



Empty Signifiers in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*

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Abstract:

This paper argues that Franz Kafka, in his 1926 unfinished novel *The Castle*, has portrayed empty signifiers. The paper first explores the concept of the empty signifier, tracing how it evolved from the idea of the instability of a sign in Saussure's linguistic theories, and what it implies. Going forward, the paper uses this exploration to identify and analyse Kafka's use of empty signifiers in the novel. It identifies four (out of many other) empty signifiers. It analyses two characters with fluctuating significations – Frieda and Barnabas – and two objects which break the stability of their supposed meanings – telephones and letters. The paper concludes by noting that the portrayal of empty signifiers does not translate into obfuscation of subtexts. Ultimately, this paper is an attempt to bring the discourse on Kafka away from ultracrepidarian pronouncements of existentialism, and to centre it back on actual, critical and complex engagements with his works.

Keywords: Empty signifiers, sign, meaning, signification.

Introduction:

Franz Kafka's (1883-1924) novel *The Castle* (1926) remains his most enigmatic work. A major part of the enigma owes to the fact that the novel is unfinished. Contrary to the blurb of the Penguin edition, the novel does not feel complete, as there are undeveloped plot ideas and meanings that are contradictory. It is only natural since *The Castle* is a first draft, that too incomplete. Perhaps Kafka had no intention to finish it, for Max Brod reports that in September 1922, Kafka had informed him that he had not worked on the novel for a while and would likely drop the story (Zilcosky xxx-xxx). Kafka, thus, never edited the novel. The process of editing is crucial for the production of a text. It can be likened to a gardener trimming a rough bush and bringing it into a pristine shape – it helps the author eliminate all those things in the text that do not serve the meaning he is trying to communicate to the reader. It also enables him to sharpen the subtext and the ideas he is trying to present. Editing also gets rid of plot inconsistencies. *The Castle* is devoid of this editorial privilege and therefore trying to pinpoint a central subtext is almost impossible. What critics can do, however, is delineate individual strands of the text and look at the meaning and the form of those strands in and of themselves. One ought not to relate these strands to the entire text since the text remains incomplete¹.

This paper explores one such strand – the utilization and complication of the idea of signifier/signified – in the novel. The paper aims to show that Kafka has portrayed empty signifiers in his novel *The Castle*. The paper first begins by exploring the concept of the empty signifiers before analysing the use of it in the novel. It critically focuses on four such signifiers, although acknowledging that there are many more in the novel. The analyzed signifiers are the characters of Frieda – who is the most clear example of it – Barnabas, whose instability as a messenger casts doubt on the signifier/signified connection of messages; as well as objects like telephones – which remain stuck only as signifiers – and letters which break the assurances of

epistolary stability. The paper concludes by noting that the portrayal of empty signifiers, however, does not eradicate the associated subtexts.

Franz Kafka is one of the greatest proponents of Modernist (and even postmodernist) world literature. His legacy in the non-realist, avant-garde literary styles is immense, and authors from Jorge Borges to Kobo Abe (Hardin and Kobo 452) were all influenced by him. His short life has been much scrutinized but never sympathetically understood. From a pastiche of diary entries, letters and anecdotes, the biographers, readers and literary critics all try to develop, by a thousand cuts, the portrait of an author who passed away too soon, without gifting the world the nuggets of his true potential. This, in itself, seems Kafkaesque. Perhaps that is why the existential themes in Kafka's works seem to be so visible to us. Indeed, themes of existentialism are prominent features of his work (Parameshwari 34). However, there is much more to Kafka than mere existentialism. As a member of a society going through all the cataclysms of the modern world including capitalist commercialization, mechanization, warfare etc., he was bound to have critical opinions on the social conditions. His literature similarly reflect such critical observations as well. Moreover, working in the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute (Prague), he witnessed labour exploitation² – an element that he also included in his writings. Lastly, throughout his life, he kept feeding his intellectual and epistemological drive by attending lectures and talks from eminent academics, authors, philosophers etc, and ending up implementing what he had learned upon his literature. Thus, these aspects of his texts cannot simply be ignored by focusing exclusively on existentialism. Thus, to hark that existentialism is the sole explanation of Kafka's very complex oeuvre, is a very childish and ultracrepidarian escape from actually and critically engaging with his works. Hence, this paper aims to bring back the discourse to this complexity by focusing on one of its many strands – the use of empty signifiers in *The Castle*.

