed from a luxury into a necessity. It's not that he should rely on himself because to do so is a show of strength; he must rely on himself because he is fundamentally alone.

The chaplain recounts a **parable** given in the law, in which a man from the country tries to gain access to the law, but is forbidden by a doorkeeper. The doorkeeper tells the man that it is possible for him to gain entry at a later time. The man attempts to see around the doorkeeper, but the doorkeeper simply laughs at his attempts to circumvent his guard. The doorkeeper explains that behind him lies another, more powerful doorkeeper, and behind him lie an indefinite number of still more powerful guardians. The man waits outside for years. He had brought some provisions with him, and he offers these in an attempt to curry favor with the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts the bribes the man gives him, but states that "I'll only accept this so that you don't think there's anything you've failed to do." Over the years, the man first rages at his condition, but then he grows senile and deaf and only grumbles quietly to himself. Finally, he asks the doorkeeper why only he has tried to gain entry at this door. "Nobody else could have got in this way, as this entrance was meant only for you," responds the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper then closes the door.

This parable is an allegorical representation of Josef's futile quest to understand the law. Like Josef's ordeal, the man's experience before the doorkeeper seems devoid of reason and compassion. Furthermore, the doorkeeper himself is simply following the mandates he receives from a larger, more powerful system—one whose extent and power the doorkeeper himself cannot grasp. Crucially, the doorkeeper's willingness to accept the man's bribes illustrates the way in which the justice system fuels itself by convincing citizens that there may be some way for them to influence their case. This is the impulse that prompts Josef to devote himself so fully, and so futilely, to his trial. Finally, the deafness the waiting man develops symbolizes the absurdity of his confrontation with the Law. Again this parable of the Law also can be read metaphorically as a parable of a larger Law than of innocence or guilt: it could be the Law of life, governing the facts of life and death, the unknowable "meaning" of life, etc. And the tailoring of the door to the man seems to imply the way that each person is alone in this journey, each gets a door just for him or herself, and it is a door they never get to go through. Everyone's experience is theirs alone, and no one ever gets understanding.

Josef responds that the man has clearly been cheated, and the chaplain tells him this conclusion is far from unequivocal. Josef tries to find contradictions within the parable that indicate an overarching moral, but the chaplain points out that it is phrased in such away that no definite moral can be ascribed to it. The two consider several ways to interpret the story and debate which characters are arrogant or deluded, and how their positions compare. Josef begins to realize that it is possible to see the doorkeeper's role as anything ranging from a considerate, dutiful servant to a small-minded cheat. The chaplain even produces an interpretation maintaining that the doorkeeper is the one who has been cheated. As the ambiguities are tallied, Josef begins to understand that the law is open to interpretation. However, the chaplain gives him the paradoxical warning not to worry too much about others' opinions, as the text itself cannot be altered. When Josef laments the absence of any single clear, true interpretation of the parable, the chaplain responds, "you don't need to accept everything as true, you only have to accept it as necessary." "Depressing view," retorts Josef: "The lie made into the rule of the world."

Josef's inability to pin down the parable's significance marks a crucial point in the novel. He has begun to realize that his trial may not in fact be undergirded by any truth or meaning whatsoever. He will get a "verdict"—but the judiciary of The Trial *is completely detached from these concerns of truth, and thus out of touch with justice itself. This is a deeply disturbing structure, but it isn't unrelated to Josef's own approach to life. His obsession with hierarchical status and control, coupled with his need to routinize his lifestyle and to impose rules upon himself to mitigate his own agency, are the individual practices that legitimize the absurd, inhuman judicial system that oppresses him. For example, when Josef devised a story to avoid being spotted near Franz and Willem's whipping, he himself concocted a lie that he then rationalized into a rule of his own world. It is also significant that Josef is told this message by the chaplain, in a cathedral: the justice system has been elevated to the level of a god.*

After extensive discussion, the chaplain asks Josef if he wants to leave. Though Josef hadn't considered leaving, he remembers his position at the bank and decides to return to work. The chaplain leaves, allowing Josef to find his own way out in the dark, and Josef is dismayed by how abrupt this parting is. He cries out to ask the chaplain if he wants anything further, and the chaplain responds that "the court doesn't want anything from you. It accepts you when you come and it lets you go when you leave."

