

The trial on trial



Since its original date of publication in 1925, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* has resisted interpretation. At first glance, the novel's seemingly simple and serial sequence of events poses no problem for the reader. Though the incidents that involve Joseph K. are themselves particularly odd and almost fantastic, the reader is able to follow. However, in the second to last chapter of the novel, the reader encounters an utterly confounding story about one man's entrance to "the Law." The chapter, and the story contained therein, poses a problem for one who wishes to ask 'what is *The Trial* about?' Though it seems reasonable to be able to extrapolate the "bigger meaning" of the novel itself from a story contained within, both portions of the novel resist an analysis that results in a clear-cut conclusion. The story "Before the Law," the text for the discussion between the priest and K. in the chapter "In the Cathedral," is open to a wide-range of interpretations and when confronted with this tale, the reader and K. become frustrated at the lack of a solid, logical end. This experience, however, is not at all isolated to this particular chapter; within *The Trial*, there is a systematic denial of definite, unambiguous conclusions. Throughout the novel, the reader actively tries to come to a variety of conclusions concerning the "meaning" of "Before the Law" and K.'s trial while seeking an illuminating connection between the two. Ultimately, however, Kafka's tale leaves him without anything concrete and, as a result, without a solid interpretation. "Before the Law" frustrates the reader not because it is particularly complicated, but because it seems at once to be full of contradiction and paradox but, after some examination, there seem to be no inconsistencies present. Though it comes as a rather unsatisfying conclusion, "Before the Law" serves very well to sum up the problems readers associate with *The Trial*; there is no rhyme, reason, or

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calculable projection of the end to K.'s judicial procedures, and, in the end, the importance of his innocence or guilt is completely suspended. Many of the problems associated with interpretations of *The Trial* stem from the translation of the title of the work itself. The German title is *Der Prozess*, for the intuitive English reader, "the process." The differentiation between the two terms "trial" and "process" speaks directly to the difficulty of understanding inherent in the novel. The trial, according to the nuanced English word, indicates both a judicial process, that is, evidence discovery, statements by parties, and moderation by a judge, and finally an absolute judgment at the end of such a process. As one can see, there appears a stark contrast between the process itself and that which one expects to come at the end of it, a judgment. It is this very disconnect between what is provided to the reader and what the reader intuitively expects that exacerbates the problems of *The Trial*. Though it is (to say the least) odd to find courtrooms and stages within apartment complexes and nymphomaniac women hounding defendants, the reader can handle it, and though these events are very strange, they are not deal breakers. What really bothers the reader is the lack of a decision, the conspicuous absence of any "definites" that point to K.'s acquittal (or even his innocence or guilt). K.'s acquittal seems, after speaking to Titorelli, to be nearly impossible to achieve. According to the painter, there are three ways in which one may progress through the court system; acquittal, though the most desired outcome, is a historic anomaly. The painter says that K.'s innocence, however, should ensure his acquittal and that the judges need to see nothing more than evidence thereof. K., however, says that this is a contradiction; K.'s innocence seems (at least to him) to be entirely evident and he has yet to be acquitted. Furthermore,

prior to the discussion of the acquittal, the painter spoke at length as to how one may influence judges in order to achieve a favorable verdict. " These contradictions can be easily explained," the painter replies. " We're talking about two different things here, what the Law says, and what I've experienced personally; you mustn't confuse the two." (153) Though it seems true that there isn't a contradiction present here per se, the reader does detect something a little unsettling; the Law, apparently, is not always followed - but who is the Law? Is it just those gigantic, lengthy, complicated tomes that contain all the court precedents of the past hundred years, or is the Law the people who effect rulings and hold court? In much the same way as K. cannot solidly grasp the ethereal nature of the court system, the reader cannot fully conclude who, or what, it is that strictly composes the Law. This lack of a resolution causes the shock associated with K.'s execution at the end of the novel, and though it is a type of " final judgment," it does not follow from any easily discernable methods of justice. For, in *The Trial*, there truly is no such thing as justice; the reader does not encounter notions of traditional, or at least rational, legal justification anywhere within the text. The reader's frustration inevitably comes to a head in the second to last chapter, " In the Cathedral." At the point just before the introduction of the story " Before the Law," the reader is aware that the novel is near its end. Up until this point, the reader has not been presented with anything remotely resembling a definite decision about K. and his status qua defendant; surely, the reader assures himself, there must come some sort of denouement that will make clear exactly what is occurring in this book. Unfortunately, the story that seems at once to explain the contents of *The Trial* serves only to perpetuate the ambiguous qualities of the novel itself. The story " Before the

