INTRODUCTION

In the historic center of Prague lies the Square of Franz Kafka, where visitors meet a larger-than-life bust of Kafka’s brooding features staring down unblinkingly from a wall of Maisel Street. Another bust is found in the Quadrio Business Centre, where Kafka’s eleven-meter-tall face, comprised of forty-two independently rotating tiers that alternately distort and restore his stern features, turns from side to side as though scrutinizing its visitors. Kafka, perhaps the quintessential modernist author and scrutinizer of bureaucracy and the world at large, has thus been immortalized as an ever-watchful guardian. As Western society veered from its traditions, modernists reexamined existence; Kafka deemed the world absurd and struggled against its “unjust Judges” (Diaries 342). As he scrutinized the world, Kafka scrutinized himself and his writing, down to the individual letter of every word: “Almost every word I write jars against the next, I hear the consonants rub leadenly against each other and the vowels sing an accompaniment like Negroes in a minstrel show” (Diaries 29). Intensely doubtful about his own writing, Kafka destroyed an estimated ninety percent of his work and before his death in 1924 asked his friend Max Brod to burn the rest. Cementing his reputation as anonymous and enigmatic, Kafka published only a few short stories during his lifetime, including “The Judgment” in 1913 and Metamorphosis in 1915. Otherwise, his writing survives only in scattered fragments—letters and diaries, aphorisms, manuscripts of unfinished novels—all rescued by Brod, who disobeyed Kafka’s final request and, carrying a suitcase filled with Kafka’s writing, left for Palestine minutes before the Nazis isolated Prague. Due to Brod’s efforts, The Trial was published in 1925, followed by The
Castle in 1926 and Amerika in 1927, and Kafka’s slim corpus attained the recognition it had not during his lifetime.

Kafka has since been credited with his own informal literary genre, the Kafkaesque, which is characterized by an illogical, senseless, often nightmarish complexity and a mood of despondence and hopelessness. He was a troubled man beset by anxiety and depression; John Updike supposes that Kafka’s nervous system “flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain” (The Complete Stories ix). The Kafkaesque connotes the horrific and bizarre, but this skewing of Kafka’s reputation towards cynicism is surprising and perhaps unwarranted. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus discusses the philosophy of absurdism, which claims that the efforts of humanity to find value and meaning in life are doomed and therefore absurd; Camus compares this absurdity to the “futile and hopeless labor” of Sisyphus, condemned to “ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight” (119). Camus praises Kafka for his depiction of the absurd, but he qualifies his praise by claiming that Kafka introduces “hope in a strange form” (130). Hope is not typically associated with the Kafkaesque, but contrarily, Camus interprets Kafka as purposeful and deliberate. Camus and Kafka agree that the world is absurd and that rationalism—the belief that reason is the basis of all truth, that logic explains all the workings of the world—is insufficient. But Kafka’s writing is not purely a venting of frustrations, not startling and bizarre merely for the sake of being startling and bizarre. Kafka should be read not as a cynic, but as a skeptic. Cynicism implies passivity: acknowledging a problem without attempting to remedy it and finally succumbing to apathy. If he had been a cynic, Kafka would have written truly hopeless
stories. As a skeptic, Kafka recognized the absurdity of the world and surmised that there must be a means of rectification. The question becomes: What is the absurdity that Kafka depicts, and what is his hope?

Before further discussion, I must acknowledge the inherent problem of interpreting Kafka. As an author whose corpus was primarily posthumous, Kafka deflects direct analysis. Aside from the few stories published during his lifetime, Kafka’s fiction cannot be said to be purely his own. *Amerika, The Trial*, and *The Castle* are truly collaborative works between Kafka and Max Brod, who organized scattered chapters into their current, incomplete forms. Though the words belong to Kafka, the narrative structure was partially constructed by Brod. To Brod’s credit, the narratives are logical and may well reflect Kafka’s original intention, but the fact remains that Kafka did not construct the current forms of his stories. Furthermore, I must rely on translations rather than the original German, and I acknowledge that translation may stray from the original spirit of the text. However, I believe that a broad thematic discussion is largely immune to misrepresentation. My discussion is based on the Willa and Edwin Muir translations, which were the first translations, published as early as 1930. Secondary literature typically relies on these translations, thus allowing me to engage in conversation with other analyses. Relying on translations, I avoid analysis of diction and syntax, which are partially the work of translators. Instead, I focus on plot, detail, characterization, and symbolism, which—and here I must rely on the integrity of the translators—are abstract ideas that transcend diction and truly belong to Kafka. Because Brod partially constructed the narrative structure of the novels, character development is ambiguous, but any character development is at least indicative of a change in character, because the
writing compiled by Brod ultimately belongs to Kafka. With these considerations in mind, I return to my discussion.

In Kafka’s fiction, the absurd is largely social—that people are, by some unseen force, bound to a bourgeois society that mandates an incomprehensible code of behavior and normalcy. Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* provides a fitting definition of the bourgeois world:

> Now the bourgeois treasures nothing more highly than the self, rudimentary as his may be. And so at the cost of intensity he achieves his own preservation and security. His harvest is a quiet mind which he prefers to being possessed by God, as he does comfort to pleasure, convenience to liberty…the bourgeois is consequently by nature a creature of weak impulses, anxious, fearful of giving himself away and easy to rule. (52)

Kafka criticizes both the bourgeois world for its forced assimilation of humanity and humanity for its submission to the bourgeoisie. If a social contract exists between humanity and society, it was not written and signed in the truest sense of a contract. Kafka depicts the contract not as an explicit agreement with the full understanding of all parties, but one forced on its participants and whose terms are never specified, so that people live in “complete ignorance of all things concerning [it]” (*The Trial* 153). It is more accurate to characterize this relationship between citizen and society as subjugation under an arbitrary social mandate, in which the directive, the *what* is known—conforming to normalcy—but the *why* and *how* is not. There is no understanding of what normalcy means, perhaps no achievable state of normalcy at all, and therefore it is impossible to fulfill this mandate. Kafka’s characters are trapped in two conflicting
situations: the necessity of understanding others to find a place among them and the fundamental human condition of being unable to understand others. Privately, Kafka describes his loneliness thus: “Insignificant as I may be, nevertheless there is no one here who understands me in my entirety. To have someone possessed of such understanding…would mean…to have God” (Diaries 339). Lacking the omniscience of God, humans can never understand each other, and thus the efforts of Kafka’s characters can never succeed. Their expectations of others are continuously subverted, they disappoint the expectations of others, and all their attempts end in frustration. For example, in the short story “Description of a Struggle,” the narrator initially expects his companion to be lively, but instead meets silence and realizes he “no longer understood his mood” (The Complete Stories 11). When he acclimatizes to silence and resolves to leave, the companion speaks and compels him to stay, as though “suggesting some agreement which [the man] had apparently forgotten” (12). When he continues their conversation, he realizes that his companion believes him to be something he is not, causing the man to undeservedly “rise in his estimation” (13). There is a perpetual sense of instability, and this vertigo of inevitable failure characterizes Kafka’s depiction of social relationships.

Human inadequacy would not be absurd unless it were also inescapable, and Kafka makes clear that humanity cannot be freed. Social subjugation is absolute because the mandate comes from an unknown yet inexorable authority. As The Trial states, “Everything belongs to the Court” (140). Kafka equates authority with an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent force that transcends humanity and demands absolute obedience. Authority is not necessarily divine, though theology features prominently in Kafka’s
work. Instead, authority refers to the higher order of the world, the system of morality and law that exists independently of humanity. In *The Trial*, this is the High Court. In *The Castle*, this is the titular Castle. Its mandate takes on elements of compulsion, forcing Kafka’s characters continuously to try to conform despite their continuous failure. They are aware of their own lack of understanding and question their role in society, but when they question the system, they discover ambiguity—and almost invariably wind up subjugated. Authority forces them to comply, but this authority seemingly has no justification other than its nature as authority. It has no concrete form, cannot be traced to an origin, and exists as an unchallengeable norm. It deeply pervades the culture of Kafka’s works, forming an unconquerable barrier to freedom. His characters can only doubt themselves and their perceived inability to conform to an impossible system. No one has chosen this subjugation, and they have no option to choose otherwise.

It is important to recognize that the Kafkaesque traits of subjugation and compulsion are not merely fictitious but the depiction of an observable real-world phenomenon; Kafka’s stories serve to expose the absurdity of the real world. Kafka’s commentary on the social sphere incorporates the political and theological spheres and synthesizes them into a single, overarching dynamic—a struggle between humanity and authority. People have an obligation to society, citizens have an obligation to government, and humanity has an obligation to a higher spiritual order. These relationships all derive from the same concept of human subjugation to a supreme authority whose hold is unexplained yet absolute. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. is pinned under the rule of a nonsensical governmental authority, the Court, and stands accused of a crime unknown to him. His predicament is the same as the average, real-world citizen whose
nationality is determined not by explicit agreement but because he happened, by chance, to be born in a particular area under the jurisdiction of a particular government. Nor does the average citizen have a complete understanding of the laws to which he is bound, and yet he must comply with those rules or suffer the consequences. Theology enters the story when K. enters the Cathedral and learns that the priest also belongs to the Court. Religion is thus depicted not as an escape from earthly constraint but as another form of subjugation, an extension of the same imposition of supreme, inscrutable authority that pervades the social and political domains. It mirrors Kafka’s personal struggle with his religious identity, an experience certainly not unique to any person.

But Kafka did not reject authority outright. His characters are not noble revolutionaries railing against an evil oppressor. Kafka’s protagonists are average people mired in a conformist, bourgeois society. They, like Kafka and so many others in the real world, are inflexible, unable to break from worldly constraints and unable to adapt to the inexplicability of the larger universe. Their quest is to understand the nature of the authority that governs them—though, per the principles of absurdism, they invariably fail. Secure in bourgeois society, they cannot comprehend the nature of authority and the world, but their efforts are not meaningless. Kafka satirized the bourgeois and the defeatism of mindless conformity, but not the inability to break free. Robin West writes that “choice” and “autonomy” have become synonyms for “right” and “good,” while “authority” and “obedience” connote “the good German, the Nazi soldier, the Stalinist” (385). But West and Kafka agree that humanity consents to obedience. West writes: “It is psychologically satisfying, or perhaps necessary, to believe in the divine authority or the natural superiority of those with power” (419). Kafka questioned authority, but even
as he protested its irrationality and absurdity, he embraced its premise. As he himself claimed, Kafka was not a critic, “only a man under judgment and a spectator” (Janouch 13). Kafka rejected rationalism and intellectualism, which place humanity and logic above spirituality—though Kafka did not believe in the inherent goodness of authority. Kafka believed in a higher existence, an authority than transcends humanity and is therefore owed obedience, but that authority simply exists, neither good nor evil, remote but omnipresent, negligent but omniscient, distant but omnipotent. Its neutral nature is best described in *The Trial*: “The Court makes no claims upon you. It receives you when you come and it relinquishes you when you go” (205). Kafka refused to attribute morality, nobility, virtue, or logic to his authority, his God, but for that very reason, Kafka recognized and accepted the transcendental power of authority. Authority may be considered transcendent from here on, which describes its existence beyond humanity but does not judge its nature. Similarly, the transcendentalism in which Kafka and his characters believe refers to transcendence of the bourgeois world in pursuit of a holier world. Kafka’s diary entry of October 18, 1921, offers his interpretation of transcendentalism: “It is entirely conceivable that life’s splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf” (*Diaries* 393). Kafka recognizes that authority exists and does not forbid happiness, may perhaps deserve obedience and be understood, and that is his hope.

Kafka observed and questioned the absurdity of obligation in the general social mandate. This conflict, which lies at the heart of his work, can be traced to Kafka’s longstanding conflict with his father, Hermann. The “shining example for [Kafka’s]
imagination and creative genius” (Brod 5), Hermann epitomized everything that Kafka attributes to the social mandate. While Kafka’s fiction suggests an elusive authority, Hermann was the concrete source of conflict in Kafka’s personal life. In the nearly fifty-page *Letter to His Father*, Kafka explores his relationship with Hermann, who was, from his son’s perspective, abusive and tyrannical. Hermann was such an authoritative figure, such an insurmountable obstacle, that he seemed to Kafka not just a man but a world, a god whose every whim was a “heavenly commandment” (*Letter* 23). Worse, Hermann was a god who had proscribed free will. Kafka believed himself subject to predestination mandated by his God, Hermann, a god whose judgment was inconstant and arbitrary, a God who “did not keep the commandments [he] imposed on [Kafka]” (*Letter* 25). Just as Kafka’s characters are involuntarily subjected to a social mandate, Kafka was forced into bondage to his father, born by chance and without choice of circumstances, and like any child, subject to the non-negotiable authority of his parents. As Kafka explores his inability to balance personal freedom and social obligation, the concept of conflicting worlds emerges:

Hence the world was for me divided into three parts: one in which I, the slave, lived under laws that had been invented only for me and which I could, I did not know why, never completely comply with; then a second world, which was infinitely remote from mine, in which you lived, concerned with government, with the issuing of orders and with the annoyance about their not being obeyed; and finally a third world where everybody else lived happily and free from orders and from having to obey. (*Letter* 25)
Hermann was the basis of Kafka’s understanding of absurdity and unconditional obedience, and his role as a slaver and lawmaker was the origin of the unseen authority that issues absolute mandates. For Kafka, Hermann represented, on the most personal level, the struggle against authority that is found in his work. Kafka mythologized his father as the embodiment of all forms of authority: patriarchal, social, political, and theological; Hermann was simultaneously father, employer, ruler, and God. All these relationships imply an authority figure whose authority exists as a matter of course rather than merit—the same idea that reoccurs time and time again in Kafka’s writing, an idea that Kafka both struggled against and struggled to accept. Because Hermann was the root of Kafka’s subject matter, *Letter to His Father* can be considered the key to his work. *Letter to His Father*, Kafka’s personal response to the real-world authority that is transformed into the authority of his fiction, suggests how he should be read and how he might be interpreted. As he rebelled against his father, Kafka also struggled against the larger idea of arbitrary authority. Kafka describes a third world, the world of freedom, as an ideal blocked by the oppressive world represented by Hermann. In *Demian*, Hermann Hesse makes a similar point: “The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who must be born must first destroy a world” (112–113). Likewise, Kafka needed to fight past Hermann, needed to find some way to destroy “the world” that was his obstacle, to be born into freedom.

A logical escape from this bondage might have been a break with Hermann and a family of his own, a possibility Kafka considered and even pursued at multiple points in his life, but he ultimately rejected this path as something belonging too much to Hermann. Starting a family would not have freed Kafka from social oppression. It would only have
shifted his position from child to parent, from oppressed to oppressor, and the bond would remain, entrapping both parties as prisoners. Furthermore, family was too associated with Hermann. Marrying and starting a family would have made him Hermann’s equal, but also more like Hermann; Hermann would only become a greater, more inescapable part of him (Letter 109). Like the bird of *Demian*, Kafka needed to overcome entirely his bondage to his family to escape the absurd world of society.

Kafka’s chosen escape route was his writing—the entirety of which can be considered his means of escape from the social mandate and family, his attempt to transcend the futility of the world. Writing, Kafka avows, is happiness: “It is really something effervescent that fills me completely with a light, pleasant quiver and that persuades me of the existence of abilities of whose non-existence I can convince myself with complete certainty at any moment, even now” (*Diaries* 29). Writing did not eradicate his doubt, but Kafka believed that writing brought him closer to fulfilment and, perhaps, understanding of the absurd. Kafka, who would bring his publications to his father’s attention, was not disappointed by Hermann’s unfailing neglect. Hermann’s aversion to his writing gave him respite from constant judgment. On April 27, 1915, Kafka wrote that he was “incapable of living with people, of speaking” (*Diaries* 334). Interaction and speech belonged to Hermann, but writing was a sphere uncontaminated by his father’s influence, a domain that belonged to Kafka as the home belonged to Hermann. Kafka’s stories are not just unending nightmares that vent his own hopelessness. Writing was his escape and an intentional, calculated form of rebellion against social subjugation. Though Kafka’s last request to Max Brod to burn all his writing seems to indicate his sense of failure, his purpose powerfully influenced the message of his fiction.
Through the act of writing, of creation, Kafka strove to achieve the same godly power that Hermann wielded over him. In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka’s purpose is not reconciliation with Hermann, but the creation of a new dynamic between them. Before, Kafka had been the victim, and Hermann both culprit and judge. Kafka could have tried to fight the absurdity of their relationship with anger and resentment, but by its very absurd nature, their relationship would have rendered this defense ineffectual; Kafka, putting forward a case but judged by the very same man who oppressed him, could not have prevailed. Therefore, in true Camusian fashion, Kafka elected not to try to escape his absurd situation. Instead, Kafka embraced his father and the authority that he wielded by understanding him. Kafka had never rejected the idea of authority and higher truth, only the incomprehensible form that it seemed to take, and Kafka now embraced the absurdity of this relationship. This acceptance was his solution to the problem of absurdity and social bondage. His struggles with the failings of authority—inscrutability and irrationality—are resolved by the understanding that there does exist a transcendental truth, the realization that humanity is capable of self-actualization outside the prison of a bourgeois world. Kafka suggests that, to fulfill the potential of one’s humanity, one must struggle, one must question authority and seek understanding of the world even if that attempt fails, because the struggle has value. Humanity can thus attain a more fulfilling, more human existence free from the conformity of the bourgeois world. Kafka’s struggle against Hermann was the basis of the struggle against authority in his work. In seeking to overcome Hermann through writing, Kafka sought to overcome the social subjugation that his father symbolized. By recognizing absurdity, Kafka weakened Hermann’s hold over his autonomy, and by extension, he overcame the greater constraint placed upon him
by society. Hermann was Kafka’s ultimate inspiration. Thus, Kafka’s work can be analyzed in the context of the father-son relationship—the bourgeoisie and the citizen, the divine and the devout, the judge and the defendant—to reveal an overarching theme of struggle against and submission to an inscrutable, indomitable authority. Within all his work there is, hidden in the absurd, a bit of hope; his characters, trapped by absurdity, can be freed by embracing that same absurdity.
By the time he wrote *Letter to His Father* in 1919, Kafka had already written many of his most famous stories, including “The Judgment,” “In the Penal Colony,” “The Metamorphosis,” and *The Trial*. Between September 20, 1912, and October 16, 1917, Kafka wrote love letters to Felice Bauer, a woman to whom he twice became engaged and from whom he twice broke. Kafka met Bauer, who was a cousin of Max Brod’s brother-in-law and worked in Berlin as an executive officer of the Carl Lindstroem Corporation, in August, 1912. Writing letters back and forth, Kafka proposed in May 1913. Doubts soon began to set in; Kafka feared that marriage would interfere with his writing, and “everything in [him] revolted against it, much as [he] always loved F.” (*Diaries* 262). Their engagement ended in July, but both continued to write, met several times, and became engaged again in July 1917. Their engagement was broken again in December, and they separated for the last time. In January 1919, Kafka met Julie Wohryzkova in Schelesen while recuperating from tuberculosis and deemed her “on the whole quite ignorant, more cheerful and sad…yet in her heart she is brave, honest, unsselfish” (Pawel 379). They became engaged during the summer, but Kafka once again broke the engagement after Hermann brutally expressed his disapproval of the relationship: “She probably put on a fancy blouse for your benefit. Those Prague Jewesses are good at that sort of thing. …Haven’t you ever heard of other possibilities? If you’re afraid, I’ll make it my business to take you there myself” (Pawel 381). Hermann likely alludes to Kafka’s involvement with prostitutes. In response, Kafka wrote *Letter to His Father* to address their longstanding conflict.