Sign, Signifier/Signified and the Empty Signifier:

Before we can analyze the use of empty signifiers in *The Castle*, we must first establish what is meant by ‘signifier/signified’ and ‘empty signifier’. Of course, we speak here in terms of Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural analysis of language. According to Saussure, a sign is the basic unit of language (Kulkarni and Chaskar 109). It comprises of a signifier (sound-image) and its corresponding signified (concept). The meaning of a sign depends upon other signs in the linguistic system. For example, a ‘cat’ is a ‘cat’ because it is not interchangeable (that is, its meaning is not the same as) a ‘bat’, a ‘mat’ or a ‘rat’. Thus, language makes meaning through a chain of differentiated signification (Kulkarni and Chaskar 112). Important for our analysis is the idea that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, as Barry clarifies “...meanings we give to words are purely *arbitrary*, and that these meanings are maintained by convention only. Words, that is to say, are ‘unmotivated signs’, meaning that there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates” (42). This naturally leads to the question of the stability of a sign.

The works of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes, Derrida etc. have all raised doubts about the nature of stable signification. Lévi-Strauss comes up with the idea of a floating signifier which is a “semantic function whose role is to allow symbolic thought to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it” (qtd. in Mehlman 23). Ohnuki-Tierney explains that “...the floating signifier brims with infinite possibilities for meaning, since it is not attached to any meaning or a set of meanings” (61). Similarly, Barthes argues for a zero sign that can create meaning from nothing (Ohnuki-Tierney 61). Whether we call it a floating signifier, a zero sign or an empty signifier, we find that certain signifiers have the ability to connote multiple numbers of signified. This is unsurprising because “any semiotic/symbolic system is based on a dynamic interplay between material signifiers and their meanings, and zero signifiers and zero meanings” (Ohnuki-Tierney 70-71). Kafka seems to have been aware of this. As stated

above, the kernels of doubt about the stability of sign occur within the original ideas of Saussure, and Kafka's Prague was a major centre of Saussurian linguistics. Incidentally, the Prague School of Linguistics (of which Jakobson was a key linguist) was founded in 1926, the same year as the publication of *The Castle*. However, we must note that Kafka died two years before this development, but nonetheless it will not be inaccurate to say that he might have had some understanding of such linguistic concepts. This is especially because although the Prague School came into being in 1926, its foundational lecture – by Mathesius – was delivered as early as 1911 (Vachek). Kafka was in the habit of attending talks and lectures and might have come across the Prague structural linguists.

It is also self-evident in *The Castle* itself. The (unfinished) novel presents a very crisp understanding of the signifier/signified in general and empty signifier in particular. Empty signifiers abound in the novel and this paper will now examine the same.

Telephones as Empty Signifiers:

When a weary K. arrives at the village and seeks refuge at the inn, he is abruptly woken up by Schwarzer and demanded an explanation. K. replies that he is a land surveyor appointed by the count. Schwarzer, disbelieving, uses the telephone – that despite being “almost above [K.’s] head” (Kafka 5), K. never noticed – to confirm this appointment from the castle. The telephonic conversation is confusing and surreal, a feature of phone calls in *The Castle*. Thus, this scene marks the first reference to a telephone in the novel. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Kafka has portrayed the telephones as empty signifiers.

