

Intimacy and human desire in the trial



In order to address the paradoxes of eroticism and human desire for intimacy in *The Trial*, it is important to recognize the ongoing theme of bondage (in the classic master/slave sense). Without this undercurrent of power and servitude, it is impossible to pin down Joseph K.'s apparent need or desire to become involved (whether intimately or socially) with women such as Fraulein Burstner, Fraulein Grubach, Leni, and the washwoman at the Court. It should be noted also that the dream-like state in which Kafka portrays the story is important to allowing these somewhat "fetish-ized" situations to occur. A central issue in K's dealings with these women is that he often seeks out women that will help him in some way. It could be to alleviate boredom and supply information (Leni), to pass the time (Elsa), to give him information and/or help regarding his case (the washerwoman), or to lend him sexual gratification (all of the above?). In fact, K. even seems to reflect on this on page 107 when he first encounters Leni after she has broken the dish to get his attention: "' I recruit women helpers', he thought, almost amazed: ' first Fraulein Burstner, then the court usher's wife, and now this little nurse who seems to have an inexplicable desire for me.'" This realization does not seem to bother him, only cause him to wonder at the coincidence. To the reader however, especially after a second reading, this fact stands out as one of the greater questions of the book: how are these women related to K.'s struggle against the court? How are they implicated in the proceedings and to what degree? What is their significance to K., whether emotionally or through the gleaning of some physical or material item or act? In an attempt to explore some of these questions, it is best to go in chronological order from the time K. meets each of these women characters, beginning first with K.'s relationship to Frl. Grubach, his landlady.

Although they do not appear to have ever been intimately involved, they seem to have a close relationship and the reader gets the idea that K. has lived in the boarding house for quite some time. Frl. Grubach is reliable and industrious and is obviously quite fond of K. as we find out during a conversation when K. comes to see her regarding Frl. Burstner's room. She says, " he could visit her anytime, he was her best and dearest boarder, as he well knew". It is not until later, however, when K. is in Frl. Burstner's room, that K. says, " she's [Frl. Grubach] beholden to me since she's borrowed a large sum from me." That adds a complexity to their relationship that was not seen when they had their initial conversation and she had seemed like his kindly landlady who wished for " his happiness". K.'s relationship with Frl. Grubach is evidence to the master/slave relationship theme, as Frl. Grubach is at K.'s service throughout the book due to the money she owes him. K. is also seen as " the punisher" in this relationship as he does not seem concerned with her feelings when he lashes out at her over her remarks about Frl. Burstner. This punisher role that K. takes on is stated on page 26 when K. " thought for a moment of punishing Frau Grubach by talking Fraulein Burstner into joining him in giving notice". Although this is not a physical punishment, he uses mental games as punishment with characters he feels superior to. This issue of K's assumed superiority is a large element in his personality. Thus when he views himself to be above someone, he acts accordingly, unheeding of their feelings and seeming not to care about the outcome of his actions. K.'s games with Frl. Grubach are evidence of this. It should be noted also that Frl. Grubach does not play much of a role in the heart of the story, but as time wears on she appears less likable, not only to the reader, but possibly to K.. She takes on

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the role of “ watcher” and is always at the boarding house. Actually, she becomes quite pitiable after her great relief is expressed when K. begins talking to her again on page 236 when she brings him his breakfast: “...you don’t know how I’ve suffered the last few days! That I would slander my boarders! And you thought, Herr K.!” She is in tears by this time and K. pleads with her not to cry while thinking of something else entirely. By this point it is easy to view her as being slightly obsessive, and perhaps also a little shady. After all, she does know all the comings and goings of the boarding house and can’t be trusted entirely. In this sense it can be said the Frl. Grubach embodies the Court. Omnipresent, something to live with that judges and oversees. She is almost motherly, but not protective, rather, she is secretive. Kafka gives no real evidence for this, but it is rather implied based on character judgements the reader can make throughout the book. Everyone seems to know of K.’s accused status (Frl. Grubach especially). Frl. Burstner seems to be the only woman that K. gives serious thought to, and since he only seems interested in gaining things from women, the reader is left wondering exactly what it is that he wants from Frl. Burstner. Could it be purely physical? Could it be separate from the trial’s proceedings? He treats her quite differently than he does Leni. For example Kafka uses descriptive language to describe her appearance and physical actions to a greater degree than he does when Leni is introduced. And, even though it may seem trivial, when Frl. Burstner is first introduced she appears seductive in small ways: “ Fraulein Burstner softly invited him again into her room.” The word “ softly” is uncharacteristicly used, and has not appeared in the description of any other character or action yet. Also, “ she crossed her legs lightly”, thus giving the impression of Frl. Burstner being sexy and inviting, yet pushing

