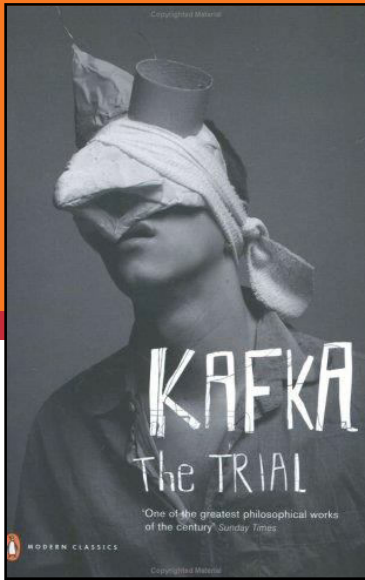


The Trial

By Franz Kafka

First published in 1925



Genre and Subject

Classical Fiction

Allegory

Philosophical Fiction

Synopsis

'Someone must have laid false information against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.' From this sentence onwards Josef K. is on trial for his right to exist in a novel which, more than any other is infinitely perceptive about the nature of terror and the futility of human life.

Author Biography

Franz Kafka was born into a middle-class, German-speaking Jewish family on July 3, 1883 in Prague, Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. Franz was the eldest of six children. He had two younger brothers who died in infancy and three younger sisters (Gabriele (1889–1941), Valerie (1890–1942), Otilie (1892–1943), all of whom perished in concentration camps.

His father, Hermann Kafka (1852–1931), was described as a huge ill-tempered domestic tyrant, who on many occasions directed his anger towards his son and was disrespectful towards his escape into literature. Kafka's father was a businessman who established himself as an independent retailer of men's and women's fancy goods and accessories, employing up to 15 people. All his life Kafka struggled to come to terms with his domineering father.

From 1889 to 1893, Franz attended the Deutsche Knabenschule, the boys elementary school in Prague. He was sent to German schools, not Czech, which demonstrates his father's desire for social advancement. His Jewish upbringing was limited mostly to his bar mitzvah and going to the synagogue four times a year with his father, which didn't give him much to go on.

In 1901 he graduated from the Altstädter Gymnasium, the rigorous classics-oriented secondary school with eight grade levels. He did well in school, taking classes like Latin, Greek and history.

After secondary school he went on to Charles Ferdinand University, where at first he decided to study chemistry, but switched after two weeks to law. Kafka obtained the degree of Doctor of Law on June 18, 1906 and performed an obligatory year of unpaid service as law clerk for the civil and criminal courts.

Discussion Starters

- Analyse the novel's first sentence. In what ways does this sentence establish a pattern for Josef K.'s passivity and for what happens to him in this novel as a whole?
- Discuss the significance of Josef K.'s name. Discuss the other characters' names, noting the use of family names for some characters ("Titorelli," "Huld," "Fraulein Burstner") and first names for others ("Leni" or "Elsa").
- When K. questions his arrest, he is told: "There's been no mistake. [Our department] doesn't seek out the guilt among the general population, but, as the Law states, is attracted by guilt and has to send us guards out. That's the Law". In other words, "guilt" seems to precede an actual criminal act. Discuss.
- Why does Josef K. decide to "play along" with his arrest, even though the men who arrest him never show him any proof of their authority and he thinks it might be a "farce"? Does he behave as if he had a guilty conscience? What do we know about his past life and his family?
- One of the unsettling aspects of K.'s arrest is its public nature. Strange men enter his bedroom, neighbours watch through the window while he is arrested; even his colleagues from the bank turn out to be present. How does it influence the way K. reacts?
- How is K. summoned to his first inquiry? What are the social conditions of the people living here? How would you characterise K.'s frame of mind when he leaves the assembly?
- Why does K. decide to return to the courtroom the following Sunday even though he hasn't been summoned? Contrary to his expectations, the assembly room is empty. Describe the strange, uncanny impression made by an empty room that was full of people in the preceding chapter.
- Discuss the section of town where Titorelli resides, his neighbours, and the building he lives in. What role do the girls play in their meeting? Does their physical deformity say anything about their moral character?
- Discuss the importance of the cathedral setting for the "In the Cathedral". What elements suggest a relationship between Josef K.'s trial and the crucifixion of Christ? Why does the priest describe K.'s tourist guidebook as full of "irrelevancies" and tell him to put it aside? What does he think about K.'s relations with women?
- What makes K.'s execution so horrific? K. thinks he dies "like a dog!" Why? Discuss the importance of shame, reputation, and one's "good name" in the novel in light of this scene. Does the execution reflect badly on K. or on the Court? Whose side are you on? Does Kafka make it clear which side we should be on?

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