A Note to the Reader

Cliffs Notes provide you with the combined efforts of teachers, writers, and editors who've studied, taught, and analyzed what literary classics mean to literature as a whole and to you in particular. Opinions expressed in the Notes aren't rigid dogma meant to discourage your intellectual exploration. You should use them as starting points to open yourself to new methods of encountering, understanding, and appreciating literature. Acquire some knowledge about the author and the work, read a brief synopsis of the work, and then read the work itself, reviewing and consulting Cliffs Notes when necessary.

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Cliff Notes
The Trial

Notes

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including
Life and Background
Critical Commentaries
On K.'s Guilt, the Court, and the Law
The Neurotic Element in Kafka's Art
Structure and Order of Chapters
Composition and Reception
Understanding Kafka
Kafka's Jewish Influence
Kafka-A "Religious" Writer?
Kafka and Existentialism
Selected Bibliography

CliffsNotes

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CONTENTS

Life and Background 	5
List of Characters 	10
Critical Commentaries
Chapter 1 	12
Chapter 2 	16
Chapter 3 	18
Chapter 4 	19
Chapter 5 	20
Chapter 6 	21
Chapter 7 	22
Chapter 8 	25
Chapter 9 	27
Chapter 10 	31
Critical Analyses
On K.'s Guilt, the Court, and the Law 	34
The Neurotic Element in Kafka's Art 	35
Structure and Order of Chapters 	38
Composition and Reception 	40
Understanding Kafka 	43
LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Born in Prague in 1883. Franz Kafka is today considered the most important prose writer of the so-called Prague Circle, a loosely knit group of German-Jewish writers who contributed to the culturally fertile soil of Prague during the 1880s until after World War I. Yet from the Czech point of view. Kafka was German, and from the German point of view he was, above all, Jewish. In short, Kafka shared the fate of much of Western Jewry people who were largely emancipated from their specifically Jewish ways and yet not fully assimilated into the culture of the countries where they lived. Although Kafka became extremely interested in Jewish culture after meeting a troupe of Yiddish actors in 1911, and although he began to study Hebrew shortly after that, it was not until late in his life that he became deeply interested in his heritage. His close relationship with Dora Dymant, his steady and understanding companion of his last years, contributed considerably toward this development. But even if Kafka had not been Jewish, it is hard to see how his artistic and religious sensitivity could have remained untouched by the ancient Jewish traditions of Prague which reached back to the city's tenth-century origin.

In addition to Kafka's German. Czech, and Jewish heritages, there was also the Austrian element into which Kafka had been born and in which he had been brought up. Prague was the major second capital of the Austrian Empire (after Vienna) since the early sixteenth century, and although Kafka was no friend of Austrian politics, it is important to emphasize this Austrian component of life in Prague because Kafka has too often been called a Czech writerespecially in America. Kafka's name is also grouped too often with German writers, which is accurate
only in the sense that he belongs to the German-speaking world. Apart from that, however, it is about as meaningful as considering Faulkner an English novelist.

For his recurring theme of human alienation, Kafka is deeply indebted to Prague and his situation there as a social outcast, a victim of the friction between Czechs and Germans, Jews and non-Jews. To understand Kafka, it is important to realize that in Prague the atmosphere of medieval mysticism and Jewish orthodoxy lingered until after World War II, when the Communist regime began getting rid of most of its remnants. To this day, however, Kafka's tiny flat in Alchemists' Lane behind the towering Hradschin Castle is a major attraction for those in search of traces of Kafka. The haunting mood of Prague's narrow, cobblestoned streets, its slanted roofs, and its myriad backyards comes alive in the surreal settings of Kafka's stories. His simple, sober, and yet dense language is traced to the fact that
in Prague the German language had been exposed to manifold Slavic influences for centuries and was virtually cut off from the mainstream language as spoken and written in Germany and Austria. Prague was a linguistic island as far as German was concerned, and while the Czech population of Prague doubled within the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the percentage of German Jews sank to a mere seven percent. The result was that Kafka actually wrote in a language which was on the verge of developing its own characteristics. This absence of any gap between the spoken and written word in his language is probably the secret behind the enormous appeal of his language, whose deceptive simplicity comes across in every decent translation.

Kafka's family situation was a reflection of his being a German-speaking Jew in a predominantly Slavic environment. The great socio-economic and educational differences between his father, Hermann Kafka, and his mother, Julie Lowy[Löwy], were at the root of this complex situation. Kafka's father's whole life was shaped by his desperate and eventually successful attempt to break out of his poor Czech milieu and become accepted in the prestigious environment of German Prague; his mother, however, came from a wealthy German-Jewish bourgeois family. Throughout his lifetime, Franz Kafka could never extricate himself from the terrible friction between his parents which was caused, for the most part, by his tyrannical father. Kafka's only strong, positive ties with his family were with his favorite sister, Ottla, who let him stay at her home and later helped him break off his relationship with Felice, his first fiancée. To one extent or another, all of Kafka's works bear the unmistakable imprint of the nerve-wracking struggle between his humility and hypersensitivity (his mother's heritage) and the crudity and superficiality of his father, who looked at his son's writing with indifference and, at times, with
contempt. This total lack of understanding and the absence of any home life worthy the name (young Franz was virtually brought up by a nurse) caused the boy's early seriousness and anxiety. As late as 1919, five years before his death, this lifelong trauma manifested itself in his *Letter to His Father* (almost a hundred pages, but never actually delivered), in which Kafka passionately accuses his father of intimidation and brutality. Although it will not do to reduce the complex art of Franz Kafka to its autobiographical elements, the significance of these elements in his work is indeed striking. His story "The Judgment" seems especially to be the direct result of his deep-seated fear of his father.

Kafka is the classical painter of the estrangement of modern man, although he is never its apostle. As early as 1905, in his "Description of a Fight," Kafka already denied man's ability to obtain certainty through sensory perception and intellectual effort because, according to him, these methods inevitably distort the nature of the Absolute by forcing it into their prefabricated structures. The resulting skepticism, of which he himself was
to become the tragic victim, was the basis of his conviction that none of our fleeting impressions and accidental associations have a fixed counterpart in a "real" and stable world. There is no clear-cut boundary between reality and the realm of dreams, and if one of his characters appears to have found such a boundary, it quickly turns out that he has set it up merely as something to cling to in the face of chaos. The "real" world of phenomena develops its own logic and leaves Kafka's characters yearning for a firm metaphysical anchor which they never quite grasp.

At no time did Kafka seek refuge from his culturally and socially alienated situation by joining literary or social circlessomething many of his fellow writers did. He remained an outcast, suffering from the consequences of his partly self-imposed seclusion, and yet welcoming it for the sake of literary productivity. Anxious although he was to use his positions, as well as his engagements to Felice Bauer and Julie Wohryzek, as a means to gain recognition for his writing, his life story is, nevertheless, one long struggle against his feelings of guilt and inferiority.

The one person who could and did help him was Max Brod, whom he met in 1902 and who was to become not only his editor but also an intimate friend. The numerous letters which Kafka wrote to him are a moving testimony of their mutual appreciation. Because of Brod's encouragement, Kafka began to read his first literary efforts to small private audiences long before he was recognized as a significant writer. With Brod, Kafka traveled to Italy, Weimar (where Goethe and Schiller had written), and Paris; later, Brod introduced him into the literary circles of Prague. In short, Brod helped Kafka to fend off an increasingly threatening self-isolation. Most significantly for posterity, it was Brod who, contrary to Kafka's express request, did not burn the manuscripts which Kafka left behind; instead, he became their
enthusiastic editor.

If Kafka had a strong inclination to isolate himself, this does not mean he was indifferent to what was going on around him. Especially in the years until 1912, Kafka familiarized himself with some of the far-reaching new ideas of the day. At a friend's house, he attended lectures and discussions on Einstein's theory of relativity, Planck's quantum theory, and Freud's psychoanalytical experiments. He was also interested in politics, especially the nationalistic aspirations of the Czechs in the Austrian Empire. In his function as a lawyer at the Workers' Insurance Company, he was confronted daily with the social situation of workers, and toward the end of World War I, he even composed a brochure on the plight of the proletariat. This is, in part, proof that Franz Kafka was not the melancholy dreamer of nightmares, isolated in his ivory tower in Prague a view still commonly held today.

It was at Max Brod's home that Kafka met Felice Bauer in 1912. This encounter plunged him into a frustrating relationship for many years,
oscillating between engagements and periods of complete withdrawal. "The Judgment" (1912) is a document of this encounter. Having literally poured it out in one long sitting, Kafka came to regard it as an illustration of how one should always write; it was the subject of his first public reading. At that time, Kafka was already filling a detailed diary, full of reflections and parables as a means of self-analysis. The same year, 1912, he wrote "The Metamorphosis," one of the most haunting treatments of human alienation, and most of the fragmentary novel Amerika. According to his own conviction, his literary productivity reached a peak at precisely the time when his insecurity and anxiety over whether or not to marry Felice reached a climax. For the first time, the deep-seated conflict between his yearning for the simple life of a married man and his determination not to succumb to it became critical.

More and more, Kafka's writing began to deal with Angst (anxiety, anguish), probably because of the sustained anxiety induced by his domineering father and by the problem of whether or not to break away from his bachelorhood existence. Toward the end of "The Judgment," and in "In the Penal Colony," as well as in The Trial and The Castle, the father figure assumes the mysterious qualities of an ineffable god. Suffering, punishment, judgment, trial all these are manifestations of Kafka's rigorous, ethical mind. The philosophy of Franz Brentano, to which he was exposed at the university, intensified his interest in these themes. The essence of this philosophy is that since emotions and concepts cannot sufficiently explain moral action, personal judgment alone must determine it; thorough self-analysis is the only prerequisite for such a total autonomy of personal judgment, a view which Kafka came to exercise almost to the point of self-destruction.

Kafka's fascination with these themes received new impetus when he
began to read the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in 1913. As radical a skeptic as Kafka and equally religious by temperament, Kierkegaard envisages man as caught in the dilemma of wanting to comprehend Divinity with the altogether inadequate tools of rationality. Since God's transcendence is absolute for him, Kierkegaard sees no way of solving this dilemma except by abandoning intellectual pursuit and venturing a "leap into faith." Kafka's plea for man to "enter into the law," stated most explicitly in the parable "Before the Law" (in *The Trial*), deals with this dilemma. The difference is that Kierkegaard is cornered by the overwhelming presence of God forcing him to make decisions. In Kafka's parable, his hero wants to enter the first gate of the palace that is, "the law" but he dies because he does not exert sufficient will to enter and leaves all possible decisions to the gatekeeper; Kafka's searching man has no divine guidance to show him the way, and the situation he faces is one of total uncertainty and despair. Antithetically, Kierkegaard's radical skepticism results in faith.
Kafka and Kierkegaard have been called existentialists, and though this label has some merits, it should nevertheless be used very carefully. Both men were fascinated by the theme of moral integrity in the face of freedom of choice and were convinced that man lives meaningfully only to the extent which he realizes himself. In this connection, it is interesting to know that Kafka felt close to Kierkegaard because of the latter's lifelong unresolved relationship to his fiancée. The problem dominated Kierkegaard's life and work as much as Kafka's life and work was dominated by his relationships with Felice Bauer (to whom he was engaged twice in 1914 and 1917), Julie Wohryzek (engaged in 1919), and Milena Jesenska (1920-22).

Perhaps more than any other story, Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" (1914) reflects his reaction to the outbreak of World War I, a feeling of sheer horror as well as disgust with the politicians in power. The result was a renewed fascination with Schopenhauer and Dostoevsky, whose extolment of physical pain finds expression in a variety of ways. Near this same time, Kafka began working on The Trial, about which he remarked that its ghastly thoughts devoured him in much the same way as did his thoughts about Felice. The novel is an elaborate and heavily autobiographical fantasy of punishment: on the eve of his thirty-first birthday, Joseph K. is executed; on the evening of his own thirty-first birthday, Kafka decided to travel to Berlin to break off his first engagement with Felice. Symptomatically for Kafka, this novel remained fragmentary as did his other two, Amerika and The Castle. "A Report to an Academy" and the fragmentary "The Hunter Gracchus" followed, and in 1919 several stories were published under the title A Country Doctor. The title story is a symbolic description of modern man living outside a binding universal order and brought to death by sensuality and the aimlessness of the forces working within him. This volume contains perhaps Kafka's best parable on the nature
of absurdity, "The Imperial Message." It is a terrifying description of how important messages, ordered at the top level to save men at the bottom, never stand a chance of getting through the manifold obstacles of bureaucracy. "The Imperial Message" is an interesting reversal of "Before the Law," where the lowly searcher never even gets beyond the first gate (the lowest obstacle) in his attempt to proceed to higher insights. In both cases, the human need to communicate is frustrated, and the inevitable result is alienation and subsequent death.

These stories were written during a time when Kafka, engaged once again to Felice, was finding a measure of stability again. Although he was determined this time to give up his insurance position and to use his time writing, he soon realized that this effort was an escape, as had been his (rejected) application to be drafted into the army. Kafka was to remain much like the roving hunter Gracchus, burdened with the knowledge that
he could not gain inner poise by drowning the fundamental questions of existence in the comforts of married life.

In 1917 Kafka was stricken with tuberculosis, an illness which he was convinced was only the physical manifestation of his disturbed inner condition. For years he had fought hopeless battles for and against marriage (he had a son with Grete Bloch, a friend of Felice's, but never knew about him); during this time, he continually sought to justify his suffering by writing. Now he gave up. "The world Felice is its representative and my innermost self have torn apart my body in unresolvable opposition," he wrote in his diary. His suffering was alleviated by the fact that he could spend many months in the country, either in sanatoriums or with his favorite sister, Ottla. These months brought with them a new freedom from his work as a lawyer and, for the second time, from Felice.

