

# Kafka's penal colony



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Roaul Duke in the popular film, *Fear and Loathing in Los Vegas*, said, " And that, I think, was the handle - that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of old and evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. " Kafka uses the idea that the " old and evil" can, in fact, prevail to create fear and suspense in *The Penal Colony*. The battle between the old and new regime, what they individually represent, and the confusion surrounding them brings a realistic terror to the piece.

The fear this instills creates a " shiver of recognition" (Charles, 1080), which brings about greater understanding of the concept of justice and good prevailing over evil. A major theme of Kafka's piece is the idea of justice, which is tied to the ever fleeting concept of truth. The primary form of justice is brought about using the apparatus. The piece tries to explain the apparatus as it consists of three parts, " the lower one is called the ' Bed', the upper one the ' Designer', and this one here in the middle that moves up and down is called the ' Harrow. " (Kafka, 142) Although the author goes into great detail about the inter-workings of the apparatus, it is difficult to comprehend, much like the concept of justice. There are many interpretations of what the apparatus looks like, mostly because the details Kafka gives are so vague. For example, the officer explains, " here is the bed... It is completely covered with a layer of cotton wool... The Bed and the Designer were of the same size and looked like two dark wooden chests.

The Designer hung about two meters above the Bed; each of them was bound at the corners with four rods of brass that almost flashed out rays in sunlight. Between the chests shuttled the Harrow on a ribbon of steel" (Kafka, 142-143). There are so many different aspects to the apparatus, although a

complete understanding is almost impossible. The apparatus represents justice in the Penal Colony because for the reader there are many interpretations of the apparatus.

These mental images are formed from the many vague details we're given about the apparatus itself, the same way that the truth about what happens during a crime committed can be vague. The commandant explained, " He would have lied, and if I had been successful in refuting his lies, he would have replaced them with new lies, and so forth. " (Kafka, 145). This shows that to the members of the old regime of the Penal Colony see the apparatus as a representation of justice because it cuts out the grey area and the lies behind the prisoner's story and one is left with one black and white conclusion: the crime happened, so the prisoner dies. As the officer says, " guilt is to never be doubted. " (Kafka, 145).

Kafka uses the idea of the apparatus to create suspense by tying the idea of truth and justice to the Old Regime, which represents the " old and evil". By tying these opposing ideals together, he causes confusion and clouds the reader's judgment about the conclusion of the story. When the old Commandant is described, there are undertones of regality. " It isn't saying too much if I tell you that the organization of the whole penal colony is his work..." The officer says, " And our prophecy has come true; the new Commandant has to acknowledge its truth.

A pity you never met the old Commandant! —But," (Kafka, 141). The prophecy isn't brought up again until the end of the piece where " after a certain number of years the Commandant will rise again and lead his adherent... to recover the colony. " (Kafka, 167). Although the officer seems

like the only person who still believes in the ideals of the old regime (namely, the use of the apparatus), there are many places where the Old Regime stands for truth and justice. The confusion and suspense occur because of this pairing.

The Old Regime utilizes a cruel and barbaric method of justice which involves a punishment with lack of a trial, the use of the death penalty, public celebratory execution, and even the viewing of this execution by children. When the reader discovers the cruelty of the Old Regime there is a "shiver of recognition" because of the reality of the situation. Throughout history societies have used the methods that were enacted by the Old Regime. Jesus was publicly hung, and many people celebrated his death. Women who were believed to be witches were burned at the stake without a proper trial.

Slaves were publicly executed simply to be made examples of. Even in modern times, Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Kim Jong-Il deaths were made public and celebrated, not to mention the lack of a fair trial given to Hussein or Bin Laden. Kafka brings about greater understanding of justice to the reader by using a "shiver of recognition" to create fear and suspense. As previously mentioned, there is the general idea that there is a "sense of inevitable victory over the forces of old and evil", but in *The Penal Colony* this is questioned.

Although in this piece there is a new Commandant, he is not viewed as regal or impressive like the previous Commandant. He seems to be easily persuaded by the women who are always by his side, not to mention that the meeting with all the higher administrative officials has become a public "spectacle... A gallery has been built, which is always full of spectators. "

(Kafka, 158). This shows that the new authority represents gluttony and excess instead of the truth and justice which was used to represent the old regime.

The sense of security around the new regime that doesn't utilize the apparatus is shattered when Kafka takes the story into the tea house. As soon as we enter the tea house, the narrator notes that "it made on the explorer the impression of historic tradition of some kind, and he felt the power of past days." (Kafka, 166). The old Commandant was buried in the tea house, a place where the townspeople meet and possibly discuss politics. This made the old Commandant a possession of the people.

The officer never mentioned that the Commandant was buried in the teahouse, "that's what he was most ashamed of." (Kafka, 166). The officer didn't want to believe that the old Commandant was becoming less regal, for in the old Regime he was privileged to be under direct order of the Commandant. He was allowed to have a front row seat to the executions and to introduce children to the utilization of the apparatus. Perhaps the ideas of the old Commandant were becoming something conventional and even watered-down because the ideals were discussed in the teahouse.

The "shiver of recognition" causes fear when "the soldier and the condemned man, ran before him pointing with outstretched arms in the direction where the grave should be." (Kafka, 167). The members of society who seemed agree with new Regime with its excess and less harsh methods of punishment, still found the old ideas acceptable. The horror here stems from the fact that the old ideals never left the society. The townspeople here

don't even notice their own barbarianism- or even worse, they've accepted their cruelty to others as being civilized.

This terrifying idea that the townspeople have accepted their barbarianism as being civilized is also represented when the oppressor becomes the oppressed. This idea is represented several times throughout *The Penal Colony*. When running to the old Commandants grave, even the condemned man runs with outstretched arms. There is mental imagery of children running home to their father here, even though earlier in the story the man was condemned to death by the same judicial system that he once supported. This theme is also represented when the officer, who originally was the oppressor, puts himself in the apparatus and becomes the oppressed.

The officer was of high authority in the old regime, but upon a change in leadership, the officer status also changed. He was oppressed by the new commandant. He then tried to support his idea of the apparatus representing truth by wanting to go down with it. Without the apparatus to uphold the ideals of truth and justice, the officer lost his identity and used it on him. " If the judicial procedure which the officer cherished were really so near its end- possibly as a result of his own intervention, as to which he felt himself pledged- then the officer was doing the right thing... (Kafka, 163). Kafka uses the confusion surrounding the old regime and if it stands for truth and justice, or if it's barbaric to add to the suspense of the piece. Kafka leaves the reader with a terrifying concept of morality. He allows the reader to decide if its heroic to die with the old regime, and to determine if justice can also be barbaric, or if it's better to know that the system is flawed and allow

the cyclic flow of old to new regime to continue even though it's cruel. Worst of all, Kafka left us questioning if it's moral to turn your back on something inhumane.