

An Analysis of the Tragic Consciousness under the Power System of Kafka's "The Castle"

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Abstract: Kafka's work presents a strong absurd, nihilistic, and symbolic writing style. As his late novel, "The Castle" recounts the desperate struggle of the little people under the power system, revealing the tragic nature of absurd nothingness. The blind worship of the power system and the discipline of the individual in a totalitarian society doom everything to the dust. Everything is a puppet of abstraction and symbolism. Kafka borrowed "The Castle" to express the absurdity of human paradox. The so-called absurdity, Yunesco believes: "Absurdity refers to the lack of meaning..... Man is cut off from his own religion, from his own metaphysical foundations, from a priori, and all his actions seem meaningless, absurd, and useless. ”.

Keywords: Absurdity, nothingness, power, puppetry, despair.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

K arrives at the castle in the capacity of a land surveyor; however, the village chief informs him, "The borders of this small country have already been marked and officially recorded. We do not require a land surveyor here; there is simply no need for one." Thus, K's identity is ambiguous from the outset. His "self-appointment" appears to be acknowledged by the castle on the surface, yet it seems that such recognition does not truly exist—merely a case of “making do” to save time and effort.[1]

1.2. Purpose and significance of the study

The castle symbolizes a chaotic world fraught with disaster and an elusive reality; it serves as an emblem of power, bureaucratic systems, and state machinery. It looms high above yet remains unattainable. *The Castle* presents a satirical portrayal of bureaucracy and foreshadows totalitarianism; during Kafka's era, anti-Semitism was rampant across Europe. This work reflects the plight of Jewish individuals who find themselves homeless; K's struggle represents a quest for truth. The truths people seek—be they freedom, justice, or law—do indeed exist but are obstructed by this absurd world filled with various barriers. Regardless of one's efforts to attain them, success remains perpetually out of reach, ultimately leading to failure. This narrative evokes feelings of despair amidst hope while awakening critical consciousness through its resonant themes[2].

2. Literature review

2.1. Mr. K

On the first night of his arrival in the village, K slept on a straw mat in full view; After he received the letter from the castle, there was a room that belonged to two maids; After that he lived under the table in the hotel; Later, he lived in a classroom with his fiancée and two assistants, and K had no place to live in the village, let alone a castle, "They let K go wherever he fell in love, of course, only in the village, and just indulged him, consumed his energy, completely excluded any struggle, and put him into an unofficial, completely unclear, and strange life" K was ignored from beginning to end, becoming the object of rejection by the villagers and a victim of the bureaucracy, and he tried to find no way to exist.

In pursuit of fulfilling his responsibilities and realizing his worth, K made relentless efforts: He probed deeply into matters concerning land surveyors hoping for clarification from the mayor; he waited outside hotels late at night in hopes of encountering Chief Klamm from the castle; he requested Barnabas frequently visit the castle for more information about it; even during his stay at the inn, he intruded upon rooms belonging to secretaries and wandered through corridors disrupting clerical work related to file distribution among officials. Even his romantic relationship with Frieda seemed like another avenue through which K hoped to meet Klamm, Because Frida used to be Crumb's lover[3]K's efforts are all but he does not enter the castle in the end, his resistance is ultimately futile, and the vulnerability of the individual's small will in the face of great power becomes the heavy tragedy of "The Castle".

On his journey toward accessing the castle's authority, K is always lonely, He sought both position and significance as a land surveyor but could never integrate into societal structures surrounding Castle life due largely to disdain from higher-ups like Klamm and hostility from villagers towards outsiders... Within this extreme power dynamic, K's loneliness transcended mere physical isolation regarding housing—it manifested as profound spiritual solitude marked by confusion—a reflection on individual fate being beyond one's control[4].

2.2. Female image

The portrayal of female characters in *The Castle* also embodies tragedy: They appear diminutive before power and authority—some chase after it their entire lives while others become failed rebels or hopelessly wait amidst struggles without resolution. Although they may engage with officials at various levels within Castle hierarchies—they ultimately gain nothing substantial.

The first type is women such as Phoebe and the proprietress who actively seek to be seen by the castle power class, hoping to realize themselves and their families by becoming "mistresses" and other roles The proprietress of the bridgehead inn is Crumb's former mistress and the embodiment of the castle's will, she consciously monitors everything in the inn, and thinks that it is a supreme honor to be Crumb's mistress, "I will be proud of this glory until I die" [5]They maintain and construct the authority of the castle in their minds, look down on others, and regard the connection with the castle as the most important thing.