In 1922, Kafka wrote "A Hunger Artist," "Investigations of a Dog," and most of his third novel, The Castle. Highly autobiographical like all of his works, the hero of "A Hunger Artist" starves himself because he cannot find the spiritual food he requires. The investigations of the chief dog in the story of the same name reflect Kafka's own literary attempts to impart at least a notion of the universal to his readers. In The Castle, K. becomes entangled in the snares of a castle's "celestial" hierarchy as hopelessly as does Joseph K. in the "terrestrial" bureaucracy of The Trial. All these stories originated in the years 1921 and 1922, years when Kafka lived under the strong influence of Milena Jesenska, to whom he owed his renewed strength to write. Although in many respects different from him (she was gentile, unhappily married, and much younger), the extremely sensitive Milena could justly claim "to have known his anxiety before having known Kafka himself," as she put it. Forever afraid of any deeper involvement with Milena, Kafka eventually stopped seeing her. That
he gave her his diaries and several manuscripts, however, is proof of his deep commitment to her.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Anna
The maid who should have brought K.'s coffee the morning of his arrest.

Assistant Manager
K.'s superior at the Bank who becomes his adversary when the manufacturer complains about K.'s treatment of him.

Bertold
The student lover of the usher's wife. He is a symbol of the corruption of the Court's hierarchy, himself a pyramid-climber.
Block
A tradesman and client of Huld's, whose submissiveness before Huld causes K. to want to dismiss the lawyer.

Fräulein Bürstner
A boarder at Frau Grubach's, where K. lives. K.'s arrest takes place in her room. His desire for her and her refusal to deal with him put her in a unique position among the women he meets.

Elsa
K.'s girl friend at the time he meets Leni. She does not appear in the novel.

Erna
K.'s cousin who informs her father, K.'s Uncle Karl, of the trial.

Examining Magistrate
The indifferent and corrupt judge presiding at K.'s first interrogation.

Frau Grubach
The elderly lady who owns the boarding house where K. lives and is arrested.

Hasterer
A lawyer friend of K.'s, whom he wants to telephone during his arrest. He does not appear in the novel.

Dr. Huld
A key figure in K.'s case. His name means "grace" or "meekness" in German. Through inefficiency, sickness (or perverted religiousness), he prevents K.'s case from getting a fair trial. He stands for the ambiguity of the Court.

Inspector
He conducts K.'s arrest with Willem and Franz.
Uncle Karl
Worried about K.'s trial because of the shame it brings over the family, he introduces him to his friend Dr. Huld.

Kaminer, Kullich, and Rabensteiner
K.'s three colleagues from the Bank whom the Inspector brings along to the arrest. Their presence demonstrates the inseparability of K.'s case from his Bank life.
Captain Lanz
Frau Grubach's nephew, K.'s neighbor.

Leni
The servant and mistress of Dr. Huld, she reflects the corrupt atmosphere of the Court. She pretends to love K., but tries to seduce him to make him subservient to Huld.

Manufacturer
One of the countless mediators. He tells K. about Titorelli, who already knows about his case.

Fräulein Montag
Fräulein Bürstner's friend who is moving in with her. She functions as her roommate's mediator with K.

Priest
He tells K. the parable "Before the Law" in the cathedral and discusses its meaning with him.

Titorelli
The painter whom K. tracks down in his efforts to find outside help. He is the only one to tell K. about the nature of the Court he is up against and about his hopeless case. As the Court painter, he has some knowledge of K.'s case.

Whipper
He executes the ancient law that "punishment is just as just as it is inevitable" on the warders.

Willem and Franz
The warders who arrest K.
Chapter 1

If we look at the novel in terms of its opening sentence, we see that this sentence contains nothing but unproven assumptions: "Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning." Until the end of the book this atmosphere of ambivalence, temporariness, and possible deception is reflected in Kafka's
language. Slander, which perhaps comes to mind when we focus on the word "traduced," is not likely to be the reason for K.'s arrest because he remains at large. The trouble is we will not know the reason at the end of the story either, though one warder's remark that "K. claims to be innocent and doesn't even know the Law" gives us a certain hint. Yet no legal charges are leveled and no verdict is passed. The trial takes place before an invisible Court without ever getting off the ground, at least in the conventional sense of the phrase.

All this leads one to think of the novel's title in terms of the connotations of the German original. "Prozess" is cognate with the English "process," and Kafka uses it interchangeably with "Verfahren" ("procedure"), which in turn has definite undertones of "entanglement." In other words, we are not necessarily dealing with a trial but perhaps a lifelong "process" of some kind. After all, everybody and everything belongs to the Court, as we are told time and again.

Certainly the timing of K.'s arrest, whatever its meaning, the morning of his thirtieth birthday, is well chosen: birthdays, especially one marking off a decade, tend to cause some soul-searching. Block, the tradesman, is also to be arrested shortly after the death of his wifethat is, at a moment when the routine of his life suffers a decisive break. At any rate, K. is caught by surprise and is in no way prepared to fend off the characters arresting him. If he were at the Bank, where he is thoroughly familiar with every detail, nothing of the kind would happen to him. He admits that much to Frau Grubach during the evening following his arrest: he regrets he did not have the presence of mind to ignore the unexpected events of that morning (for example, Anna did not bring his coffee) in short, he did not act "reasonably." As in so many of his other pieces, Kafka shows his hero waking up and being unprepared. ("The Metamorphosis," for instance). It is Kafka's
way of saying that K.'s arrest is not a dream but inescapable reality.

The invisible Court jealously guards the "highest Law," whose content remains as inaccessible as its top level judges. How it operates on the low levels is beautifully shown in the arrest scene: two obnoxious warders, who do not even know their superiors, much less anything about his case, are sent to arrest K. They are not even eager to apprehend him; they merely claim to do their job. But quite the contrary, by waiting for K. to ring the breakfast bell, they let him take the initiative. In other words, K., by ringing for his breakfast, is actually ringing for his arrest. This, by the way, is a major argument against the interpretation of the novel as essentially a political satire or even a symbolic account of the totalitarian mind: neither the Gestapo nor the Soviet K.G.B. have been known to leave the details of arrest up to their victims. Anyway, the warder lets K.'s question about his identity go unanswered, as if nothing unusual had happened, and casually asks whether K. has rung the bell.
The problem of whether K. could do anything to alter his fate will be dealt with elsewhere. If we accept the line of interpretation that he becomes guilty because he mishandles his trial, then we will have to look at this arrest scene more carefully because it is here that things already begin to take their fateful course. K. commits his first, though on first glance perhaps negligible, mistake: rather than pushing for an immediate clarification of the strange occurrences surrounding his arrest, K. acknowledges the warder's insolent question ("Did you ring?") by referring to Anna and the breakfast she is supposed to bring. K. is trying to convince himself that he is merely gaining time to observe the intruder to detect his intentions. In reality, he has already accepted his appearance and assault. His insistence that the stranger introduce himself before any more questioning is only a desperate attempt on K.'s part to suppress the gravity of what has happened and cannot be reversed. Toward the end of this scene, the two warders reveal that they have been sent merely to "observe your reactions." If K.'s guilt is predetermined for any reason, does it make sense that the invisible Court tries to prod the "reactions" of someone already firmly in its grip? No wonder this sentence has been used to back up the interpretation of K.'s guilt, resulting solely from his wrong handling of his case.

All one has to do in order to show the built-in ambiguity of this central issue is to see the warders as part of K.'s own personality, as some sort of ever-watchful superego. Their observing mission assumes a very different meaning because the simplistic opposition "Court versus K." is considerably modified. There are several lines about how close the warders feel toward K., and at the end the executioners also accompany K. to the quarry like a "unity."

There are more instances of people watching K. or K. feeling watched: before he is even arrested, a woman is "peering at him with
a curiosity unusual even for her," and a bit later the same "inquisitiveness" is mentioned. During his arrest several people are "enjoying the spectacle," and the Titorelli scene in Chapter 7 is full of peeping girls. All these instances of observing, feeling observed, or actually being observed reflect Kafka's own neurotic self-analysis and his deep-felt need to get at every aspect of everything in order to arrive at a bearable degree of certainty (for an example of his self-analysis, see the pros and cons about marriage in his diary or read the stories "The Burrow" or "A Hunger Artist").

K. will never be able to extricate himself from his acknowledgment of his arrest. It is precisely his strange arrest that causes him to feel attracted to the Court; the warders also admit that the Court feels attracted by guilt and that this is the reason they have been sent out. This mutual attraction prevails throughout the story, yet there is also the possibility that it, too, is a lie. Certainly it is remarkable that the Inspector himself says the warders may have told K. a lot of nonsense about the arrest and their role in it.
In an obvious parallel to Gregor Samsa's futile attempt in "The Metamorphosis" to separate the extraordinariness of his insect personality from his daily life, K. also seeks to separate his daily routine at the Bank from the events surrounding his arrest. His three colleagues from the Bank, whom the Inspector has brought along to facilitate K.'s unobtrusive return to his office, show that such a separation is impossible. In fact, K. refers to them as a "Court of Inquiry" during his re-enactment of his arrest later on in Fräulein Bürstner's room. This inseparability is exactly what his uncle means when he says, "to have a case like this means to have already lost it."

It has to be this way, for if we accept any real guilt (beyond that purely tactical one of mishandling his trial) on K.'s part, it has been brought about exactly by the way he has lived as a carefree bachelor-businessman. At any rate, by desperately trying to keep the arrest away from his consciousness (conscience), he tries to keep the metaphysical sphere from interfering with his daily life. If something is to make sense to him, it must appear in the familiar form of his material world.

He is guilty because he has completely buried his moral sensitivity under his job at the Bank. He cannot deal with things, including his case, in terms other than those he uses at the Bank: "The trial was nothing but a big business deal, the kind he has managed successfully many times for the Bank." He never begins to comprehend the fundamentally different nature of this case against him; he only comes to accept certain facts about it later on. He cannot even think of guilt unless it is put in clear-cut legal terms and definitions to him. Neither Samsa nor K. can imagine that their guilt consists precisely of their ignorance of the Law beyond its known bourgeois codification.

K.'s encounter with Fräulein Bürstner is important because she is the first of the three women he meets. They represent the three
possibilities vis-à-vis the Court: to stand outside of it, like Fräulein Bürstner; to live in conflict with it, like the usher's wife; and to be its slave, like Leni. As a result of his inability to understand his own case, K. cannot establish any meaningful contact with Fräulein Bürstner beyond that of sexual desire and subsequent deprivation. (In some areas of Germany, "bürsten" is a slang expression for sexual intercourse). The description of K. as "chasing over her face with his tongue like a thirsty animal, then kissing her violently on her neck, right on the throat, before resting his lips there" speaks for itself. (The scene between Frieda and K. in The Castle is similar even to details; it is patterned, in turn, after the seduction scene in "The Stoker" chapter of Amerika). It is important to see that in this assault scene, K. desperately tries to drown himself in sensuality in order to forget his situation. He craves something no woman can possibly supply—oblivion from his suppressed guilt feelings. And these he has from the outset, for in spite of his put-on defiance, he senses he has been summoned before this strange Court to
justify his life. He is not even all that taken aback by his arrest, as he says to the Inspector. The assault scene conveys a pattern typical of Kafka, the conflict between pairs of opposites, the continuous ebb and flow between desire and tranquillity, movement and standstill.

It is Fräulein Bürstner's function to distract K. from his case simply by being around him. When she asks him how his arrest was he replies, "terrible," and the narrator continues that he "did not even think about it now that he was moved by her sight." Her other function and she is the only woman who does so is to turn him away after their first encounter, thereby trying to direct his attention back to his own case. At the end, K. will think of this when her image appears again and will accept his fate because he realizes he has not taken her advice seriously. That the Inspector conducts his first questioning in her room is evidence for the role she plays in his case.

Chapter 2

The opening of the second chapter is ample proof that The Trial cannot be read literally as a reflection of political tyranny or even as a satire of such a system. There has never been a police state which made sure a defendant is rested before his interrogation, nor has there ever been one that has left it up to its victims to choose the time of their arrest. "If K. had no objections," he is to appear on a Sunday, not necessarily every Sunday, but so that his case can be quickly concluded. As if to prove this point, the authorities do not even specify the time K. is to appear and, as it turns out, give him only a vague description of the place he is to go to. (One might note that this is a specific suburb of Prague where Kafka went frequently). Nevertheless, he will be reprimanded for not meeting the Court's vaguely formulated demands.
K.'s first response is to abide by the summons and to make his first appearance also his last one. To get things over with, he even declines the invitation of his Assistant Manager to join a party. Without being aware of making a mistake, K. sets his own time for his first appearance 9 A.M., since that is the time which courts usually open and without a fault of his own, he arrives at the place over an hour late. Nobody among the authorities has bothered to tell him details, and yet the Examining Magistrate reproaches him for being late. This is a pattern clearly noticeable throughout the novel: previous little about his pending trial is ever explained, or even mentioned, to K. In fact, the reader is led to believe it is up to K. to take the initiative. This is not altogether wrong. The trouble is that, barely has K. taken it, it turns out he has maneuvered himself into a less favorable position. What the Court wants, or pretends to want, is uttered in such an ambiguous way that, by reacting at all, he sinks into an ever deeper quagmire. Whatever steps K. takes, the Court latches on to and uses against him. In connection with this first interrogation it is interesting to note that
the German original for "interrogation" is "Verhör," a word with clear connotations of "hearing incorrectly." This is one of Kafka's great themes: if, indeed, there is a Law, a message, issued from the highest echelons, it is bound to become inaudible, unintelligible, or at least distorted, by the time it reaches the common people. Applied to K.'s situation this means that there is no rational, legal way of establishing contact, let alone rapport, with the Court.

As K. errs through the delapidated Juliusstrasse to locate the Court offices, he recalls the words of the warder Willem that an "attraction existed between the Law and guilt, from which it followed that the Court must abut on the particular flight of stairs which K. happened to choose." Frustrated by this lack of orientation, K. takes Willem's words to heart. He decides to use the name of Captain Lanz, his neighbor at Frau Grubach's, to find the whereabouts of the Court. There is of course no man by that name anywhere, nor could the young woman whom he asks for Lanz's place possibly know the Captain. Nevertheless, she directs K. to the office he is looking for and insists on closing the door behind him because "nobody else must come in." The logic of the dream world prevails: though K. gets there through a series of absurd questions and answers, the Court seems to have assembled where he is looking for it and, what is more, apparently only to receive him. Yet nobody pays any attention to K. and when they finally do, it is only to chide him for having violated a rule they never bothered to let him know: "You should have been here an hour and five minutes ago," the judge says twice.