Law" concerns a man's attempt at entry into "the law." The story, however, never commits itself to any particulars concerning who is to blame for the man's inability to enter, and furthermore, the reader is never told what "the law" is. It seems that the identity of "the law" is perfectly obvious, but keeping in line with the differing translations of "der prozess," "the law" does not necessarily imply justice and definite decision. "The law," then, is perhaps just a process that has no ultimate (party beneficial or otherwise) conclusion, much like the man's experience in his attempts to gain entrance. As the discussion between the priest and K. shows, there are many ways to interpret the story. At first, K. is convinced that the man was deceived - "the doorkeeper conveyed the crucial information only when it could no longer be of use to the man." (217) The priest, however, shows that the doorkeeper in fact did not deceive, but only served his duty by answering the questions that he could. In order for the doorkeeper to have deceived the man, the priest says, a contradiction must arise from "the two important statements" given by the doorkeeper; "that he can't grant him admittance now"; and the other: 'this entrance was meant solely for you.'" (217). To the reader (and to K.), however, this does not seem satisfactory - both parties still think that the doorkeeper withheld important information which could have at once possibly provided the man with entrance into the law, or dissuaded him from wasting his life waiting for the opportunity to enter. The priest goes on to discuss other opinions of the story; that the doorkeeper is actually the one deceived and that he is subordinate to the man, or that both are in fact deceived. The priest, however, does not ever commit to one interpretation of the story; he is merely "pointing out the various opinions that exist on the matter." (218). He is quick to warn K. however, that he "mustn't pay too

much attention to opinions," which, as the reader must surely feel, is a particularly out of place warning. Why discuss the opinions at all if K. should not pay attention to them? Throughout the discussion, however, the priest does provide two statements which are free of bias, that is, they do not tend to support any distinct interpretation of the text as to whether it was the doorkeeper or the man who was the one deceived. First, the priest states that "the commentators tell us: the correct understanding of a matter and misunderstanding the matter are not mutually exclusive." (219) This statement goes, unfortunately, untouched by K. throughout the rest of the conversation, and though at first glance it seems to propose a contradiction, or at least a paradox, it is actually quite helpful in unpacking the story and The Trial as a whole. The discussion between the priest and K. that follows the story is based off of the assumption that one person (most likely the man, potentially the doorkeeper) is being deceived. Though perhaps adequately explained away by the priest after K.'s initial reaction to the story, the idea of deception generates the ensuing conversation. The notion of deception implies a deceiver and one who is deceived; K. thinks it is the man who is deceived by the doorkeeper, while the priest proposes arguments in favor of the opposite. Both interpretations seem viable, but the real question is not who is deceived, but if there is at all any deception present in the story. What at first seem to be contradictions to the reader and K., such as "correct understanding and misunderstanding not being mutually exclusive," are, in fact, not contradictions at all. Instead of the man or the doorkeeper, it is the reader who is being deceived by the proposition of statements that initially seem to be negations. At first, a contradiction is welcoming, for it brings with it a definite "one or the other" quality. Kafka,