The second category features rebellious figures like Amalia who defend their love & dignity against high-ranking official Sortini rejecting shameless advances thereby marking themselves "others" leading her family into hardship & suffering whilst shackling herself further still—the embodiment reminiscent Sisyphus' plight knowing well refusal leads only unto endless pain yet choosing suffering out responsibility instead resisting oppression silently safeguarding familial integrity

Lastly are forward-moving individuals exemplified by Olga aware fully both origins behind misfortunes afflicting families alongside tragic fates awaiting them yet struggling desperately against predestined doom enduring humiliation inflicted by guards serving nobility urging brother Barnabas repeatedly venture forth seeking audience despite understanding futility inherent therein—all driven solely towards finding pathways out darkness enveloping kinship bonds.

Notably central amongst these depictions is Frieda whose introduction occurs framed through identity tied directly back onto being mistress associated closely with Klamm viewed desirably by men yearning possessively over her allure admired enviously among other women alike—but following departure alongside K perceptions shift dramatically rendering her devoid connection previously held transforming pillar support system collapsing now reduced merely dust scattered beyond doors losing appeal entirely illustrating how attitudes directed towards her stem not inherently personal rather contingent upon nebulous ties linked back toward authority hence positioning Frieda too merely becomes sacrificial figure emblematic broader tragedies entrenched bureaucracy itself."

2.3. Villager

The villagers' awe towards the castle and its inhabitants has become a societal norm; they naturally revere the elevated power structure. Their attitude toward K fluctuates with his status as a land surveyor. For instance, if K receives a message from the castle officials, the villagers regard him with increased respect, perhaps believing he might have somewhere to go that evening. Conversely, if K spends an entire day without gaining any access to the castle due to his role as a land surveyor, their gaze turns condescendingly upon him. The villagers hold deep reverence for the castle and yearn for proximity to it or its officials; they envy and flatter those who can establish connections with higher-ups in the castle while avoiding anyone who challenges its authority or is powerless.

"The members of the crowd are always potential persecutors, because they dream of cleansing the community of impure elements that corrupt the group, purge the renegades who destroy the group." [6] The villagers are spectators of the innocent under the power system, but in a sense they also become perpetrators, and their indifference and numbness make the sporadic rebels finally have nowhere to go.

Although Barnabas's family is isolated by the villagers as representatives of resistance against the castle, they continuously strive to integrate into both the castle and village life in hopes of being recognized and accepted—often going to extreme lengths for this purpose. Barnabas's father stands daily on roads frequented by officials' vehicles near the castle, seeking understanding and forgiveness from them; within just three years, he transforms from a healthy individual into someone unable to care for himself. Olga mingles in stables with her followers, trading her body for money received from them in order to support her family while desperately trying to gather information about messengers. Barnabas goes daily to wait at the castle not as an acknowledged messenger but merely out of routine; he has not delivered a single letter in two years until K's arrival. Amalia realizes that all efforts are futile; thus she silently bears all familial responsibilities alone without complaint.

In the account of the Barnabas family, Kafka described "hopelessness" and "despair" the most. The process of intercession is too difficult, they spend time, money, and manpower but there is no result, which is a kind of despair; The purpose of the intercession is ultimately unattainable, the castle will not reply to the Barnabas family, they cannot get out of the status quo, this is another kind of despair; And interceding for the punishment of the innocent who has not been convicted is a deeper level of despair.

Therefore, the villagers' blind worship of the power system and the crowning of the individual by the group consciousness together constitute a tragedy at the villager level.

3. Bureaucracy and autocratic rule

3.1. Bureaucracy

The officials of the castle are representatives of power and bureaucracy, and they are callous, indifferent to the requests and plight of villagers and outsiders. As a symbol of power, Crumb is always high above and maintains a god-like majesty, but he is always "sleepy-eyed and absent-minded"; The office mode of the officials is night trial, because "those old men can't stand it when they see them during the day, and they can solve it quickly at night, and under artificial light, it is possible to forget their ugliness in their sleep after interrogation". [7]

The servants in the castle were a gang of robbers and bandits who attacked the villagers and women, and the officials were free to chase after the women they liked, and the women were to take this as a blessing. On the surface, officials are the elite of society, powerful and successful, but in fact, no one knows what they are doing and who they are, and those who are high above are given to them by the world, and the fear of power is the shackles that people themselves oppress themselves and bind themselves.