The impossible location, the sordid atmosphere, and the small, dog-eared law book are all signs of the complete indifference the authorities are displaying toward K. The Examining Magistrate even has K.'s profession down as that of a house painter. K. has made up his mind to keep the initiative and lets the judge know he has not
really expected anything but inefficiency anyway. He is still certain, even overbearing; "It is only a trial if I recognize it as such," he says, thereby making a major mistake: he accepts the trial, even if only temporarily and out of a readiness to compromise, perhaps of sheer curiosity, basically because he does not take it seriously. He simply cannot conceive of being guilty. His claim to fight the Court not merely for himself but also for all the others who are indicted shows that he is by no means the only one accused. To be sure, not everybody is guilty to the same degree and not everybody will be punished alike, but perhaps Kafka's point is that to live means to become involved in evil-doing. Also, not everybody is aware of his guilt, as K. certainly proves. In all this we must not forget that the novel's major theme is not K.'s guilt but the way in which he seeks to handle the procedure he is involved in.

K.'s determination to reproach the Court for the manner in which it conducted his arrest turns into sheer anger when he notices secret signs
being exchanged between the Examining Magistrate and members of
the packed courtroom. His point-blank attack on the lethargy and
corruption of all levels of the Court is met by more indifference. The
badges K. notices on everybody present confirm his suspicion that he
is facing some closed organization whose mind is already made up on
the very subject they are supposed to deal with. When he seeks to
escape the stifling atmosphere, he is held back by the Magistrate who
warns him that, "Today you have flung away with your own hand all
the advantages which an interrogation invariably confers on an
accused man."

Because he does not understand his situation, K. at first decides that
"attack is the best defense." Both the women showing him the way to
the office and the applause of the audience present encourage K. in his
aggressiveness. He is led to believe that he can progress without
having to worry about serious obstacles. His downfall is that in a
superficial way he seems to make headway. It always turns out soon,
however, that his thrusts lose themselves in empty space. Like a spider
captured in a web, K. keeps himself from further entanglement only
when he is near exhaustion.

Chapter 3

K. does not show the slightest understanding of his situation. He is
surprised and even irritated that the Court has evidently taken
seriously his initial refusal to be tried and has, as a result, not issued a
specific date for the next session with the authorities on a Sunday
morning, "assuming tacitly" that this is what they want him to do. The
now familiar pattern prevails: K.'s initiative leads him nowhere, and
the authorities recede before him whenever he addresses them. As a
person under arrest, and one who has been previously reprimanded for
showing up late, K. has every reason to make sure he acts in compliance with the Court. The sad fact is, however, that, even though he shows up at the most plausible time, there simply is no session scheduled for that time.

K. runs into the same promiscuous woman who interrupted the first interrogation by giving in to the advances of a student, a potentially powerful assistant of the Court. She knows her way around and her husband, the usher, meets K.'s need for inside information about the Court. It turns out that all she wants is to seduce K. The dirtiness of the setting—the Chief Magistrate's "law book" is a sex magazine—reflects the decadence of the Court. The names "Hans" and "Grete" on the book cover, taken from a very popular German fairy tale, suggest its unreal quality. Most importantly, the intricate pattern of hierarchial rungs gives K. a first glance of the impenetrable wall of indolence and conspiracy he is up against: the woman, the student-assistant, and the Magistrate—they all represent three levels of bureaucratic decadence tied together by sexual appetite. Like everywhere else in Kafka's writings, erotic contacts happen suddenly and because
they do, they also lead to immediate disappointment through roused expectations. Deprivation is a feature of these sudden encounters: K. does not even get near the woman here, who does not put up much resistance when she is dragged away from K. and taken upstairs to her boss. The deprivation is a symptomatic feature of the world of *The Trial*: Fräulein Bürstner, too, is not available to K. after their first embrace; and her return at the end of the novel repeats this pattern.

With the help of the cuckolded usher, K. gains access to the Court offices which are located, strangely but appropriately enough, in the garret. As opposed to the usher, K. still thinks his case is by no means "a foregone conclusion," and he follows him with great curiosity. Like all members of the middle strata of the Court, the usher has long since resigned himself to his fate and is bewildered by anyone still optimistically engaged in fighting his case. K. meets a whole roomful of defendants who all rise courteously because they mistake him for the judge. In Chapter 8, Block will tell K. that they stood up, not for him, whom they recognized as a defendant, but for the usher as a potentially helpful person whose good will is to be cherished. A tall man, whose natural superiority is still noticeable despite the dumbfounded reaction he displays when K. addresses him, stands as a grim illustration of the debilitating effect of the Court: he has handed in several affidavits concerning his case but has never received a reply. The resulting uncertainty has rendered him helpless. At this point K. is still convinced of his superior businesslike approach in tackling his own case and he pushes the "weakling" aside.

K. arrives before the gentleman from the Court's Clerk of Inquiries, who is introduced to him with the following words: "He supplies all the information the clients need; since our procedure is not too well known among the people, many of them ask for information. He has an answer ready for each question: if you feel like trying him out, go
ahead." At this crucial point where K. is led to believe, as is the reader, that he is very close to the fulfilment of his desire to get at the innermost circles of the Court, his strength fails him. His only wish now is to escape the stale air and dizzying narrowness of the garret. Again the familiar pattern of the highest Court receding before K.'s advances prevails. The parallel to the scene in *The Castle* is obvious, where K. falls asleep at exactly the moment he is on the verge of obtaining everything he wants from Bürgel.

Chapter 4

The opening paragraphs make it clear that Fräulein Bürstner is not going to grant K. his wish for another date. Her decision to move in with the pale and weakly Fräulein Montag is her precautionary step against possible advances on K.'s part. Speaking for her roommate, Fräulein Montag argues that "interviews are neither deliberately accepted nor refused," but that
someone may just "see no point in them." This argument is very much like the one with whose help the authorities keep K. at bay. Note, too, that when Fräulein Bürstner sends her roommate as an intermediary, it is on a Sunday of all things, a day which is bound to remind K. of his first interrogation. As a result, a certain, perhaps only symbolic, relationship exists between the three. The message Fräulein Montag brings to K. is to suggest that he talk to her instead of her friend: in terms of K.'s scheme this means that he has not found any sympathy, let alone recourse, in Fräulein Bürstnershe is seemingly disinterested in his case, possibly because he cannot tell her anything about legal matters in which she claims to be interested.

K. assesses Fräulein Bürstner incorrectly: recalling Frau Grubach's derogatory remarks about her loose behavior, he convinces himself that it is only a question of perseverance until she yields to him. This continued sensual yearning coupled with self-delusion about her are an indication of his confusion, which is the direct result of his unwillingness and inability to come to terms with his case.

It will turn out that her refusal to listen to K. could have worked to his advantage, had he taken her advice that he should rely on himself. We must add, however, that this argument makes sense only if we assume that his proper handling of his own case could eventually lead to his acquittal. We must see clearly, though, that there are at least as many passages in The Trial that foreshadow the opposite. It cannot be emphasized often enough that the "guilt" K. incurs by mishandling his case is not the same as the original guilt on whose account he has been arrested in the first place. The former is more like a series of tactical errors, whereas the latter results from his basic moral insensitivity. Of course they are connected with each other in the sense that K. fails to defend himself adequately because his moral deficiency keeps him from assessing the nature of his case and the seriousness of his
position correctly.

The overall mood of the chapter is one of K. feeling ridiculed and deceived by the two women, individually and as a team, as well as by the suave Captain Lanz. K. feels, above all, watched. K.'s preoccupation with feeling watched, actually being watched, and watching others himself, deserves special mention. It is an indication of K.'s (and Kafka's) almost neurotic desire to pin down every single aspect of every single ramification of everything going on around or within him. It is the psychological expression of his craving for total transparency against which the priest will warn him: "It is not necessary to accept everything as true, only as necessary."

Chapter 5

The strange timeless and developmentless atmosphere of the world portrayed finds a most adequate expression in the title of this chapter,
"The Whipper." It stands out because it shows the continued repetition of the one event it deals with. Everything is reduced to certain fixed habits, a reflection of the inaneness of the Court.

This chapter affords us a glimpse into the terroristic facets of the Court. K. himself is not exposed to punishment, but the two warders whom he has accused of illegal practices during his arrest are to be whipped. K. is understandably shocked at this, not only because he had not planned to have them beaten, but because by punishing them the Court takes away from K.'s attack on it: by responding to K.'s complaint in this way the Court demonstrates that K.'s charges of indifference and inaccessibility are not universally valid. Of course, K. would prefer no beatings for this reason. However, the overseer calms him down: "The punishment is as just as it is inevitable." By implication this sentence makes clear that K. is guilty and that nobody can escape his just punishment.

What makes the scene so particularly frightening to K. is the stereotyped repetition of the whipping. A reflection of his own hopeless situation, it is this repetition that tortures him most: he is almost tempted to "take off his clothes and to offer himself to the whippers." He is already caught in the vicious, senseless cycle of floundering about. This motion around in a circle is the structural equivalent of his life's justification, which he craves but cannot obtain.

Chapter 6

K. is taken to the lawyer Huld by his obtrusive Uncle Karl (who greets his lawyer-friend by calling himself Albert), whose main worry is the shame his nephew is about to bring on the whole family by his involvement in a trial. A representative of the shallow bourgeois
mentality, Uncle Karl cannot help but resort to the dubious, though publicly esteemed, Dr. Huld. This episode is also heavily autobiographical: Kafka always had to defend himself, as a person and an artist, against such well-intended but boorish and at any rate inefficient intrusions. Yet even his uncle knows enough to comment that "things like this don't occur suddenly, they pile up gradually, there must have been indications." This is an unequivocal view of K.'s life as the cause of his present involvement.

Leni is nothing but a tool of the Court. This is why she urges K. not to act stubbornly against the authorities. As opposed to the usher's wife, who is not depraved enough to want to be enslaved to the Court's lewd officials, Leni does not even desire her freedom from Huld. The diction used in her description is full of possessives and such little symbols of deformation as "claws" and "webbed hand." It is with these that Leni pulls down K. to the floor in an attempt to make herself his mistress. In a perversion of the old fairy tale motif of "loving girl breaks the spell cast on poor boy," Leni cannot and does not help him. Her erotic playfulness, rehearsed in long
years with her employer, Huld, only serves to enslave K. physically. Later on, Block meets the same fate at her greedy lips.

Proportionately to the degree that K. is gradually becoming aware of the seriousness of his case, he thinks Leni might be able to help him. The truth is that he is even more distracted from relying on himself. He does not realize what she is doing until after the humiliation she inflicts upon Block on behalf of and with the help of Huld. The point of the chapter is that, whatever K.'s reason or rationalization for accepting outside help from anybody, the effect is bound to be negative.

Chapter 7

More than even the previous chapter, this one reveals the hierarchy of mediators and contact people with whose aid K. aspires to free himself. What Huld and Titorelli have in common is that they point to the invisible, inaccessible, highest Court without being able to help K. In their capacity as K.'s mediators, they are accessible to him only through other contacts, such as Uncle Karl and the Manufacturer. This principle of mediation is deeply entrenched in the world of The Trial: an entire staff will be instrumental in bringing about the meeting between K. and the priest (they are the Bank Director, an Italian visitor, Leni, and the Verger).

Who are the three figures after whom the chapter is named? The lawyer Huld has inside knowledge of the Court in the sense that he sees the confusion and jealousies prevailing among its members. He makes no efforts to hide these difficulties from K.; in fact, he stresses the insurmountable obstacles to a meaningful defense in this thicket of assumptions, opinions, and half-truths. He makes it clear to K. that his
only chance at all lies in K.'s allegiance with him. But there is more: Huld wants nothing short of complete subservience from K. (he demands and gets it also from Leni, and Leni, in turn, wants it from K.) as a *sine qua non* for any effort. In this connection it is important to realize that "Huld" means "meekness" or "grace" in German. Huld dissuades K. from drawing up petitions to the higher levels himself because "defense was not actually countenanced by the Law, but only tolerated." Besides, even if one could accomplish some minor point, "any benefit arising from that would profit clients in the future only, while one's own interests would be immeasurably injured by attracting the attention of the ever vengeful officials."

Some interpretations see Huld as a divine mediator who sacrifices himself to the highest Court on behalf of his clients. If we accept this interpretation, his sickness assumes a new dimension beyond that of sloth and decadence. If he takes it upon himself to suffer for his clients, then his sickness radiates a sacrificial quality. The trouble with this argument is that, even if we accept it, the lawyer's "Huld" ("grace") turns out to be a perverted one: it is not that of religion, but that of secularized messianism.
Huld reveals his true nature when he describes himself as being concerned, not with "ordinary cases," but as a lawyer who "lifts his client on his shoulders from the start and carries him bodily without once letting him down until the verdict is reached, and even beyond it." His perversion lies in the assumption that he can solve each client's case. In spite of his limits he keeps bragging about connections, but they fail to produce results he thinks he can "carry" others. In his scintillating back-and-forth between his presumptuousness and weakness lies his guilt. He distorts the essentially positive quality of uncompromising faith into humiliation. Huld acts like Jesus, but in a world that lacks the religious foundation for such an approach.

It is perhaps more plausible to see Huld as a representative of all those forces in our confused world that want to make life "easier" for people, thereby depriving it of its meaning. Leni is of the same kind. They both humiliate their clients Leni by degrading them sexually and by making them believe she can help them, and Huld by insisting that he has all the answers as long as his clients are willing to give up their personalities. If we substitute "consumerism," "sexual permissiveness," or some form of political totalitarianism for their plan, we have no trouble seeing them as typical representatives of our time. Their common desire is to "help" us escape from freedom and responsibility.

The scene between the Assistant Manager and the Manufacturer reflects K.'s waning self-assurance. He even has the feeling that he is made the "object" of a business deal: "It seemed to L. as though two giants of enormous size were negotiating above his head about himself." The Assistant Manager's remark, "Thanks, I know that already," means that the Court is not the least bit interested in K.'s petition. It also shows that the world of the Bank and that of the trial
cannot be separated. The reason the Court would not accept K.'s petition is simply that, even if it were perfect and arrived at the proper place (unlikely in the anonymity of the Court), it would contain only the justification of his life in retrospect. It would not, however, prove his innocence or exempt him from punishment.