*Letter to His Father*, while revealing Kafka’s purpose as a writer because of its
uniquely personal nature, came after many of his works and therefore cannot be considered an archetype of Kafka’s fiction or be treated as a template of his work. But by the same logic, *Letter to His Father*, because it came after so many other works, can be considered the culmination of Kafka’s philosophy. It is the product of a matured Kafka who, after the struggle against the absurdity of human life represented by his earlier writings, finally reached a conclusion about the dilemma that had haunted him for so long. Though the letter comes late in his career, Kafka returns to the same themes in all his writing because they are all interrelated facets of an ongoing struggle. *Letter to His Father* is both a product of earlier works and evidence of the motivation that produced those earlier works, because the underlying idea is the same; Kafka, recognizing the absurdity of subjugation under Hermann’s patriarchal authority, projects that absurdity onto society, politics, and theology. Freud theorized that children’s play, an expression of imagination, segues into adult fantasy, an “attempt to correct some kind of dissatisfaction,” and writers use the same material as that which composes fantasies to compose their writing (Cavalcanti 229). Freud would thus interpret Kafka’s writing as an attempt to “correct” his dissatisfaction with Hermann. *Letter to His Father* differs from Kafka’s other work primarily because of its overtly personal nature. This glimpse into Kafka’s real-life situation reveals a tension that illuminates his other works. The letter is therefore a key to Kafka that traces the evolution of his thoughts and clarifies his work as a struggle against the absurd. In all other respects, the letter can be treated as a form of literature. In his discussion of Freudian psychic sources of writing, Jose Cavalcanti surmises that *Letter to His Father* “originally did not have literary aspirations,” but because Kafka fantasized about reconciliation, the letter realized his fantasies and
metamorphosed into a creative “narrative” of subconscious desires “beyond [Kafka’s] memory or comprehension capacity” (230). Indeed, *Letter to His Father* is not factually accurate. Though it documents the history of Kafka and Hermann, the letter is a biased and abstract narrative. It mythologizes Hermann beyond strictly irrefutable fact, transforming him into a figment that is, in Hanif Kureishi’s words, “one of Franz Kafka’s liveliest lies, probably one of his best literary creations or fictions” (11). It chooses points of interest rather than encapsulates the entirety of the father-son history, because it does not need to do so; the narrative form is intended to reflect Kafka’s intention, which makes it a useful guide to Kafka’s work. By understanding the relationship Kafka perceived between himself and Hermann, one can understand the relationship between humanity and authority that Kafka depicts in his fiction.

Kafka’s feelings toward his father seem contradictory, not least because the purpose of the letter is not reconciliation with Hermann, but recognition of their irreconcilability. Cavalcanti notes the “careful and large handwriting” and “few corrections” as evidence that Kafka truly intended Hermann to read the letter (230), but Kafka did not write to please him. Kafka writes that Hermann expects from his children, if not gratitude, “some sort of obligingness, some sign of sympathy,” but the letter contains neither and makes no attempt to resolve the tension between them (*Letter 3*). It does not directly indict, but the letter nevertheless probes the relationship to highlight flaws and even exaggerate them, which only exacerbates the wounds between father and son. For this reason, perhaps, Julie Kafka never delivered her son’s letter to Hermann. Kafka knew how to appease Hermann yet refused to do so, suggesting that the letter was not truly written for Hermann. But if Kafka did not seek reconciliation, he had no need
to write it. If it was self-clarification that he sought, he could have internalized all the contents of the letter and arrived at a conclusion for himself and himself alone. Kafka might have even cut off all contact with his father and denied his fatherhood, but instead he chose to linger over this deeply troubling relationship. Writing this novella-length letter suggests a deep contradiction in Kafka’s perception of his father—he wanted to break away but could not bear to do so. Reading the letter as a form of literature strengthens this interpretation, because the artist must have an inspiration for his work, some turmoil that he can translate into art, and Kafka states that his writing is all about Hermann (*Letter* 83). If he had truly broken with Hermann, he would have lost his subject matter, and this letter is evidence of his need. Kafka and Hermann were “an immortal double-act, always co-dependents” (Kureishi 11). Brod surmises that Hermann was a “shining example for Franz’s imagination and creative genius,” and that Kafka’s “admiration for his father…had a touch of the heroic in it” (Brod 5). His notion that Kafka admired his father is noteworthy, as a cursory reading of Kafka might suggest otherwise; Kafka writes in his diary that it is “unpleasant to listen to Father talk with incessant insinuations” (*Diaries* 154). Such an accusation might suggest that Kafka thought his father petty, but it is no less true that Kafka envisioned his father as the supreme authority, a man who “from [his] armchair ruled the world” (*Letter* 17). Though he protested and rebelled, Kafka never sought to overthrow Hermann. His mythologization of Hermann suggests a deep respect for his authority, but the contradiction of this mingled contempt and respect can only be discussed after breaking down Hermann’s authority into its constituent parts.

Hermann Kafka, the fourth child of Jacob Kafka, a butcher, traveled to Prague
from the village of Osek and found work as a traveling sales representative, clawing his way out of poverty and establishing himself as an independent retailer of men’s and women’s fancy goods and accessories. Hermann pressured Kafka to take up the family business, and Kafka was exposed to commerce from a young age until “the business and [Hermann] became one” (Letter 49). To understand the domestic relationship between father and son, Tom McCarthy suggests viewing economics as an extension of the home: “Economics is derived from the Greek oikos, which means ‘home’ or ‘hearth’—the idea being that the economic realm allows an individual to expand the dominion of his home management beyond the bounds of his immediate property” (Letter xii). In the context of business, the family is an economic unit with Hermann as the employer and Kafka as an employee. It was perhaps for this reason that Kafka did not marry, that Hermann was displeased with his engagement. Understanding the economy—and by extension, the family—as a zero-sum game, Hermann’s domestic power would be reduced should Kafka start his own, independent home. Thus, Kafka was made to live in his father’s shadow, unable to accumulate power of his own. Kafka instead took to miserliness, which he describes as “one of the most reliable signs of profound unhappiness” (Letter 59). Miserliness characterizes Kafka’s writing process and writing style, accounting for his low output, micromanagement of word choice, and continual self-doubt, to the point that he made Brod pledge to burn his work. In a physical sense, miserliness shows itself in Kafka’s bodily concealment. He avoided the “disgrace of showing [himself] in public” in view of his father’s powerful body and overwhelming physical presence (Letter 17). Yet it is only as a father that Hermann becomes unbearable. Kafka states that he “should have been happy to have [Hermann] as a friend, as a boss, an uncle, a grand-father, even
as a father-in-law” (Letter 7). Kafka’s insistence that he could have accepted Hermann as a boss raises the question as to how the father-son relationship differs from the employer-employee, and the answer is obligation. Being Hermann’s child meant that Kafka’s employment was founded on an unequal relationship. An employee offers services and is paid for them, an explicit contract that is also breakable, but the child is indebted because he can offer no service, and his hypothetical employment is unconditional, unavoidable, and unmitigable. In terms of credit-debt, the employee receives wages, while the child receives inheritance. Wages are part of a contract and received in exchange for work proffered, but inheritance is a gift that cannot be repaid, and the gift of life is one that Kafka describes as “undeserved” (Letter 33). Childhood is absurd because it combines arbitrariness with inescapability. Its arbitrary nature distinguishes it from economics, giving Hermann authority without reason and without consent, and Kafka’s conflict is the result of his struggle to accept this irrational arrangement.

Aside from economic authority, Kafka imbues Hermann with political authority that anticipates the totalitarian police state. He recounts the story of Hermann dragging him out of bed and onto the pavlatche, the semipublic balcony, and says this of his trauma: “Even years afterwards I suffered from the tormenting fancy that the huge man, my father, the ultimate authority, would come almost for no reason at all and take me out of bed in the night…” (Letter 13). This scene recalls the opening scene of The Trial, in which Joseph K. is dragged out of bed and accused of a crime. It evokes secret police, turning the politics of the domestic sphere into actual politics. Kafka equates the home with the world, and Hermann is the ruler of both. His political opinions, which “run down the Czechs, and then the Germans, and then the Jews,” is described as the
“enigmatic quality that all tyrants have” (Letter 17). Hermann is a dictator because, despite all his inconsistencies and arbitrariness, he is never in the wrong. Kafka further describes the conflict between himself and Hermann as a “terrible trial…in which you keep on claiming to be the judge” (Letter 65). As with any dictatorship, the dictator cannot stand accused; the dictator is the judge, and should the plaintiff make a case against him, he dismisses the case; the dictator can never become the defendant.

Likewise, Hermann forbade Kafka from pleading or petitioning, disallowing Kafka’s potential case against him: “Not a word of contradiction!” (Letter 29). Though not every government is totalitarian, Kafka’s portrayal of Hermann’s political power suggests governmental power over citizens. They must obey laws, must conform to a certain code of conduct, without consenting to their submission. Unable to speak, Kafka was left with writing as his only voice of complaint against the arbitrary nature of Hermann’s totalitarian control. Kafka recalls that Hermann was usually playing cards whenever Kafka arrived to give him his new books, an image with striking implications (Letter 83). Cards are an arbitrary game: players have no control over the hand they are dealt.

Writing is inherently empowering because the writer fully controls his world. Hermann represents arbitrary political power, while Kafka, writing books, is concerned with unraveling the logic of this authority.

While economic and political authority are strictly human realms of control, Kafka also imbued Hermann with theological authority. Like many others disillusioned with the intangibility of religion, Kafka struggled with religious authority. God is distressingly distant and inscrutable, demanding belief without basis; Brod calls this divide, which hounded Kafka, the “theology of the crisis—that tendency that sees
between God and man…a yawning abyss that can never be bridged” (Brod 170). Kafka was also concerned with the seemingly absurd contradictions of predestination and punishment: If God is all-powerful, why does He permit evil? If He permits evil, why does He punish evil? Kafka, as he explored authority in the social and political spheres, sought to understand the nature of God’s supreme authority. His writing draws on his personal life to mythologize Hermann as a god, the “ultimate authority,” a godly figure wielding theological power and passing down “heavenly commandments” (Letter 23). Kafka writes that Hermann had imbibed Judaism, so that “the faith that ruled [his] life…[was] part and parcel of [his] own nature” (Letter 77). In Kafka’s mind, Hermann believed in Judaism because it affirmed him, the Jewish man. Hermann believed in Judaism only to believe in himself, upholding himself as God. Realizing this self-affirmation, Kafka mythologized Hermann as the Heavenly Father of Judaism. To that end, Kafka attributed to Hermann all the traits befitting a Kafka, “the Kafka will to life, business, and conquest,” while lowering himself as a Lowy, his mother’s family, with “a Lowyish spur that impels more secretly, more diffidently, and in another direction, and which often fails to work entirely” (7). Thus, Kafka drew inspiration for his own characterization from his mother’s relationship to Hermann. He depicts Julie Kafka as devoted to Hermann, tending to his needs at home, helping with his business, and never shielding her son against him. By calling himself a “Lowy with a certain basis of Kafka” (7), Kafka employs a “feminine masochistic identification” (Ritva 319) that leaves him, like Julie, forever subservient to their God, Hermann. Any aggression that Kafka might have directed at Hermann would have been ineffectual. Kafka thus focused on another object of his ire: his own body. Kafka’s “hypochondriacal preoccupations” (Ritva 322)
included worries about digestion, hair loss, and spinal curvature, which, “intensifying in innumerable gradations, finally ended with a real illness” (Letter 85). In a diary entry of 1910, Kafka writes, as though in premonition: “I write this very decidedly out of despair over my body and over a future with this body” (Diaries 10). In August 1917, Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis.

Evidently, Hermann, for all his earthly presence, was no more benevolent or transparent than the distant Judaic God. If he could solve the quandary of his absurd obligation to Hermann, Kafka might also dispel the mystery of God’s authority and the rationale of his own loyalty. To begin with, Kafka considers Hermann a world unto himself, “a world…concerned with government, with the issuing of orders and with the annoyance about their not being obeyed” (Letter 25). Hermann is a political world, but also a theological world characterized by hypocritical commandments; Kafka recounts that even as Hermann corrected his table manners, he committed the same gaffes (Letter 23). Not only are these orders hypocritical, they are arbitrary, as in the story of Hermann dragging Kafka out of bed “almost for no reason at all.” Like Hermann, God demands obedience, but He demarcates sin arbitrarily and punished sins whose existence He has allowed. Hermann, telling stories of his youth, denied his children the “opportunity to distinguish [themselves] as [he] had done” because that would have involved the sin of “violence and revolution…[and] breaking away from home” (Letter 45). In the same way, God tempts believers with sin, first by allowing it to exist, and then by drawing attention to its existence through his express forbiddance. Kafka accuses Hermann of this same contradiction: “While on the one hand you tempted me to it by means of example, story, and humiliation, on the other hand you forbade it with the utmost severity” (Letter
45). Kafka is convinced that it was Hermann who “pushed [him] down into this filth—just as though [he] were predestined to it” (*Letter* 101). Kafka concludes that divine authority can be unjust, which raises the question of his obligation to such an authority.

But Kafka’s complaint is not against authority, but against the absurdity of authority. Kafka was “convinced that there were truths which could not be assailed” (Brod 173), and one of those truths, as discussed previously, is the third world of freedom “where everybody else lived happily and free from orders and from having to obey.” His supposition that one might be free from orders and obedience in this world seems to suggest that he desires to escape all authority, but Brod theorizes otherwise:

That brings him back to the Jewish creed, in one sentence of which, “Our God is one God,” I see the strongest spell against all attempts to attribute to God ethical laws fundamentally different from those of mankind. God, the world of perfection, of the Platonic “highest good,” is under the same laws as we are, our morality runs toward this goal, without, it is true, our being able to comprehend the goal… (Brod 184)

Kafka’s original concept of triune worlds proposes that he, the slave, occupies one; Hermann, the God, occupies another; and the rest of humanity, the free, occupies the third. These are not three equal worlds, but two, respectively occupied by God and the freed persons of humanity, the enlightened portion of humanity, for whom God is not a force of subjugation but an example of autonomy that they have attained for themselves. Kafka and the rest of humanity, those trapped in the earthly, bourgeois world, are confined to their prison. Their goal, the goal of humanity, is to escape that prison-world into a free-world, having reached the full potential of humankind. To do so, humanity
must understand God and the “highest good.” Brod posits that it is impossible for humanity to comprehend this goal, but the inability to comprehend precludes neither attempt nor success. Kafka’s writing suggests that, though the goal of perfection is inscrutable and perhaps unreachable, one must strive for it anyhow by struggling against the absurdity of its inscrutability. Only by recognizing the prison of the bourgeois world can one hope to escape it, and Kafka seems to believe, despite his consciousness of human weakness, that man, “with his spark of reason, will, and ethical perception is not altogether the plaything of super-mighty powers…which he does not understand and never can understand” (Brod 171). If Kafka believed that humanity is doomed, there would have been no point in writing works of hope, perhaps no point in writing at all. To Kafka, freedom is possible, and his aim is to achieve freedom—to reveal, understand, and embrace the absurd, and in doing so, be freed.

Having established Hermann’s supreme authority, Kafka probes the absurdity of the relationship between them. While he recognized that reconciliation was impossible, having stated in a message to Brod that “the roots of this enmity are ineradicable” (Brod 170), Kafka pursued understanding nonetheless. Kafka recalls joking about his father out of self-preservation: “Jokes of the kind that are made about gods and kings, jokes that are not only compatible with the profoundest respect but are indeed part and parcel of it” (Letter 41). Antagonistic jokes only strengthen the butt of the joke by highlighting the joker’s scanty means of attack. Kafka later abandoned flippancy and discussed his relationship with his father in more self-affirming terms: “The child’s exclusive sense of guilt has been partly replaced by insight into our helplessness, yours and mine” (Letter 29). Note that Kafka recognizes this process as incomplete. He states that his guilt has
been “partly” replaced by insight, because freedom is an ongoing struggle against the complacency that threatens to plunge him back into the bourgeois world. Hermann will always exist just as authority will always exist, and Kafka must continue to struggle against it with perhaps no end in sight. But even this endlessness can be transformed into a boon, because understanding the limits of one’s ability is another form of the self-awareness that Kafka advocates. Furthermore, Kafka notably insists that, like him, Hermann is helpless and therefore blameless: “Rather, by virtue of your antagonistic nature, you could not help but always and inevitably cause the child such disappointments” (Letter 19). Kafka’s empathy is evidence of his growing understanding, but blamelessness does not exonerate Hermann. Blamelessness strips him of power by stripping him of agency. If Hermann has no actual power beyond that which has been afforded to him by his nature, even his most tyrannical acts are not the result of a consciously malicious will but something beyond even his control. Hermann as God is likewise subject to the predestination imposed on humanity. Thus, as Brod theorizes, God and humanity are bound by the same laws. God is no longer so distant and so inscrutable if it can be understood that He is constant in inconstancy, that even the arbitrary has been preordained. If the power dynamic between God and humanity is a zero-sum game on the economic model, then God’s diminished power is humanity’s increased power, placing God on a closer level to humanity—a level that can, perhaps, be reached by ascension into the world of freedom. However, Kafka does not seem to believe that God should be, or can be, overthrown. Kafka lived in “a voluntary and therefore triumphant surrender” (Janouch 17). Kafka accepted Hermann’s authority just as he accepted God’s authority, the transcendental authority of the world. Kafka’s goal
was to clarify the relationship between himself and his father so that he could accept Hermann’s authority. Likewise, he aimed to clarify the relationship between himself and God so he could better understand and accept God’s authority.

Kafka ends *Letter to His Father* with an answer written from Hermann’s perspective. This answer tears apart Kafka’s own rhetoric and accuses him of writing to indict Hermann while simultaneously surviving on his blood like a tick—an addendum that seems self-sabotaging but serves to humanize the letter by introducing ambiguity. Truth tyrannizes over those who do not possess it, and Kafka, by including this response, avoids imposing on Hermann as a mode of revenge. Most importantly, this response from Hermann’s perspective completes the narrative. Kafka states that “with the correction made by this rejoinder—a correction I neither can nor will elaborate in detail—in my opinion something has been achieved which so closely approximates the truth…” *(Letter 121)*. He calls this a “correction” because up to this point, the narrative has been written entirely from his perspective, but an accurate portrayal of the father-son relationship must include Hermann as the godly arbitrator who judges Kafka’s argument—and who must prove it wrong. Kafka is not accusing his father, because he cannot accuse the judge, the authority figure whom he has mythologized. Kafka’s mythologization of their relationship requires the imaginary reply that silences him. His inability to explain the correction reflects the struggle to understand the absurd: he has an idea of what he wants to say, has an idea of freedom, but can only grasp blindly. Yet he must make an attempt. Returning to the purpose of the letter, Kafka evidently did not write this letter in hopes of reconciliation. His correction shows that Hermann, the judge, would have interpreted the letter as further proof of the unbridgeable distance between
them. But Kafka did write the letter, perhaps for his own benefit. Writing thus becomes its own reason—writing for the sake of writing, of thinking and struggling through the absurdity of life.
FRAGMENTS OF A STRUGGLE: KAFKA’S SHORT STORIES

Kafka’s short stories form the bulk of the *The Complete Stories*, beginning with one of his earliest works, “Description of a Struggle,” written in 1904, and appropriately ending with his last, “Josephine the Singer,” written in 1924. At first glance, these stories have wildly different concerns. “Description” depicts the surreal nighttime stroll of an ordinary man, while “Josephine” describes a colony of mice and the titular singer’s place in society. Situated within the twenty years between these two stories are nineteen other short stories and dozens of fragments, spanning subjects as diverse as a man’s attempt to defend a treatise about a giant mole, a doctor’s struggle against his patients to return home, a creature’s reflection on its burrow. *The Complete Stories* might be read merely as a compilation, and indeed, each story could be analyzed separately to great effect. Yet as with all of Kafka’s other work, the underlying themes remain the same: society, authority, and, especially, the father-son relationship that characterizes all forms of authority. Accordingly, this chapter will address *The Complete Works* as a unified work, categorizing and analyzing the stories as contributors to particular themes and as evidence of the salience and development of those themes throughout Kafka’s career. To this end, the stories will be placed in three subcategories. First is the bourgeois world and its inherent, absurd qualities: humanity’s attempt to conform to society, and society’s inability to facilitate humanity’s quest for truth. Second is the inscrutable authority, the force that drives humanity to conform and obey: the nature of this authority and its political and theological foundations. Third is the father-son relationship, viewed through Kafka and Hermann’s relationship, culminating in an analysis of *The*
Metamorphosis as an allegory of the struggle between father and son and the larger conflict between God and man.