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however, keeping in line with the perplexing nature of the court system that pervades the rest of the novel, systematically unveils the ambiguous nature of the ensuing discussion and the story itself. To begin discussing the first of the “contradictions,” it is best to define the words that carry the most significance, which in this case are “correct” and “misunderstanding.” “Correct” implies an objective standard in which there is some matter X, and there is a way to understand it Y that everyone (either by consensus or by mandate from, say a judicial proceeding?) treats as absolutely unalterably right. “Misunderstanding,” however, is subjective – one can misunderstand matter X in a variety of ways. Misunderstanding, however, does not directly imply incorrectness; it just means that one did not understand matter X in the usual way. Perhaps even further, one can perceive matter X completely backwards and find himself in a paradox, but this does not absolutely rule out that understanding matter X backwards or differently than the norm means one’s understanding is incorrect (re. the opposite of correct and thusly mutually exclusive). In addition there seems to be a difference between the parts of speech of “the correct understanding” and “misunderstanding;” though the first appears to be a noun (because of the word ‘the’), the second phrase could be either a noun or a verb, that is, the process of misunderstanding. K., in his discussion with the priest, is engaged in a process of understanding (or, misunderstanding) the story – however, due to the sheer number of viable interpretations available it seems as if there is no such thing as “the correct understanding.” Or perhaps, even further than that, all interpretations of the story are “the correct understanding” even if they flow from an obfuscation of the facts of the story. In this way it seems that “Before the Law” does not resist

interpretation whatsoever, for it provides fertile ground for a myriad of analyses! The effect, however, is a reflection of the problem persistent throughout the rest of the novel. If every understanding is viable, then there is no 'this is wrong, and this is right,' and so, the "correct" understanding can result from an utter misunderstanding of the text. The second statement made by the priest is one that concerns truth and necessity. After discussing the final interpretation of the story, that it is impossible to pass judgment of any kind on the actions of the doorkeeper in his capacity as servant of "the law," K. declares that in order to accept that particular opinion, one must consider everything that the doorkeeper said was in fact true. The priest responds "No...you don't have to consider everything true, you just have to consider it necessary." (223). K., clearly despondent, replies that it is "a depressing opinion... Lies are made into a universal system." (223) The distinction made between "truth" and "necessity" is unpleasant as it leaves the reader with a third option that invades the generally accepted true/false dichotomy: not false. In the "Before the Law" story, the doorkeeper does not provide the man with all information relevant to the events that are currently taking place or could take place in the story. In fact, he seems to give only half of what would be pertinent to the man; that "you cannot enter now" could be followed up with either "but you can in five minutes or time X" or, even worse, "and you cannot enter ever in the future." These are possible additions to the initial statement, and they could be useful to the man - but the doorkeeper does not utter them. Does that make him a liar, that is, a disseminator of falsities? Or is he telling the truth, but leaving something out - and in neglecting to say something, is that lying? Unfortunately, there is no way to arrive at either extreme of truth, and therefore, the initial doorkeeper

statement must be this third thing – not false. Once again, there is no definite answer that one can construct with regards to the doorkeeper's statements to the man waiting to enter the law – K., and the priest, cannot even agree on what should seem to be an easy question; whether or not the doorkeeper is lying. There are no concrete conclusions because, as K. says, “lies are made into a universal system;” there is no way to detect that which is definitely true or false using evidentiary support because every facet of the story generates multiple viable interpretations. The doorkeeper, as the priest explains to K., must have contradicted himself in his two important statements in order for him to have made, oddly enough, a contradiction and, therefore, deceived the man. The two statements given by the doorkeeper, “that he can't grant him admittance now,” and “this entrance was meant solely for you [the man],” at first seem incongruous for it doesn't seem to make sense that an entrance made for just one person would also be eternally closed to him. If in fact a contradiction did arise from these statements then it would be clear that the doorkeeper, whether intentionally or not, deceived the man. It is, however, not that clear, for the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance to the man “now.” The implication that arises from this statement is that the man, though denied admittance at that time, will, at a later date, be granted admittance. The fact that he is not eventually granted admittance is troubling and seems to, once again, speak to the indefinite nature of what the doorkeeper says. The second statement uttered by the doorkeeper concerns those properties that are attributed to the entrance. The doorkeeper states at the end of the story that ‘the entrance was meant solely for [the man].’ When the reader is initially met with this declaration, he feels slight anger at the fact that this information