Titorelli, too, is part of the Court. He is in charge of doing the portraits of the various judges. His studio is filled with the same stifling air which prevails in all other attics, and it borders on some of these judges' hideaways. Like Huld, he claims he has connections with the higher levels of the Court, but, unlike Huld, he does not soothe K. by promising him his acquittal. When he advises K., he does it as a private individual and not as his counsel of defense. As a result, K. follows his advice willingly. Titorelli's position is unique because he is neither completely outside the Court, like K., nor entrusted with a function by it, at least not as far as K.'s case goes. This sets him apart from the many officials who cannot help K. because "they are caught up in legal matters by day and night."

Titorelli is a beautiful-sounding Italian name that evokes associations
with such historical painters as Tintoretto. It is also an assumed
amethat is, a sort of a lie. We know this from the Manufacturer who
learns about K.'s case from the painter, another indication of Titorelli's
familiarity with the Court. What we also know from the Manufacturer
is that "Titorelli probably also lies." This he no doubt does when he
pretends not to know the reason for K.'s visit with him. He also lies
because he does not reveal to K. the extent to which he is in the
Court's "confidence." It is only by accident that K. discovers the only
way to reach the Court, located in the attic, is to go through Titorelli's
roomin fact, step over his bed. To K., who has taken it as a good omen
that Titorelli's studio is located far away from all the Court offices,
this comes as a shock.

None of Titorelli's portraits shows the judges the way they really look. They are all extremely vain, do not really sit on "thrones," but
nevertheless insist on being portrayed like their counterparts of days
long gone by. Is this a hint that, in ancient days, the visible instances
of the Law were not so corrupt? Or does it mean that the discrepancy
between the absolute integrity of the Law as such and its miserable
human executors has always been equally wide? Again, the two views
are not mutually exclusive.

Here, it is important to note that Titorelli is not allowed to paint the
judges the way he wants to. Nor are the judges themselves "free": they
are subject to the whims and desires of their superiors. This means
that the nature of the manifestations of the Law is determined in
advance and by necessity tarnished. Since flattery prevails, the
portraits look alike with only the distinctions of rank varying. Titorelli
has inherited his position from his ancestors; like they, he knows how
to paint the judges along "secret" guidelines.

One picture, an allegory of justice, K. cannot even recognize as such.
Titorelli explains that it represents "Justice and even the goddess of Victory," which makes K. reply that it really looks like "the goddess of the Hunt." The portrait also shows a judge ready "to jump up the next moment to say something decisive or pronounce a verdict." This is a lie, for no judge of this Court will ever feel such motivation nor pass a verdict.

There are several paintings of one and the same heathscape, each showing two little trees in front of a sunset. Titorelli thinks they are all different, but they are not. As he admits, "before the Law one loses artistic verve." He who has seen through the inexorable sameness of things, he who knows there can be no acquittal, can also see no individual nuances in the paintings any more.

This brings us to Titorelli's "inside knowledge." Though he does not want to know the ultimate secrets of the highest Court, unattainable for him who has not read "their books" either, he nevertheless has knowledge which he has inherited from his ancestors and acquired through experience. He knows that there has never been an acquittal ("only in legends"), and
he also knows the Court is convinced of each defendant's guilt. As opposed to Huld, he speaks his mind freely. In the fragment entitled "The House," added to the Vintage Books' edition of the novel, the Titorelli episode is continued with a most remarkable sentence: "K. was not disconcerted by Titorelli's shameless smile, directed with lifted head into empty space." He who has seen the truth, stared into the abyss of nothingness, has resigned himself to painting the same pictures over and over again.

When K. complains to Titorelli about his contradictory argumentation, the latter reminds him: "In the code of the Law . . . it is of course laid down on the one hand that the innocent shall be acquitted, but it is not stated on the other hand that the Judges are open to influence." This is a variation on Kafka's famous aphorism that "the correct understanding of a matter and the misunderstanding of the same matter do not entirely exclude each other."

Titorelli advises him to keep postponing his case because "by keeping it from getting beyond the first stages he escapes the danger of new sudden arrests." He convinces K. of the wisdom of opting for this approach rather than "ostensible" acquittal and is quite willing to attest to his innocence (knowing, however, this would not help a bit). What Titorelli wants is that K. resign himself to what is feasible. Every other solution is impossible because, as Titorelli elaborates, "even while they are pronouncing the first acquittal, the Judges foresee the possibility of the new arrest."

The mediators Huld and Titorelli are involved with the Court, though in very different ways. The outward signs are the atmosphere of sloth and illness around Huld (disregarding the "religious" interpretation now) and one of promiscuity around Titorelli. He transcends Huld in the sense that he confronts K. with the realities of the Court and his
case. What they and the Manufacturer do to K. to a mounting and plausible degree is function as a series of brakes on his self-defeating search for outside help. Expressing it differently, K.'s awareness of his situation has grown to a point where one more piece of circumstantial evidence will make him draw the consequences: Block is about to furnish it.

Chapter 8

Huld continues to emerge as a paradoxical character: he pretends to have influence with the higher-ups and yet pleads with K. not to dismiss him. He claims he loves to help him and would truly regret it if a "misunderstanding" forced him to withdraw his help (he cannot grasp the fact that K. might want to cease relying on him for rational reasons), and yet he keeps K. enslaved. He demands submissiveness from K. and Block, and yet he tells them the Court dislikes them because of their submissiveness. He forces Block to read the same legal documents over and over again, justifying his treatment of him by saying Block does not understand them. At the same time, it is obvious that he himself does not believe in the
writings: "After a certain stage in my practice nothing really new happens." Huld simply uses the documents to keep Block dependent and to demonstrate that by reading legal documents nobody can learn even a basic fact, such as whether or not his case has been opened yet.

Block's self-deprecation is a masterpiece of psychological insight into the mechanism of mutual influence between the awareness of guilt (imaginary or real) in the accused and its effect on the accuser. It is Huld who summons Block, and yet it is Block's automatic slavish compliance that causes Huld to react as if his client were intruding. He even accuses Block, who literally lives in his lawyer's house to be near him at all times, of appearing at the wrong moment. When the tradesman, overly anxious to read the lawyer's whims, meekly asks whether he should leave again, he almost forces Huld to humiliate him. Through self-doubt and a disgustingly fawning attitude, Block maneuvers himself into a position of apparent guilt. That he is really guilty (everybody is guilty to some degree in the sense that K. is guilty long before he is arrested), is another subject. The point here is that people, by acting in a self-effacing manner, drive others to treat them "like dogs." The same thing happened to K. at his arrest and then before the Examining Magistrate: by showing bewilderment and indecision at the wrong moment, he let the authorities take the initiative and believe his guilt. (The fact that he really is guilty before the highest Law is a different issue again: the arresting officials know and care nothing about that). Leni and Huld find K. attractive because he is, or, as far as they know, appears guilty. The same psychological phenomenon operated in Fräulein Bürstner, who also found K. attractive for the same reason. The mere charge results in an awareness of guilt (real or imagined) which, in turn, tends to drive the accused into the arms of the Court. The syndrome Kafka deals with here is that which makes Raskolnikov give himself up in Dostoevski's
Crime and Punishment. As everywhere in Kafka's writings, the boundary lines between imagined guilt, projected guilt, and actual guilt are not clear-cut.

Because his case is much older (five years as opposed to K.'s six months), Block has stooped much lower in his eagerness to gain some form of help. At first, he even treats K. as if he owned him something, only to turn against him the minute this appears opportune. Because his case is so much older, he realizes that his case is "beyond reason" and that, if help comes at all, it will come through Huld, unlikely though this is. As opposed to K., he has neither the desire nor the strength to dismiss the lawyer.

K. is utterly repulsed by Block's fawning behavior and by Huld's attempt to impress him through treating the tradesman "like a dog." "Had he not chased him away sooner, he [Huld] would have achieved just that through this scene," the narrator says. Huld's pseudo-legal, or at least inefficient legal actions, Block's self-effacing duplicity, and Leni's role as a mistress to everybody in the name of the Law strike K. like a continuously
repeated ritual: "... as if K. was listening to a well rehearsed conversation that had been and would be repeated many times and which would keep its novelty only for Block."

K. is entirely justified in feeling and thinking the way he does. What he does not know yet is that nobody can really escape this subservience and entanglement completely. He, too, has prostrated himself before several women by now, is eager to sound out the contemptible Block in search of clues that might help him, and, in the end, will also be compared to a dog (as Block is here). In the parable "Before the Law," Kafka reduces K.'s and Block's behavior before the inaccessibility of the Law to its most succinct form when he shows us how the man from the country even seeks to win the sympathy of the fleas in the doorkeeper's fur coat.

The recapitulation of K.'s visit to the Court offices in Chapter 3 affords us a glimpse into the Court's arbitrariness and superstitiousness. It turns out, through Block, that the confusion which K. noticed in a defendant then (and which K. interpreted to be the result of his own aggressive behavior toward that defendant) was really the consequence of the latter's shock over K.'s doom. He claimed he could tell K.'s doom by looking at his lips an absurd statement, but symptomatic of the arbitrary nature of top decisions.

K., too, has fallen victim to self-delusion, following even the most unlikely leads rather than focusing on his own conscience. Block makes the point that, absurd though the idea of reading a defendant's guilt from his lips may be, "if you live among these people it's difficult to escape the prevailing opinions."

The world in which K. seeks to find his bearings confounds him more with each step toward acting "reasonably." Tempting though it is, we should not jump to the conclusion from this that K. could have
extricated himself from his entanglement had he actually dismissed Huld. In this chapter, K. is on the road toward doing just that, but did not finish it, quite in keeping with the notion of the "broken off radiuses." To believe that his dismissal of Huld would have altered his fate pre-supposes that K.'s case is essentially a rational and legal one that can be fought along rational and legal lines.

Chapter 9

The Bank picks K. as a guide for an Italian visitor because he speaks the language and is knowledgeable about art. As far as the structure of the novel goes, Kafka uses this connection to demonstrate one more time how utterly inseparable K.'s world of the Bank is from that of his case.

While waiting for his visitor in the cathedral, K. notices a picture and scans it with his flashlight. The cathedral, by the way, is Prague's fourteenth-century St. Vitus Cathedral, under whose Gothic spires Kafka grew up. This is important because Kafka's proverbial love of Prague has been used to argue for the arrangement of Chapter 9 as the culmination point
immediately before the final chapter. Note, too, that one of the pictures shows a knight who "seemed to watch an event carefully which went on before his eyes. It was surprising that he did not go nearer." An underlying pattern of Kafka's world, a combination of strong intentionality and absence of motion, becomes visible here. We have dealt with it before in the form of desire and immediate deprivation; here, it is hesitancy that keeps him from following up his intention of looking at it more clearly. The picture brings to mind the doorkeeper of the parable "Before the Law," when K. remarks that the "knight could have been meant to stand guard."

Upon reading the parable, we sense that it mixes concrete and abstract images, that it is an artistic attempt at expressing the basically inexpressible. We will revert to this point after dealing with it in detail. The man from the country, who has not expected "to run into any great troubles," suddenly learns at the door to the Law that he cannot gain admission now. It is astounding that the question he immediately asks is not why he is being denied admission now but, rather, whether perhaps he might be allowed to enter later. Kafka's all-pervading pattern begins to assume contours already: the man from the country has a fatal way of giving away the advantage of initiative. Rather than insisting on clarifying this first essential item, he yields to pressure that at first does not manifest itself as such. The answer he receives to his second, less relevant, question whether he will be permitted to enter later is vague, so vague that it reinforces his already strong hesitancy to act. The doorkeeper's statements that he is "powerful" and "only the lowest doorkeeper" intimidate the man from the country enough to prevent his asking any further questions, much less his trying to enter. His aim having been thwarted (this, anyway, is what he thinks has happened), he gradually loses interest in it and permits himself to be distracted. More and more he becomes attracted
by the doorkeeper's face, his beard, and even the fleas in his fur coat. His fixation on these irrelevant details mounts, rendering him ever more incapable of acting on his own. The doorkeeper is not described as inhuman. Quite the contrary: he offers the man from the country a chair by the entrance. There he spends the better part of his life and it becomes obvious that Kafka is here, among other things, also portraying a complex mental process. As the years pass, the man from the country develops the *idée fixe* that the man supposedly keeping him away from the Law is the only obstacle. The man from the country retrogresses, his vision becoming ever more myopic, which is beautifully expressed in his dwindling eyesight. That he sees the "radiance" of the Law only as he dies is a theme which we find in many of Kafka's pieces, most prominently perhaps in "The Penal Colony": it is only in the face of death that we recognize the beauty or even the mere existence of the Law (the Absolute?). Though his single-mindedness of purpose has slackened considerably, the man from the country still has moods in which he pursues his
original aim. This is exactly the point that Kafka tries to make: he is inconsistent, dependent on moods, and casting about for outside help, as is K. He humiliates himself further by trying to bribe the doorkeeper. But this is in vain: the doorkeeper accepts, but only to keep the man from thinking that he has left one approach untried. The man from the country thus proves the inaccessibility of the Law, but also his unceasing quest. The one decisive question he never asks is this: why is he not being admitted? As he is about to pass away, he asks something he must have noticed for some time why nobody else besides him has tried to enter through this door. The doorkeeper's reply is most frightening because it shows that our seeker's recognition of the "radiance," his awareness of insight into the Absolute, has come too late if, indeed, it could have altered his fate at all. The reply is, "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended for you. I am now going to shut it."

This means that the man has not been mistaken in his belief that there is potential meaning to his life. It is just that this meaning turns out to be inaccessible to him, at least as he might benefit from it. The fundamental question is whether he could have attained cognizance of the "radiance" if he acted differently. The man from the country is a man doomed to remain in the antechamber of paradise, who nonetheless hopes to gain admission through perseverance. The tragedy is that he perseveres by waiting pointlessly rather than by determining the right road for himself. But as one of Kafka's famous aphorisms says, "There is a goal, but no road. What we term 'road' is nothing but hesitating." The man from the country, then, or K., realizes as he dies (is led away to his execution) that his battle has taken place in front of the door set aside for him alone and that, for a cursed reason beyond his understanding, he has lost it. Let us remember again that, though the man from the country may very well
be guilty of a lack of initiative or determination, thereby possibly forfeiting his chance of entry, this does in no way explain why he is condemned to such a harrowing situation in the first place. Translated into the language of the novel this means that K.'s possible, even probable, mishandling of his case has nothing to do with his fundamental guilt, with which he is burdened from the outset. The mishandling of his case may be the result of his fundamental guilt, but it does not explain it.