away K.'s advances. This is the first and only woman that has power over K. (besides perhaps the elusive Elsa) and he seems to find her compelling. He later takes her in a somewhat forceful and impulsive, almost feral way. "' I'm coming' said K., rushed out, seized her, kissed her on the mouth, then all over her face, like a thirsty animal lapping at a spring it has found at last." To the reader, this seems to be an almost violent outburst of passion and makes K. appear seem vulnerable and susceptible to acting purely on physical needs (shades of Mersault come to mind). Thus it initially appears that K. wishes to gain only sexual gratification from Frl. Burstner, as no other sort of attraction is mentioned. Frl. Burstner does, however, tell him that she will be working at a law office and wants to help him. This immediately raises the question of whether he is becoming involved with Frl. Burstner to receive her help. Her importance to K. is also difficult to ascertain, since when she appears at the end, one is left wondering about her involvement in the trial. The character of Frl. Burstner represents the Court in its elusiveness, it's lack of making sense, being understood, or captured and held to look at. It is important to also include Elsa, as she is an important character to help shed light on K.'s dealings with women. Although she is mentioned only a few times and does not seem to play a large role in K.'s life, she does represent a truth about K.. Joseph K. does not ever seem to have an actual " girlfriend", only women that come his way and are attracted to him for some unknown reason. With Elsa the reader is given the impression that this rule is broken: that he came to Elsa. She implies that she is a bartender by night and a prostitute by day, as she " only receives visitors in bed". This is just someone else that K. uses to fulfill a particular need, namely for sex. Later in the story, after K. has the conflict with the bandy-legged student, K. " pictured how

funny it would be, for example, to see this miserable student, this puffed-up child, this bandy-legged, bearded fellow, kneeling at Elsa's bedside, clutching his hands and begging for mercy." The implication is once again of a slave/master relationship. It seems that K. takes a special liking to women who are "above him" somehow. Women who do not throw themselves at his feet, like Leni and the washerwoman/court usher's wife. He feels himself superior to most people and could have a mental/physical need for being submissive (sexually speaking) without emotional attachment. This would explain his urges and thoughts about going to see Elsa: he only mentions going to see her when he is feeling "above" people or his situation. This would also explain his obsession about Frl. Burstner as she is coy and toys with his desire by being elusive yet discreetly seductive (in her apartment) all the while "stroking her hip" while she is sitting on the divan (pg. 30). He treats women who already at his service with something to offer him without a care, as if he could easily do without them (Leni, Frl. Grubach, the court usher's wife, and even Frl. Montag, although K. is repulsed by her physical appearance and demeanor). This dominance versus submissiveness is a part of K.'s life not only with women, but with the court. There are times when he is on top and powerful and times when he is lost, beaten down and can think of nothing but the Court. Leni is quite an odd and impenetrable character. She "just happens to be" the lawyer's nurse and is conveniently there to meet K.. She is childlike not only in her looks ("she had a round doll-like face, her pale cheeks and chin forming a circle completed by her temples and forehead") but in her actions also. For instance, she gets K.'s attention by smashing a plate against the wall hoping he would come out. In this sense she has a complete disregard for K's trial, yet seems at other times wants to

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try to help him by giving him advice and information about the judges. Her need and desire for K. is selfish as it is revealed that she finds all defendants attractive. K.'s desire and need for her are also selfish, motivated by both lust and the information she can provide him. K. seems to be able to do with or without her, but it does seem that she provides respite from the lawyer's long speeches on the nonsensical judicial system. For example, "the only welcome interruption during these visits was Leni, who always knew how to arrange things so that she served the lawyer's tea in K.'s presence. Then she would stand behind K., apparently watching the lawyer as he bowed deeply over his cup...secretly allowed K. to grasp her hand... Leni sometimes dared to stroke K.'s hair softly." (pg. 123). It seems that that was Leni's purpose... to serve K. physically and to provide him with some information. Thus again the theme of master/slave continues: Leni, in service to her older master, K., who is in turn in service to his master, the Court, and the lawyer serving as the rope by which they are both bound. In discussing the role of bondage and servitude, the scene with Block and the lawyer beginning on page 190 is an excellent example. (Although this is not directly related to the females which K. encounters, it does put these situations into context). In this scene all roles are either reversed or heightened. Block is forced by the lawyer (and his own needs) to act much like a trained animal for the lawyer. There is something very fetish-like about this scene. The lawyer is Punisher and Giver of needs, Leni is the go-between, the master's higher-order slave, telling the Master how the subject behaves and "if he's been good". K. is the bystander, the one in which the master seeks to give pleasure or pain to by making him watch the whole disgusting scene. This scene, which represents a "hierarchy" of bondage and servitude is a theme that runs throughout this

entire book, particularly in dealings with the Law. It may appear to have nothing to do with K.'s relation to some of the women in the story, but it is actually a concentrated version of the story with each of the women and the Court in general. It can be argued that all of these women were secretly against K., even to the point of plotting behind his back. When asked the question..." How did K. put each of these women on trial in a sense", it would be more prudent to ask " How did these women put K. on trial? Is the reader the unseen and omnipresent jury on the life of K.? Are we glad he's been executed? Was it the face of the reader in the window that K. saw before his death? Who were we..." friend? A good person? Someone who cared?...Was it everyone?" (pg. 231)