The Entrapping Bourgeois

In 1904, at the age of twenty, Kafka began “Description of a Struggle.” Though the story convinced Max Brod of his literary genius, modern appraisal has been less kind. In the foreword to The Complete Stories, John Updike advises readers to skip “Description of a Struggle,” along with “Wedding Preparations in the Colony,” written in 1907, criticizing them as “not merely opaque but repellent” (Complete Stories xii). It is widely agreed that the two stories are less mature and elegant than Kafka’s later work, but to skip them would overlook the temporal development of the Kafkian theme of imprisonment in a bourgeois world. To illustrate this development, the two stories can be compared to “A Report to an Academy.” Kafka initially depicts the bourgeois world as an obvious threat in the preceding two stories, but by the time of “A Report to an Academy,” he has recharacterized the bourgeois into a world of entrapment, into which one can be absorbed and blinded to both its own existence and the existence of higher truths. It is precisely this world that Kafka believed himself to have fallen into, as per his diary entry of July 19, 1910: “When I think about it, I must say that my education has done me great harm in some respects…I can prove at any time that my education tried to make another person out of me than the one I became” (Diaries 15-17). From his elementary education in the Deutsche Knabenschule to his study of chemistry and law at Charles University in Prague, Kafka despaired of education because it distracted from writing. Education led to his employment as an insurance officer, first at the
Assicurazioni Generali in 1907 and later at the Worker’s Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in 1908. In 1911, Karl Hermann, husband of his sister Elli, proposed that Kafka collaborate in the operation of an asbestos factory known as Prager Asbestwerke Hermann and Co. In a diary entry of January 19, 1915, Kafka writes: “I shall not be able to write so long as I have to go to the factory… Immediate contact with the workday world deprives me—though inwardly I am as detached as I can be—of the possibility of taking a broad view of matters” (Diaries 326). Modernism emerged as a reaction against the monotony of commercial work and the bourgeois values of the Industrial Revolution, and Kafka, likewise, rebelled against the employment that tore him away from his artistic calling. Perhaps for this reason, his earliest works, written during this period, are primarily concerned with the bourgeois world.

The instability of the bourgeois world is one of the most prevalent themes in “Description of a Struggle,” the titular struggle being an uncertain attempt to break away from the unstable interpersonal relationships of the bourgeoisie. It begins with the narrator sitting alone at the end of a party, surveying a pile of pastries that he has picked out and arranged. The partiers are described thus: “At about midnight a few people rose, bowed, shook hands, said it had been a pleasant evening, and then passed through the wide doorway into the vestibule, to put on their coats” (9). Kafka’s preoccupation with the details of social niceties—the bowing and the shaking of hands, the spoken pleasantries—and his depiction of multiple people following this exact procedure demonstrates the impersonality of the bourgeoisie by showcasing its dehumanizing and regimenting tendencies. None of these customs are natural, yet no one is exempt from them, not even the slightly drunken man who approaches the narrator with “rather more
animated conversation” about kissing a girl (10). This conversation is more animated than the party, which follows preset formalities. By comparison, this non-conformist experience breaks the narrator out of his reverie of wine and pastries, a submissive trance-like state into which the party—bourgeois society—has lulled him. He leaves the party with the man, but despite his claim that he had “saved an ungrateful young man from disgrace,” the truth is that the man had saved him from the stifling atmosphere (11). But this new companion is neither friend nor foe, and he continually subverts the narrator’s expectations: “No sooner had I given him an encouraging slap on the back than I suddenly no longer understood his mood, and withdrew my hand” (11). There is little comfort in this liberation. If he is the narrator’s key to freedom, the companion is a perplexity with which the narrator must struggle.

Kafka illustrates the lure of conformity by describing the narrator’s difficulty understanding his companion and his temptation to give up, forsaking the difficult struggle in favor of familiarity. The narrator describes the possibility of returning to his home, where he would feel warm and “spend hours alone between the painted walls and the floor which, reflected in the gilt-framed mirror hanging on the rear wall, appears slanted” (12). His description of his home with its warmth and light reminds of the party that he has just escaped; the limited space between the walls and the floor suggests the claustrophobia of confinement in society; the slanted reflection, shown in a mirror framed by false gold, suggests that society provides only the illusion of freedom. It would be easy for the narrator to return home, but instead, he grapples with liberation by attempting to understand his companion. He goes so far as to imagine the other man having a conversation about the narrator, speaking from the companion’s perspective just
as Kafka took on Hermann’s voice in the last paragraphs of *Letter to His Father*. Kafka thus suggests that one can never achieve perfect understanding of others, as that understanding stems from one’s own perception. What one knows about others is only a product of the mind, an amalgamation of impressions and expectations rather than innate truths. Likewise, it is difficult or even impossible to perceive higher truths apart from the bourgeois because any perceptions one might have will be tainted by biases. Thus, Kafka rejects Descartes’ theory of innate ideas, which claims that concepts of truth, gifted by God, are naturally present in the mind. Descartes states: “[God] presents [himself] to my mind with so much distinctness and clearness—and from the fact alone that this idea is found in me, or that I who possess this idea exist, I conclude so certainly that God exists” (Descartes 45). Kafka would oppose innate ideas on the grounds that humanity is not capable of direct communion with God. Instead, Kafkian literature seems in line with Locke’s theory of experience, which claims that ideas come from sensations and reflections: “I think it is easy to draw this observation—that the ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all” (Locke II.viii.15). Locke claims that humans observe primary qualities—the highest truths of existence—but humans translate these observations into lesser, secondary qualities—subjective sensations. Thus, humanity can never understand higher truths in their purest form and must rely on subjective interpretations, which, according to Kafka, constitute the bourgeois world.

True liberation from conformity may seem impossible, but Kafka suggests otherwise. Initially, the narrator is uncertain and under the power of his companion, but
as he embraces the inconstancy of his situation, he gains the power to warp reality at his whim—at one point managing to swim-fly through the air—and once he realizes that his companion “is indifferent…also harmless,” he eventually rides him like a horse (20). He conquers the uncertainty of this situation in much the same way that he analyzes the moon. At first glowing powerfully and “terrifying,” the moon loses its power when the narrator “grew accustomed to it and watched with composure the difficulty it had in rising” (22). Like the bourgeois world, the moon seems an insurmountable obstacle until the narrator observes it, quantifies its behavior, and realizes its weakness. Even if breaking away is a difficult, uncomfortable, even unhappy task, Kafka advocates that struggle against uncertainty.

“Wedding Preparations in the Country” gives more insight into interhuman relationships and the interference of society. Its protagonist, Raban, must travel to the country to meet his future wife, Betty. The story is notable for depicting a vast number of bystanders: a little girl holding a puppy, two gentlemen exchanging information, a lady adorned with ribbons and flowers, people riding in carriages and others walking by with umbrellas. Kafka’s precise description of these bystanders hints that each of them are real people with full, complex lives, but like the companion of “Description,” none of them can be fully understood. Two version of the story exist, and in the second version, the story momentarily breaks away from Eduard Raban’s perspective to provide the inner thoughts of an elderly gentleman: “‘Yes, when one is young—’ the gentleman said, meaning nothing in particular by this, merely wanting to indicate how it was raining…” (74). Unlike the conversation that the narrator of “Description” imagines from his companion’s perspective, this line in “Wedding Preparations” truly delves into the old
man’s mind. But unlike the reader, Raban cannot read the man’s mind as he wishes. Raban misinterprets his words to mean that the old man considers “Raban’s thirty years nothing in comparison, and...at the age of thirty he had, of course, been more sensible than Raban” (74). Thus, the old man’s harmless idea about the weather becomes an insult. Raban’s misinterpretation shows that outside lives are exactly that—outside—and only surface-level perceptions are possible, precluding the possibility of true communion.

Perhaps for this reason, society dictates how one must act and think in relation to others. “Wedding Preparations” suggests that being alone is the highest form of freedom, while marriage is a social trap that restricts one’s actions. Raban clearly has no affection for his fiancé, whom he has never met, and he has little romantic inclination, though he seems to believe that he should. His statement that “everyone says her eyes are beautiful” (58) is contrasted by his admission that “[he has] never found eyes beautiful” (59). There is a conflict between his personal belief and the belief of society, to which he succumbs. Nonetheless, Raban recognizes that marriage will restrict him, and he understands that its significance is limited: “I don’t even need to go to the country myself, it isn’t necessary. I’ll send my clothed body” (55). His notion that a clothed body will suffice suggests that marriage is artificial, that marriage is a construct for which his shell is enough. His body is clothed; the body is separated from his mind, and the clothes are symbolic of day-to-day interactions, such as employment, which mandates a code of dress. These things are physical, earthly, possessing none of the higher spirituality—sanctity, unity—associated with marriage. Raban’s true being is extrinsic to marriage, and he describes his true being as assuming “the shape of a big beetle” (56). An early hint of The Metamorphosis, this strange notion shows the innate incompatibility of higher truth and bourgeois reality.
All social obligation is similarly restrictive. Raban muses that refusing invitations may be difficult, and he thinks: “For it is not so easy as I imagine it now when I am still alone and can still do everything...for I shall have no one there whom I could pay calls on whenever I like, and no one with whom I could make more strenuous expeditions...” (62). Ultimately, Raban knows that solitude enables him to “do anything.” These things that he lists, which are to be done with someone, do not show a lack of opportunity when alone, but instead show that choice is eliminated by companionship. Alone, what he does or does not do has yet to be defined; but with an acquaintance, requirements and boundaries have already been determined. Bourgeois society mandates certain modes of behavior, restricting personal freedom. If there is a higher truth to be found, then it will not be found solely through others, even if there is value in community. Instead, Kafka suggests that truth is internal and metaphysical, therefore requiring introspection and personal development apart from the artificiality and obligations of society.

Unlike the previous two stories, “A Report to an Academy,” written in 1917, depicts a narrator wholly absorbed within bourgeois society. Red Peter, speaking before members of an academy, describes his former life as an ape and how he learned human behavior. The simian/human dichotomy speaks to the conflict between the spirituality of the inner self and the earthliness of the external. Just as Raban’s true nature as a beetle is obscured by marriage, Red Peter’s nature as an ape is irreversibly lost during his assimilation. Of this process, he says that returning to life as an ape would have been possible “had human beings allowed it, through an archway as wide as the span of heaven over the earth” (250). Kafka’s allusion to heaven suggests that adhering to truth, as opposed to conforming to society, is the path of higher spirituality. Red Peter’s life
hinged upon his conformity, and only by abandoning his true identity could he continue to live in the external world. His current existence is a false one, a shell like Raban’s clothed body, that denies the essence of his identity. Despite physical freedom, Red Peter has no autonomy, and he recognizes that he has not found freedom but only “a way out” (253). His entire identity is a performance like that of the trapeze artists he describes, who can move freely through the air but are little more than “a mockery of holy Mother Nature” (253). Red Peter’s comparison reminds of Kafka’s diary entry about “Japanese jugglers, who scramble up a ladder that does not rest on the ground” (Diaries 12). A performer’s identity can change; there is nothing sacred about identity, nothing that makes one guise—as a performance artist, banquet attendee, speech-giver, each one demanded by Red Peter’s caretakers—truer than another. Each is a superficial performance. Red Peter describes a half-trained chimpanzee as having “the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye” (259). This is exactly his fate as a broken creature.

Malleable identity is not, however, necessarily condemned. In Kafkian fashion, the story contains nothing as straightforward as a moral message. “Report” highlights Kafka’s maturation since writing “Description” and “Wedding Preparations,” with its more nuanced theme and his trademark humility, his qualification of what he outwardly dislikes—in this case, conformity. Kafka portrays Red Peter as a sympathetic victim of oppression, one who has been locked away, beaten, and burned. His submission is understandable and not quite a defeat. Maintaining his identity and escaping is an impossible dream, but finding “a way out” is not, and at this he succeeds. Kafka suggests that there is nothing heroic in clinging to an unrealistic ideal and forgoing a more
manageable goal. There is nothing glorious in Red Peter’s initial resistance, when he “wished to see no one, and to stay in the dark, [his] face turned toward the locker” (252). Reality often mandates compromise. Red Peter’s refusal to view the world outside his cage, his desire to stay in the dark and see no one, does not benefit him. Realizing this, he decides that, having no way out, he has to create one: “I made no other demand; even should the way out prove to be an illusion; the demand was a small one, the disappointment could be no bigger. To get out somewhere, to get out! Only not to stay motionless with raised arms, crushed against a wooden wall” (254). Red Peter realizes that to “get out” is not true freedom, but this is the only freedom afforded to him, so he must seize it. In many ways, this compromise mirrors Kafka’s personal attitude about submission to authority. Red Peter adjusts his desire from what is most ideal, freedom, to something more appropriate to the situation, something smaller and possible—simply getting out of his cage, even if he remains enslaved. His refusal to remain caged is more effective than using idealism as an excuse for what would ultimately be mere inactivity inside the cage. Likewise, Kafka responds to the bourgeoisie not with mere distaste and desire to escape. His writing shows its limitations but also the limitations of humanity. To break with society, to understand authority and truth, is perhaps unachievable; Kafka’s characteristic humility did not allow him to believe that he was capable where others were not. To begin to understand is the more realistic goal, and this Kafka attempted to do.

**The Inscrutable Authority**

Within the various bourgeois worlds that he constructs, Kafka continually depicts a distant authority possessing both political and theological power over its subjects.
Political or theological, this authority possesses several distinctive traits. First, it is not an authority personal to individuals but an all-encompassing, communal authority that claims dominion over an entire world. Even if that world is physically a small region of a larger world, i.e., the island of “In the Penal Colony,” Kafka depicts that region metaphysically as a claustrophobic, self-enclosed world governed by its own absurd laws. Confinement is a recurring theme of this small world. Disjointed from any other reality, it becomes a world unto itself, from which there is no escape. Second, this authority is inscrutable. Its workings are unknown to those whom it subjugates, and no method can reveal those workings. Kafka’s protagonists and narrators are often travelers who stumble into a bizarre world or, as in “The Refusal,” citizens long-acustomed to absurdity, but any effort to understand the ruling authority invariably ends in failure. Third, this authority possesses absolute power but rarely exercises that power. Somewhat paradoxically, despite wielding absolute power, the authority has little real impact. For instance, the Emperor of “The Great Wall of China” is distant, his voice inaudible across the vast territory that he commands. Authority is so remote from its subjects that its power is almost never witnessed and only accepted as vague fact, this remoteness perhaps the very thing that renders it inscrutable. Finally, this authority is arbitrary but absolute. Despite failing to exercise power and doing nothing to maintain power, it manages to command the almost ubiquitous obedience of its subjects. These traits render the shadowy authority of Kafka’s fiction an omnipresent force. Kafka shows that authority exists everywhere and always, will continue to exist, and is ultimately greater than humanity.
Though Kafka depicts this authority in all his short stories, this section will primarily examine three, “In the Penal Colony,” “The Great Wall of China,” and “The Refusal,” as the most prominent examples. These three stories most directly resemble political allegories. Precisely for this reason, they exemplify Kafka’s depiction of political authority not only for its own sake but as an allegory of theological authority. Many read Kafka as a political activist warning against totalitarianism—*The Trial* is often interpreted as a forewarning of Nazism—but the political scenery of his fiction is only a backdrop to authority on a larger scale. To Kafka, theological authority is a political relationship, and political authority can therefore model the former. Just as interhuman politics reflect, on a smaller scale, the theological covenant between human and God, Kafka’s depiction of an all-powerful government bears a striking similitude to an all-mighty God. Whenever he depicts political authority, Kafka depicts not only the authority of a human government but that of God—Kafka’s concern is not authority wielded by humans, but authority that commands humans. Despite struggling to cope with the distance of authority, Kafka ultimately embraces the legitimacy of authority.

“In the Penal Colony,” written in October 1914 and published in October 1919, depicts an unnamed penal colony and describes the final deployment of a torture and execution device designed by the Old Commandant, now deceased. Under this justice system, the accused is always found guilty without trial, and this machine, or “apparatus,” carves the sentence of the condemned on his skin—a process that kills the prisoner over the course of twelve hours. As the Old Commandant is deceased, the current Commandant, finding fault in the injustice of this method and apparently influenced by women who “stuff [him] with sugar candy” (152), has discontinued usage of the
apparatus. During this final execution, an officer describes the process to the narrator, an explorer, in the attempt to convince him to advocate for the machine. When the explorer is not convinced, the officer realizes that his devotion to the machine is antiquated, and he attempts to validate his devotion by martyring himself through self-crucifixion—only for the machine to malfunction and kill him instantly, denying him his desired death.

We must consider how the story moves beyond political narrative before analyzing it as an exploration of the nature of authority. Its investigation of theological authority begins with the Old Commandant as a representation of the God of the Old Testament. In Kafkaesque fashion, the penal colony is sequestered on an island away from a presumably larger world governed by different authorities. The narrator is an explorer from the West who was “sent out to study criminal procedure in all the countries of the world” (156). Yet the story contains only sparse hints that there is an outside world at all, vague details about the explorer being from a different land. In contrast, the penal colony and its political workings dominate the story. Even while absent, the Old Commandant is a much more tangible authority than those of the supposed outside world, because the officer and the apparatus extend his influence. The explorer asks the officer, “Did he combine everything in himself, then? Was he soldier, judge, mechanic, chemist, and draughtsman?” to which the officer answers, “Indeed he was,” reflecting the Old Commandant’s godlike omniscience (144). Moreover, he was an all-punishing God. Everything in this self-contained world was his creation, and the apparatus delivered his judgments. Defense was impossible against his authority; the condemned did not know their sentences, did not know they had been sentenced, and did not have a chance to mount a defense, which the officer assumes would simply be lies “backed up with more
lies, and so on and so forth” (146). Having been judged guilty, prisoners are meant to experience a religious epiphany in the sixth hour of their torture: “Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates… You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one’s eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds” (150). Thus, the Old Commandant’s apparatus transforms its victims into Christ-like figures, crucified and redeemed by a purgatorial machine.