There have been countless interpretations of the parable, but they all can be classified under two categories. Each has to come to terms with the crucial question: would the doorkeeper have held back the man from the country if he had simply walked through the door? Let us first discuss the line of interpretation which answers with a clear "no." In order to be consistent, it will also have to pronounce K. guilty in the sense that he mishandles his case, thus forfeiting his chance of acquittal.

That the doorkeeper goes to shut the door at precisely the moment the
man dies illustrates that the two men are but two aspects of the same phenomenon and are dependent upon each other. They both represent aspects of our innermost struggle between activity and passivity, initiative and hesitancy, or conviction and doubt. In other words, the doorkeeper's vagueness and ambivalence is a direct function of the supplicant's failure to try to enter. His determination would have forced the doorkeeper either to yield to demands or to turn the man away by force. If we ask the doorkeeper within us for permission instead of acting on our own, we will certainly not be permitted in, for it is the doorkeeper's function to say "no." The lesson of the parable is that the man from the country should have tested the alleged power of the guard. He might very well have discovered that the guard's power is a figment of his imagination, the result of his own hesitation. He would also have discovered that, once the first "doorkeeper" is behind us, the others look far less invincible: a psychological mechanism sets in, reinforcing our self-assurance with each successive step. Within itself this argument makes sense. The trouble is, however, that it grants a degree of freedom to the man from the country which he simply does not have. His severe mishandling of his case is the inevitable consequence of guilt accumulated throughout his life. Both lie buried in his insensitivity and amorality.

The other line of interpretation argues that it is the fate of the man from the country to have to fight a battle he cannot possibly win. As far as K.'s case is concerned, certainly, there are many more lines in *The Trial*, as well as in Kafka's stories and letters, in favor of this more pessimistic outlook. At any rate, this outlook takes issue with the key sentence of the first interpretation: the doorkeeper would not have held back the man if he had merely tried to walk through. The argument is now, from the doorkeeper's reply, "the door was intended for you; I am now going to shut it." The parable draws its enormous
tension the tension between the *certainty* of a goal and the *impossibility* of reaching it. It argues that "Before the Law," as, indeed, the whole novel, would not be a parable but only a thrilling exercise in brinkmanship if the doorkeeper's reaction were made subject to the supplicant's determination. The very point of the novel, runs the argument, is that the human condition is vis-a-vis logically insolvable paradoxes— that is, a human obligation to come to terms with them by accepting them as necessary. This interpretation argues that there can be no clear-cut answer to the question of how the man from the country should have acted because this is a false or irrelevant question in the first place. Why pose this question once we know he cannot escape his punishment, the just and inevitable consequence of the guilt he loaded upon himself long before his thirtieth birthday?

Ambivalence also characterizes the conversation K. has with the priest about the interpretation of the parable. As a member of the Court, the priest
reproaches K. for deluding himself about the nature of the Law which he has to "serve." Yet none of the interpretations they discuss emerges as absolutely correct. The priest warns K. not to pay too much attention to mere "opinions." The main insights of this round of intellectual one-upmanship are, as the priest puts it, that "it is not necessary to accept everything as true, but only as necessary," and that, as K. counters, "both conclusions are to some extent compatible." This is a variation of the priest's statement at the beginning of their discussion, a most revealing comment on the nature of both the Law and Kafka's writing: "The right perception of any matter and the misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other."

Perhaps the most mature way of looking at the parable, and thus the novel, is contained in a famous section from the short story "The Great Wall of China" (1918):

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely symbols and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the wise man says "Go over," he does not mean that we should cross over to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if it were worth the effort; he means some miraculous beyond, something unknown to us, something he too cannot define more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the least. All these symbols merely express that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we have known that before. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the symbols you would become symbols yourselves, and thus rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet this is also a symbol. The first said: You have won.
The second said: But unfortunately only symbolically. The first said: No, in reality; symbolically you have lost.

The upshot is that the parable seems to have been invented with the explicit intention of defying interpretation.

The pictorial quality of K.'s language assumes a rare density in the parable. It is amazing how distinctly we can see both the doorkeeper and the man from the country before us. Nothing really seems abstract and we almost forget that the man has waited all his lifetime. The doorkeeper's language enhances our vivid impressions of an everyday event as do the sentences beginning with "he," through which we are drawn close to the entrance seeker. His voice we hear only once at the end in the form of a question, a marvelous way of showing his metaphysical loneliness.

Chapter 10

The significance of this chapter, like that of Chapter 1, lies in its chronological explicitness. Not only do the two black-frocked men pick up K.,
also dressed in black, at 9 A.M. the warders arrested K. (also both in black) before 9 A.M. but this chapter also deals with the evening preceding K.'s thirty-first birthday. Exactly a year has elapsed between the two chapters. It is at the end of this chapter that the only occurrence of the whole story eluding all speculation takes place: K.'s death.

Death has been a possibility throughout, though always covered up by K.'s counter-measure and pleas of innocence. In fact, at one point in the opening chapter, when K. is left alone by the warders for a moment, he muses over the possibility of suicide only to dismiss it right away as a "senseless act."

It is now more obvious than ever that the Court does not intend to do anything against K.'s will. As the priest put it in the previous chapter, suggesting that the Court is apt to recede before K.'s thrusts: "The Court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come and it dismisses you when you go." The reason for the Court's compliance is of course that K. is at its complete mercy anyway. The executioners who appear as he has expected them to are even more polite than the warders were. They can afford to be because their grip on K. is total, symbolized by the way they lock him between themselves "in a unity which would have brought all three down together had one of them been knocked over." This description brings back one of the warders' reminder in the opening chapter that he and his colleague "stand closer to you (K.) than any other people in the world." These two sentences have been made the basis for an interpretation of the warders and executioners as parts of K.'s personality, even his superego.

At any rate, the three make their way across the bridge and K. turns toward the railsa motion toward suicide reminiscent of "The
Judgment" (1913), where Georg Bendemann's end also brings his relief. K. does not have the strength to carry out his plan, however. He has another chance to kill himself at the very end when preparations for his execution at the quarry are made: "K. now knew exactly that it would have been his duty to grab the knife passing back and forth over his head and plunge it into his own breast." Again he cannot summon enough willpower. He also cannot accept the responsibility which "rested with whoever had not granted him not enough strength to commit the deed."

Fräulein Bürstner's appearance (perhaps only in his mind?) also supplies a link to the opening chapter. It occurs exactly at the moment when K. considers a last attempt at resisting. This is consistent with the portrait we have of her because she was the only one who admonished him to rely on himself and, consequently, refused to listen to him after their first meeting. Her appearance triggers the realization in K. that he has failed to follow her advice and that resistance to his impending end is senseless now: "I always wanted to attack the world with twenty hands and, also, for a purpose not to be approved. That was wrong. Shall I now demonstrate that not even this
one-year-old trial could teach me? Shall I leave this world without common sense? Shall people say after I am gone that at the outset of my case I wanted to carry it to an end and that at the end of it I wanted to start over again? I don't want them to say that." This proves that K. is not interested in showing his innocence any longer. On the other hand, it is hardly possible to construct his guilt out of this admission that he "wanted to attack the world with twenty hands." The sole issue now is the most proper form of his death. If he has not been able to prove his innocence, at least he wants to go down with "common sense" and not as a coward. He has resigned himself to the necessity of his pronouncement as "guilty." We should not forget that the connection between guilt and punishment is not the explicit subject of the novel, although it is K. himself who is eager at the outset to attain a juridically clear interpretation of this connection. This, he believes then, would eventually have to lead to his acquittal.

The last sentence, "'Like a dog!' It was as if the shame of it must outlive him," reads as if Kafka had wished K.'s unsatisfactory and sad death. In light of a diary entry, according to which Kafka regarded K.'s execution as a direct reference to the humiliations at the hands of his father, this becomes even more plausible. Yet we should at least consider the possibility of K.'s death as a liberation. After all, in the parable mentioned previously, the man from the country experiences the Law's "radiance" precisely at the moment he dies: the moment of death coincides with his awareness of his actual situation. In the context of the novel this means that the more K. "sees through" the world of the Court and his situation, the closer he gets to his death. From this realization it is but a short step to his desire to die.

Without for a moment trying to overrate the autobiographical element, we should still mention that several entries in Kafka's diary suggest that K.'s eventual and positive assessment of his death may well be a
reflection of Kafka's repeated desire to commit suicide as a way out of his problems. (The most prominent diary entry is that of November 2, 1911).

Another indication of Kafka's relativization of K.'s death and his remarkable distance toward it is the hero's almost comical question to his executioners, "What theater are you playing at?" The answer comes in the form of consternation and silence, suggesting that every possible objection to K.'s execution has already been raised.

The intensity of the last scene is enhanced by the image of a human being flashing across the horizon over the quarry. The questions K. may feel emerging now freeze into one prolonged scream. They have become meaningless and show the complete breakdown of his whole argumentation along the lines of logic. All his life he has chosen this legal-logical approach rather than recognize the actual forces of life, which are not those of legality and logic. "Logic is doubtless unshakeable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living." The will to life mentioned here is already
undermined in Chapter 1, and his inability to commit suicide now is only its final, perverted manifestation. His helpless floundering reflects the utter hopelessness of his fate. The correspondence of this hopelessness with his floundering frenzy is one of the elementary appeals of all of Kafka's writings. The almost complete absence of verbal expression, much less metaphysical speculation, increases this appeal. As Kafka once put it, "I have to write like one who can only help himself by wildly throwing around his arms."

On K.'s Guilt, the Court, and the Law

Certainly The Trial has many layers of meaning which not even the most "scientific" analysis can decode, be it psychoanalytically or, more recently, linguistically oriented. The probably inevitable result of the novel's multi-level makeup is that certain components are stressed while others are not. Yet it seems that, in spite of this danger, our view of K. will pretty much determine our interpretation.

Both the philosophical-theological and the autobiographical interpretations shed light on two important layers. If we view the Court only as a description of a corrupt bureaucratic system, or as a projection of Kafka's personal problems, K. winds up as the miserable victim whose story grants mankind absolutely no hope in a totally alienated world. The same is true if we take the parable, the novel's artistic focal point, and view it as the tribunal where K., elevated to an absolute level, is forced to vindicate himself as a representative of mankind without really knowing why or how.

If we look at K. as guilty, as a man who is part and parcel of this faulty world and whose aberrations result in severe, though logically consistent occurrences, then we must acknowledge a higher Law.
toward whose absolute standards K. is stumbling. Looking at The Trial this way makes it appear, not only as a portrayal of human desperation, but also as one of Kafka's faith: not faith in the sense of salvation, or even orientation, to be sure, but faith in his eventual acceptance of his sinful life and its consequences.

In this interpretation, K. does not die as a result of his involved and absurd situation, but because he was already dead inwardly at his arrest. From the very outset of the story he does not love anybody or anything, does not aim for anything beyond his immediate physical needs, is insensitive and egotistical. His assets are limited to purely economic concerns to a point which keeps him from comprehending the nature of his own new situation. But his self-assurance and defiance against the bizarre authorities, which seem to amount to justified protest in the eyes of the reader at this point still sympathetic to him gradually disappear. The longer the trial lasts, the more K. becomes aware that the strange Court with all its bizarre
and corrupt officials may have the right to investigate against him after all. As the priest warns K. during their discussion about the meaning of the parable, "It may be that you don't know the nature of the Court you are serving." It makes sense, therefore, to see the many scenes of K.'s trial as sequences of his evolving consciousness (and conscience; the two words are cognates). In this case the final scene with all its horror represents the last consequence of guilt in the form of a nightmare. If we accept this view, then the confusing and contradictory aspects of the Court are also a reflection of K.'s inner condition.

It is important to understand that there are many levels of the Court, most of them tangible, corrupt, and dealing with K. in a most haphazard way. The highest level is, above all, elusive. The levels at which K. fights mirror the shortcomings of this life (his included, as said above) and are therefore in no position to pass judgment. The representatives of these levels become bogged down in unresolved and unresolvable issues and utter "diverse viewpoints" at best. Their ranks "mount endlessly so that not even the initiated can survey the hierarchy as a whole" and each level "actually knows less than the defense." Even the "high judges" are "common" and, contrary to popular belief, sit only on "kitchen chairs." These officials represent the sensual unhampered forces of life itself. Their power is such that nobody can escape them. At the same time, and this makes for their paradoxical nature, they are forever caught up in reflecting and registering in a rather abstract realm removed from life. "They were often utterly at a loss; they did not have any right understanding of human relations."

Beyond these bungling levels of the Court, there is the highest seat of Law itself, absolute and inaccessible, yet weighing more and more heavily on K., who becomes increasingly aware of its existence and
its relevance to his case. It marks that point of the endless legal pyramid where the notions of justice and inevitability come together, where the countless contradictions and errors of its organs are reconciled. It is the instance which K. becomes drawn to, of which he has an increasingly definite feeling that he has been summoned before it to justify his life. This is the Law he has to serve and which he has violated by being unaware of its existence.

The indifferent and corrupt authorities "are merely sent out by the highest Court." They do not know their superiors. They stand clearly below this "highest Law." This is why the doorkeeper of the parable stands before the Law rather than in it.

The Neurotic Element in Kafka's Art

In 1917 Kafka learned about his tubercular condition, which appeared in one night with heavy bleeding. When it happened it did not only scare
him, but also relieved him of chronic insomnia. Surprising though this aspect of relief may be on first glance, it becomes understandable when we consider that he was well aware of the profound effect it had on his future: it forced him to dissolve his engagement with Felice Bauer and to give up all marriage plans, tentative though they may have been. The idea of marriage, however, meant more than the decision about his future with another human being in Kafka's life it was, literally speaking, the one mode of life he extolled. To be married, to have a family, to be able to face life by escaping loneliness and by belonging these were the ambitions which he never had the strength to realize.

The humiliation he suffered at the hands of his father is a subject all by itself but has to be mentioned because one cannot see his disease or his understanding of it apart from it. Suffice it to say here that he felt humiliated, not only by his father's insensitivity and brutality (Letter to His Father), but also by his mere existence. To Kafka, he belonged to those wholesome, big, life-affirming characters whose very practicality instilled both envy and fear in him. This father could never be wrong. As far as his disease goes, this meant that Kafka agreed with his father's view that, as the only male descendant of the family, he had the duty to have a son. It is ironical that Kafka did have a son with Grete Bloch, Felice's friend, but that was out of wedlock and, besides, he never knew about him.