However, to analyze the telephone, one must not start at the beginning of the novel but at K.’s interactions with the mayor. When K. reminds the mayor that Schwarzer had called the castle to confirm K.’s appointment as land surveyor, the mayor makes a startling claim – that all contacts with the castle “are merely apparent” (Kafka 68-69) and that there is no such thing as

a telephone in the village. When one uses a telephone in the village, they can only hear “...hissing and singing [...] But, you see, that hissing and that singing are the only real and reliable things that the telephones here tell us, everything else is illusionary” (Kafka 69). Hissing and singing are audible sounds that are not specifically related to the person using the phone. Thus, they have no meaning. As a sign, they only have a signifier but no signified. This becomes even clearer when we compare the mayor’s argument with the time when K. personally calls the castle for access. In this call, K. hears a buzzing of childish voices that may well have been a song sung at a distance, yet “...as if out of this buzzing there emerged in a quite impossible fashion a single high-pitched yet powerful voice that struck the ear as if demanding to penetrate deeper than into mere hearing” (Kafka 21). The high-pitched voice “demanding to penetrate deeper than into mere hearing” (Kafka 21) is the meaning that is supposedly there in these phone calls, that is, the signified. Thus, this signified tries to be much more than a simple audible sound – “mere hearing” (Kafka 21) – which is its signifier. However, the signified cannot connect with the signifier and thus, ultimately, the high-pitched voice fails to make an impression on K. Hence, the telephone has no fixed meaning, no ultimate signified. It is only a floating, empty signifier.

However, still, these signifiers are rather important, since the mayor warns K. that:

real significance attaches to these telephone replies, certainly, how could it not? [...] All these statements have no official significance; if you attribute official significance to them, you are making a mistake, on the other hand their private significance in terms of friendliness or hostility is very great, usually greater than any official significance could ever be. (Kafka 69-70)

An “official” significance cannot be attached since there is no signified. In absence of a signified, the signifier – hisses, singing, simple sounds etc – becomes the most important. Since

the signified is missing, one is free to attach “private significance” (Kafka 70) to the signifiers, overriding the official ones. This idea of Kafka’s, in effect, is a precursor to Lacanian primacy of the signifier. According to Lacan, the signifier – and not the signified – is the most important factor in a sign, and that the interaction between signifiers results in meaning (Yi 211). It is also seen here – K. is free to attach any private significance to the signifiers, and such primacy of signifier results in “friendliness or hostility [which is] usually greater than any official significance could ever be.” (Kafka 70)

Apart from the hisses, one cannot even trust the telephones when a proper, intelligible voice answers them. As the mayor explains “Nor do I understand how even an outsider can think that, when he calls Sordini, [...] it really is Sordini that answers. It’s much more likely to be a minor clerk [...] On the other hand [...] when you call the minor clerk, Sordini himself replies” (Kafka 69). This confusion is quite similar to Klamm calling Frieda’s name (see the section below). The signifier – calling for Sordini – does not here correspond to the desired signified – minor clerk answering (and vice-versa). Thus, this empty signifier also casts doubt on the identity of the receiver, such as of Oswald’s – the castle official who answers K.’s call regarding access. No wonder the doubt also permeates to K., and a confusion regarding the names of the assistants ensue, ending in K. chillingly asking – ““Who am I then?”” (Kafka 21).

The telephone, thus, is Kafka’s ingenious way of portraying an empty signifier.

Frieda’s Meanings:

We now come to the clearest use of empty signifier in *The Castle* – the character of Frieda. Frieda is the barmaid at Count’s Arms with whom K. gets into a relationship. This amorous association is quite abrupt and follows the dream-logic prevalent throughout the novel. At first glance, thus, Frieda is supposed to signify, from the point of view of K., a love partner. However, this signification is not stable. The reader is uncertain about the authenticity of K.’s

feelings for her because of Frieda's past association with Klamm. It seems that K. does not always adhere to the logic of his heart when dealing with Frieda:

...now that beauty was gone. A few days of living with K. had sufficed to achieve that [...]
Or was being away from Klamm the real cause of her decline? It was Klamm's nearness that had made her so madly alluring, in that allurements she had snatched K. to her and now she was waiting in his arms. (Kafka 129)

Thus Frieda, as a (former) mistress of Klamm, signifies for K. the chance to progress to the castle. So, K. desires her. Hence, the signification of Frieda as a partner is supplanted by the signification of Frieda as a means to Klamm and the castle. A similar change of signification is also seen in her profession. As Pepi explained, Frieda started as a chambermaid. However, she rose to the position of barmaid once she associated (or pretended to associate) with Klamm – “So Frieda [...] really was Klamm's mistress. But what was good enough for Klamm was bound, surely, to be admired by everyone else, so that in no time at all Frieda had become a great beauty [...] actually too powerful, the bar was now scarcely enough for her” (Kafka 278). Thus, she did not only signify the profession of a barmaid but also the power of being associated with the castle. Much like a floating signifier, she holds multiple meanings. Moreover, she is herself aware of her empty signification. After quoting the landlady's claims that K. saw Frieda as a path to Klamm, Frieda argues:

It was the product [...] of your thinking that in me you'd conquered a sweetheart of Klamm's and so held a pledge, redeemable only at the highest price. Negotiating that price with Klamm was your one aspiration. Since I was nothing to you, the price everything [...] You picture the discussion with Klamm as a business deal, cash for cash. You're allowing for all possibilities; provided you get the price, you're prepared to do anything; if Klamm wants me, you'll give me to him, if he wants you to stay with me, you'll stay, if he wants you to

throw me out, you'll throw me out, but you're also prepared to play-act [...] because you've no other feeling for me but that of an owner. (Kafka 147-148)

Apart from the very clear critique of patriarchal gender relations, this paragraph also prominently indicates that Frieda is an empty signifier. K. can put any meaning on her, depending on the situation. The willingness of K. to “play act” (Kafka 148) is important here. To act means to undertake a role, a meaning different from the actor's ‘off-stage’ persona. It is also to signify – through the role – multiple meanings including the emotional, the social-psychological and the narrational³. Thus, the signifier which allows K. to enact these meanings is Frieda, which also naturally implies that she is an empty signifier. Frieda's empty signification is likewise seen in the assistants' attempts to similarly associate with her and become “ a lesser Klamm” (Kafka 237). Finally, this is also the reason why Amalia claims to have never heard of Frieda and dismisses K.'s engagement with her. Amalia – who has fought against the authority and meaning of the castle – has no reason to use Frieda to signify any sort of association with either Klamm or the castle. Thus, to her, Frieda does not exist, even though this same Frieda, as indicated by Pepi, is known all over the village for her signification of the same. Hence, Frieda is an empty signifier.

This is further seen by the fact that Frieda's association with Klamm is highly doubtful. A real confusion of semiotic meaning lies here. According to the landlady, Klamm calling Frieda “need not in fact mean what one would like it to mean, he simply called the name Frieda – who knows what he had in mind? – the fact that Frieda naturally came running was her affair [...] but we cannot claim he was calling her, not as such” (Kafka 47). Thus, merely calling Frieda by name does not mean *calling for* Frieda, which challenges Saussure's conception of the sign. A signifier is supposed to correspond to a signified, but that is not the case here. Rather, the name ‘Frieda’ does not correspond to the person ‘Frieda’. Yet, interestingly, the village, the assistants, K., and Frieda herself consider her to be associated with Klamm based on this very

signification. Thus, we can see how a single signifier – Frieda – holds two contradictory meanings. This can only happen if the signifier is empty, and thus is a location to posit multiple meanings. Further evidence of this lies in Frieda's past as well. If Pepi's narration⁴ holds any weight, Frieda seems to have deliberately changed her own signification multiple times, from a chambermaid to Klamm's 'mistress' and barmaid, then to K.'s fiancée, moving on to associating with the assistants and finally returning to Count's Arms – all to elevate her social position. This smooth gliding in and out of meaning is also indicative of her being an empty signifier.

There is much more to discuss about the game of signification that Kafka initiates in the character of Frieda than can be contained in a single paper. This paper only scratches the surface of the topic, but in a way to satisfy the point that the character is portrayed by Kafka as an empty signifier.

Barnabas and the Work of Messengers:

Barnabas is in (supposed) charge of official communication between K. and the castle. This communication primarily takes place through letters and messages, which Barnabas carries to and from the castle. However, if the letters are empty signifiers (see the section below), then there is also a significant doubt on the stability of Barnabas' own meaning. Such doubts manifest early in the text. After reciting a message of thanks to Klamm for sending him a letter, K. suddenly realizes something interesting about Barnabas – “He was only a messenger, of course, not knowing what was in the letter he had been given to deliver, yet his look, his smile, his whole bearing seemed themselves to constitute a message...” (Kafka 27). Thus, Barnabas' signification as a messenger is being challenged here by K. who reads his own signified – the message – in him. Furthermore, in any message or letter, the content is the signified and the letter (as in physical paper containing sentences) or the message (spoken or written words) the

signifier. However, by equating Barnabas with the message, K. also confuses this difference between the two, thus pointing out the fact that Barnabas is an empty signifier.