But all the same, the Old Commandant’s omniscience is questioned. Following his death, the organization of the penal colony, deemed by the officer “so perfect that his successor…would find it impossible to alter anything,” begins to change (141). When the officer attempts to execute himself with the apparatus, the machine malfunctions. Though the destruction of the machine might be interpreted as evidence of the failing of the Old Commandant and an indictment of his fleeting authority, even in this instance Kafka does not depart from his usual depiction of absolute authority. There is still an operative transcendental truth. One must ask: Why did the machine malfunction? When he sets up the apparatus for his own death, the officer programs the words “Be Just” to be fatally engraved on him. Essentially, the officer asks the machine to punish his injustice, the cruelty with which he has treated his fellow citizens, and the machine’s response is ambiguous. Does the machine affirm his actions as just by failing to write “Be Just”? But the officer is not granted the vindication that he desires. His yearning for the religious enlightenment that he believes the machine capable of granting is not granted to him. Thus his death becomes an arbitrary act. Such an absurd death reflects the popular Judaic belief that Jesus Christ was one of many false messiahs and that his crucifixion did not provide the salvation believed by Christianity. Likewise, the officer crucifies himself
to prove himself right, and the result is an unsatisfying death: “It [the face of the corpse] was as it had been in life; no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found” (166). The Old Commandant’s apparatus, through its destruction, punishes an unjust man with an unjust death and therefore proves a point about its authority—that it cannot be manipulated to serve the purposes of humanity. Its nature is inscrutable. In this way, Kafka satirizes religion as incapable of interpreting transcendental truth. If the Old Commandant is God and the apparatus his truth, the officer is a priest who provides only the form of religion, the bureaucratic structure and methodology, without the greater substance. What the officer describes as a religious epiphany in the other victims is an individual experience that he cannot understand for himself. When he attempts to force an epiphany, he inevitably fails. In another allusion to Christ, the Old Commandant’s grave is engraved with a prophecy that he will “rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony” (167). In Judaic terms, the Old Commandant is a true messiah, one who, unlike Christ, has yet to rise again, and whose justice and authority is uncontaminated by the rigid bureaucracy of organized religion.

The ambiguity of the apparatus raises another question: Does it provide any real enlightenment? It evidently does not in the case of the officer, but whether it has the intended effect on the condemned is never confirmed, and indeed, the process is shrouded in secrecy. Not only is the condemned not told his sin, the sin is written in deliberately obscure script with “lots and lots of flourishes” (149) so that it is “difficult to decipher the script with one’s eyes” (150). Interestingly, Kafka chooses to depict crimes through writing, but perhaps criticizes writing as an inadequate medium—another display of his
self-doubt and his qualification that his writing cannot capture the full nature of authority, only its inscrutability. Likewise, criticism of the apparatus has its own difficulties.

While denouncing the apparatus, the explorer employs a pedantic, bourgeois tone that fails to convey the horror the machine deserves. He notes the “injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution,” but also thinks that it is a “ticklish matter to intervene decisively in other people’s affairs” (151). Like many of Kafka’s characters, the explorer detaches himself from the horrific events, noting that there is something unsettlingly wrong but doing little to oppose it because to do so would be “ticklish.”

There is no humane objection. The prisoner is not a sympathetic victim, not a heroic martyr but “a submissive dog…[that] would only need to be whistled for when the execution was due to begin” (140). Objection to the machine is only a protestation against the abstract nature of the machine, not against its application; the explorer protests the machine because he believes it unjust, but not for the sake of its victim. As an allegory of authority, Kafka’s writing similarly objects to the nature of authority, but not to its existence or its claim upon humanity.

“The Great Wall of China,” written in 1917, explores nation-building, communal identity, and the nature of an absolute authority that, unlike the fading authority of “In the Penal Colony,” is continuously present but distant. It unfolds as the reflection of an elderly mason from the southern provinces who had once been employed in the construction of the Great Wall. Despite being intended as “protection against the peoples of the north,” he claims, the Great Wall had been built piecemeal so that not only could it “not protect, but what there [was] of it [was] in perpetual danger” (235). Labor groups were tasked with building five hundred yards of the wall over the span of five years, then
transferred so that they could see “on their journey finished sections of the wall rising here and there…[hear] the rejoicings of new armies of labor streaming past from the depths of the land” (237). These sights would rekindle the laborers’ faith in the project and encourage them to continue. In the second half of the narrative, part of which is published as a parable called “A Message from the Emperor,” the narrator focuses on the authority of the distant Emperor whose message is not received by his far-off subjects.

Just as “In the Penal Colony” uses the political setting in its discussion of theological authority, “The Great Wall of China” uses the nation-building process to explore human consciousness and how authority maintains its claim over humanity. Like Kafka’s other authority figures, the Emperor is a remote figure whom the citizens can only imagine as an abstract force: “We think only about the Emperor. But not about the present one, or rather we would think about the present one if we knew who he was or knew anything definite about him” (243). The citizens do not consider the Emperor to be an actual person, and they do not differentiate between different emperors. The Emperor exists as an embodiment of the authority of the Empire: “The Empire is immortal, but the Emperor himself totters and falls from his throne…” (243). Regardless of the identity of the individual person acting as emperor, the ultimate authority of the Emperor endures. As the mainstay of Kafka’s fiction, the authority figure is never a singular being but an omnipresent force. In this vein, the Emperor is distant and inscrutable, even to the point of ineffectuality. For Kafka, authority is unquestioned, but authority is also so removed and so inscrutable that it cannot be obeyed. In “The Great Wall of China,” the national boundaries are so vast that the administrative center of the capital is too far from the provinces for any of the Emperor’s messages to be heard. In the story’s parable, the
messenger sets out on his journey but “the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end…how vainly does he wear out his strength…” (244). Kafka therefore asks: If this authority is so remote, how is it maintained, and what is its value? The answer is found in the mason’s tale about the construction of the Great Wall, which both elucidates how authority maintains its power and why Kafka ultimately accepts authority.

What is the purpose of the Great Wall? Evidently not its purported purpose of defense against the northern invaders, as the mason notes that there are very likely “gaps which have never been filled in at all” (235). Rather, the government ordered the wall to be built for the sake of building it. By enlisting the citizens in a shared goal against a shared enemy, the government draws them together and builds a national identity. Their apparent enemy is the North, but the mason states: “Now, I come from the southeast of China. No northern people can menace us there” (241). Not only has the narrator never seen the invaders infiltrate the gaps of the wall, he has never seen them at all. They, like the authority figure, remain a fluid abstraction onto which citizens project their fears. Furthermore, the Great Wall is constructed piecemeal because the wall must be partially completed to continue motivating the citizens with evidence of progress, but left unfinished to maintain their motivation. Nationality is fostered through a national goal, as seen in the mason’s description of the workers’ motivations: “Every fellow countryman was a brother for whom one was building a wall of protection, and who would return lifelong thanks for it with all he had and did” (238). If construction of the “wall of protection” ceased, the countrymen would cease to be a “brothers,” because the act of construction confers solidarity. Also, note that thanks are “lifelong.” As the population grows, these new citizens also need to partake in construction to be inducted
into the national identity—the solidarity of the previous generation is built not on any inherent quality of humanity but only on “lifelong” thanks. In conversation, Kafka said that while “intellectual labor tears a man out of human society,” labor in the workshop, a craft, “leads him towards men” (Janouch 15). Should the unifying enterprise of craft end, the national consciousness would dissolve.

Government encourages communal identity in its citizens through shared subjugation to its authority. Kafka approvingly depicts the group consciousness of the laborers as an example, even if subjugation conflicts with human nature; Kafka writes that “human nature, essentially changeable, unstable as the dust, can endure no restraint” (239). Only under subjugation does humanity achieve constancy and become capable of greater achievements. Both in this story and his novels—to be discussed in later chapters—Kafka seems fascinated with communal projects and communal ambition. In his narration, the mason relates how a scholar judged the Great Wall as providing “for the first time in the history of mankind a secure foundation for a new Tower of Babel,” and the mason asks: “Why were there in the book plans…proposals worked out in detail for mobilizing the people’s energies for the stupendous new work?” (239) A recurring theme in Kafka is the search for meaning through interpersonal interactions, exemplified in the construction of the Great Wall. Of course, it is wholly impractical to use the Great Wall as the foundation for a tower, and the mason says as much: the proposals can be meant “only in a spiritual sense” (239). But Kafka ultimately approves of the subjugation that allows this ambition. Authority is inscrutable, but it forms a bond between people: “Unity! Unity! Shoulder to shoulder, a ring of brothers, a current of blood no longer confined within the narrow circulation of one body…” (238). In the Biblical story of the
Tower of Babel, God, witnessing the arrogance of a united and ambitious humanity, scattered them and confounded their speech so that they could no longer understand each other. Kafka may be suggesting that, by reconstructing the Tower of Babel, humanity might reunite in understanding. However, the reconstruction cannot be finished, or even progress much at all, lest humanity anger God, and reaching God would end the subjugation that unites humanity. Rather than the completion of the Tower of Babel, it is the communal effort of building the Tower of Babel that Kafka values. Perhaps the error of the officer in “In the Penal Colony” is not injustice, but his belief that he understands more of the higher truth of the Old Commandant than his fellow citizens.

Kafka may struggle to accept the distance and inscrutability of the authority represented by the Emperor, but he criticizes the “feebleness of faith and imaginative power on the part of the people that prevents them from raising the empire out of its stagnation” (247). Imperial inscrutability is not the problem—Kafka decries the stagnation of citizens who never attempt to understand beyond its inscrutability. While their communal efforts are beneficial, they fail to recognize those benefits. Kafka accepts human inability to understand higher transcendental truth or meaning in the world as a “fundamental defect” (247), but the mason, who chooses not to question “the very ground on which we live” (248), exemplifies the “feebleness of faith and imaginative power” that Kafka describes. Instead, Kafka accepts authority and its inscrutability as the source of unity and of art, because the struggle to understand is a form of piety.

“The Refusal,” written in the autumn of 1920 and never published in Kafka’s lifetime, resembles “The Great Wall of China.” It takes the form of a man’s reflection on living in a small town distant from the capital, the inhabitants of which submit to orders
issued by the capital despite being refused whenever they appeal for government aid.

They are led by the tax-collector who also holds the rank of colonel, and the soldiers who uphold the law appear inhuman, their most striking traits being “the prominence of their teeth which almost overcrowd their mouths, and a certain restless twitching of their small narrow eyes” (265). Again, the authority of this story is distant, and what can be seen of that authority is frighteningly strange, but Kafka is surprisingly direct in conveying, if not his approval, his submission.

The narrator states: “Our little town does not lie on the frontier, nowhere near; desolate highlands have to be crossed as well as wide fertile plains. To imagine even part of the road makes one tired, and more than part one just cannot imagine” (263). But Kafka might argue that the road must be imagined. Understanding the placement of the town on the frontier, then the distance between the frontier and the capital, and then the location of the capital within the entire nation—Kafka might say that this process of understanding is tiring but essential, not necessarily for the sake of the higher truth, but for a greater understanding of even the little town. Kafka modestly accepts the absurdities of the world, but seeks to understand a little bit of that dilemma. “The Refusal” demonstrates that humility with its focus on the small town, in which the citizens form a delegation to petition the colonel with an unassuming request “for a year’s tax exemption, possibly also for timber from the imperial forests at a reduced price” (266). Continuing Kafka’s traditional depiction of bureaucratic impenetrability, the citizens’ request is met with a flat refusal, just as, “in all important matters, the citizens can always count on a refusal,” yet they continue to make requests (267). This pattern symbolizes Kafka’s struggle with authority. In his quest to understand authority, Kafka
made only small overtures—his writing even doubts its own effectiveness—but nonetheless he persisted. This ritual of perpetual failure raises the question of why Kafka continued to write and why the citizens continue to make requests knowing they will be rejected. Indeed, the narrator adds that the citizens receive the refusal with an “undeniable sense of relief,” and that “without this refusal one simply cannot get along” (267). Why is refusal welcomed?

The complying citizens must be contrasted with the discontented. Kafka ends the story with the narrator’s observation that discontent is found in “young people roughly between seventeen and twenty,” who are “utterly incapable of foreseeing the consequences of even the least significant, far less a revolutionary, idea” (267). The next section of this chapter discusses the recurring motif of a father figure in more detail, but these lines begin to raise a poignant question about Kafka’s personal life: Why did he choose not to marry and relocate, therefore remaining under Hermann’s influence?

Unlike many writers seeking the romantic ideal of intellectual freedom—Percy Shelley, for instance, who eloped to Scotland at the age of nineteen—Kafka never broke with his family. Assuming the authority depicted in his fiction is based on Hermann, Kafka chose to stay because he could foresee the consequences of the “revolutionary idea” of freedom. Freedom from Hermann would have deprived Kafka of his theme, and worse, removed him from the struggle for submission and comprehension, without which his personal growth as an artist and his quest for transcendence would have ended. Likewise, the citizens of “The Refusal” feel relief at the rejection because their attempt is already an achievement. Failure allows them to try again. Only those blind to the consequences of freedom, Kafka says, feel discontent. Freedom is the path of escapism. For Kafka,
authority was not just a truth of his personal life embodied by Hermann, but a necessity through which he could begin to understand the world.

The Heavenly Father

In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka claims: “My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast” (*Letter* 83). Everything discussed thus far stems from Kafka’s observation of Hermann. His portrayal of bourgeois society and the conflict between societal obligation and personal freedom comes from Hermann’s “shouting, cursing, and raging in the shop…and other sorts of tyrannizing” (*Letter* 51). His understanding of the inscrutable authority and his acceptance of its arbitrariness comes from Hermann’s “self-confidence” in his authority, so that Hermann “had no need to be consistent at all and yet never ceased to be in the right” (*Letter* 17). Kafka transformed his struggle with Hermann into a larger struggle with authority. Inevitably, Kafka’s depiction of authority is frequently paternal. Though often enough there is an actual father, equally often the father figure is a patriarchal political authority, such as the Emperor in “The Great Wall of China” or the colonel in “The Refusal.” As previously discussed, Kafka contrasts the father figure with the son, or the subject, who tends to fall under the power of the father without resistance. When he does question the father’s authority, the son questions the nature of that authority—the reason for it, the extent of it—but almost never questions the fact of this authority. This tendency comes from Kafka’s own understanding of Hermann and Kafka’s acceptance of the absurdity of their relationship. Suggesting that the father-son relationship is the crux of Kafka’s depiction of authority in all his fiction, this section evaluates “The Judgment,”
which depicts an actual father-son relationship, in conjunction with other short stories portraying patriarchal dynamics and the psyche of the son as an oppressed figure.

“The Judgment” was written in a single sitting on the night of September 22, 1912, and in his diary entry of September 23, Kafka writes: “Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul” (Diaries 213). It begins with Georg Bendemann sitting in his room and musing about his friend in Russia, who had left their hometown years prior to set up a now-failing business. Though initially reluctant, Georg had been persuaded by his fiancé, Frieda Brandenfeld, to write to Georg about his engagement. Georg then sees his father and informs him of the letter to his friend, to which Georg’s father responds with a litany of accusations—that Georg has fabricated this friend, that Georg has deceived him about the family business, that Georg wants him dead. Georg manages only ineffectual defenses, before his father finally sentences him to “death by drowning” (87). Georg obeys, running from his home to a bridge, swinging himself over the railing, and plunging to his apparent death. This patriarchal family structure parallels humanity’s subservience to God, the father being an absolute, inscrutable authority, and the son being his vassal. There are obvious enough references to Kafka’s personal experiences that the story can be immediately understood as a representation of Kafka’s life—Georg’s relationship with his father and his engagement to Frieda reproduce Kafka’s relationship with Hermann and his engagement to Felice Bauer, whose initials mirror those of Frieda Brandenfeld and to whom he dedicated “The Judgment.” Understanding Georg as a stand-in for Kafka, analysis of the father-son dynamic between Georg and his father sheds light on the relationship between Kafka and Hermann.
Georg’s father resembles Hermann in both physical appearance and demeanor, and most importantly, in the way that he is perceived by his son. When Georg sees his father, the first thought in his mind is that “[his] father is still a giant of a man” (81) in the same way that Kafka describes Hermann as physically imposing: “There was I, skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad” (Letter 15). Yet the father has a strangely inconsistent aspect. His shape and size are protean. He is described as “giant,” but he is still easily lifted and tucked into bed. Lying in bed, he manages to touch the ceiling. Like Hermann and the other authority figures of Kafka’s fiction, Georg’s father possesses an intangibility of being that makes his authority impossible to comprehend. In Hermann, this manifests in his “enigmatic quality that all tyrants have, whose rights are based on their person and not on reason” (Letter 17), while the fictional characters further demonstrate their elusiveness through physical inconsistency. Their amorphous shape prevents them from being “covered up” in the way that Georg would have hidden his father in bed to mask his authority (84). Authority transcends physicality, existing as an irrepressible metaphysical force.

In the first of his accusations, Georg’s father claims that Georg’s friend in Russia is not real. Readers might be inclined to believe the narrator and protagonist, Georg, over his belligerent father, but the father’s claim seems less farfetched when considering Georg’s inconsistent narration. Though he tells the reader that his business is succeeding, Gregor lives in “one of a long row of small, ramshackle houses” (77). In Freudian terms, Georg’s musings at the beginning of the story, which deal with the social ramifications of his economic position and writing to his friend, indicate his conscious ego, while the father represents the superego, the punitive authority that judges Georg and sentences
him as guilty. Perhaps for this reason, Georg is highly forgetful. He forgets his father’s size and his resolve to watch his father’s movement in case of attack. Finally, the narration states that Georg “kept on forgetting everything” (86). His forgetfulness indicates his inability to reconcile the irrationality of his situation and his bondage to his father. Georg is condemned as selfish and unfilial by the severe authority of his father, just as Kafka, taking on Hermann’s voice at the end of *Letter to His Father*, condemns himself for his unfilial, self-serving letter. In his second accusation, as the retired owner of their family business, Georg’s father reproaches Georg for “strutting through the world, finishing off deals that [he] had prepared for him” (86), just as Kafka writes that he can “enjoy what [Hermann] gave, but only in humiliation, weariness, weakness, and with a sense of guilt” (*Letter* 49). Guilt is the question in both Georg and Kafka’s minds, and Kafka seems to believe that, as sons, they are inherently guilty of receiving the “undeserved gift” of life (*Letter* 33). Their superegos, represented by their fathers, constantly remind them of this guilt. Any attempt to escape is futile—the superego is an inescapable part of the psyche.

Kafka became engaged and broke off those engagements largely due to Hermann’s disapproval. Georg’s father likewise condemns his son’s romantic life: “Because she lifted her skirts like this, the nasty creature…you have disgraced your mother’s memory, betrayed your friend, and stuck your father into bed so that he can’t move” (85). Marriage disgraces the mother’s memory because marriage would rescue the son from his feminine masochism, the same sort of bondage that entrapped Kafka. Kafka, who associated his identity with that of Julie Kafka, could not have married without casting off his mother’s femininity to take on his father’s masculinity. Escaping
femininity represents the ego’s efforts to escape the superego, a motif that Kafka recurrently employs in his work. In “A Little Woman,” the narrator faces a young woman whose hostility eerily recalls Kafka’s self-accusation of falsehood in *Letter to His Father:* “So with feminine guile she steers a middle course; she keeps silent but betrays all the outward signs of a secret sorrow in order to draw public attention to the matter” (318). Arguably, the woman represents the subconscious superego of the narrator—and Kafka—as he considers his public standing and how he can “stay quietly where [he is] and not let it affect [his] behavior as far as can be seen” (321). To truly be free, the narrator must escape the woman, but this is impossible, the woman surveys him always. Thus, Kafka associates femininity with his own attempt at escape; the conflict between ego and superego creates a hostile female figure.