Yet Max Brod said in 1917 that Kafka presented his disease as psychological, as a sort of "life-saver from marriage." Kafka himself is quoted as saying to Brod, "My head is in cahoots with my lungs behind my back." To put it differently, to write all the fantastic things he wrote, Kafka could not allow himself to sink his roots into the practical sphere of his father, if, indeed, he had been able to do so at all. Yet he had identified himself with the aspirations of his father. Out
of this conflict a crisis was bound to arise: what he could not solve in his mind was solved, in a sense, by his body. In a letter written in 1922 he refers to himself as a "poor little man obsessed by all sorts of evil spirits" and adds that it is "undoubtedly the merit of medicine to have introduced the more consoling concept of neurasthenia in place of obsession." Aware that a cure could only come through the exposure of the actual cause of a disease, he added that "this makes a cure more difficult."

Parallel to his awareness that he could not possibly gain spiritual relief, and certainly not salvation, in this world, Kafka's tuberculosis progressed. He spent more and more time taking rest cures, then the only therapy. "I am mentally ill, my lung condition is merely a flooding over the banks of a mental disease," he wrote to his second fiancée Milena Jesenská. This disease consisted of an undissolvable dissonance, a deeply ingrained opposition within him. He had two main opponents, one in the sum total of the characteristics he admired in his father but which he loathed at the same
time; the other in his craving to write about that which he was experiencing himself with such intensity—his lack of protection, his nagging skepticism, his withdrawal and alienation. His uncompromising attempt to depict the world almost solely in terms of this dilemma has been called his neurosis. Yet we should at least be aware of the fact that he himself also called it a first step toward insight, in the sense that a mental disease, too, can be an essential window through which to view truth. It is in this light that we should interpret his professions that he has not found a way to live out of his own strength "unless tuberculosis is one of my strengths."

The actual horror of his disease, as he saw it, was not his physical suffering. His father thought it was an infection, and Brod believed it resulted from his fragile constitution and his unsatisfactory work as a lawyer. Kafka saw beyond these at best superficial explanations and saw it as an expression of his metaphysical vulnerability. Viewed in this manner, it becomes a sort of sanctuary that prevented him from falling victim to nihilism. As he put it himself, "All these alleged diseases, be they ever so sad, are facts of faith, man's desperate attempts at anchoring in some protective soil. Thus psychoanalysis (with which he was familiar) does not find any other basis of religion but that which lies at the bottom of the individual's disease."

We have made the point elsewhere that in The Trial the Court and its paradoxes may be seen as the reflection of K.'s unresolvable problems. In connection with what we have said here it is interesting to note that several attempts have been made to read K.'s story as that of a medical patient. The very title in German, Der Prozess, definitely also means a medical process. Also, it is possible to read entire passages without changing anything if we substitute physician for lawyer, disease for guilt, medical examination for interrogation, nurse for usher, patient for the accused, and cure for acquittal. We would not
jeopardize the meaning of the story at all; whatever would remain as parabolic is also present in the original version. Certainly the argument that Kafka was not aware of his failing health when he was writing the novel is not a good counter-argument because, first, his deep spiritual dilemma existed of course long before its physical manifestation (that is, tuberculosis according to his own view) occurred; second, because his hypersensitivity would certainly have enabled him to write from within the view of a consumptive. The point made here is not to prove that Kafka really had this in mind when he worked on K.'s case: on the contrary, the mere possibility of such meaningful interchangeability rather proves that K.'s fundamental situation is open to several readings which need not be at odds with each other.

All this is not supposed to demonstrate that Kafka simply equated faith and health or the absence of faith and disease. Certainly, however, there is a relationship between his uncompromising search for total truth
and his vulnerability, his limitless self-exposure to the difficulties of life. It must take super-human strength to continuously snatch every bit of firm ground away from under one's feet in an almost maniacal effort to doubt one's own position. Kafka was notoriously incapable of living by the many little white lies the average person adopts as a means of surviving, and he both marveled at and envied those who could, as Milena Jesenska wrote, "He is without the slightest asylum. . . That which has been written about Kafka's abnormality is his great merit. I rather believe the whole world is sick and he the only healthy one, the only one to understand, feel correctly, the only pure human being. I know he does not fight life as such, only against this kind of life." The confessions of a woman in love?

The ultimate question is whether it is not precisely this fixation on purity and perfection that are his spiritual disease, his neurosis, his sin. Every fiber of Kafka would have yearned to exclaim with Browning's Andrea del Sarto: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?"

It was his fate that reach and grasp, in his world, were doomed to remain synonyms simply because there was no possibility of heaven.

Structure and Order of Chapters

As we follow K.'s stumbling through the story we get the distinct feeling that there is not much of a development he goes through. Not even Huld, for instance, with all his insight and connections, knows whether K.'s case has ever gotten off the ground. There is no "way," or, more appropriately, whatever appears to be K.'s "way" assumes an altogether different meaning in the thicket of the Court's endless mazes. Kafka once wrote, "The true way leads over a rope which is
not strung up in the air but a little above ground; it seems designed to cause us to stumble rather than be walked on." What we have in *The Trial* is a detailed depiction of K.'s directionless stumbling.

The abrupt beginning is a good case in point. We know nothing about K.'s background, and his attempt to vindicate himself through a written petition referring to his past fails miserably before he has a chance of carrying it through. To argue that a major structural reason for this absence of a "way" lies in the closely defined time span of the novel is not very convincing. Many twentieth-century novels also deal with strictly defined time spans and yet do not confront the reader with such a complete *tabula rasa* of their heroes' backgrounds.

Each chapter has the pronounced tendency to start all over again because thematic interconnections are unclear if not absent altogether. The entire section with Titorelli, for instance, is but a variation of the section with Huld. Both scenes rely on a mediator to even get K. in touch with
Huld and Titorelli, respectively. This repetitiveness is important, especially if we see the authorities as a reflection of K.'s ruminating consciousness (conscience). Kafka freely admitted that the multiplicity of possible directions was a subject that was close to him personally: "I always had to tackle the radius and then to break it off. . . The center of the imaginary circle is full of beginnings." The broken off "radiuses" of this novel are the many chapter fragments. Frequently, they do not seem to lead anywhere except to ever-new beginningsto K.'s former girl friend Elsa, to his mother, to the lawyer's regular get-togethers at the pub (fragments included at the end of the 1969 Vintage Book edition used here).

Kafka himself was aware of the fragmentary character of his work (about four-fifths, fragments) and also recognized his inability to complete things. This inability lay buried in his overly keen perception of the infinite possibilities following from each kaleidoscopic situation and his uncompromising desire for writing the "true" rather than the "necessary," to use the priest's final comment to K. He was, as he said himself, obsessed with writing and yet doomed as a writer because he could never hope to trace the manifold ramifications of each aspect or nuance. It is important to see that his repeated breaking off of "beginning radiuses" is not a flaw of this particular novel, but the consistent result of his temperament that corresponded to his frustratingly imperfect, and hence fragmentary, world view. Kafka was by temperament and outlook committed to remain uncommitted.

It does not follow from this, however, that there is no unity in the novel. The Court is, as Titorelli says, "everywhere" and it does indeed hold together the diverse radiuses of action. The Court holds them together in the sense that all scenes are pervaded by incomprehensibility which unites all of K.'s flounderings. It is of
course true that this statement of cohesion is a negative one: to the extent it exists, it is the result of the absence of direction, commitment, a "way" one radius traveled to the end.

_The Trial_ has a particular problem because there has been considerable disagreement as to the order of several chapters. It has been argued that, well-rounded though the scenes and the central pieces within this novel are ("Before the Law," for instance), some of the chapters are almost interchangeable as far as their placement goes. This is said to be the direct result of the lack of coherence of the novel that is, the virtual absence of a plot. Though there is something to this argument, "interchangeability" is probably too harsh a word. It would presuppose that Kafka, the exceedingly conscientious writer, deliberately refrained from an overall pattern for the novel.

Brod's arrangement of the chapters was valid, or at least accepted as such, until a new arrangement was attempted by Herman Uyttersprot in his detailed study, _On the Structure of Kafka's "Trial"_ (Brussels, 1953). His argument is that Brod's arrangement is wrong in several instances, especially
as far as the novel's time factor goes. Uyttersprot discovered that the events of the novel cannot be fitted into the time interval between K.'s thirtieth and thirty-first birthdays. How can, he argues, winter (Chapter 7) precede autumn (Chapter 9) in the course of the one year of K.'s trial? He rearranged a few chapters, even included a few fragments that had been added as loose ends by Brod. He places Chapter 4 right after Chapter 1, arguing that the sentences in Chapter 4 referring to Frau Grubach's insults against Fräulein Bürstner in Chapter 1 find a more logical continuation this way. His main argument, however, concerns the crucial Chapter 9.

Whether one adheres to Brod's original arrangement of this chapter in next-to-last position or prefers the new order of Chapter 9 preceding Chapter 7, the parable chapter is the artistic culmination point of the novel. If one accepts the new arrangement, the scene between K. and the priest loses its paramount position as the major pointer to K.'s immediate end. It rather assumes the role of a portentous warning to K. One can certainly argue that it makes more sense to have the priest reprimand K. in Chapter 7 while there is still time (this presupposes that K. does have alternatives while fighting his case), rather than only before his end. In fact, the frantic involvement with his case begins only after the priest's parable and subsequent discussion.

Plausible though the new arrangement is, all we know for a fact is that Kafka did not finish The Trial. Moreover, several possible arrangements are certainly compatible with each other. It may well be that Brod and Uyttersprot give us the original and later arrangement, respectively. What we do know is that these problems result from Brod's inexact notes and rather free way of editing, which, in turn, are partly the consequence of his lifelong and intense friendship with Kafka.
Composition and Reception

Almost simultaneously with "In the Penal Colony," Kafka began to write *The Trial* in the summer of 1914, a date which has unfortunately convinced many people that the novel is primarily a work foreshadowing political terror. Of course he was painfully aware of the interconnections between World War I and his own problems, but never in the sense that the novel was supposed to be a deliberate effort to write about the political scene.

From all we know, it is much closer to the facts to view *The Trial* in connection with the enormous tension under which he lived during his two years with Felice Bauer. It can be shown that especially his first engagement to her in June 1914 and his subsequent separation from her six weeks later found their expression in the novel: the engagement is reflected in K.'s arrest and his separation in K's execution. Even certain details fit
easily: the initials F.B. are both Felice's and those Kafka used to abbreviate "Fräulein Bürstner"; K's arrest takes place in Fräulein Bürstner's room, which he knows well, and Kafka's engagement took place in Felice's apartment, which he knew well; K. is asked to dress up for the occasion, strangers are watching, and the bank employees he knows are present; at Kafka's engagement, both friends and strangers were present, an aspect which the reserved Kafka abhorred particularly. Most significantly perhaps for a demonstration of the parallel, K. is permitted to remain at large after his arrest. In Kafka's diary we read that he "was tied like a criminal. If I had been put in chains and shoved in the corner with police guarding me . . . it would not have been worse. And that was my engagement." We can translate K.'s escort to his execution into Kafka's painful separation in Berlin: there Felice presided, their mutual friend Grete Bloch and Kafka's writer-friend Ernst Weiss defended him, but Kafka himself said nothing, only accepted the verdict.

At any rate, Kafka took great pains to record his emotional upheaval during these years, which largely coincides with his composition of *The Trial*. A selection of a few diary entries will do:

August 21, 1914: "Began with such high hopes, but was thrown back . . . today even more so."

August 29, 1914: "I must not rely on anything. I am alone."

October 10, 1914: "I've written little and poorly . . . that it would get this bad I had no way of knowing."

November 30, 1914: "I cannot go on. I have reached the final limit, in front of which I may well sit for years again to start all over on a new story which would again remain unfinished. Their destiny haunts me."

January 18, 1915: "Started a new story because I am afraid to ruin the old ones. Now there are 4 or 5 stories standing up around me like horses"
before a circus director."

The main reasons Brod decided not to abide by his friend's request to burn certain fragments, preferably without reading them, are set forth in his *Postscript to the First Edition* of 1925, which includes Kafka's original request. Brod took the manuscript in 1920, separated the incomplete from the complete chapters after Kafka's death in 1924, arranged the order of chapters, gave the piece the title it has, though Kafka himself used only the title to refer to the story without ever calling it *The Trial*. Brod admitted he had to use his own judgment arranging the chapters because they carried titles rather than numbers. Since Kafka had read most of the story to him, Brod was reasonably certain he proceeded correctly, something which had been doubted for a long time and was finally revised. Brod also recorded that Kafka himself regarded the story as unfinished, that a few scenes were supposed to have been placed before the final chapter to describe the
workings of the secretive trial. Since Kafka repeatedly argued, according to Brod, that K.'s trial should never go to the highest level, the novel was really unfinishable or, which is the same, extendable *ad infinitum*.

When Brod edited *The Trial* posthumously in 1925, it did not have any repercussions and, as late as 1928, there was no publisher to be found. It was Schocken, then located in Berlin, that ventured a publication of the complete works in 1935 but Germany was already under Hitler's authority, and Kafka was Jewish. The whole Schocken Company was shut down by Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda, and so it is not surprising that Kafka became known outside the German-speaking world first. Schocken Books, Inc., now located in New York, published *The Trial* in 1946.

There have been many well-known writers to recognize and extol Kafka's genius and his impact. Thomas Mann was among the first:

He was a dreamer and his writings are often conceived and formed in the manner of dreams. Down to comical details they imitate the alogical and breath-taking absurdities of dreams, these wondrous shadow games of life.

Albert Camus gets a little closer to the core of things:

We are here placed at the very limits of human thought. Indeed, in this work everything is essential, literally speaking. It certainly represents the problem of the absurd in its totality. . . . It is the fate and possibly also the greatness of this piece that it offers countless possibilities without affirming a single one.