The flip side of this is that the castle may not actually receive any messages from K. at all. Barnabas, for K., signifies a channel of communication to the castle, with the latter expecting his words to reach Klamm's ears. In other words, Barnabas' services as a messenger is the signifier while Klamm's ears (or eyes) are the signified. However, this meaning is not stable as Barnabas himself informs – "Klamm isn't waiting for the messages, in fact he's annoyed when I arrive [...] he usually gets up when he sees me coming [...] and won't receive me. Nor is it laid down that I should come with every message immediately, [...] When I bring a message, it is voluntarily" (Kafka 114). Delivering messages is the supposed fixed meaning of the work of a messenger. A messenger's essence is to deliver messages. However, in the castle, it is merely a voluntary action. If so, what is the status of a messenger here? What is the meaning of his line of work? Whatever it is, it is neither stable nor fixed and depends on what the receivers – such as K. and Klamm – want to make of it. Thus K. too, upon receiving the very first letter from the castle, sees it only as a personal choice – and not as a definite command – whether or not to let "...the news brought by Barnabas to govern his entire employment" (Kafka 24). Thus, it indicates that Barnabas is an empty signifier.

This is further exemplified in Olga's description of Barnabas' work in the castle. It seems that Barnabas' interaction with the castle is confusing, frustrating and surreal. It is never clear if he is dealing with Klamm⁵ or even bringing back the correct letters. The normal function of signifier/signified gets interrupted and thus Olga warns K. that the castle "have different ideas about messenger work, incompatible with yours..." (Kafka 167). Ultimately, K. ends up realizing the empty signification of Barnabas as he declares to Olga – "I believe I see clearly now. Barnabas is too young for this job. Nothing of what he says can be taken seriously as it stands. He's scared to death up there, he can't take things in, and if he's forced even so to give

an account down here, the the [sic] result is a tangle of made-up stories” (Kafka 173). Thus, Barnabas is an empty signifier.

The Instability of Letters:

During the early twentieth century, letters were one of the primary instruments of distant communication. This commonality of epistolary practice in this period, however, should not prevent us from acknowledging that Kafka was a prolific letter-writer. His missives to Bauer, Milena and Diamant are still counted among the most read epistles today. At the same time, his epistolary form also shines in texts like *Letter to His Father* (1919). It is only natural, thus, that letters find their way into *The Castle* as well. It is Barnabas who hands K. his first letter from the castle. On the outset it is a simple letter that appoints him into the count’s service and marks out his superiors. However, the way K. interacts with the letter strips away its ordinariness, and establishes it as an empty signifier.

K. begins with the salutation of the letter – “Dear Sir” (Kafka 24) – which he finds suspicious. He argues that it exemplifies the contradictions in the letters which make the recipient – him – oscillate between the meanings of a “freeman [...] whose own will was acknowledged and accepted” (Kafka 24) and a worker. This makes him reach a startling conclusion:

...he saw it as a choice freely offered him [sic], it was up to him what he wished to make of the arrangements contained in the letter, whether he wished to be a village workman with a connection [...] with the castle or an ostensible village workman who [...] allowed the news brought by Barnabas to govern his entire employment. (Kafka 24)

Thus, this is nothing but the portrayal of an empty signifier. The letter here have multiple meanings and it depends upon K. to fill it with a chosen signified. This is also the reason why the mayor, in his turn, can cancel K.’s meaning and impose his own upon the letter. Being an empty signifier, the letter for the mayor merely means that K. will be taking an active

interest in K. *but only if* K. is appointed by the count. Thus, the letter for him does not signify a confirmation of employment⁶. As he explains to K. – “A private letter from Klamm clearly has a lot more *significance* [my emphasis] than an official missive, it’s just that it does not have the significance *you* [author’s emphasis] attach to it” (Kafka 68).