However, Kafka condemns escape from the superego because, as previously discussed in “The Refusal,” escapism precludes comprehension and whatever transcendence is possible. In response to his father’s accusations, Georg initially attempts to defuse the situation by making light of his father’s exaggerated attitude, calling him a “comedian” (86). When his father claims, “I’ve established a fine connection with your friend and I have your customers here in my pocket,” Georg quips, “He has pockets even in his shirt!” (87). But despite his attempts to ridicule his father, Georg empowers him. It might also be said that Georg empowers his father by his attempts to ridicule him. By mocking his father, Georg reveals his awareness of the unequal dynamic between them, thereby acknowledging his father’s power over him. In *Letter to His Father,* Kafka recalls joking about Hermann out of self-preservation, and he calls his jokes “part and parcel” of “profound respect” (41). Kafka understood that
antagonistic jokes do not disempower the subject, but empowers by admitting a need for this weak defense. Though Georg makes fun of his father and seems momentarily to gain the upper hand, “in his very mouth the words turned into deadly earnest” (87). These jokes are not jokes but the ineffectual attempt of a man fleeing from his superego. Kafka, understanding the inefficacy of such an attempt to debase Hermann, instead sought “insight” into the mutual helplessness between them (Letter 19). Georg fails to employ this self-affirming tactic, remains entirely under his father’s sway, and eventually drowns himself at his father’s command.

Opposition is a recurring theme of Kafka’s depiction of the father-son dynamic. In addition to Georg’s antagonistic remarks meant to diminish his father’s authority, Kafka depicts the son supplanting the father and the father replacing the son. Georg’s friend becomes a rival for his father’s affection, as the father states that his friend “would have been a son after [his] own heart” (85). In the Oedipal context, Georg’s friend models his opposite—being affectionate with the father and less affectionate, even hostile to the mother based on his reaction to learning of the mother’s death, his condolence “phrased so dryly that the grief caused by such an event, one had to conclude, could not be realized in a distant country” (78). The friend escapes the struggle against authority but sacrifices his development and becomes poor and isolated. But where the friend escapes struggle through conformity, Georg also attempts to escape struggle by supplanting his father—becoming the father figure to his father—without comprehending their relationship. Georg rebels against his father by imitating him, taking his authority in the business, burying his authority by covering him up, and mimicking his marital status by himself becoming engaged. In “The Village Schoolmaster,” Kafka portrays a similar
form of father-son rivalry between the narrator and a schoolmaster when the narrator, an intellectual, tries to defend the schoolmaster’s honesty about witnessing a giant mole in his own essay: “Originally I thought my intervention might be of some use to you, while now I cannot but recognize that I have damaged you in every way” (175). Though he seemingly wishes to aid the schoolmaster, the narrator supplants him as his brochure steals attention and distracts from his original topic. Likewise, Georg attempts to steal power from his father by reversing their roles, and in a startling reversal of Kafka’s memory of Hermann carrying him onto the balcony as punishment, Georg assumes the paternal role as he carries his father like an infant and tucks him into bed. In the father’s words, Georg’s mind is split into “an innocent child,” his conscious self that cares for his father as a matter of filial piety, and “a devilish human being,” his unconscious self that cares for his father only to dominate him (87). However, Georg cannot escape from his superego. In Freudian consideration of the Oedipus complex, the superego’s authority is assigned to the father figure, who lords as the supreme authority over the child. As Georg flounders and stares “at the bogey conjured up by his father,” his father’s stature changes, transforming from an infantile figure to a man who can stand on his own (85). At the story’s end, the authority of Georg’s superego has been fully transplanted to his father, allowing him to command Georg’s death.

When Georg’s father issues the command, Georg feels himself “urged from the room” (87). Here, Kafka imbibes the father with the absolute authority of the Emperor and the Old Commandant—and of God. Georg becomes a Christ-like figure, an allusion previously hinted in the story when Georg reminds his father of his friend’s account of the Russian Revolution and “a priest on a balcony who cut a broad cross in blood on the
palm of his hand and held the hand up and appealed to the mob” (83). For the mob, the priest is the medium of God’s truth. For the reader, Georg becomes the medium of Kafka’s ideal. When he rushes from the room, Georg runs into a charwoman who cries, “Jesus!” and covers her face with her apron (87). Guilt is again broached, this time with the connotation of original sin. Georg is dying not for the sins of humanity but for his own, though his personal sin—being a son to his father—is also inherent in humanity. Georg drowns not only in water but also in his father’s irrational accusations. His father, God and superego, does not require a reason to condemn him. On this reading, the Freudian superego is not an abstract construction but a real force capable of violence; Kafka acknowledges that the path he advocates, of searching for truth and confronting the superego, can be a painful and dangerous one. But Georg, even while hurtling towards his death, does so “as a starving man clutches food” (88). His acceptance of his father’s authority comes as a relief rather than a burden. Thus, Kafka maintains the inviolability of obedience and subordinates humanity to the authority under which it exists. Georg’s death is not in the least melodramatic or sanctimonious. He waits for “a motor-bus coming which would easily cover the noise of his fall,” and at the time he lets himself drop, “an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge” (88). His passing has no lasting impact. His fall makes no sound audible over the continued activity of the world. Why did Kafka depict Georg’s death in this way? The wronged victim who hangs himself in anguished innocence and thus defies his accusers is a common literary trope, yet Kafka has Georg drown. Georg’s unassuming death suggests several ideas. Drowning makes it difficult for the body to be found, and even if found, the body is often unrecognizable; Kafka evidently did not wish to make Georg a heroic figure dying a
noble death. His death cannot be said to be a victory—Georg may be free from his obligation to authority, but his life and the very basis of his humanity are also lost. Georg’s death results from not only his inability to comprehend his father but his inability to try to resist him; Kafka evidently believes that, to the very best of its limited ability, humanity should always struggle for comprehension. When asked by Gustav Janouch about the story, Kafka replied: “‘The Judgment’ is the spectre of a night… the verification, and so the complete exorcism, of the spectre” (31). Samuel Ritvo suggests that “The Judgment” was a “discharge in fantasy of the conflicted feelings toward his father in an effort to exorcise them—murderous impulses as well as tender, caring feelings” (327). Through “The Judgment,” Kafka exorcised his escapist impulse, weighing his struggles under Hermann against his fears that marrying Bauer would impair his writing ability—before finally resolving to accept Hermann’s subjugation and strive for understanding.

**The Metamorphosis: The Artistry of Vermin**

Thus far this chapter has overviewed the themes of Kafkian literature—Kafka’s depiction of the bourgeois society dominated by an inscrutable authority, both modeled by and exemplified in the father-son relationship. Naturally these themes coexist in Kafka’s fiction, but the previous sections focused on the themes individually for the sake of building foundational knowledge. This section will analyze the themes in unison as they converge in *The Metamorphosis*. Published in 1915, *The Metamorphosis* is Kafka’s most famous story. Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, wakes up to find himself metamorphosed into a monstrous insect, and the novella deals with his attempts to adjust to his condition as well as the reactions of his sister and parents, who are repelled. Gregor is wounded by his father on multiple occasions. After a long period of neglect,
Gregor finally dies in his bedroom. Critics have long considered Gregor a stand-in for Kafka, and as in the case of Georg of “The Judgment,” the idea has merit; Kafka did characterize his writing as a homage to his father.

Unlike Georg and most victims in Kafkian literature, Gregor appears to be a sympathetic character whose plight is undeserved. Readers learn that Gregor had taken on an exhausting, thankless job to provide for his family and that he had planned to help his sister, Grete, fulfill her dream of studying violin at the Conservatorium. For family reasons, Gregor is trapped in a bourgeois routine and caught in a cyclical situation metaphorized by his inability to take sick days: “But that would be most unpleasant and would look suspicious, since during his five years’ employment he had not been ill once” (91). Because he has never been ill, Gregor cannot be ill in the future. Likewise, because he has started down the path of bourgeois society, he cannot stop himself from falling deeper into conformity. There is no reward for conformity; Gregor can only continue to conform or be punished: “What a fate, to be condemned to work for a firm where the smallest omission at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion!” (94). Societal policing of his continued conformity mirrors Hermann’s tendency to “reinforce abusiveness with threats” (Letter 31). In this way, family and society become analogous. As he receives no reward from society, Gregor garners no reward from his family, which likewise becomes accustomed to his efforts on their behalf: “They had simply got used to it, both the family and Gregor; the money was gratefully accepted and gladly given, but there was no special uprush of warm feeling” (111). Despite his altruistic efforts, Gregor is still viewed with disgust and scorn when he transforms into an insect. If Gregor is a representation of Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* seems a more self-exonerating work.
compared to “The Judgment,” as though Kafka is claiming that he, too, did his utmost to meet societal and familial expectations but ultimately suffered alienation. But as usual, Kafka does not fully absolve himself and instead depicts mutual bondage between Gregor and his family. Upon Gregor’s transformation and eventual death, all three members of the household discover their own strengths: the father regains his strength and works again, the mother takes up sewing, and the sister blooms “into a pretty girl with a good figure” (139). Their previous dependence on Gregor was parasitic and repressed their own potential, just as Kafka compares his own existence to that of a tick living on Hermann’s blood. It stands to reason that the family bond impedes both Gregor and his family. When this bond is broken by Gregor’s transformation, his family is freed. They “canvassed their prospects for the future, and it appeared on closer inspection that these were not at all bad” (139). If his family is freed, why should Gregor be condemned to death? To answer this question, one must examine the nature of his metamorphosis.

Gregor’s transformation arguably represents Kafka’s own nature—that is, the insect represents the artistic soul, Kafka the writer rather than Kafka the member of society. It is a true reflection of his identity, truer than the human caught in the cyclical trap of bourgeois society and obligation to his family. Gregor’s transformation occurs overnight while he lies in bed. Writing is, for Kafka, “a nighttime activity, as are dreaming, copulation, and self-abuse” (Johae 215). Like Gregor, Kafka was lying “in bed in [his] misery” when he was seized by the idea for The Metamorphosis, and he describes the story’s scenario as “a repulsive scene” that has come “pouring out” (Letters to Felice 47, 108). Gregor’s transformation into the repulsive, too, is a creative act. In the opening paragraphs, Gregor looks around his room and describes a picture he had cut
out from a magazine, which shows “a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole” (89).

Society considers this lady, wearing false skin, beautiful. In contrast, Gregor’s outward ugliness reflects the truth of his being, but society rejects that truth and ostracizes him. *The Metamorphosis* is not a story of self-loathing, but of societal alienation. Gregor’s transformation into an insect might seem deprecating, but his metamorphosis is an empowering event that could have granted him agency over his life and allowed him to break away from family and society. Though Kafka had reservations about the power of his writing and felt obliged to qualify what it could achieve, the fact still stands that he devoted himself to literature. Kafka the writer was removed from society, but there was nothing inherently wrong about this removal. Likewise, Gregor does not immediately loathe himself upon discovering that he has become an insect, because there is nothing inherently wrong with being an insect. Gregor enjoys his new life, and “for mere recreation” he forms the habit of “crawling crisscross over the walls and ceiling” and “hanging suspended from the ceiling,” enjoying the “almost blissful absorption induced by this suspension” (115). There is an artistry to these movements; Gregor defies the laws of gravity that would have impeded him as a human, just as artists are expected to defy the norm. To be an insect is to follow his truest nature and to be free.

Gregor’s transformation is not completed overnight, nor is it an entirely physical change. His voice changes from a “persistent horrible twittering squeak,” which, though horrible, at least “left the words in their clear shape” (91) and could be understood by his mother, to a voice so unrecognizable that the chief clerk proclaims, “That was no human voice” (98). As he acclimatizes to his new body and comes to terms with his new life, Gregor mentally, perhaps subconsciously, abandons humanity. Only when confronted by
his family and employer does he feel himself “drawn once more into the human circle” (99). Drawn though he may be, Gregor clearly thinks of himself as being part of another circle, another world. Following this, Gregor adapts to and enjoys his new life. Evidently, being an insect does not inherently repulse Gregor. Not until Gregor is reminded of humanity does it inspire self-loathing. When Grete rearranges the furniture in his room to give him more space to maneuver, Gregor initially “looked forward to having his room emptied of furnishing” (116). At this point, Gregor would have gladly cast off his humanity, including the human possessions that tied him to his home, in favor of free, open space. Only when his mother reminds him that this is the equivalent of “giving up hope of his ever getting better” (116) does Gregor feel conflicted and self-loathing: “Gregor was now cut off…he dared not open the door for fear of frightening away his sister…and harassed by self-approach and worry he began now to crawl to and fro…” (119). Gregor’s self-loathing stems from being pulled in different directions by opposite worlds, one of the past—society and reality—and one of the present—the artistic. Society dictates that humans are to be loved and insects to be shunned. Gregor’s father represents the authority that enforces this ultimatum, “driving Gregor back into his room,” brandishing a stick and using violent force without a care for “circumstantial preparations” that might avoid injuring his son (104). His assault, “literally a deliverance,” ends with Gregor being pushed through the cramped doorway of his room, “bleeding freely” (105). Like Hermann, Gregor’s father is a divine authority capable of cruel punishment. Gregor is truly free only when he surrenders to his present self and the absurdity of his situation.
Throughout the story, Gregor’s insectoid body, symbolic of Kafka’s artistry, slowly deteriorates under his father’s violence. His slow death reflects Kafka’s seclusion, which stemmed from Hermann’s distance. In a diary entry of May 4, 1913, Kafka states: “Always the image of a pork butcher’s broad knife that quickly and with mechanical regularity chops into me from the side and cuts off very thin slices which fly off almost like shavings because of the speed of the action” (Diaries 221). Kafka felt that his father and society at large were slowly killing him by eroding his artistic identity. In The Metamorphosis, Gregor’s father shoves him through a doorway, leaving him bleeding and bruised, and throws an apple at him, which lodges in his back and begins to rot. Gregor’s degradation represents the degradation of Kafka’s artistry, which a conformist society condemns. Kafka suggests that society has contradictory expectations for artists, demanding that they serve its leisure while condemning them as different and therefore objectionable. In the short story “A Hunger Artist,” the protagonist, a hunger artist who fasts for forty days, experiences the audience’s waning interest and, worse, its misunderstanding of his art. When a spectator tries to console his apparent melancholy, the hunger artist grows infuriated, only for his impresario to suggest that his irritation and sadness result from his fasting; the hunger artist deems this a “perversion of the truth” in a “whole world of non-understanding” (273). What the hunger artist understands as art is not the entertainment that society wants from him. Society considers him a pariah, a spectacle, but for the hunger artist, the art of fasting is as natural as eating is to other people: “Because I have to fast, I can’t help it…because I couldn’t find the food I liked” (277). What he desires is the transcendence of art, not the bourgeois conformity that society demands. Written as Kafka was dying, “A Hunger Artist” can be read as his
autobiographical depiction of the dying, alienated artist whose vision has been rejected by society. Likewise, *The Metamorphosis* depicts the seclusion that he felt, the absurdity of being an artist seeking acceptance from a hostile world.

If Gregor had accepted the absurd, his metamorphosis would have granted him freedom and reversed the power dynamics of his household. Gregor the human had been enslaved to his family, but Gregor the insect forces his family to react to him: “If they were horrified then the responsibility was no longer his and he could stay quiet. But if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset…” (98). In this situation, Gregor is the character with the most agency. What others decide can only be in relation to Gregor’s choice to stay or to leave, so that the seemingly weakest member of the family “can control, manipulate or mesmerize the rest” (Kureishi 13). In the father-son context, whoever understands and embraces the absurdity of their relationship has greater control. Gregor’s father reacts violently, but his reactions signal his weakness. He cannot adapt to the situation and can only react to Gregor: “Pitilessly Gregor’s father drove him back, hissing and crying ‘Shoo!’ like a savage” (104). Kafka describes the father as a savage, and indeed, his reaction is primal, instinctual, and uncontrolled. Gregor’s father reacts to the unknown with ignorance and hostility, as he “did not himself know what he meant to do” (121). However, Gregor’s family may also be considered the focal characters of the novella. Unlike Gregor, his family eventually adapts to the situation, abandoning its dependence on him and learning self-sufficiency. At first, their despondence prevents them from seizing control: “What really kept them from moving into another flat was rather their own complete hopelessness and the belief that they had been singled out for a misfortune…” (124). At the novella’s end, they move past this
hopelessness and each family member develops their own sense of identity. Grete undergoes a metamorphosis of her own from girlhood to womanhood: “It struck both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter’s increasing vivacity…she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure” (139). Grete’s metamorphosis directly contrasts that of Gregor; Gregor becomes ugly, while Grete becomes beautiful. Her change earns societal approval, but Kafka also describes that the “sorrow of recent times…[have] made her cheeks pale” (139). Grete’s bloodless visage suggests that Grete metamorphoses into a new vassal of the bourgeois world to replace Gregor.

Gregor dies, thinking of his family with “tenderness and love,” believing that he must disappear for his family’s sake (135). In Kafkian fashion, perhaps what keeps Gregor from leaving his family is the innate understanding that he must remain to struggle under the authority of his father and society. Without this struggle to accept the absurd, he cannot achieve transcendence. It is debatable whether Gregor achieved some form of enlightenment; Kafka tends to doubt the ability of the artist, as in “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk.” Josephine, the titular singer of a colony of mice, apparently cannot sing well at all, and what the narrator refers to as her “piping” comes “a long, long way” from her claim to “give [them] new strength and so on and so forth” (370). Or perhaps Josephine truly can sing, and her talent is incomprehensible to the other mice—though, instinctively recognizing its worth even without understanding, they admire her nonetheless. Regardless, Josephine never realizes that her relationship with the colony harms them both; Josephine’s singing attracts predators, while the colony hinders her artistic growth. But in The Metamorphosis, Gregor does seem to realize that the bond
between himself and his family causes them both to suffer, and his growing irritation, his
“rage at the way they were neglecting him,” gives way to tranquility before his death
(125). For this reason, Gregor may be the focal character after all, the titular
metamorphosis referring neither to Grete’s coming of age nor to Gregor’s physical
transformation, but to his eventual acceptance of his relationship with family and society.
As he comes to understand his family, he comes to accept their hatred and thereby
accepts his true nature. In this same way, Kafka hoped to understand Hermann,
understand the conflict between them, so that he might come to accept himself and his
artistry. Antony Johae supposes that even if he had come to this understanding and
 gained “access to the protected and hidden spaces of his inner being,” Kafka would
require “rest from his endeavor, a rest which when taken is followed by a protracted loss
of insight” (217). On February 11, 1915, Kafka wrote to Bauer of the difficulty in
balancing creativity and earthliness: “It is very difficult for me to find my way back after
an interval; it’s as though the door, which only a great effort had forced open, had
unobtrusively swung shut” (Letters to Felice 444). Thus, Kafka suggests that
understanding is fleeting and needs to be “secured and defended against the world outside”
(Johae 217). In the short story “The Burrow,” the protagonist, an unspecified mole-like
creature who constructs and maintains an elaborate system of tunnels, likewise burrows
to protect itself from the outside world. However, the protagonist notes the necessity of a
connection with the outside world even as it protects itself against that world: “Apart
from this main exit I am also connected with the outer world by quite narrow, tolerably
safe passages which provide me with good fresh air to breathe” (326). Neither Gregor
nor Kafka could simply remove themselves from the world or from their families. They
must remain in a self-imposed imprisonment, a hermetic environment, precisely because imprisonment allows the ideal of freedom, “of tranquility, of satisfied desire, of achieved ambition” (327). In a diary entry of June 21, 1913, Kafka writes: “The tremendous world I have in my head. But how [to] free myself and free it without being torn to pieces” (Diaries 222). Kafka hoped to free himself and free Hermann, the “tremendous world.” Gregor achieves this through death. Dead, he is freed.
**ESCAPISM IN THE FREE WORLD: AMERIKA, OR THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED**

While the previous chapter discussed Kafka’s short stories as an overview of the themes of absurdity and authority, the following chapters illustrate Kafka’s literary maturation by focusing on his novels—the development of his themes and their culmination in what would be his resolution of the conflict between rationality and authority: acceptance of authority while continuing to seek clarification and understanding. Kafka wrote three novels: *Amerika, The Castle,* and *The Trial.* *Amerika,* his earliest work, begun in 1911, went unfinished. In 1914, Kafka abandoned work on *Amerika* in favor of *The Trial.* Kafka began writing *The Castle* in 1922 but did not manage to finish it before his death in 1924. It seems that Kafka never returned to *Amerika* despite, according to Max Brod, being so “particularly delighted” by the final, incomplete chapter that “he used to read it aloud with great effect” (*Amerika* 299). E.L. Doctorow notes that Kafka wrote two drafts before abandoning the manuscript, suggesting “self-admitted failure” (*Amerika* x). Is it contradictory that Kafka found the novel both delightful and failed? Not necessarily; Kafka viewed writing as a duty—an extension of his need to understand authority. Kafka might have considered *Amerika* a failure *because* it was pleasurable.