And Hermann Hesse's exhortation reminds us that we should above all steer clear of modish talk about "Kafkaesque" horror:
Whoever is able to really read a poet, that is, without questions, without expecting intellectual or moral results, to absorb in simple readiness what he offers, will receive any answers he is looking for in Kafka's language. He gives us the dreams and visions of his lonely, difficult life, parables of his experiences, anxieties, and enthrallments.

Since the late forties, interpretations have swamped the "Kafka market." Generalizing a bit, one can say that they have all followed either the view of Kafka, the artist, or Kafka, the philosopher.

In 1947, André Gide and Jean-Louis Barrault came out with a well-received dramatization. The German version had its debut three years later. Gottfried von Einem composed an opera (libretto by Boris Blacher), which was first performed in Salzburg, Austria, in 1953. The most recent version is the film by Orson Welles (1962), with Anthony Perkins in the lead role. Though critics have held widely differing opinions on the film many charging it is more Welles than Kafka its success seems justified because of all absence of symbolic or allegorical representation and its high-quality cinematic language.
Understanding Kafka

A major problem confronting readers of Kafka's short stories is to find a way through the increasingly dense thicket of interpretations. Among the many approaches one encounters is that of the autobiographical approach. This interpretation claims that Kafka's works are little more than reflections of his lifelong tension between bachelorhood and marriage or, on another level, between his skepticism and his religious nature. While it is probably true that few writers have ever been moved to exclaim, "My writing was about you [his father]. In it, I merely poured out the sorrow I could not sigh out at your breast" [Letter to His Father], it is nevertheless dangerous to regard the anxieties permeating his work solely in these terms. Kafka's disenchantment with an eventual hatred of his father were a stimulus to write, but they neither explain the fascination of his writing nor tell us why he wrote at all.

The psychological or psychoanalytical approach to Kafka largely ignores the content of his works and uses the "findings" of the diagnosis as the master key to puzzling out Kafka's world. We know Kafka was familiar with the teachings of Sigmund Freud (he says so explicitly in his diary, after he finished writing "The Judgment" in 1912) and that he tried to express his problems through symbols in the Freudian sense. One may therefore read Kafka with Freud's teachings in mind. As soon as this becomes more than one among many aids to understanding, however, one is likely to read not Kafka, but a text on applied psychoanalysis or Freudian symbology. Freud himself often pointed out that the analysis of artistic values is not within the scope of the analytical methods he taught.

There is the sociological interpretation, according to which Kafka's
work is but a mirror of the historical-sociological situation in which he lived. For the critic arguing this way, the question is not what Kafka really says but the reasons why he supposedly said it. What the sociological and the psychological interpretations have in common is the false assumption that the discovery of the social or psychological sources of the artist's experience invalidate the meaning expressed by his art.

Within the sociological type of interpretation, one of the most popular methods of criticism judges Kafka's art by whether or not it has contributed anything toward the progress of society. Following the Marxist-Leninist dictum that art must function as a tool toward the realization of the classless society, this kind of interpretation is prevalent not merely in Communist countries, but also among the New Left critics this side of the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. Marxist criticism of Kafka has shifted back and forth between outright condemnation of Kafka's failing to draw the consequences of his own victimization by the bourgeoisie and between acclamations stressing the pro-proletarian fighting quality of his heroes. That Kafka was
the propagator of the working class as the revolutionary class has been maintained not only by official Communist criticism, but also by Western "progressives." And it is true that Kafka did compose a pamphlet lamenting the plight of workers. Yet in a conversation with his friend Janouch, he spoke highly of the Russian Revolution, and he expressed his fear that its religious overtones might lead to a type of modern crusade with a terrifying toll of lives. Surely a writer of Kafka's caliber can describe the terror of a slowly emerging totalitarian regime (Nazi Germany) without being a precursor of communism, as Communist criticism as often claimed. One can also read *The Trial* as the story of Joseph K.'s victimization by the Nazis (three of Kafka's sisters died in a concentration camp); it is indeed one of the greatest tributes one can pay to Kafka today that he succeeded in painting the then still latent horror of Nazism so convincingly. But one must not neglect or ignore the fact that Kafka was, above all, a poet; and to be a poet means to give artistic expression to the many levels and nuances of our kaleidoscopic human condition. To see Kafka as a social or political revolutionary because his country doctor, for instance, or the land surveyor of *The Castle* seeks to change his fate through voluntary involvement rather than outside pressure is tantamount to distorting Kafka's universal quality in order to fit him into an ideological framework.

Closely connected with the quasi-religious quality of Marxist interpretations of Kafka's stories are the countless philosophical and religious attempts at deciphering the make-up of his world. They range from sophisticated theological argumentation all the way to pure speculation. Although Kafka's religious nature is a subject complex and controversial enough to warrant separate mention, the critics arguing along these lines are also incapable, as are their sociological and psychological colleagues, of considering Kafka
simply as an artist. What they all have in common is the belief that Kafka's "real meaning" lies beyond his parables and symbols, and can therefore be better expressed in ways he himself avoided for one reason or another. The presumptuousness of this particular approach lies in the belief that the artist depends on the philosopher for a translation of his ambiguous modes of expression into logical, abstract terms. All this is not to dispute Kafka's philosophical-religious cast of mind and his preoccupation with the ultimate questions of human existence. It is just that he lived, thought, and wrote in images and not in "coded" conceptual structures. Kafka himself thought of his stories merely as points of crystallization of his problems: Bendemann, Samsa, Gracchus, the hunger artist, the country doctor, Josef K., and K. of The Castle all these men are close intellectual and artistic relatives of Kafka, yet it will not do to reduce his deliberately open-ended images to a collection of data.

Interpretations are always a touchy matter and, in Kafka's case, perhaps more so than in others. The reason for this is that his works are 1)
essentially outcries against the inexplicable laws that govern our lives; 2) portrayals of the human drama running its course on several loosely interwoven levels, thus imparting a universal quality to his work; and 3) very much imbued with his high degree of sensitivity which responded differently to similar situations at different times. Particularly this last aspect suggests incohesion and paradox to the mind which insists on prodding Kafka's stories to their oftentimes irrational core. Kafka's pictures stand, as Max Brod never tired of pointing out, not merely for themselves but also for something beyond themselves.

These difficulties have prompted many a scholar to claim that Kafka rarely thought of anything specific in his stories. From this view, it is but a short step to the relativistic attitude that every interpretation of Kafka is as good as every other one. To this, one may reply that "to think of nothing specific" is by no means the same thing as "to think of many things at the same time." Kafka's art is, most of all, capable of doing the latter to perfection. Paradoxical though it may seem at first, viewing Kafka's work from a number of vantage points is not an invitation to total relativism, but a certain guarantee that one will be aware of the many levels of his work.

Despite the many differences in approaching Kafka's writings, all of them must finally deal with a rather hermetically sealed-off world. Whatever Kafka expresses is a reflection of his own complex self amidst a concrete social and political constellation, but it is a reflection broken and distorted by the sharp edges of his analytical mind. Thus the people whom his heroes meet and whom we see through their eyes are not "real" in a psychological sense, not "true" in an empirical sense, and are not "natural" in a biological sense. Their one distinctive mark is that of being something created. Kafka once remarked to his friend Janouch, "I did not draw men. I told a story.
These are pictures, only pictures." That he succeeded in endowing them with enough plausibility to raise them to the level of living symbols and parables is the secret of his art.

Kafka's stories should not tempt us to analyze them along the lines of fantasy versus reality. An unchangeable and alienated world unfolds before us, a world governed by its own laws and developing its own logic. This world is our world and yet it is not. "Its pictures and symbols are taken from our world of phenomena, but they also appear to belong somewhere else. We sense that we encounter people we know and situations we have lived through in our own everyday lives, and yet these people and situations appear somehow estranged. They are real and physical, and yet they are also grotesque and abstract. They use a sober language devoid of luster in order to assure meaningful communication among each other, and yet they fail, passing one another like boats in an impenetrable fog. Yet even this fog, the realm of the surreal (super-real), has something convincing about it. We therefore have the exciting feeling that Kafka's people say things
of preeminent significance but that it is, at the same time, impossible for us to comprehend.

Finally, the reader seems to be left with two choices of how to "read" Kafka. One is to see Kafka's world as full of parables and symbols, magnified and fantastically distorted (and therefore infinitely more real), a world confronting us with a dream vision of our own condition. The other choice is to forego any claim of even trying to understand his world and to expose oneself to its atmosphere of haunting anxiety, visionary bizarreness, and occasionally faint promises of hope.

Kafka's Jewish Influence

Prague was steeped in the atmosphere of Jewish learning and writing until the social and political turmoil of the collapsing Austrian Empire put an end to its traditional character. The first Jews had come to Prague in the tenth century, and the earliest written document about what the city looked like was by a Jewish traveler. According to him, Prague was a cultural crossroads even then. Pulsating with life, the city produced many a lingering myth during the subsequent centuries, and they, in turn, added to its cultural fertility. The myth of the golem is probably its most well known: golem ("clay" in Hebrew) was the first chunk of inanimate matter that the famed Rabbi Loew, known for his learnedness as well as his alchemistic pursuits, supposedly awakened to actual life in the late sixteenth century. This myth fathered a whole genre of literature written in the haunting, semimystical atmosphere of Prague's Jewish ghetto. It is this background, medieval originally, but with several layers of subsequent cultural impulses superimposed on it, that pervades the world of Franz Kafka, supplying it with a very "real" setting of what is generally and
misleadingly known as "Kafkaesque unrealness."

One of the unresolved tensions that is characteristic of Kafka's work occurs between his early (and growing) awareness of his Jewish heritage and the realization that modern Central European Jewry had become almost wholly assimilated. This tension remained alive in him quite apart from his situation as a prominent member of the Jewish-German intelligentsia of Prague. The problem concerned him all the more directly because his family clung to Jewish traditions only in a superficial way. Although perhaps of a more orthodox background than her husband and therefore not quite so eager to attain total assimilation into gentile society even Kafka's mother made no great effort to cherish Jewish ways. On one level, then, Kafka's animosity toward his father and his entire family may be explained by his mounting interest in his Jewish heritage which they did not share.

Kafka felt drawn to Jews who had maintained their cultural identity,
among them the leader of a Yiddish acting group from Poland. He attended their performances in 1911, organized evenings of reading Yiddish literature, and was drawn into fierce arguments about this subject with his father, who despised traveling actors, as did the Jewish establishment of Prague. It was at that time that Kafka began to study Hebrew. As late as 1921, however, he still complained about having no firm knowledge of Jewish history and religion.

What fascinated Kafka about the various members of this group was their firmness of faith and their resistance to being absorbed into the culture of their gentile environment. There are numerous letters and diary entries which point to Kafka's awareness of the essential difference between Western and Eastern Jews concerning this matter. Kafka felt a great affinity with the chassidic tradition (*chassidic* means "pious" in Hebrew; it was an old conservative movement within Judaism which came to flower again in the eighteenth century in eastern Europe). Kafka admired very much their ardent, this-worldly faith, their veneration of ancestry, and their cherishing of native customs. He developed a powerful contempt for Jewish artists who, in his estimation, too willingly succumbed to assimilation and secularization.

Kafka was particularly interested in Zionism, the movement founded by Theodor Herzl (*The Jewish State*, 1890) to terminate the dissemination of Jews all over the world by promoting their settlement in Palestine. Zionism preached the ancient Jewish belief that the Messiah would arrive with the re-establishment of the Jewish state, and Kafka's desire for such a Jewish state and his willingness to emigrate should be noted. Kafka published in a Zionist magazine, planned several trips to Palestine (which never materialized because of his deteriorating health), and was most enthusiastic about the solidarity, the sense of community, and the simplicity of the new
While it is true that Kafka's friend Max Brod influenced him in supporting the ideals of Zionism, it is incorrect to say that without Brod's influence Kafka would never have developed an interest in the movement. His Hebrew teacher Thieberger, a friend and student of Martin Buber, was also a major influence on Kafka. Thieberger emphasized Jewish responsibility for the whole world and believed that everybody is witness to everybody else. Oddly enough, Kafka's father's steady exhortations to "lead an active life" may have added to his growing esteem for the Jewish pioneer ideal. Another source of Kafka's growing interest in Jewish tradition was, of course, his sickness, the very sickness that kept him from carrying out his plans to emigrate to Palestine and live there as a simple artisan. The more Kafka became aware of his approaching end, the more he delved into the study of his identity. A year before his death, he started attending the Berlin Academy of Jewish Studies, and it was during that same year, 1923, that
he met Dora Dymant, who was of chassidic background and further accented his search and love for his Jewish roots.

It is clear that Kafka's interest and love for the various aspects of Jewry are not merely an attempt on his part to make up for past omissions in this matter. They are, above all, the result of his religious concerns"religious" in the wider sense of the word that is, religious by temperament, religious in the sense of ceaselessly searching and longing for grace.

Kafka A "Religious" Writer?

To know Kafka is to grapple with this problem: was Kafka primarily a "religious" writer? The answer seems to depend on the views one brings to the reading of his stories rather than on even the best analyses. Because so much of Kafka's world remains ultimately inaccessible to us, any such labeling will reveal more about the reader than about Kafka or his works. He himself would most likely have refused to be forced into any such either/or proposition.

Perhaps one of the keys to this question is Kafka's confession that, to him, "writing is a form of prayer." Everything we know about him suggests that he probably could not have chosen any other form of expressing himself but writing. Considering the tremendous sacrifices he had made to his writing, it is only fair to say that he would have abandoned his art had he felt the need to get his ideas across in some philosophical or theological system. At the same time, one feels that what Kafka wanted to convey actually transcended literature and that, inside, art alone must have seemed shallow to him or at least inadequate when measured against the gigantic task he set for himself—that is, inching his way toward at least approximations of the
nature of truth. Each of Kafka's lines is charged with multiple meanings of allusions, daydreams, illusions and reflections all indicating a realm whose "realness" we are convinced of, but whose nature Kafka could not quite grasp with his art. He remained tragically aware of this discrepancy throughout his life.

This does not contradict the opinion that Kafka was a "philosopher groping for a form rather than a novelist groping for a theme." "Philosopher" refers here to a temperament, a cast of mind, rather than to a man's systematic, abstract school of thought. Whatever one may think of Kafka's success or failure in explaining his world, there is no doubt that he always deals with the profoundest themes of man's fate. The irrational and the horrible are never introduced for the sake of literary effect; on the contrary, they are introduced to express a depth of reality. And if there is one hallmark of Kafka's prose, it is the complete lack of any contrived language or artificial structure.

