

Before the law -
translated by willa
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Sachs Michael Sachs March 27, Comment on “ Before the Law” I have been asked to comment on “ Before the Law,” by Franz Kafka (Select Writings).

Before I made any comments I wanted to read what other commentators had to say about this story. 1 What I found is deep analysis and various different meanings given to the scenarios and characters in the story. There are also discussions on who Franz Kafka (Wikipedia) was and the times he lived in. The definition of “ law” and Kafka’s views on the society in which he lived were also discussed. 2 I thought too much was being read into “ Before the Law.” Perhaps Kafka intended something much simpler.

The gatekeeper never helps the man from the country in a way ultimately beneficial to the man. Even though he knows, the gatekeeper never tells the man from the country that the gate was made just for the man and allows the man to grow old and infirm before revealing the gatekeeper will shut the door on him. The gatekeeper tells the man from the country that it is possible the man may gain entry one day, but it is never revealed how this might occur. It is never stated that the fleas actually speak to the gatekeeper on the man’s behalf. The more

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powerful gatekeepers inside do not interact with anyone. Therefore, the common theme that runs throughout this story is the lack of mutually beneficial cooperation among the characters regardless of the scenario.

I remember a class in psychology I took at the University of Illinois. A student teacher chose a woman and I to participate in an experiment. The woman and I could not converse among ourselves before or during the experiment. I went first. I was to bid either 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5. The woman was to follow my bid with 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5. We did this 5 times and our responses were

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marked down side by side. If either her bid or my bid was higher than the other person's bid, the higher bidder got that amount in dollars. Thus, for example, if I bid 5 and she bid 2, I got \$3. 00. After I bid first 5 times we repeated the experiment with her going first 5 times. The actual result was that as first bidder, I bid 5 each time for 5 times and she bid 5 each time as well. So I got nothing. When she bid first, she bid 5 and I followed with a bid of 5 each time. It was the same result and she got nothing. Finished, we wondered what this was all about.

The student teacher pointed out that if the woman and I had silently cooperated with each other we could have both prospered. Whenever I bid 5, if she bid 0 each of the 5 times I would have gotten \$25. When she went first, if she had bid 5 and I bid zero each time she would have gotten \$25. Instead, we both got nothing. I was stunned by how a mere change in thinking could so strongly affect a result.

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In "Before the Law's" collection of non-cooperating characters and scenarios nobody ends up better than they were before. Certainly the man from the country does not and we are apparently to be left with the same grim scenarios after he dies. Kafka's "Before the Law" leaves much open to interpretation. It makes us think.

Kafka is said to be an existentialist. (Wikipedia) The nineteenth century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (Wikipedia) is regarded as the father of existentialism. Kierkegaard existential philosophy maintained that "the individual is solely responsible for giving his or her own life meaning and for living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation and

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boredom. In his narration of the live recreation of “ Before the Law,” Orson Welles’ (Orson Wells) closing comment is “ This story is the logic of a dream...and a nightmare.” Could it be that Kafka’s “ Before the Law” was simply meant to show the reader what might happen when people fail to cooperate?

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Notes

1. For the various comments made by different writers run a web search on “ Before the Law.”
2. Ibid.

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Works Cited

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