Like all of Kafka’s work, *Amerika* is claustrophobic. Its protagonist, sixteen-year-old German immigrant Karl Rossman, is seduced by a housemaid and exiled to New York City by his parents. In the New World, Karl finds not opportunity and freedom but perpetual confinement under various authority figures. As his ship arrives in the United States, Karl befriends a stoker who is about to be dismissed from his job. Together, they plead the stoker’s case to the apathetic Captain. Karl escapes the situation after being
recognized by his uncle, Senator Jacob, who shelters him for a time before abandoning him for the minute transgression of visiting Jacob’s friend, Mr. Pollunder. Karl does not defend himself and leaves New York, meeting two drifters, Robinson and Delamarche, who travel with him to find work in Butterford. The scoundrels exploit Karl by selling his suit, eating his food, and ransacking his belongings. Karl breaks from them, finding work at the Hotel Occidental and being taken under the wing of its Manageress. Karl works twelve-hour shifts, during which he is “sequestered in an attic with strangers, constrained in a porter’s cubicle,” and after losing his job due to Robinson’s reappearance, rejoins the pair of scoundrels and is “imprisoned in a bedroom, and trapped on a balcony” (Amerika xii). Setting the novel in America, land of freedom and open space, highlights the constraint to which Karl is subjected.

Max Brod chose the title Amerika when he assembled the incomplete manuscript and published it in 1927, retitling it from its original, working title, Der Verschollene, i.e. The Man Who Disappeared or The Missing Person. Kafka’s original title brings its own slew of connotations. Heinz Politzer suggests that the real theme of the novel is “not the reality, present or future, of a civilization far away from Kafka’s Prague, but the growth, both personal and intellectual, of Karl Rossman” (124). Likewise, Doctorow argues that Karl’s disappearance lies not only in his physical exile, but the loss of his “personality or moral integrity” and his “metaphysical ephemera” (Amerika xiii). Karl is not entirely helpless, and on multiple occasions, he attempts to defend himself with either words or physical force. Regardless, the result is the same; Karl fails to adapt and is forever estranged by the foreign, hostile New World. But struggle does not cause disappearance. What causes Karl to disappear is not his estrangement, but his avoidance of the
conflicts—his case before the captain, his case before Uncle Jacob, his case before Delamarche—that would grant him metaphysical presence. At one point, Karl muses on “movement without end, a restlessness transmitted from the restless element to helpless human beings and their works” (17). This same movement would have halted his disappearance; the “restlessness” of conflict would have ensured his continued existence. However, Ritchie Robertson argues that “America is not just the setting but the theme of the novel” and that “the presentation of the world’s most advanced industrial and technological society was a major part of Kafka’s project” (45). Certainly, Kafka was imitating Americanism. In the diary entry of October 8, 1917, Kafka writes that Amerika was an imitation of Charles Dickens, but he also states: “It was my intention, as I now see, to write a Dickens novel, but enhanced by the sharper lights I should have taken from the times and the duller ones I should have got from myself” (Diaries 388). Kenneth Payne describes the conception of Amerika as a “chain of American impressions or images” (30), but the setting has no impact on the plot. Kafka was not critiquing American social conditions and institutions, but the ideals of freedom and democracy that America represented. Karl, not America, is the center of the story. Amerika focuses on Karl’s repeated run-ins with authority figures and his repeated escapes.

Karl repeatedly escapes rather than confronts conflict. He sometimes puts up an ineffectual defense, but he quickly abandons his attempt—abandoning the stoker’s case before the captain, failing to defend himself before his uncle, and so on. Karl moves from one authority figure to the next, escaping each one, and thus never faces or explores authority; Karl deflects all the conflict in his life. All the Kafkaesque elements that would make for an interesting novel are present—the bourgeois society, the inscrutable
authority—but the novel ultimately fails at being Kafkaesque and feels unsatisfying because the protagonist never confronts his own strange world. Every time Karl meets the sort of adversity that would make the novel exciting, he flees: from the ship, from his uncle, and finally from the hotel. Every time the novel builds up rising action and is about to reach a climax, the tension dissolves with his flight.

Even Kafka’s trademark claustrophobia dissolves. In the unfinished concluding chapter of the novel, Karl sees an advertisement for the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. Seeing that it promises employment for everyone, Karl applies for a job, is hired despite his lack of skills, and departs for Oklahoma by train. He admires the vastness of the valleys and their “broad mountain streams…so near that the breath of coldness rising from them chilled the skin of one’s face” (298). According to Max Brod, Kafka “used to hint smilingly, that within this ‘almost limitless’ theatre, his young hero was going to find again a profession, a stand-by, his freedom, even his old home and his parents, as if by some celestial witchery” (299). This happy ending is self-indulging and, had it been written, would have required a deus ex machina, which Kafka never employed. Karl, like Kafka, is estranged from his father; Kafka, indulging his desire for reconciliation, gives Karl the chance of reunion. Compared to “The Judgment” or The Metamorphosis, which are so successful because the protagonist remains bound to authority and subject to the absurd, Amerika avoids conflict, provides an escape, and never delivers conflict-resolution. Perhaps realizing this failure, Kafka abandoned Amerika, and after writing “The Judgment,” Kafka said of his story: “It confirmed my belief that the novel [Amerika] is stuck in the disgraceful troughs of literature” (Pawel 271). Nevertheless, Amerika, being his earliest novel, sheds light on Kafka’s development and future works.
is a prologue to his later novels and initiates motifs that would later be developed. This chapter analyzes *Amerika* as the foundation for *The Castle* and *The Trial*. Having suffered under Hermann’s authority but not yet fully realized the need to face authority, Kafka meanders by escapist instinct toward themes that would become his lifelong fixations.

**The Authoritative Captain**

In the first chapter, “The Stoker,” which was published as a short story in 1913, Karl arrives in the United States on an unnamed ship. Here, the first signs of claustrophobia appear as Karl is physically trapped on the ship—though he has little intention to leave—by the “swelling throng of porters pushing past him” (3). When he realizes that he has forgotten his umbrella, he descends deeper into the ship through a maze of “endlessly recurring stairs, through corridors with countless turnings, through an empty room with a deserted writing-table,” and because he must fight through a crowd of people, becomes hopelessly lost (4). Karl’s predicament parallels the confusion of all Kafkian protagonists trapped in an absurd world. For Karl, the maze-like ship is no different than the island of “In the Penal Colony.” Governed by strange rules and filled with authorities who hinder him, the world is impenetrable despite his best efforts to comprehend. Initially, the stoker traps Karl by seizing “the door handle and pulling the door shut with a heavy movement, [sweeping] Karl into the cabin” (4). Karl is pinned to the bunk, but the stoker is not a controlling authority despite the claustrophobia of the cabin. The stoker tells Karl that he is about to be dismissed from his job due to the
machinations of the Chief Engineer, Schubal. Like the workers of “The Great Wall of China,” Karl and the stoker are bonded by shared conflict; Karl has been dismissed by his father, and the stoker will similarly be dismissed by Schubal. Kafka portrays the communal identity that would recur in his work when the stoker releases Karl, demonstrating their solidarity under subjugation. Together, they plead the stoker’s case before the Captain.

Once again, Kafka depicts a hostile bureaucracy in the form of the gentlemen and the Captain. When they arrive, Karl and the stoker are almost evicted from the room with physical force, and during the stoker’s extended speech about the injustice of his treatment, there is an obvious “dispersion of interest” (16). There is no benevolent authority. Even the Captain, who maintains civility, expresses only “resolution to hear the stoker this time to the end” (16). When Schubal appears to defend himself, Karl notes that the stoker could “probably split the man’s hated skull with his fists,” but it was “beyond his power to take the couple of steps needed to bring Schubal within reach” (21).

If the Captain is an unsympathetic authority, Schubal is an unreachable one. Both embody aspects of authority that Kafka would later combine into a singular authority figure. The idea that Schubal could be defeated if only he could be reached—but that he cannot be reached—reflects Kafka’s perception of authority as an inscrutable force that, if only it were within reach and openly exercised its will, might be understood. This scenario foreshadows The Castle, in which the protagonist K. likewise tries to meet Klamm, the secretary of the Castle, and understand the inner workings of its world. The ship can be considered a prototype of the Castle, both impenetrable worlds governed by a shadowy authority figure, before whom the protagonist must plead his case. But unlike
K., Karl manages an audience with the Captain, and his struggle aboard the ship ends when he quickly disembarks—an act of escapism. In an unlikely coincidence, Karl meets his uncle, Senator Jacob, who happens to be meeting with the Captain, and Kafka thereby releases Karl from the tension of the conflict between him and Schubal. Before he leaves, Karl asks the stoker, “Why don’t you say something? Why do you put up with everything?” (34). But the person who says nothing is Karl. Karl abandons the conflict and receives Schubal’s congratulations; Karl leaves under the protection of his uncle; and Karl ultimately flees the conflict aboard the ship for the stability of submission to Uncle Jacob.

The Judgment of Father and Family

Uncle Jacob becomes both father figure and authority figure, closely mirroring Kafka’s relationship with Hermann. Uncle Jacob provides Karl with a home and teachers so that he “had never to learn by hard experience” (38), a form of the same “undeserved gift” that Kafka attributed to Hermann. Even as he provides for Karl, Uncle Jacob cages him in his home and subjects him to irrational law. Karl is confined to the house and unable to glimpse the outside world, having been given the contradictory advice to “examine and consider everything” while also being discouraged from standing on the balcony “gaping down at the street like lost sheep” (39). Uncle Jacob never expressly forbids anything. Karl is merely advised against looking from the balcony, and likewise, advised not to use the regulator of his writing desk—a mechanism that controls the compartments of the desk—though “it would have been quite easy to lock the regulator,
and yet Uncle Jacob refrained from doing so” (42). Uncle Jacob’s vague, inconsistent warnings indicate Kafka’s perception of authority. Kafka’s complaint against authority is not the principle of its existence, but its inscrutability, which renders it difficult to obey. Kafka also decried how authority enables disobedience; Uncle Jacob provides for Karl and purchases the desk for him, thus tempting Karl to use the regulator that Uncle Jacob warns against. In the same way that Hermann told stories of his youth that enflamed the imagination with violence and disobedience, the way that God allows the existence of sin yet punishes it, Uncle Jacob enables Karl’s offenses. Uncle Jacob’s vagueness suggests to Karl that his displeasure is a mere “pretext” (42), masking the retribution to come.

Eventually, Karl accepts the invitation to visit one of Uncle Jacob’s friends, Mr. Pollunder, after asking his uncle’s leave, which Uncle Jacob grants with “apparent pleasure” (50). But by the next day, Uncle Jacob has changed his mind and attempts to dissuade Karl. Uncle Jacob ultimately acquiesces, but after Karl leaves, he sends a letter that repudiates Karl, stating that Karl must “neither visit [him] in person, nor try to get in touch with [him] either by writing or through intermediaries” (94). The punishment seems too extreme for the crime; Karl has done little to warrant such an exile, but Uncle Jacob, like Karl’s birth father, banishes him with little warning and little preparation. Kafka thus suggests the irrationality of authority. It exists as a self-empowered force that demands submission and, perhaps more importantly, piety. When he receives the letter at Mr. Pollunder’s home, Karl obeys Uncle Jacob and departs, but in doing so once again indulges in escapism. Karl escapes the source of his conflict, fleeing “the huge house, the endless corridors, the chapel, the empty rooms, the darkness everywhere” (80) that is another form of the ship, the absurd world that he should face. The plot point is not
resolved—Karl’s conflict ends, but there is no satisfying conclusion to the debacle with Uncle Jacob. Karl realizes that Mr. Green, the messenger, had intentionally kept him at Mr. Pollunder’s to prevent him from returning to Uncle Jacob before the letter was delivered, and he even begins to question Mr. Green’s motives, but he ultimately chooses to leave. Perhaps, like Georg’s friend in “The Judgment,” Mr. Green is the usurper of Karl’s role as son, the would-be surrogate for Karl, and each “must fight for his own hand and…any obligatory social connection between them would be determined in time by the victory or destruction of one of them” (66). But Karl does not struggle. He disavows his obligation to authority by allowing himself to be exiled. Likewise, Kafka wished to escape Hermann—but by the time he wrote Letter to His Father, Kafka had realized that Hermann was his inspiration. Karl’s departure is an escape from his pious task to learn, to delve into the reasons for his exile and the authority that commanded it, and it cripples his growth.

Following his “expulsion from his benefactor’s capitalistic Eden” (Payne 36), Karl spends the night at a small inn, “merely a last little eating-house for New York car and lorry drivers” (99), where he meets Robinson and Delamarche, an Irishman and Frenchman respectively, both of whom Karl immediately notes “did not look very trustworthy” (99). Like Karl, they are searching for work, and the trio agree to travel together to Butterford, but Robinson and Delamarche exploit Karl by selling his suit, spending his money, and dispatching him to obtain food. Briefly, Karl takes on the father-role by providing for them in exchange for information and companionship. When Karl finally breaks with them, Delamarche reassesses their dynamic, himself assuming the father-role: “All day you’ve trotted behind me, hanging on to my coat-tails and doing
whatever I did and keeping as quiet as a mouse” (127). Recalling “The Judgment,” Karl and Delamarche’s conflict originates in rivalry. Both are immigrants on the road who need to find work. Each attempts to gain power over the other by making the other dependent on himself. Karl uses money as leverage, while Delamarche uses information, but their goal is the same—to become father to the other man. Though Robinson and Delamarche return, Karl momentarily escapes this conflict just as he did Uncle Jacob and entirely abandons the father-son dynamic that characterized both conflicts. He takes refuge in the Hotel Occidental as a bellboy under the protection of the Manageress and her assistant, Therese, thus entering the most prominent mother-son relationship in Kafkian literature.

Kafka’s depiction of women is less than flattering. There are few women in his short stories, the most prominent being Grete, who eventually neglects Gregor, and Gregor’s mother, who seems to sympathize with Gregor but passively takes the father’s side. In The Castle and The Trial, women are typically vampiric creatures whose earthly charms distract the protagonist from his quest to comprehend his subjugation. Amerika shares the pattern of seductive, entrapping women, such as Clara, Mr. Pollunder’s daughter, who charms Karl with her beauty but bends him to her will, even at one point using physical force to restrain him, having “slipped one hand to his throat, on which she began to press so strongly that Karl could only gasp for breath” (69). There is also Johanna Brummer, the housemaid who seduced Karl, but she diverges from the beautiful, vampiric archetype as a thirty-five-year-old motherly figure. Like Clara, she chokes Karl, but all the while she cares for him as though “she would never give him up to anyone and would tend and cherish him to the end of time” (29). Johanna combines the vampiric and
the motherly, though after *Amerika*, Kafka largely discarded the maternal dynamic. At the Hotel Occidental, Karl finds another mother figure, the Manageress, to replace Johanna and the recently lost father figure of Uncle Jacob. She shelters him and offers him work as a bellboy, but she serves also as an escape from the father-son conflict that Karl had with Uncle Jacob and Delamarche. By sheltering Karl, the Manageress robs him of the opportunity to struggle and mature. Kafka may or may not have consciously realized this point, but this escapism coddles both himself and Karl. In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka envisions his relationship with Julie Kafka much as he does Karl’s relationship with the Manageress. Kafka considered his mother “illimitably good” to him, but “in no good relation” (*Letter* 41). Her kindness, he claims, drove him “back into [Hermann’s] orbit, which [he] might perhaps otherwise have broken out of” (*Letter* 43).

Evidently, Kafka considered Julie a hindrance to his understanding of Hermann, as someone whose kindness placated him and stopped him from reversing the “orbit” into which he had fallen. Kafka wrote this to Hermann about Julie: “She loved you too much and was too devoted and loyal to you to have been for long an independent spiritual force in the child’s struggle” (*Letter* 55). Likewise, Karl loses the Manageress’s support when he needs it most; Robinson reappears at the Hotel Occidental, drunk, and when Karl offers him asylum, offends the Head Waiter to the extent that he is dismissed, a verdict that the Manageress is unable to reverse. Neither does Karl fight the verdict “determined by the first words that happened to fall from the judge’s lips in an impulse of fury” (177). Once again, Karl flees, this time from the Hotel Occidental and the clutches of the Head Porter who detains him. Karl then leaves with Robinson to join with Delamarche, falling back into the father-son conflict.
Delamarche and the Oklahoma Theatre: Submission to Authority

In Kafkaesque fashion, Karl has, time and time again, found himself victim of an oppressive system ruled by an inscrutable authority—but unlike Kafka’s other characters, Karl flees instead of confronting or questioning authority. Kafka seems unwilling to explore the struggle against authority that would become so prominent in his work. He realizes his subject matter is the nature of authority, which explains why Karl meets so many authority figures, but Kafka allows Karl to escape without facing them, indulging his own escapist urge to flee from Hermann. Only at its end does Amerika subvert its escapist pattern. This section analyzes the subversion of escapism and the unfinished end to Amerika as evidence of Kafka’s maturation as a writer. Amerika thus becomes a prototype for The Castle and The Trial, novels that abandon escapism in pursuit of piety and understanding.

