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The Trial as a Dystopian Dreamscape

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Abstract:

An arrest on account of a crime he wasn't aware of was Joseph K.'s start to his thirtieth birthday morning. The turn of events throughout the novel come about abruptly all the while giving the reader an illusion of darkness, an unceasing walk in a dark labyrinth, yet such seemed to be Kafka's intentions. So much so that 'Kafkaesque' becomes the adjective that replaces the notion of Dystopia. In clever use of allegory and symbolism, Kafka successfully annihilates the idea of the societal establishment. It is ironic how a trained lawyer like Kafka would care to write about a trial leading nowhere, but the nihilist and critique in Kafka merge together to form the writer in him, making *The Trial* as one of his most compelling work that explore the relationship between man's existence within the modern world, power dynamics and conflicts, system of values and religion, anxiety and alienation that it brings along; Rich with symbolism and laced with paranoia and helplessness, *The Trial* is a horror story of incontestable charges and the powerlessness of one individual against a corrupt and dilapidated system; it starkly reminds one of Eliots' *Wasteland* and the notion that this is perhaps, the true essence of one's futile existence.

Keywords: Kafkaesque, dystopia, Institutions, dreamscape.

Joseph K. was arrested in the morning after his landlady failed to bring him his daily breakfast at eight o'clock. Time is significant here because K. who woke up from his sleep to start another new day is awaited by a nightmarish reality that continued to haunt him until his death. It is almost a parallel of *Metamorphosis*, where Samsa wakes up to find himself caught in another freakish nightmare of being a cockroach, just as K's predicament is that of innocence, Samsa's is of being unable to move properly. The idea of blurry and indistinguishable lines between dream

and reality are what makes the Kafkaesque universe so utterly powerful. The reality is potently striking, relatable and yet hauntingly escapable. It is both true and estranged from everyday lives of its inhabitants. Kafka is unlike Orwell or Huxley when it comes to presentation of worlds overrun by dystopic elements. His dreamscape is far more powerful by the virtue of its everyday reality in the lives of everyday humans. Kafka has created atmosphere although most of the scenes and settings are somewhat surreal. Is it supposed to be real life, some sort of nightmare or the author's vision of a spiritual judgement?

It is in the eventual realization of an interrogation in his case, where K. is left puzzled of the "organization" that arrested him "which not only employs corrupt warders, stupid Inspectors, and Examining Magistrates of whom the best that can be said is that they have recognize their own limitations, but also has at its disposal a judiciary of high, indeed of the highest rank." (Kafka 45) K. felt like a hero that stood against the corrupted law but his consciousness took gradual change as he started preoccupying himself with his trial. He visited the Court the next Sunday after his first inquiry. During this time, he observed the building of the Court and it had left such a poor impression on him that by the end of his tour he even felt nauseous and had to frantically look for an exit. Throughout the novel, Kafka gave explicit descriptions of buildings but they are mostly dirty, "oppressive" (Kafka 66) and overloaded, stark images of the buildings, as claustrophobic as the story itself make the narrative a disturbing experience. These images add to the nightmarish and torturous reality that he had woken up from at the beginning of the novel. It is also interesting how Kafka chose dark themes throughout the novel, for instance the interaction between K. and the advocate mostly happens in poorly lit rooms at night, painter Titorelli's studio was small and oppressive that had no proper light. The suffocation of K's life isn't just the non-existent trail and crime, it is the suffocating and deplorable condition of all institutions that seem to have numerous such cases. Kafka perhaps came close to reflecting his personal life as that of a lawyer, when he wrote of these institutes and their internal mechanisms. It reflects a grim reality, which is as dark as the 'institutes' that K is visiting. K's visit to the Cathedral was a "raw, wet, murky day" (Kafka 188) and the Cathedral seemed to be so dark that candles had to be used even at daytime. It is no doubt that Kafka utilized darkness to intensify the obscurity of the trial and the authority behind the "organization" (Kafka 45). We wait for the trial to end and the crime to be revealed, but like the protagonist and the systems, we too are in the dark. The darkness seeps into every nook of the story overall cementing the even darker narrative that seems to hide something sinister behind it.