Josef cannot make sense of this encounter, and his only response is to revert to the routine to which he has become accustomed. When meeting a chaplain one expects guidance and comfort. But the chaplain leaves Josef alone, in the dark—he still has no understanding or connection. The chaplain's parting words further characterize the judiciary as an entity unconcerned with truth and justice—a system that operates simply in order to perpetuate its own meaningless structures, and which is vastly bigger than any individual.

CHAPTER 10

On the eve of Josef's thirty-first birthday, two men in coats pay an unexpected visit to Josef's apartment. Josef inexplicably seems to understand that the men have come for him. They silently escort him into the street and grasp him so tightly that the three men appear to have formed one mass.

At this point, Josef seems to accept his fate with a passivity that he has not displayed previously. He appears to have gained the sort of unquestioning faith in the inscrutable workings of the law that Franz, Willem, and the inspector displayed on the day of Josef's arrest. Or perhaps he has lost faith in his ability to withstand it. Regardless, he is described as becoming one with his former captors.

The men reach an empty town square, decorated with flowers. Just as Josef makes up his mind to walk no further, he spots Fraulein Burstner, or a woman who greatly resembles her. Josef's indifference to her identity makes him realize that resisting his captors would be pointless. He lets them lead him on, convinced that all that is left for him to do is maintain his common sense. He is grateful his escorts do not speak, so that he himself may say only what is necessary.

Josef's struggle against the Law's absurdities has eradicated any impulse to understand or influence his surroundings. When Josef realizes that he no longer cares about knowing whether the woman is Fraulein Burstner, he realizes that the Law has finally crushed his instinct to resist it.

The group passes over a bridge and Josef glances nostalgically at some benches where he had once rested. He is quickly embarrassed when the group slows down, and explains that he had no interest in actually stopping.

The Law has so alienated him from his existence that Josef is not only ashamed to be nostalgic for his past, he actually feels no such nostalgia or interest.

A policeman approaches Josef and his escorts. Josef forces his escorts to continue walking, and even breaks into a run. The group loses the policeman and approaches a quarry on the outskirts of town, to which a single building is adjacent.

Josef's defiance of the policeman implies that the Law that governs him is somehow larger and more powerful than mere government.

The men prop Josef on a rock by the quarry and remove his coat and shirt. They behave bizarrely courteously towards each other and to Josef. One of the men produces a long butcher's knife, and the two begin to pass it back and forth over Josef. Josef realizes that he is expected to take the knife and stab himself, but he resists doing so. Instead, Josef looks around; he notices someone with outstretched arms leaning from a window of the lone house. He wonders who the person could be, and ponders other unanswered questions about his trial.

Josef's refusal to execute himself shows that he still possesses some spark of defiance. However, he has already submitted to the system too fully to resist it. Moreover, the questions he asks himself demonstrate that the year he has spent trying to decipher the Law has not contributed to any greater understanding of why he is being punished.

Josef raises his arms, but one of the men clasps his throat while the other thrusts the knife into his heart. As Josef's vision begins to go dim, he sees the two men staring into his face, watching him die. The book's final line describes Josef's last words: "'Like a dog!' he said. It seemed as if his shame would live on after him."

The book does not reveal anything profound in its conclusion—only more of the sorts of ambiguities that characterize the Law itself (and all the metaphorical readings one can make about the systems of law). Like the man in the parable who spends years sitting before the doorkeeper without gaining any understanding of his situation, Josef's legacy shows that he has not transcended the same petty concerns of public appearance that plagued him at the outset of the novel. All of his resistance and efforts have not stopped the fact that he is going to die alone, that he was never going to be able to stop himself from suffering this verdict, feeling shame at where he as wound up even though he was always going to wind up there.

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