After his exile from the Hotel Occidental, Karl joins Robinson and travels to Delamarche’s home, where the final phase of the story, the return to the father-son dynamic, unfolds. Delamarche is staying with a wealthy and obese lady named Brunelda, and the two attempt to detain Karl as their servant. While the power struggle between Karl and Delamarche had before been ambiguous, Delamarche is now clearly the father figure; Karl seeks protection from him against the police, as Delamarche would be “more easily induced than the policeman not to deliver him to the hotel” (217). The reversal of their roles anticipates the relationship in The Castle between K. and his assistants, Arthur and Jeremiah, who initially fill the role of K’s sons but become rivals who try to impose paternal authority on K. Delamarche’s insistence that Karl assume the role of servant is
an attempt to induct Karl as his son, both replacing the decrepit Robinson and claiming power over his old rival, Karl.

Karl’s conversation with Robinson about his servitude illustrates several points about authority and obedience that Kafka would expand in his future novels. Robinson tells Karl that “if you’re always treated like a dog, you begin to think that you’re actually one…I don’t care who’s on the balcony with me, so long as there’s somebody” (231). Kafka is often treated as a writer of the grotesque, but what he writes is bitterly true; he does not indulge in the impractical, romantic ideal of freedom, instead preferring the realism of ever-present authority, the struggle to meet obligation, and the difficulty of maintaining dignity. Robinson embodies the struggle for dignity under subjugation when he tries to convince Karl to stay. Robinson craves company in his subjugation. Solidarity with Karl would restore a semblance of the self-respect that he has lost while being, amid other abuse, “struck across the face several times with the whip” (232). Alone, Robinson loses his humanity. Kafka believed in community, just as he believed in authority. To Kafka, community is a positive response to authority, a way to mitigate the unavoidable degradation of submission. Kafka also depicts the father-son rivalry in Robinson and Delamarche’s competition for Brunelda’s attention. Robinson describes how Brunelda “lifted up her skirt and wiped [his] eyes with the hem” (232), and he wonders what more she might have done if Delamarche had not called her back. As Delamarche seeks to control Karl, Robinson seeks to take Delamarche’s place and steal Brunelda, creating an unending, cyclical process. Karl tells Robinson, “What applies to you needn’t apply to me at all. Besides, that kind of thing only applies to those who put up with it,” to which Robinson replies, “But why shouldn’t it apply to you as well? Of
course it applies to you, too” (233). This exchange implies the Kafkian premise that authority is universal. Karl’s journey is evidence enough. No matter where he flees, there is always an authority figure waiting for him. Even if Kafka indulges in escapism, Karl’s “escape” can only be temporary before he inevitably falls under the power of a new authority. There is no alternative. When he looks over the balcony at a political campaign rally, Karl is trapped by Delamarche, Robinson, and Brunelda—but the democracy below is a mob “flowing backwards and forwards without plan,” and the opposition brings a “grand coup,” smashing lights so that everything is swallowed in “the illusoriness of darkness” (257). Romantic freedom is anarchy, and faced with the barbarism of the mob, the orderly subjugation on the balcony above seems preferable. Notably, this exchange takes place on a balcony—the same place where Hermann punished Kafka in his childhood—signaling Kafka’s potential acceptance of what he had called tyranny. Though the balcony exchange is perhaps the most obvious case in point, Kafka had previously critiqued the ideal of freedom. Soon after Karl joins Delamarche and Robinson, Kafka writes: “Towards evening they came to a more rustic, fertile neighborhood. All around they could see endless fields stretching across gentle hills…and often they heard above them trains thundering over the lofty viaducts” (116). Kafka accentuates the idyllic countryside, the freedom and opportunity iconic to the Great American West, but the intrusive trains remind that industrialism and an “insistent, urban and technological America” is never far (Payne 31). Despite appearances, there is no freedom.

Repeating his usual response to authority, Karl tries to escape Delamarche; Kafka would have allowed him to escape earlier in the novel, but in this case, Delamarche beats
Karl and forces him to stay. When he wakes, Karl moves to the balcony and speaks with a student, Joseph Mendel, on the balcony of the adjacent building. Mendel tells him that he should stay. Karl argues that Delamarche is a “bad man,” and Mendel replies: “If all servants were as fastidious in their choice of masters as you are!” (266). Once again, Kafka reiterates that submission is not a matter of choice. Everyone has obligations, even absurd obligations, but must submit nonetheless. Under questioning, Mendel reveals that he works during the day and studies by night, but he also tells Karl: “If I had to give up either my studies or my job, of course I’d give up my studies” (268). His job is the more practical choice, just as submission to authority is more practical than the ideal of freedom, which, as demonstrated by the political mob, ends in chaos and destruction.

Interpreting Mendel’s studies as an art form that seeks understanding—just as Kafka’s literature is his attempt to scrutinize obligation and, by understanding authority, transcend submission and acquire some form of dignity—Kafka declares obedience more important. Politzer argues that, at this point, Karl has succumbed to “nihilism” and “the last stages in his disillusionment” (155). However, the text seems to suggest otherwise. Karl ceases to ascribe meaning to freedom, but as Camus says, there is “no necessary common measure” between “refusing to grant a meaning to life” and “declaring that [life] is not worth living” (Camus 8). Instead, Kafka depicts Karl, true to his hopes, striving for fulfilment even in the face of enslavement and abject reality.

In the incomplete final chapter pieced together from manuscripts, “The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma,” Karl has somehow left Delamarche. Karl sees a placard advertising the Oklahoma Theatre, which promises employment for all: “The great Theatre of Oklahoma calls you! If you think of your future you are one of us! Everyone
is welcome! Our Theatre can find employment for everyone, a place for everyone!” (272). Like the Hotel Occidental, the Oklahoma Theatre employs Karl, becoming the story’s final authority. Though many people see the placards advertising work, “nobody believed in them any longer,” especially not the one belonging to the Theatre, because “it did not mention payment” (272). Kafka criticizes the bourgeois mindset that seeks earthly fulfilment over higher truths, metaphorizing society’s movement away from the spiritual as disbelief in the Theatre. However, Karl believes that the Oklahoma Theatre will ignore all that he has done, allowing him to “find acceptance” and “find some way of at least beginning a decent life” (273). When he arrives at the racetrack entrance, Karl is greeted by a long platform on which young women are “dressed as angels in white robes with great wings on their shoulders [and] blowing on long trumpets that glittered like gold” (274). It is an overtly religious vision, and Karl demonstrates a hitherto unseen willingness to engage with authority when he is inspired to take up a trumpet and play along with them. Thus, the Oklahoma Theatre becomes a religious symbol of inclusion that, discounting the fanciful ending that Kafka envisioned but never wrote, suggests his acceptance of authority. Unlike the small crowd of prospective employees who dither below, unwilling to travel deep into the racetrack, Karl notes that, to ask where the workers are being interviewed, he must “cross the platform, among all the angels” (276). And he does so. While he had fled from the trials of the ship and the hotel, Karl manages to penetrate the racetrack, the final reality to demand his obedience and summon him. When he meets the staff manager, he tells him, “I read the placard your company put out and I have come here as I was requested,” to which the manager responds, “Quite right. Unfortunately, there aren’t many who do the same” (281). This is Karl’s first success.
By promising to “do [his] best and try to carry out all [his] instructions” (290), Karl has abandoned escapism and learned piety. Completing a series of interviews, Karl is moved to more and more modest employment within the Theatre, from engineer to technician to intermediate pupil—demonstrating the mode of appropriate freedom that Kafka espoused in “A Report to An Academy.” Having learned from the student on the balcony the appropriateness of meeting obligations before rationalizing them, Karl acquiesces to modest work and, faced with the peevishness of the clerk, submits rather than flees.

However, the Oklahoma Theatre diverges from Kafka’s usual depiction of authority. Contrasting the irrational judgments of the Captain, Uncle Jacob, and the Hotel Occidental, the Theatre overlooks Karl’s inexperience and accommodates him. Compared to the Castle and the High Court in Kafka’s later novels, the Theatre is accessible. Karl’s willingness to submit to its authority is cheapened by the relative ease of doing so; Karl does not struggle with inscrutability or irrationality as K. of The Castle and The Trial do. In this regard, the Oklahoma Theatre is not a true authority. It employs Karl, but it exists for his sake rather than independently, accommodates rather than demand obedience. Its nature as a theatre may indicate falsity, suggesting that it performs a mere role. Though he had begun to abandon escapism, Kafka still afforded Karl an easier path than the truly pious submission he would later depict.

Perhaps realizing the weaknesses of the escapism that pervades the novel, Kafka did not finish Amerika. It is the weakest of his novels, but Amerika provides valuable insight into Kafka’s maturation as he outgrows escapism. By providing the framework for The Castle and The Trial, Amerika serves its purpose as a first novel. Its ending clearly demonstrates the lesson that Kafka learned by writing it. When the Theatre of
Oklahoma asks Karl for his name, he answers, “Negro,” signaling his final acceptance of submission, even enslavement, to authority, thus leading Kafka down the direction of his future literature—darker and more suffocating, with an omnipresent authority from which the protagonist never has the option to escape, and which Kafka, likewise, never again tries to escape, instead facing the stark horror of this reality.
THE CONUNDRUM OF AUTHORITY: THE CASTLE

Though Amerika is chronologically followed by The Trial, this chapter focuses on The Castle, which reads as the natural sequel to Amerika. In The Trial, Joseph K. encounters the persecution of a strange authority, but he remains in familiar surroundings. In Amerika, Karl is denied that luxury and exiled to a foreign land where he must learn the lay of the land and the ways of the people; likewise, K., the protagonist of The Castle, finds himself in a new world whose laws are unfamiliar to him, and his task as Land-Surveyor is to map the village ruled by the Castle. The previous chapter interprets the ship and the Hotel Occidental as prototypes of the Castle, symbols of the impenetrable authority that Kafka sought to understand. But while Karl flees from both conflicts, K. resolves to stay in the village under the thrall of the Castle: “I can’t go away. I came here to stay. I’ll stay here” (180). Most tellingly, K. states that, rather than choosing not to leave, he lacks the ability to leave. By the time he wrote The Castle, Kafka had realized the omnipresence of authority, the need to face obligation, and the error of escapism. Having established the impossibility of escaping conflict, Kafka knew the value of having K., the spiritual successor to Karl, remain under the sway of the Castle. Where Amerika depicts escape from authority, The Castle depicts submission to authority, exploring how authority simultaneously demeans and promotes dignity in a collective humanity. The titular Castle is an inscrutable authority whose confusing methods, perpetrated by an inefficient bureaucracy, rule over the bourgeois society of the village. The Castle is the “essential adventure of a soul in quest of its grace” (Camus 129); K.’s quest for meaning enters both the theological and patriarchal spheres as he attempts to penetrate the godliness of the Castle by reaching a single official, Klamm, a father figure
with whom he competes and whom he seeks to understand; and all the while, K. interacts with the villagers, forming relationships and becoming deeply involved in the community, an exploration of the social sphere unique to *The Castle*. While he seeks the domestic stability of a career and home, K. continues his search for meaning, a goal shared by the other villagers and dependent upon the Castle. Communication is the key to understanding, depicting both the weakness of language and the dignity of discourse as every character shares his or her own, usually conflicting, interpretation of the Castle. But Kafka shows that there is meaning to discourse. Meaning becomes intertwined with self and community rather than being an entirely external locus found in the Castle. In the search for meaning, therefore, Kafka advocates communion under authority.

**Purpose of the Castle and Bureaucracy**

What is the Castle? Throughout the novel, the Castle, an authority sacred and beyond the earthliness of the village, serves as an apparent source of meaning, but it is unclear what imbues the Castle with sanctity and meaning: What gives meaning to meaning? Its bureaucratic nature aside, the Castle exhibits inherent meaning that the characters of the novel instinctively understand. In the opening lines, Kafka describes the Castle as being present even in its absence: “The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there” (3). This description suggests the Castle’s secrecy and distance from its subjects, but despite the darkness, K. knows to gaze into the “illusory emptiness above him” (3). Perhaps the Castle inhabits an illusion of emptiness, and K. knows its presence regardless, or the Castle is part of the emptiness, and its very authority is an illusion. When he observes the Castle in the morning, K. sees “the Castle above him, clearly defined in the glittering air,
its outline made still more definite by the thin layer of snow covering everything” (11). Despite its modest appearance as “a rambling pile consisting of innumerable small buildings closely packed together and of one or two stories,” the Castle momentarily “satisfies” K.’s expectations (11). When he approaches it, K. becomes disappointed at the “wretched-looking town, a huddle of village houses, whose sole merit, if any, lay in being built of stone” (12). But despite its appearance, the Castle remains a source of power and authority. Walter Corbella notes that the Castle occupies a central position in the village, a “vantage point from which control and authority can be established” and that defines “the hierarchical division between the gentlemen and their social inferiors” (Corbella 70). K. compares it to his hometown, the church tower of which is “firm in line, soaring unflatering to its tapering point,” but ultimately an “earthly building” (12). It lies defined in relation to the human community, and because of its earthliness, lacks holiness. In comparison, the Castle possesses windows that glitter “with a somewhat maniacal glitter” and battlements that are “irregular, broken, fumbling, as if designed by the trembling or careless hand of a child…as if a melancholy-mad tenant…had burst through the roof and lifted himself up to the gaze of the world” (12). This “melancholy-mad tenant” is the authority lying outside human limits. It is free and inscrutable, “maniacal” in its irrationality and imperceptibility, but due to such traits, authority transcends humanity and embodies its sense of meaning.

From the beginning, the Castle assumes religious connotations through its all-encompassing nature. It is omnipresent, simultaneously assimilating its subjects within its boundaries and disseminating its sanctity to its subjects. Schwarzer tells K., “This village belongs to the Castle, and whoever lives here or passes the night here does so, in a
manner of speaking, in the Castle itself” (4), and likewise, the teacher says, “There is no
difference between the peasantry and the Castle” (14). Most obviously, the villagers are
part of the Castle, but conversely, the Castle must be part of the villagers. Perhaps what
imbues the Castle with meaning and authority is the very people over whom it rules, the
people who trust in the authority of the Castle and therefore give it control. Kafka
explores another converse relationship between authority and subject when K. negotiates
the terms of his employment after the Mayor has requested that the teacher hire K.
Though the teacher is doing K. a favor by giving him work, K. states that “when one is
compelled to take someone else on, and this someone else allows himself to be taken on,
then he is the one who grants the favor” (124). For the teacher to gain authority over him,
K. must accept the post. Similarly, the Castle owes its authority to those who imbue it
with authority. Corbella observes that “power does not emanate from a single individual
or site, but in the multiple interactions between the villagers and the authorities” (78).
This is not to suggest that the Castle possesses no inherent authority; Kafka, through his
observation of absolute relationships like that between father and son, certainly believed
that unconditional authority exists—but not independently of humanity. Without subjects
to validate it, authority would be obsolete. Similarly, Klamm does not need to assert his
power over K., but he needs K. to have power. As Ron Smetana observes, the power of
the Castle is “diffused through the entire village population” (47). The Castle needs the
villagers just as the villagers need it.

Like Kafka, K. firmly believes in the absurd authority of the Castle and the
“ludicrous bungling that in certain circumstances may decide the life of a human being”
(82), but the stone-and-mortar Castle cannot be equated with metaphysical meaning.
Corbella distinguishes the function of the Castle as a physical and a symbolic structure. What is observed as the physical form of the Castle is a construction that denotes the efforts of the social enterprise to understand meaning, the invisible authority symbolized by the Castle. When he observes the Castle, K. attempts to capture the Castle’s authority, but the Castle’s outward appearance, while indicative of authority, is not the authority. Authority cannot be seen, but it is always present. Even when it disappears from K.’s range of vision, the Castle is felt, which “serves as indication of its illusory nature” (Corbella 71). Before his meeting with the Mayor, K. notes that meeting with the authorities is not difficult, but that all these authorities do is “guard the distant and invisible interests of distant and invisible masters” (74). When he speaks of authorities here, K. means the bureaucracy of the Castle, while the absolute authority that Kafka is primarily concerned with is the “distant and invisible master” symbolized by, but ultimately lying beyond, the Castle. K. also states that he fights “not only for himself, but clearly for other powers as well which he did not know” (75). It seems unlikely that K. is under the compulsion of some secondary authority in conflict with the Castle. Instead, K. is fulfilling his duty of piety towards authority by questioning and seeking to understand it; K’s conflict with authority is a form of submission, in which K. forgoes “an unofficial, totally unrecognized, troubled, and alien existence” in favor of vigilance towards authority and being “always on his guard” (75). Kafka did not write to escape or conquer authority, but to understand his submission. Similarly, K. says, “I don’t want any act of favor from the Castle, but my rights” (96). Never does K. desire freedom from the Castle. His desire for “rights” suggests willingness to submit, reflecting Kafka’s rejection of romantic autonomy. Kafka’s struggle was for dignity, not liberation; K. muses that
“through too great compliance he would only become the teacher’s slave and scapegoat” (199), but K. still obeys the teacher as he does the Castle. Kafka was concerned with balancing self and obligation, and to that end, he felt the need to sanction authority. Likewise, K. continues his investigation of the Castle and seeks to learn its secrets.

Even the internal structure of the Castle belies its true authority. Villagers who have visited the Castle include K.’s assistants, Arthur and Jeremiah, who were sent to him by the Castle, and Barnabas, the messenger who brings letters from Klamm. Barnabas’s account of the Castle indicates that even inside, there are barriers: “Is it really Castle service Barnabas is doing, we ask ourselves then; granted, he goes into the offices, but are the offices part of the real Castle?” (228). Because of the barriers put up by the “physical” Castle, it is unclear what constitutes the “real” Castle, the absolute authority. People create systems that are increasingly refined and self-enclosed until that system no longer speaks to reality, and in The Castle, that system, the tool to comprehend the meaning of authority, is the form and bureaucracy of the Castle. As Corbella argues, the physicality of the Castle “matters to the villagers insofar as it represents the control without bounds that permeates their lives,” but the symbolic power of the Castle “resides primarily in their minds” (72). Contact between the villagers and the Castle is facilitated by the bureaucracy—the officials and their servants—but the hierarchy is incomprehensible, the bureaucracy seems to do little of worth, and the Castle never exercises its supposed power and authority. Though K. is fixated on Klamm and views him as the ultimate authority representing the Castle, Klamm is only a single official. Servants of the Castle, who stay at the Herenhoff Inn, are “ruled by their insatiable impulses” (285) and described by Frieda, the barmaid and Klamm’s mistress, as
“contemptible and objectionable creatures” (51). The Castle is seemingly incompetent and incapable of recognizing its own incompetence. In explaining the workings of the Castle, the Mayor tells K. that his employment as Land-Surveyor was an accident of bureaucratic confusion. When K. decries the error, the Mayor responds: “Errors don’t happen, and even when once in a while an error does happen, as in your case, who can say finally that it’s an error?” (84). Errors are only apparent, and affairs are settled “justly, yet all the same arbitrarily” (88). The Castle is made up of unexplainable paradoxes, and the officials’ activities seem to serve no purpose.

But for all its seeming faults and even its tyrannical nature—officials are middle-aged and brusque, and servants are often sexually promiscuous—the Castle is not depicted as something to be overthrown. Kafka suggests that though authority appears irrational and inconsistent, humanity may simply be unable to comprehend an existing internal logic. Barnabas’s sister, Olga, describes the chaotic method of the officials traveling between the village and the Castle: “There are several roads to the Castle. At one time one of them is in fashion, and most carriages go by that; then it’s another and everything drives pell-mell there. And what governs this change of fashion has never yet been found out” (280). Olga suggests that, because some unknown law “governs” the change, the only impediment to knowing the path of the officials is the obscurity of law. Any observed inconsistency stems from ignorance of a system that is beyond humanity. Most likely, Kafka did not believe humanity could comprehend the higher truth of authority, and it is unclear whether he believed that humanity should do so, even if it were capable. Comprehension might heighten dignity, but it would also negate the benefits of submission by mitigating struggle. If humanity understood its workings,
authority would not be a true authority, disproving the existence of higher truth. K. muses: “If an authority is good, why should it not be feared?” (239). True authority ought to be feared, and to be feared, it must remain beyond the ken of its subjects.

