

Existentialism in kafka essay sample



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Existentialism is the thought that reality has no meaning or purpose, and that this is something man must come to terms with through his life until he faces death. The pursuit of meaning is a prevalent theme in the work of Franz Kafka, especially so in his parable "Before the Law," in which a man refuses to face, or perhaps simply does not or will never realize, the fact that reality is meaningless. The central claim of existentialism is Jean-Paul Sartre's proposition that "existence precedes essence"- that what defines someone is their existence, their consciousness, and not their nature- the theory that life is not ruled by some omniscient metaphysical being or force, but rather, by the individual. Man defines himself, thus, man is responsible for himself in all things.

In Kafka's "Before the Law" the character K is told a story by a priest, the story of a man who arrives at a doorway to "the Law" seeking entrance, yet is denied by the guard there. "The man, on reflection, asks if he will be allowed, then to enter later," and the guard replies, "'It is possible'... 'But not at this moment'" (Kafka 175). The man is puzzled, but determined in his quest. The doorkeeper supplies him with a stool and the man settles in to wait. However, he is continually denied entrance by the guard year after year, despite giving up all of his worldly possessions; he ends up spending the entirety of his life waiting. The gatekeeper waits as well, permitting the man to continue waiting indefinitely. As the man lies dying, he wonders why it is that he was the only person seeking "the Law". The gatekeeper tells the man that the gate he guards was only meant for him and since he is dying, he, the gatekeeper is going to close it. K is "strongly attracted to the story" and proceeds to engage the priest in an analytical argument about the

significance of the tale (Kafka176). " Before the Law" is, at its heart, an allegory of every man's search for a means through which to comprehend his existence.

The gatekeeper and the law in this parable are symbolic of the questions man faces in this life that he finds that he himself cannot answer and his inner battle to understand himself. The gatekeeper being, "only the lowest doorkeeper'," hints toward man's struggle to intimately know himself, for, "keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. Even the third of these has an aspect that even [the gatekeeper] cannot bear to look at" (Kafka 175). This is played upon further, when the countryman loses focus and, " forgets about the other doorkeepers...[the one before him] the only barrier between himself and the Law" (Kafka 175). He becomes almost single minded and obsessive, seeing only a singular path to the Law, reflecting the man's lack of perspective as he grows weary of " the imaginary" and fails to realize that, perhaps, Kafka reflects, " the truth that lies closet...[is] that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell," when attempting to be self examine oneself and that one will always hit a metaphorical wall when attempting to know oneself, for it is a fragment of the human condition that is inescapable (Kafka 262).

Whether man questions religion or a higher power or his purpose in life- the Law represents the answers that he believes must exist, the gateway to the meaning of truth and knowledge, while the gatekeeper is a manifestation of his own failings that prevent him from realizing that perhaps there is no universal truth, no answer to these questions. The Law is sought by all, and <https://assignbuster.com/existentialism-in-kafka-essay-sample/>

when the man in the tale questions the gatekeeper as to why, “that in all these year no one has come seeking admittance but [him]’,” the doorkeeper replies that, “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you,” this dialogue echoes the individuality of it all and the loneliness of introspection (Kafka 176). It highlights the struggle of man as an individual as he attempts to understand himself. In this way, “Before the Law” is a message about “inner” life as opposed to “exterior” life. Kafka highlights the internal struggle of man, the human condition and man’s fight to oppose it.

The man from the countryside in this tale is searching, as all men search, for a reason, a “law,” perchance, to act as a guide in a life in which there is none. In this way, there is an absurdity to the story in an allegorical sense— for as man seeks a guiding hand to lead him through the senselessness that is the human condition, he will discover that the path to understanding is blocked only by his own mind and is thus an obstacle of his own making. Finding out that the gate that the keeper guards is nonexistent and simply a fancy of his own making and a struggle of the individual, something that only the he himself can overcome for each battle to discover oneself is unique to the individual, a personal law. The characters of K and the priest represent the two clashing sides within themselves; the priest being the rational side that dictates there must be a meaning to the story, coming up with multiple interpretations; while K acts against this, demanding more and never satisfied with the answers given. K, in this parable and all similar, appears to be a reflection of an inquisitorial side of Kafka himself. K is seeking understanding of himself in the universe, but he is faced with irrational fears

and he develops a certain contemplative anxiety as he is faced with the pressures placed upon man by the existential.

As stated previously, man defines himself, and consequently man is responsible for himself in all things- a responsibility that can develop an anxiety in man as he comes to realize that he is alone in his struggle. Kafka has proven to be an anxious man vicariously through his previous works and in life, and this is reflected in the questioning character of K, who is coming to terms with his own realizations of the "law" and its meaning in the priest's allegorical tale. Kafka discusses his own experience with self-analysis in a journal entry written on January 19, 1922: "[Introspection] will suffer no idea to sink tranquilly to rest but must pursue each one into consciousness, only itself to become an idea, in turn to be pursued by renewed introspection" (Kafka 262). Kafka views introspection as something that is almost torturous to the mind, something that plagues him ceaselessly.

This path of introspection resonates with Kafka's explanation of what he calls the "true way," which, "goes over rope which is not stretched at any great height but just above the ground," and in this way it appears to, "be more designed to make people stumble than to be walked upon" (Kafka 236). K appears to be just as affected by the story as Kafka is by the notion of self-analysis- as is the man within the parable itself, who is importunate in his questioning of the gatekeeper- incessantly questioning the priest and challenging him even when reasonable and believable responses are given; he simply cannot accept the tale for what it is, and is thoroughly trapped within his mind. No simple explanation will suffice, for man must understand himself why he seeks the Law and what he has to gain. The story of K and <https://assignbuster.com/existentialism-in-kafka-essay-sample/>

the priest also represent a truth within Kafka for they are both part of him- for, “ In [him], by [himself], without human relationship, there are no visible lies,” according to Kafka and through which the dialogue between the characters of K and the priest gains a new meaning (Kafka 259). By the end of the second segment of “ Before the Law” K declares the law nonexistent- an extremely close step to the theory of existentialism which is suggested within the story- a statement made by Kafka himself, and at this same moment the reader comes to realize the allegory behind the short story of the man from the countryside, the gatekeeper, and the Law.

The “ law” can also be interpreted in a more literal sense, not only representing meaning, that sort of unobtainable goal, but also, analogously, the structure within society. The man made systems of academia, law, government, and politics- which are meant to define concepts such as truth and knowledge, and bar those deemed unworthy by society. The difficulty in obtaining the “ law” is mirrored in the difficulty of accessing these groups and in the way that all responsibility in regards to being granted entrance to these factions rests on the shoulders of the individual. This second meaning only works to emphasize the undertone that the law is only meant for “ special people,” and is something that one must strive toward with an open mind or be taunted by when unable to reach it. The story within “ Before the Law” is of a man who, “ cannot come to terms with his life while he is alive,” and thus, “ dead [within] his own lifetime,” as Kafka weaves a tale within a tale in order to examine the introspective and its existential qualities (Kafka 262). He views the human struggle to come to terms with oneself and thoroughly dissects it, coming to the conclusion that all men must face their

inner selves and whether or not they realize what limits them from doing so before death is a choice of their own for it is their battle to face alone.