Essentially, Kafka desired to "extinguish his self" by writing, as he himself put it. In terms of craftsmanship, this means that much of his writing
is too unorganized, open-ended, and obscure. Even allowing for the fact that he was concerned with a realm into which only symbols and parables can shed some light (rather than, say, metaphors and similes which would have tied his stories to the more concrete and definitive), it is doubtful whether Kafka can be called an "accomplished writer" in the sense that Thomas Mann, for instance, can.

Kafka was, then, a major writer, but not a good "craftsman." And he was a major thinker and seer in the sense that he registered, reflected, and even warned against the sickness of a whole age when contemporaries with a less acute consciousness still felt secure.

The question of Kafka's being a religious writer has been going on for decades, but has often been meaningless because of the failure of critics or readers to explain what they mean by "religious." It is essential to differentiate between those who call Kafka and Kafka's works religious in the wider sense of the term—that is, religious by temperament or mentality—and those who assert that his stories reflect Kafka as a believer in the traditional Judaic-Christian sense of the word. Of this latter group, his lifelong friend and editor Max Brod was the first and probably most influential. A considerable number of critics and readers have followed Brod's "religious" interpretations particularly, Edwin Muir, Kafka's principal English translator. However, for some time now, Kafka criticism has not investigated the "religious" aspect. This is so partly because the psychoanalytical approach and the sociological approach have been more popular and fashionable (especially in the United States), and also because critics and biographers have proven beyond doubt that Brod committed certain errors while editing and commenting on Kafka. While the original attitude toward Brod was one of absolute reverence (after all, he saw Kafka daily for over twenty years, listened to his friend's stories, and advised him on changes), the consensus of
opinion has more recently been that, although we owe him a great deal as far as Kafka and his work are concerned, he was a poor researcher. He was simply too self-conscious about his close friendship with Kafka and therefore too subjective: he would never admit the obviously neurotic streak in Kafka's personality. While we may trust Brod when he claims that Kafkas's aphorisms are much more optimistic and life-asserting than his fiction, it is difficult to consider Kafka primarily as a believer in the "indestructible core of the universe" or more pronouncedly Jewish-Christian tenets. His famous remark, striking the characteristic tone of self-pity, "Sometimes I feel I understand the Fall of Man better than anyone, is more to the point. We have no reason to doubt Brod's judgment about Kafka's personally charming, calm, and even humorous ways. It is that in Kafka's fiction, calmness is too often overshadowed by fear and anxiety, and the rare touches of humor are little more than convulsions of what in German is known as Galgenhumor ("gallows humor")that is, the frantic giggle before one's execution.
In summary one can argue in circles about Kafka's work being "religious," but one thing is clear: Kafka's stories inevitably concern the desperate attempts of people to do right. And as noted elsewhere, Kafka and his protagonists are identical to an amazing extent. This means that the main characters who try to do right but are continuously baffled, thwarted, and confused as to what it really means to do right are also Kafka himself. Viewed in this way, Kafka becomes a religious writer par excellence: he and his protagonists are classical examples of the man in whose value system the sense of duty and of responsibility and the inevitability of moral commandments have survived the particular and traditional code of a religious system hence Kafka's yearning for a frame of reference which would impart meaning to his distinct sense of "shalt" and "shalt not." If one takes this all-permeating desire for salvation as the main criterion for Kafka's "religiousness" rather than the grace of faith which he never found, how could anyone not see Kafka as a major religious writer? "He was God-drunk," a critic wrote, "but in his intoxication his subtle and powerful intellect did not stop working."

**Kafka and Existentialism**

Kafka's stories suggest meanings which are accessible only after several readings. If their endings, or lack of endings, seem to make sense at all, they will do so immediately and not in unequivocal language. The reason for this is that the stories offer a wide variety of possible meanings without confirming any particular one of them. This, in turn, is the result of Kafka's view which he shares with many twentieth-century writers that his own self is a parcel of perennially interacting forces lacking a stable core; if he should attain an approximation of objectivity, this can come about only by describing
the world in symbolic language and from a number of different vantage points. Thus a total view must inevitably remain inaccessible to him. Such a universe about which nothing can be said that cannot at the same time and just as plausibly be contradicted has a certain ironic quality about it: ironic in the sense that each possible viewpoint becomes relativized. Yet the overriding response one has is one of tragedy rather than irony as one watches Kafka's heroes trying to piece together the debris of their universe.

Kafka's world is essentially chaotic, and this is why it is impossible to derive a specific philosophical or religious code from it, even one acknowledging chaos and paradox as does much existential thought. Only the events themselves can reveal the basic absurdity of things. To reduce Kafka's symbols to their "real" meanings and to pigeonhole his world-view as some "ism" or other is to obscure his writing with just the kind of meaningless experience from which he liberated himself through his art.
Expressionism is one of the literary movements frequently mentioned in connection with Kafka, possibly because its vogue in literature coincided with Kafka's mature writing, between 1912 and his death in 1924. Of course, Kafka does have certain characteristics in common with expressionists, such as his criticism of the blindly scientific-technological world-view, for instance. However, if we consider what he thought of some of the leading expressionists of his day, he certainly cannot be associated with the movement: he repeatedly confessed that the works of the expressionists made him sad; of a series of illustrations by Kokoschka, one of the most distinguished representatives of the movement, Kafka said: "I don't understand. To me, it merely proves the painter's inner chaos." What he rejected in expressionism is the overstatement of feeling and the seeming lack of craftsmanship. While Kafka was perhaps not the great craftsman in the sense that Flaubert was, he admired this faculty in others. In terms of content, Kafka was highly skeptical and even inimical toward the expressionist demand for the "new man." This moralistic-didactic sledgehammer method repulsed him.

Kafka's relationship with existentialism is much more complex, mainly because the label "existentialist" by itself is rather meaningless. Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard all have a certain existentialist dimension in their writings, as do Camus, Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger, with whose works the term existentialism has been more or less equated since World War II. These various people have rather little in common concerning their religious, philosophical, or political views, but they nevertheless share certain characteristic tenets present in Kafka.

Kafka certainly remained fascinated and overwhelmed by the major theme of all varieties of existentialist thinking, namely the difficulty of responsible commitment in the face of an absurd universe.
Deprived of all metaphysical guidelines, a man is nevertheless obligated to act morally in a world where death renders everything meaningless. He alone must determine what constitutes a moral action although he can never foresee the consequences of his actions. As a result, he comes to regard his total freedom of choice as a curse. The guilt of existentialist heroes, as of Kafka's, lies in their failure to choose and to commit themselves in the face of too many possibilities-none of which appears more legitimate or worthwhile than any other one. Like Camus' Sisyphus, who is doomed to hauling a rock uphill only to watch it roll down the other side, they find themselves faced with the fate of trying to wring a measure of dignity for themselves in an absurd world. Unlike Sisyphus, however, Kafka's heroes remain drifters in the unlikely landscape they have helped create. Ulrich in Musil's The Man Without Quality and Mersault in Camus' The Stranger these men are really contemporaries of Kafka's "heroes," drifters in a world devoid of metaphysical anchoring and suffering from the demons of absurdity and
alienation. And in this sense, they are all modern-day relatives of that
great hesitator Hamlet, the victim of his exaggerated consciousness
and overly rigorous conscience.

The absurdity which Kafka portrays in his nightmarish stories was, to
him, the quintessence of the whole human condition. The utter
incompatibility of the "divine law" and the human law, and Kafka's
inability to solve the discrepancy are the roots of the sense of
estrangement from which his protagonists suffer. No matter how hard
Kafka's heroes strive to come to terms with the universe, they are
hopelessly caught, not only in a mechanism of their own contriving,
but also in a network of accidents and incidents, the least of which
may lead to the gravest consequences. Absurdity results in
estrangement, and to the extent that Kafka deals with this basic
calamity, he deals with an eminently existentialist theme.

Kafka's protagonists are lonely because they are caught midway
between a notion of good and evil, whose scope they cannot
determine and whose contradiction they cannot resolve. Deprived of
any common reference and impaled upon their own limited vision of
"the law," they cease to be heard, much less understood, by the world
around them. They are isolated to the point where meaningful
communication fails them. When the typical Kafka hero, confronted
with a question as to his identity, cannot give a clear-cut answer,
Kafka does more than indicate difficulties of verbal expression: he
says that his hero stands between two worlds between a vanished one
to which he once belonged and between a present world to which he
does not belong. This is consistent with Kafka's world, which consists
not of clearly delineated opposites, but of an endless series of
possibilities. These are never more than temporary expressions, never
quite conveying what they really ought to convey hence the
temporary, fragmentary quality of Kafka's stories. In the sense that
Kafka is aware of the limitations which language imposes upon him and tests the limits of literature, he is a "modern" writer. In the sense that he does not destroy the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic components of his texts, he remains traditional. Kafka has refrained from such destructive aspirations because he is interested in tracing the human reasoning process in great detail up to the point where it fails. He remains indebted to the empirical approach and is at his best when he depicts his protagonists desperately trying to comprehend the world by following the "normal" way.

Because they cannot make themselves heard, much less understood, Kafka's protagonists are involved in adventures which no one else knows about. The reader tends to have the feeling that he is privy to the protagonist's fate and, therefore, finds it rather easy to identify with him. Since there is usually nobody else within the story to whom the protagonist can communicate his fate, he tends to reflect on his own problems.
over and over again. This solipsistic quality Kafka shares with many an existential writer, although existentialist terminology has come to refer to it as "self-realization."

Kafka was thoroughly familiar with the writings of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, and it pays to ponder the similarities and differences between their respective views. The most obvious similarity between Kafka and Kierkegaard, their complex relationships with their respective fiancées and their failures to marry, also points up an essential difference between them. When Kafka talks of bachelorhood and a hermit's existence, he sees these as negative. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, was an enthusiastic bachelor who saw a divine commandment in his renunciation of women. For Kafka, bachelorhood was a symbol of alienation from communal happiness, and he thought of all individualism in this manner. This makes him a poor existentialist.

Unlike Kierkegaard, who mastered his anguish through a deliberate "leap into faith," leaving behind all intellectual speculation, Kafka and his heroes never succeed in conquering this basic anguish: Kafka remained bound by his powerful, probing intellect, trying to solve things rationally and empirically. Kafka does not conceive of the transcendental universe he seeks to describe in its paradoxical and noncommunicable terms; instead, he sets to describing it rationally and, therefore, inadequately. It is as if he were forced to explain something which he himself does not understand nor is really supposed to understand. Kafka was not the type who could will the act of belief. Nor was he a man of flesh and bones who could venture the decisive step toward action and the "totality of experience," as did Camus, for instance, who fought in the French Underground against the Nazi terror. Kafka never really went beyond accepting this world in a way that remains outside of any specific religion. He tended to
oppose Kierkegaard's transcendental mysticism, although it might be too harsh to argue that he gave up all faith in the indestructible nature" of the universe, as he called it. Perhaps this is what Kafka means when he says, "One cannot say that we are lacking faith. The simple fact in itself that we live is inexhaustible in its value of faith."

In the case of Dostoevsky, the parallels with Kafka include merciless consciousness and the rigorous conscience issuing from it. Just as characters in Dostoevsky's works live in rooms anonymous and unadorned, for example, so the walls of the hunger artist's cage, the animal's maze, and Gregor Samsa's bedroom are nothing but the narrow, inexorable and perpetual prison walls of their respective consciences. The most tragic awakening in Kafka's stories is always that of consciousness and conscience. Kafka surpasses Dostoevsky in this respect because that which is represented as dramatic relation between, say, Raskolnikov and
Porfiry in *Crime and Punishment* becomes the desperate monologue of a soul in Kafka's pieces.

Kafka's philosophical basis, then, is an open system: it is one of human experiences about the world and not so much the particular *Weltanschauung* of a thinker. Kafka's protagonists confront a secularized deity whose only visible aspects are mysterious and anonymous. Yet despite being continually faced with the essential absurdity of all their experiences, these men nevertheless do not cease trying to puzzle them out. To this end, Kafka uses his writing as a code of the transcendental, a language of the unknown. It is important to understand that this code is not an escape from reality, but the exact opposite the instrument through which he seeks to comprehend the world in its totality without ever being able to say to what extent he may have succeeded.

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Brod, Max. *Über Franz Kafka*. Frankfurt, Heidelberg: Fischer, 1966. This volume was the first to contain Brod's three important pieces on Kafka. For over twenty years Brod saw his friend daily and discussed his work with him. Because of Brod, four-fifths of Kafka's work was not burned, as Kafka had requested it to be.

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attempts to do justice to the reading of Kafka by presenting his work from many different viewpoints, some of them strongly disagreeing with most Kafka criticism.

Heller, Erich. *The Disinherited Mind*. Cambridge, England: Bowes and Bowes, 1952. The tenor of the essay "The World of Franz Kafka" (the other two deal with other aspects of modern literature) is that Kafka, although fully aware of his own sickness and the sickness of the age, could at no point even begin to extricate himself from his personal tragedies. He would not and could not venture the "leap into faith" and can under no circumstances be called a believer.

Janouch, Gustav. *Gesprache mit Kafka* (Conversations with Kafka). Frankfurt: Fischer, 1951. Janouch, who met Kafka in 1920, participated in several translations of Kafka's work into Czech. The volume is a collection of letters, notes, diary entries, and personal memories. The material is therefore rather personal in character, expressing Kafka's views in the form of parables, aphorisms, and anecdotes.


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Reimann, Paul, ed. *Franz Kafka aus Prager Sicht*. (Franz Kafka
(Viewed from Prague) Prague: Voltaire, 1966. This collection of lectures delivered at the now famous Kafka Symposium of 1963 marked a turning point in the Communist appraisal of Kafka. For the first time, the relevance of his work was admitted for Socialist countries as well. In the meantime, this cautious new approach has been completely reversed, especially since the Warsaw Pact Invasion of August, 1968. Once more, Kafka's work is regarded as decadent and irrelevant for Socialist societies. Since all contributions are by noted Communist critics and politicians many of whom emigrated to the West after Dubcek's fall the emphasis is on such concepts as realism, alienation, and the function of art in a Socialist society.