The church is another interesting factor in the novel. A church that is universally considered to be a dwelling place for all where all may find peace and solace has a contradicting representation in the novel. In chapter nine when K. met the priest at the cathedral, the priest narrates a parable about the court and its handlings of its victims. The conversation here did not help K. in lifting his burdens, in fact it only added to it. The priest's parable only intensified K.'s anxiety and further crushed his hope. "One cannot speak of a religious reading of *The Trial* in the singular, since there are both Jewish and Christian readings, and within these further divergences. One of the prevalent religious readings has employed the theology of original sin as an interpretive guide. According to this reading, Joseph K. can be viewed as both innocent and guilty: innocent by the measure of human law, guilty by the measure of divine Law. This approach satisfies our sense from the text itself that K.'s guilt and innocence cannot be sorted out only according to secular criteria of justice, but it falters before the same problem as the secular readings noted above - the problem of Joseph K. in particular being singled out for such a brutal punishment, while others around him are exempt. Shifting the explanatory ground from the humanly legal to the mysteriously divine not diminish the excessive and arbitrary aspect presented by K.'s punishment, even if one interprets original sin, in a Calvinist manner, as entailing divine retribution.", comments Bruce K Ward.

A more metaphorical and intrinsic approach allows us to view this state of paranoia as a psychoanalytical dystopia, willing to be examined reading. It is on this level that the novel becomes highly thought provoking as it takes on metaphysical questions and explores a race that has outgrown and probably capitalized religion. Like the existential novels that eventually would become popular in the mid-twentieth century, it is inevitable, not to read *The Trial* as a search for the authentic self and perhaps ones limits, and K.'s inability to navigate to the heart of the court is a representation of his failure to get to the center of his own essence. K.'s ineffective search for some objective truth is ultimately, hollow and K.'s inability to locate any firm basis to the world he inhabits is emblematic of the human life lived in a world without any absolute supernatural forces, without any untouchable doctrine that may make sense of the chaos of existence. It is a harkening of Camus' Sisyphus and his futile labor. The story may be taken as an allegory for the worthlessness of life, as it approaches one of the key questions that philosophers have battled with over years: that is, if death is inevitable and an ultimate end, how does one deal with the sense of inescapable guilt that an individual inherits while living? The existential crisis then, can never be resolved, only its utter helplessness can be accepted.

The order of events throughout the novel seem more impractical as the story draws closer to his death. The first line of the last chapter “The End” began with “on the evening before K.’s thirty-first birthday” (Kafka 206) which reminds the reader of the time that has passed since his arrest. A reflection of the reality of events that had happened after his arrest seemed to degrade slowly into vagueness. In the last chapter, the evening before his thirty-first birthday, K.’s heroic attempt to fight against the Law proved futile as he was quietly escorted out of his apartment and had a knife plunge into heart. K. saw a faint human figure that seemed to want to give him a helping hand. He thought to himself if there were “some arguments in his favor that had been overlooked” and thought of the “Judge whom he had never seen” and the “High Court, to which he had never penetrated” (Kafka 210). The intensity of obscurity reached its extreme at the end of the novel. It questions the futility of his trial and the invisibility of the power that he had fought against. K. was murdered for a reason he himself is hardly aware of. This uncertainty reflects the disfigurement of the reality he has been living after he was arrested on his thirtieth birthday. Kafka’s intention seemed to suggest that the whole situation K. has gotten himself into shows how power can design a condition to penalize the guiltless while the victim is caught in a helpless situation. It questions the idea of free will and makes the existence of freedom merely a trap. The power that K. fought against seemed to be an invisible power and all the actions he took to fight against this power proved futile for he does not even know what he is up against. This obscurity of the invisible power is yet another element that give Kafka’s *The Trial* a feeling of uncertainty, an illusion that makes K.’s case faintly a dream like condition. Strongly reminiscent of Orwell’s *1984*, the omnipresent and omnipotent power structures have proved their existence. However, the Orwellian dystopia has a cause-and-effect relationship. The reader is scared at the end, at the prospect of such an existence. The Orwellian organizations efficaciously wipe any semblance of humanity from the lives and minds of their residents. However, in case of the Kafkaesque universe, the reader is not just horrified, but also deeply disturbed. This puzzle makes no sense. Obscurity and vagueness of the events that followed K.’s trial and the unnatural surrounding that accompany his situation emerge together to create distortion of reality and in doing so we see Kafka’s excellent work on magic realism.