Interestingly, all of this complicates the idea of the epistolary pact. While analysing the asylum letters of Artaud, Wilson argues that:

...the ‘pacte épistolaire’ [...] is based on the recognition of reciprocal epistolographical rituals, such as discourses of absence and presence, shared references to time and space, [...] shared life rhythms [...] This scholarship relies on stable notions of sender and addressee, on the idea of [...] letters as dialogues and collaborations between two living people who usually enjoy certain communicative freedoms and a shared sense of reality. (2)

No such pacts can be made about the letters K. receives since they, as empty signifiers, confuse any notion of stability. K. himself understands this and thus freely ascribes his meaning to the letters. Other aspects of the “pacte épistolaire” (Wilson 2) cannot also be applied as most factors of stability are also challenged throughout *The Castle*. There is substantial doubt regarding the fix identities of K., the castle clerks and even Klamm. Neither the backdrop of the village nor the castle itself are stable entities; while time in *The Castle* can argued to be “abrogated” (Church 65). Moreover, since the letters are empty signifiers, no concrete dialogue or collaboration can be established between the sender and the receiver – the castle and K. – and thus letters continue to remain a source of undecidability. Thus, no wonder that Mizzi also cancels both the mayor’s and K.’s significance of the letter – turning the epistle into an origami boat – and ends up “playing dreamily” (Kafka 71) with it. Thus, the letter is yet another portrayal of an empty signifier in the text.

Conclusion:

Hence, we have sufficient reason to establish that Kafka has portrayed empty signifiers in his unfinished novel *The Castle*. Empty signifiers are portrayed in the characters of Frieda and Barnabas whose fixed meanings are subject to change throughout the novel. At the same time, Kafka has also used objects – such as telephones or letters – as empty signifiers, contradicting Ohnuki-Tierney's assertion that empty signifiers cannot be ascribed to objects (71). It also thus, in effect, shows that a game of signification is played by Kafka in this novel as he constantly switches the meanings of the empty signifiers, keeping their semantic stability floating. A game of this kind is, of course, expected in any context where an empty signifier is used, since different people would try to fill up the signifier with different meanings. However, interestingly, Kafka's use of it in the novel also anticipates many such games in postmodernist literature. It must be noted, however, that portraying certain characters or objects as empty signifiers does not mean that they lack subtext. Frieda's character, for example, will always carry a subtext that is critical to patriarchy; while the telephone will always hint at the critique of hollowness of communication in capitalist society. The subtexts, unlike the signified, remain unaltered.

Endnotes:

1. In any credible and scientific form of criticism, the meaning of individual strands must be necessarily seen in relation to the meaning of the *entire* text. This standard procedure is not possible for texts that are incomplete and/or unedited.
2. See the important compilation of Kafka's clerical writings in Corngold, Greenberg et al. edited *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*.

3. Consider what the masks and the characters signify, for example, in the Japanese Noh theatre.

4. It is to be noted that Pepi's account of Frieda's past is to be taken as anecdotal. The readers do not know the veracity of her account, which was to be established, or debunked, in further interactions between her and K. The plot certainly seems to go that way, with Pepi offering K. to live with her and the other chambermaids. However, just as the landlady prevents K. from finally answering to Pepi's offer, the readers are also prevented from knowing the truth by Kafka's decision to drop the novel.

5. Olga also informs K. that Barnabas has "collected and compared a great many" (Kafka 168) reports about Klamm's appearance but when showed Klamm in the castle, he does not recognize him. This confusion is also a confusion of the empty signifier. As Klamm appears differently to different people, a fixed meaning cannot be ascribed to him. Thus, Barnabas is left to compare different meanings which do not, ultimately, be imposed on Klamm as Klamm is himself an empty signifier.

6. Very interesting is K.'s response to the mayor's signification – that it is so thorough as to leave nothing "but the signature on a blank sheet of paper" (Kafka 68). It anticipates Derridean ideas of the signature, exploring which, sadly, is beyond the scope of this paper.

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