has been withheld from the man. Even worse, the reader cannot understand why, when the entrance was meant for the man, that he was never admitted; it seems it is impossible to decipher the reasons (if there are any?) as to why the man was never granted admission. There is, however, something very clear about the conversation that takes place between the doorkeeper and the man; when the man asks the doorkeeper why no one else has ever requested admittance to “ the law,” the doorkeeper does not actually answer his question. Because of his answer, we assume that the man was asking about this entrance and why no one else ever came by to ask to be let in, and the reader is met with a potentially sufficient answer in that this particular entrance was meant only for this particular man. Here, yet again, the reader is provided with a “ non-false;” it is not false that the entrance was solely for the man because the readers of the novel have no evidence to the contrary, but it does not necessarily seem true either, for the man was never admitted. Perhaps the doorkeeper, in keeping in line with leaving out the potential last half of his previous sentence, forgot to finish this last statement – that, perhaps, the entrance was meant only to test the man, or that this entrance was meant solely for the man to wait by for an eternity. These possibilities are extrapolations and not supported individually by the text of the story, but their potential applicability serves only to show that “ Before the Law” is a microcosm of the systematic lack of definites that pervades the rest of the novel. Even further, it is possible that the second important piece of information that the doorkeeper bestows upon the man comes only as a result of the man’s attendance to the law for so many years. It is feasible to imagine that, at the beginning of the events within the tale, the man was in fact given all the information that the doorkeeper could have

told him. From there, it took the apparent commitment of the man to sit and stay by the entrance to show that he was ready to enter “ the law,” and perhaps he even did. In keeping with the erratic, unreasonable themes of the rest of The Trial, in which the courts seem to be a corrupt, illogical sort of system, “ the law” in the story could be simply the mirror of the frustrating process in which K. finds himself throughout the novel. The man was put on a sort of trial without him even being aware of such, and after showing that he was committed to the law, he was finally disallowed access; a very unexpected result, but once again, a result in line with the unpredictable and surprising nature of “ the law,” the doorkeeper, and the court system of the novel. Another question worth asking is what would have happened if the man had simply ignored the doorkeeper and entered through his own volition. The doorkeeper gives the very last words of the story and, after he says that the entrance was meant solely for the man, he declares “ I’m going to go and shut it now.” (217) Now, it seems, that the entrance was always open but the man was intimidated by the doorkeeper; perhaps this was the “ trial” by which the man was to be judged worthy to achieve “ the law.” Since the story ends without the man replying to the doorkeeper’s statement, the reader must assume that the man, ultimately, does not achieve his goal. The differentiation between the doorkeeper’s presence at the gate and the (apparently) physically open entrance begs more questions as to whether or not the doorkeeper was lying to the man in telling him that he could not enter. Nothing about the physicality of the opening to “ the law” has seemed to have changed throughout the story and therefore, since the man seemingly could have entered at any time he wished, whatever the doorkeeper had said is utterly irrelevant. But once again, though the

presence of the doorkeeper and the physical opening of the gate are not contradictions or mutually exclusive, there is nothing definite about the situation that would allow K. or the reader to arrive at a specific conclusion. Though each facet of the novel seems to resist a thorough and reasonable understanding, reading *The Trial* in light of the story “*Before the Law*” helps to unpack some of the themes present within the larger text. K.’s interaction with the court system is so confusing and exasperating because nowhere is there an iota of logic – there quite simply doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason why K. is on trial and how he may prove his innocence through the process. “*Before the Law*” sparks so many interpretations that it seems any understanding (even an arguable misunderstanding, as in the case of K.’s initial analysis) is feasible and as a result, there is no notion of an objective correct or incorrect way to resolve the problem. Kafka systematically plants passages within the text that at first seem to propose contradictions but, after examination, the reader discovers that there is no inconsistency; there is only myriad interpretation. There are no definites discernable within “*Before the Law*” and *The Trial* in general; no definitely wrong or correct interpretations and, as a result, no definite conclusions about K.’s innocence, the man’s entry into “*the law*,” and the doorkeeper’s deception.

References Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Schocken Books: New York, 1998.