Kafka’s brilliance as a writer can be seen from the complexities his writing brings. *The Trial* is one of his many works that result in a never-ending interpretation. It explores different themes and till date the inexhaustibility of its meaning remains the same. Christian Huber and Iain

Munro remark “Kafka is perhaps the first great writer to comment on the phenomenon of "moral distance" where the institutions that are supposed to help us, such as the law, confront us as an inhuman and alienating force.... In Kafka's *The Trial*, the process "moral distancing" begins with a mere accusation even before the formalities of the trial itself.... For Kafka, the bureaucratic process is not the only way to create "moral distance" among people, and it is more closely bound up with the cruel enforcement of ethical ideals than with bureaucracy per se. In fact, his stories give us examples of where moral principles are themselves used in a cruel fashion by moral individuals against others.” Samsa in *Metamorphosis*, is a victim of a similar predicament. His own family distances themselves from him because of his ‘condition’, his own father shoves him into the room to get him out of sight. He is condemned to die alone and unloved because of being different from the norm. The cruelty meted out to these characters is simply because they have ‘faults/accusations or conditions’ that they have no control over. Just as K accepts his fate to die, accused of an unknown crime, Samsa accepts the fate of being vermin. He would rather crawl under the darkness of the bed and loses all sense of communication as we approach the end of the story; his dehumanization is complete. Initially K. fights back, taking over his hearing to implore the court that the proceedings are unjust. However, his resolve is beaten down by the inevitability of prosecution, and only at the nightmarish end does the reader truly understand the extent to which K. has contributed to his own destruction by his compliance with the officials. Kafka’s characters do not realize their incapability to reconcile values and the practical world. K would not run away or hide; therefore, he will indeed die at the hands of a bureaucracy that has no place or time for actual justice. The impossibility of realization of transcendental values makes it such that K will not just die, he will be killed alone in a quarry, “like a dog” (Kafka 211) . Christian Huber and Iain Munro notably remark how, “Kafka ably demonstrates how "moral distance" not only occurs in situations in which formal rationality plays a role but also when transcendental values become corrupted in their actualization in any setting. This also holds true for ethical principles which can be used to legitimate "ethical violence.”

Kafka revealed the truth of power by using an ethereal effect. His dystopia is different from that of Orwell where “And after that, you don’t feel the same towards the other person any longer” (Orwell, 369). The crime, punishment and punishers in Orwellian dystopia are palpable and real, whereas in Kafka’s narration, the twisted dream-narrative becomes the mouth-piece for his complaints against the social reality. The Guardian newspaper wrote in one of its reviews- “The

Trial is deeply thought-provoking in its uncomfortable presentation of a world where people are observed by secret police and suddenly arrested, reflecting the social turmoil in Europe around the time Kafka wrote it in 1914. There are striking parallels to Orwell's 1984 where the protagonist is observed constantly and people are punished by the totalitarian state for actions which seem harmless, such as 'thought-crime'." So, is Joseph K a victim of thought-crime too? Kafka's socio-historical elements are palpable because they are contained within the lines of everyday reality. It is in the penultimate chapter, that he does reveal some truth; wildly different from what the reader anticipates, this truth isn't about the trial or the case, but about the system itself, "Lies are made into a universal system,". The magic realism he used is not magic of deceptive appearance but of revelation. Kafka uses his universe to uncover a truth that is commonplace reality of the dysfunctional systems around the world. It is this nightmarish power of his narrative that gives 'Kafkaesque' the intensity to stay relevant even today.

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