3.2. Autocratic Rule

The castle is a symbol of autocratic rule. This power of domination is both concrete and abstract, and the castle's rule over the villagers seems to be real, but just as Crumb's name is actually just a symbol of power, the castle is just a void that ordinary people can't touch. But such power is omnipresent and omniscient, and its elusive appearance and strong charisma make it almost divine, and it has a religious effect on people in the dark, and the system is strict and unrivaled. The bureaucracy, represented by the castle, is huge, transparent and solid, and ordinary people cannot fit into it, powerless and confused. The stratification of power, the consideration of "what is the sin to be added, there is no excuse for it" is the posture of people attacking themselves.[8]

4. Ending

It's all in vain, and every effort made is a repetitive wasted effort. All the trial and error and hard work are just struggling in this endless struggle. Every time I see a little hint of hope, it is just a desperate rewriting after hope, and in the end it can only become more and more desperate[9].

4.1. Production

K persistently sought to approach the castle and its officials through various means, desperately attempting to alter his current predicament; however, his efforts were largely in vain. In order to converse with Kram, he seduced Kram's lover, Frida, winning her affection. He attempted to leverage the connections between the landlady and Frida to gain an audience with Kram but found himself repeatedly thwarted after numerous fruitless endeavors. Consequently, he reluctantly accepted a temporary position as a school janitor offered by the well-meaning village headman[10].

K also planned to visit Kram at the VIP Hotel personally, hoping to get closer to Hans in order to seek assistance from his mother. His hopes were further pinned on Barnabas, the messenger from the castle.

Ultimately, K's failure to meet Kram or enter the castle culminates in a tragic conclusion that underscores the humble and miserable circumstances of small individuals. From the outset, K's pursuit resembled a tragedy; despite his relentless efforts toward achieving his goal of entering the castle—employing every possible strategy—he ultimately met with disappointment and was destined

for a lonely demise. He was acutely aware from the beginning that what he pursued was fundamentally illusory.

4.2. Reason

The castle symbolizes a chaotic world fraught with disaster and an elusive reality. It serves as a representation of power, bureaucratic systems, and the machinery of state governance. Elevated yet unattainable, it embodies the absurdity inherent in bureaucracy and foreshadows totalitarianism. During Kafka's lifetime, Europe was rife with anti-Semitism. "The Castle" reflects the plight of Jews who find themselves homeless; K's struggle is ultimately a quest for truth. The truths people seek—be they freedom, justice, or law—exist but are obscured by myriad obstacles within this absurd world. Regardless of one's efforts to attain them, such pursuits invariably culminate in failure; thus individuals experience despair amidst hope and awaken to the clarion call of critique.

Kafka's sense of absurdity stems from his own life experiences. As a Jew facing historical adversities, he belonged to a community that was forced into diaspora across various regions without their own nation or homeland—a condition that engendered profound feelings of alienation and lack of belongingness. Their identity remains unrecognized by the world at large despite generations striving to establish their own state without success. In "The Castle," K represents those who desperately seek entry into the castle in pursuit of rightful recognition and belonging—a portrayal that mirrors the authentic experiences of Jewish individuals as well as Kafka's personal existential disorientation following his engagement with life itself.

5. Conclusion

The tragic consciousness underlying the rights system is conveyed through this novel, which intertwines reality and unreality, reason and absurdity, as well as exaggerated caricature and sharp satire. When K attempts to enter the castle but encounters obstacles at every turn, I too strive to approach K—an embodiment of Kafka. Yet amidst the buzzing noise surrounding him, no interpretation seems reasonable; only chaotic information prevails. Gradually, I find myself lost in a castle named Kafka, where readers become akin to land surveyors: summoned to measure the meaning of the novel yet discovering no pathway into this castle called K.

It is only in such moments that I am fortunate enough to shorten my distance from Kafka; I come to better understand his perception of "a nightmarish existence." This understanding arises from my hesitation between persisting in creating what I deem valuable or opting for a more fast-food style of literary interpretation.

"I am writing. I hope to continue writing! My life has gained some legitimacy. Once again, I can engage in dialogue with myself rather than staring into utter void. Only through this means can I hope for improvement." —Kafka

Literary works do not contain any preachiness, particularly those by Kafka himself. He never intended for his writings to be viewed by unfamiliar readers.

This book appears to express something significant; however, I struggle to identify it clearly. It feels as though each page he wrote penetrates my throat, leaving me breathless.

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