

All for one



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

When faced with injustices, it is far easier to say one would act against them than actually physically or verbally doing so. In Franz Kafka's "In The Penal Colony," when invited, an explorer is subjected to observe an inhumane execution where defendants are mercilessly murdered with inscriptions of their crimes. The officer, the procedure's lone, surviving supporter, hopes that the explorer will agree with these methods; however, when he does not, the officer elects he himself to be put to death by the unjust machine. The explorer's response, the lack of any remote notion of stopping the officer, reveals his internal conflict of acting or not acting, his strong sense of self-preservation, and his small sense of sympathy.

As the officer strips in order to be placed in the machine, "The explorer bit his lips and said nothing" (220) as if stopping himself from utilizing his power to stop the officer. It reveals an internal conflict within the explorer, in which he is hesitant to act but is aware that he should. Even when merely discussing the procedure itself, the explorer says, "I was already wondering whether it would be my duty to intervene and whether my intervention would have the slightest chance of success" (216). This doubt is, therefore, a combination of both his ability to succeed and if he should make the attempt to begin with. The explorer's doubt is made apparent through his action biting his lips as if in order to keep from saying something and as result, not acting. This hesitation reveals a somewhat cowardice aspect of the explorer's character, as well as an insecurity of his power to influence. This internal conflict and cowardice also appears when the narrator states that "If the judicial procedure which the officer cherished were really so near its end – possibly as a result of [the explorer's] own intervention to which he felt

himself pledged..." (221), questioning himself about if he is to blame or not for the officer's choice by merely being there. The explorer seems to be aware that he has influenced the officer, despite having previously saying, "I can neither help nor hinder you" (213). His conflict between believing he has no influence but also seeing his impact to an extent, but not acting to purposely influence the officer and acting to save his life, then leans more towards a selfish motive.

The psychological struggle and selfishness that the explorer endures is, however, quickly shadowed by his instinct to preserve himself, especially when the situation does not directly affect him. The narrator describes that, "[The explorer] knew very well what was going to happen, but he had no right to obstruct the officer in anything" (220-221). In knowing the consequences of allowing the officer to proceed in putting himself in the machine, the explorer rationalizes not saving the man's life by saying it was not his choice to make, and it will not impact him in any way. In this way, he is far more invested in his own well being saying that he is "...going away early tomorrow morning, or at least embarking on [his] ship" (217) because he is able to escape the root of the issue and be free of the sight of it, it no longer will exist to him, proven when he "...quitted the teahouse and made for the harbor" (226) at the first opportunity to escape the colony. The explorer even convinces himself that "...the officer was doing the right thing; in his place the explorer would not have acted otherwise" (221). He realizes that the execution system is immoral with his very clear statement of "I do not approve of your procedure" (216) but justifies that the officer is taking the right course of action by killing himself and taking his own action rather

than someone acting against him. Because the explorer believes that the officer is correct, his decision not to stop him is therefore right as well. Tied directly with selfishness, the explorer's need to rationalize clearly wrong and morbid choices to make himself feel better is evidence of his strong sense of self-preservation. His detachment and disregard through this rationalization and believing it is not his "right" to intervene illustrates an instinctual response to save oneself first.

Rivaled by other notions of selfishness, self-preservation, and cowardice, in the final lines describing his choice to not act to save the officer, the explorer is also revealed to have some sense of sympathy. Saying that "...in his place the explorer would not have acted otherwise" (221) reveals that the explorer, in some way, admires the officer for his commitment to his beliefs because he believes he would act the same way that the officer does if it were him. Before this outright declaration that the officer is willing to die for his cause, the explorer, though he disagrees with the procedure, tells the officer, "I shall tell the Commandment what I think of the procedures, certainly, but not at a public conference, only in private" (217). The explorer seems to sympathize with the officer, electing to avoid shaming him by only discussing his disagreement in private. While mainly negative aspects are revealed in his contemplation, the explorer shows he is capable of understanding another perspective through these sympathetic and almost admiring comments.

In summation, inaction proves far more substantial to the characterization of the explorer, ironically, through the use of action. The explorer's inaction to prevent the officer's suicide reveals parts of his character such as cowardice,

insecurity, selfishness, self-preservation, and even some bits of sympathy through what he does do and his rationalizations for those actions. Rather than just saying he would act against these injustices and take the easy way out, though still acknowledging its existence, the explorer recognizes the injustice, yet allows it to fester by ignoring it and fabricating reasons for his decision to do as much.