Villagers unconditionally accept the authority of the Castle, never distinguishing between the officials and the Castle. Gardena, the landlady of the Bridge Inn, tells K. that “Herr Klamm is a gentleman from the Castle, and that in itself, without considering Klamm’s position there at all, means that he is of very high rank” (63). If his position were clarified, Klamm’s stature would be reduced. His powerful presence stems from K.’s ignorance about him. Inscrutability, Kafka suggests, is what gives authority power.

Kafka shows the futility of the attempt to define authority, but simultaneously, he shows the value of the attempt as the only chance for even a possibility of understanding—that there is meaning in pursuing an impossible duty. K. is no different from the villagers in his obsession with and reverence for the Castle, never questioning the power of the authorities, but he continues his attempt to penetrate the Castle. K. responds to Gardena that though he does not presume he will be able to “face Klamm without a door between [them]” and supposes that he may “run from the room at the very sight of him,” he insists on speaking to Klamm, as fear is “no valid reason in [his] eyes for refraining from the attempt” (65). K. starkly contrasts with Karl, who fled from this challenge; K. realizes that he is ignorant but never wavers in his quest for understanding, being “prepared to put up with [his] ignorance…so long as [his] strength holds out” (73). While K. is more aggressive in his attempts, other villagers share his line of thinking.

Regarding her dismissal from Klamm, Gardena says that she was “entitled to inquire…but had no right to be unhappy” (106). Like K., Gardena had once been
inquisitive about the Castle, and nothing suggests that this has changed. In comparison, her more mellow stance implies that failing to meet Klamm is to be expected. Gardena says that if there is no chance of meeting Klamm, K. “won’t alter that fact by means of this protocol” (148), but that through the protocols of the Castle, K. possesses “a sort of connection perhaps with Klamm” (149). Even that minimal connection is a meaningful victory; K. insists that anything less of a direct meeting is failure, but Kafka’s humility—even self-deprecation—suggests that his view was more in line with that of Gardena. K.’s presumes that failing to meet Klamm is utter failure, disregarding the existence of “tiny, vanishing, actually invisible hope” (147). But his inquisitiveness is not wrong, and, as will be discussed, every villager similarly inquires into the Castle. When K. learns of Barnabas’s frustration at his uncertain position in the Castle, K. states that “something is there, something which Barnabas has the chance of using, something or other at the very least; and that it is Barnabas’s own fault if he can’t get any farther than doubt and anxiety and despair” (240). K.’s disapproval stems from Barnabas’s inaction. In Amerika, Karl is the only prospective employee of the Oklahoma Theatre willing to go deep into the racetrack in search of the management; Barnabas, like the dawdling bystanders, allows doubt to stop him, something that Kafka deems negligence of duty. Kafka’s stance was that “one must fight to get to the top…one must take advantage of everything that offers any hope” (210). Pursuing any form of hope amid subjugation, as K. does, is the most dignified way to live. What K. must correct is his flawed perception of hope, which the following section further explores through the father-son dynamic.

Father-Son Mimetic Rivalry
René Girard, whose work in anthropological philosophy introduced the theory of mimetic desire, provides a possible interpretation of the father-son rivalry that pervades *The Castle*. According to his theory of mimesis, human beings imitate each other’s desires, and this imitation gives rise to rivalries and conflicts; the subject desires an object because he is provoked by the desire of another person, the model, for the same object. Thus, there is always a triangular relationship of subject, model, and object, which can develop into mimetic rivalry between subject and model for the desired object. Applied to Kafkian father-son dynamics, the son is the subject who develops a rivalry with the father, the model, over some object. When he steals Frieda away from Klamm, K. competes directly with the authoritative father figure, *pace* the Freudian Oedipal complex, for reasons other than sexual desire. Before learning that Frieda is Klamm’s mistress, K. competes with Frieda as fellow subjects of the Castle, and his words are meant as “a weapon for bringing down her pride” (48). As evidenced by Frieda’s wording when she asks K. if he wants to “take [her] away from Klamm” (50), K. does not want Frieda for her own sake, but only because of her connection to Klamm. Note that other villagers consider sexual affairs with officials to be “respectable,” as Jeremiah calls Frieda because she is a “former sweetheart of Klamm’s” (307). K. differs from the villagers in his direct competition with Klamm. In a deleted passage, Gardena claims that Klamm cannot be said to be “sometimes more and sometimes less of an official, for he is always an official, to full capacity” (438). Villagers consider Castle officials beyond their reach and therefore beyond competition—Girard calls this phenomenon, in which the subject merely imitates the model, external mediation. However, in internal mediation, the subject and model do not belong to different worlds, and the subject comes
to resemble the model so that they desire the same things; because they are in the same world and reach for the same object, they become rivals. Internal mediation is modeled by K., who evidently believes it possible to reach Klamm and distinguishes him as a “private person” able to be spoken to anywhere, “in a house, in the street, wherever [K.] happens to meet him” (112). K.’s attempt to reach Klamm is not purely a quest for understanding, but also a competition. When attempting to win an audience with Klamm, K. describes himself as fighting with the authorities “for something vitally near to him, for himself, and moreover, at least at the very beginning, on his own initiative, for he was the attacker” (75). Recall Kafka’s admission that he attempted to lessen Hermann’s power through jokes and considered breaking with him by marrying—Kafka’s early attacks against authority as he competed with Hermann.

Another example of mimetic rivalry between father and son is the competition between K. and Jeremiah, once again for Frieda. K.’s assistants, Jeremiah and Arthur are childlike, climbing through windows, following K. against his wishes, and being chased off with threats. Though seemingly obedient, they both display mimetic tendencies when vying for Frieda’s attention, “jealously” watching her movements with K., trying to sleep with Frieda, and trying to ruin K. “so as to be left alone with [Frieda]” (181). When he leaves K., Jeremiah takes Frieda, and he appears to age drastically. Jeremiah explains that when he is alone, “all [his] youthful spirits are gone” (302). Jeremiah ages because, having left K. and being outside his authority, Jeremiah becomes a rival. Frieda later asks K.: “Do you think that Jeremiah, so long as he was in service, would have dared to take me away?” (323). While Jeremiah was his assistant, K. was an external mediator/model and therefore not a rival, but once dismissed, Jeremiah becomes part of
the same world as K. Now they take part in internal mediation, vying for the object of their desires, Frieda. Perhaps K.’s hatred of Jeremiah and Arthur stems, as Jeremiah accuses, from his subconscious fear of displacement, which makes him “afraid of assistants” (306). If so, his hatred harkens to “The Judgment,” in which Georg’s father attempts to replace Georg with his friend, a substitute son, to avoid Georg’s displacement of himself as the authority. In that story, also, Georg’s father has a changing appearance like Jeremiah, being frail while under Georg’s power but growing stronger and taller when asserting his authority over Georg. Changes in physical appearance in accordance to changing metaphysical perception is a hallmark of Kafkian literature, and in *The Castle*, signifies the changing power dynamic between father and son.

Like that of Jeremiah, Klamm’s appearance also changes. He appears differently to each person, whose descriptions fluctuate “in detail…and yet perhaps not so much as Klamm’s real appearance” (230). His ever-changing appearance leads Gardena to conclude neither K. nor herself are “even capable of seeing Klamm as he really is” (64). Barnabas, too, doubts that “the official who is referred to as Klamm is really Klamm” (229). What changes may not be Klamm’s appearance, but perceptions of his image. In this way, Klamm’s appearance depends “on the mood of the observer, on the degree of his excitement, on the countless gradations of hope or despair which are possible for him when he sees Klamm” (231). K.’s perception of Klamm as a rival offends the villagers because it challenges their own perspective. Perhaps much more offensive than the difference between themselves, K. alone defies external mediation in favor of internal competition. Through Klamm’s inconstancy, Kafka shows the conflict of perspective
between individuals, suggesting another theme of *The Castle*: the purpose of 
communication.

**Communication and Language**

*The Castle* is a story of communication and, despite the failings of language, the 
value of discourse. Despite their shared belief in its absolute authority, each of the 
villagers has his or her own interpretation of the Castle. Aside from their different 
perception of Klamm, villagers share with K. varying, often conflicting information about 
the Castle. Michael Löwy argues that K. “does not feel called to take up the villagers’ 
cause or initiate collective action,” and thus his attitude is “strictly individual” (54), but 
Löwy neglects the constant discourse between the villagers and K. Similarly, Corbella 
states that the world of the Castle “affords no room for the development of emotional ties 
in the form of companionship or friendship, especially because they disrupt the 
established order” (75), but the Castle seems instead to facilitate companionship.

Gardena finds K.’s desire to meet Klamm presumptuous; Olga tells K. that many believe 
Klamm’s secretary Momus to be Klamm himself; Burgel, a secretary to an official, 
Friedrich, tells K. that the Castle tends not to judge at night, because judgments become 
more private. These discussions are a system of communication that binds the village 
together as a community. Compared to Clara or Brunelda of *Amerika*, the women in *The 
Castle* are typically less antagonistic. Even Frieda, who beseeches K. to go “to the south 
of France, or to Spain” to keep her with him (180), is only a momentary distraction. In 
fact, Frieda, like K. and the villagers, searches for meaning: “She was seeking and he was 
seeking…their tossing limbs did not avail to make them forget, but only reminded them 
of what they sought” (60). Note that in *Amerika*, lust and other earthly desires draw Karl
away from conflict; Frieda and K. instead remind one another of their duty to authority. Their physical communion reminds them of their search but is ultimately insufficient; their search is for spiritual communion. K.’s quest for admission to the Castle complements his quest for acceptance into the community; K. finds a fiancé in Frieda, then work from the teacher, and lodgings with Barnabas. If Schwarzer is correct that whoever stays in the village stays “in the Castle itself” (4), then K.’s two quests are one and the same. By gaining acceptance into the community and shedding the status of foreigner that sets him apart, K. also gains acceptance into the Castle. Klamm writes K. to praise him as a Land-Surveyor, claiming that “the surveying work that [he has] carried out thus far has been appreciated” (154). K.’s literal task as Land-Surveyor is to map the village. On a metaphysical level, he explores the village’s customs and beliefs about the Castle, thereby fulfilling this task through communication.

Before discussing the value of communication, it must be noted that Kafka likewise highlights the failings of language. Communication is difficult; K. and the villagers are often at odds because they fail to comprehend one another, particularly because of their different perspectives. Frieda tells K. that Gardena said his “character was so different from ours…that even when [he] spoke frankly, it was bound to be difficult for [them] to believe [him]” (201). Paradoxically, communication facilitates understanding, but mutual understanding is needed to facilitate communication. Like all worthwhile endeavors in Kafkian literature, communication is confusing and painstaking.

In the opening of the novel, Schwarzer’s call to the Castle to affirm K.’s identity requires that he reach over K. for the telephone that rests almost over his head, so that “he could not, even with the best intentions, avoid disturbing K.” (6). When he himself calls, K.
hesitates to give his identity because he is “at the mercy of the telephone…the other
could shout him down or hang up the receiver, and that might mean the blocking of a not
unimportant way of access” (27). When he reveals that calls to the Castle would cause
all the instruments in the subordinate departments to ring, if only “practically all the
departments didn’t leave their receivers off” (94), the Mayor emphasizes that the
inscrutability of authority hinders direct communication. K. hands the letter from Klamm
to the Mayor, and the Mayor tells him that rather than the Castle validating his role as
Land-Surveyor, “the task of proving that [he has been] taken on is laid on[him]” (92).
Kafka did not believe in convenient answers handed down by providence, choosing
instead to participate in the more frustrating path of struggling for answers. “To anyone
who knows how to read official communications, and consequently knows still better
how to read unofficial letters, all this is only too clear,” says the Mayor. K. responds,
“You interpret the letter so well that nothing remains of it but a signature on a blank sheet
of paper” (92). Language, Kafka claims, is an insufficient system of communication, the
subjectivity of language lending itself to misinterpretation and impeding true
understanding.

Yet language is the only medium available. Kafka suggests that
miscommunication, as another form of endless struggle like submission to authority, has
its own merits. K.’s quest largely takes place through discourse with the village
community, and miscommunication forces them to continue their attempts. Ongoing
conversation about the Castle is fruitful whether or not the ambiguity of authority is ever
clarified. In fact, conversation is facilitated by inaccessibility; the lack of an easy
catharsis, the impossibility of an end, perpetuates community. Before Olga shares the
secret of her sister, Amalia, she says that “complete accord” is needed both for K. to help them and for them to help K. (243). It seems impossible ever to reach complete accord, but because of this impossibility, Olga must tell K. the story, which, at least minimally, enriches his understanding of the village and the Castle. Communication is how K. seeks to integrate himself into the community, and the community provides structure to the enterprise of meaning; Kafka, likewise, wrote as a form of communication, and he chose not to break with Hermann because family was the structure in which he could begin to understand him. Thus, Kafka stresses the importance of communal identity in the quest for meaning, and the role of authority is to foster and enforce community. When Pepi, the chambermaid who temporarily replaces Frieda as barmaid at Herenhoff Inn, must return to her original post, she reflects that she is happy to return to the other chambermaids: “Why should I get on better than they do? For that was just what held us together, the fact that the future was barred to all three of us in the same way, and now I have broken through after all and was separated from them” (406). As with the masons and workers of “The Great Wall of China,” shared blind subjugation to authority contributes to the communion between Pepi and her friends. K., who seeks to displace Klamm, approaches authority erroneously. To K., understanding means rivalry and mastery, but to Kafka and the villagers, understanding is deference to the quest; reflection, not rivalry, is the proper mode. During an unsuccessful wait for Klamm outside Herenhoff Inn, K. has a moment of seeming enlightenment that removes him from his competitive quest. In his solitude, K. muses:

It seemed to K. as if at last those people had broken off all relations with him, and as if now in reality he were freer than he had ever been…but—this conviction was
at least equally strong—as if at the same time there was nothing more senseless, nothing more hopeless, than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability. (139)

This passage suggests that Kafka, perhaps inspired by Judaism, was drawn to the communal enterprise. Unlike Protestantism, which leans toward individualism in its rejection of papal supremacy, Catholicism and Judaism emphasize community. But Catholicism still incorporates a measure of autonomy; church membership itself is a matter of choice. Judaism takes communal identity further. Jews are born into faith and community. Hannah Arendt interprets *The Castle* as “the one novel in which Kafka discusses the Jewish problem, the only one in which the hero is plainly a Jew” (115). Löwy agrees that K. is a Jewish figure, claiming that K. is an “eternal troublemaker who is always out of place” (204). Per this argument, K., ostracized by both the Castle and the village, embodies the “modern would-be assimilationist Jew” seeking recognition (Arendt 116). However, though different from the villagers in his confrontational mindset, K. is not set so far apart from the village community. K. truly does become assimilated into the village, was perhaps assimilated the very moment he stepped within its boundaries. K. himself recognizes the “relations” he possesses within the village, and contrary to Löwy’s claim that K. alone “refuses voluntary servitude” (204), K., like the villagers, acknowledges the power of the Castle. Even when he momentarily achieves the freedom that he craves, K. realizes that freedom from authority is meaningless; authority is the source of community and meaning.

Kafka provides an example of an archetypal heroic individual in Amalia, from whom Kafka’s opinion about individualism can be inferred. Like K., Amalia differs from the villagers in her perception of the Castle, but while K. remains obedient even while
challenging Klamm, Amalia has altogether rejected the Castle. Though her family used to be in good standing, the village has since ostracized them because Amalia refused the sexual summons of an official, Sortini. Amalia’s individualism emerges with her changed appearance at the Fire Brigade’s celebration, where she attracted Sortini; Olga describes that Amalia’s “somber glance, [which] has kept the same quality since that day, was high over [their] heads” (245). The change is not physical—Olga emphasizes that Amalia is not particularly beautiful—but internal, as evidenced by her “somber glance.” Earlier, K. had taken notice of her gaze as well, describing it as “cold, clear, and steady,” and “not hateful but proud and upright in its reserve” (219). Amalia has a different understanding of the world than others, including K., which allowed her to reject Sortini. According to Olga, Castle officials are so attractive that “women can’t help loving the officials once they give them any encouragement” (256), and K., analogously, is obsessed with Klamm. Though Olga insists that Amalia must love Sortini, or else she “would be too exceptional for plain human understanding” (256), Olga is partial to the Castle in a way that Amalia is not. In another example of miscommunication, Olga projects her own viewpoint onto Amalia, and indeed, Olga admits that she herself would have answered Sortini’s summons. Amalia likely feels nothing for Sortini, her understanding of authority leading to utter rejection of both the Castle and its officials. While the villagers consider the Castle an external mediator, and K. treats the Castle as an internal mediator, Amalia seems to forgo mimesis altogether in favor of autonomy. Unlike her fellow citizens, Amalia does not imitate or compete with a model, the Castle, to distinguish her identity. Instead, she takes the road of the romantic heroine and affirms herself as an individual.
But Kafka’s depiction of Amalia is unsympathetic. Löwy praises Amalia as “irreducibly [embodying] the refusal to submit, disobedience, in short, human dignity” (204), but Amalia’s disobedience does not preserve her dignity. She becomes a mute creature unable to connect with the community and, far more than K., the “out of place Jew” that Löwy describes. If the village represents Jewish community, K. becomes, or has always been, part of the community, while Amalia becomes and remains an outsider. Her brand of heroism abandons communal identity and appears rooted in stubbornness and egoism, as Amalia does nothing to help her family even while her actions ruin them. Her freedom is like the momentary release that K. felt—hopeless, senseless, and ultimately meaningless. As Amalia abandons the Castle, the Castle likewise abandons Amalia. No punishment comes, because the Castle no longer recognizes her family. As previously discussed, voluntary submission to authority lends it power and even existence. Amalia and the Castle no longer occupy the same metaphysical order. Before he can be forgiven, Amalia’s father “had to prove his guilt” (275), an impossibility so long as Amalia does not recognize the Castle. Amalia’s family is “punished” instead by the community. Olga describes their father’s customers boycotting him and their family friends breaking with them: “We weren’t afraid of anything in the future, we were suffering under the immediate present, we were actually enduring our punishment” (269). To Kafka, individualism threatens meaning by forgoing communal identity, leading to the worst possible fate—being set adrift, alone, in a meaningless world. Like K., Amalia does not understand that certain duties are owed to authority, that reverence is owed, and that the unbridgeable distance between them, the subjects, and the Castle, the authority, is not permission to displace or break with authority. Camus claims that K.’s interaction
with the Barnabas family is his attempt to “recapture God through what negates him, to recognize him, not according to our categories of goodness and beauty, but behind the empty and hideous aspects of his indifference, of his injustice, and of his hatred” (133). Indeed, K. begins to diverge from archetypal moral judgments, but Camus argues that to forsake “morality, logic, and intellectual truths” makes K. “a little more exiled” (133). However, K.’s abandonment of logic and intellect seems to have the contrary effect of bringing him closer to the Castle. Amalia clings to morality and logic, rejecting the Castle’s absurdity by shredding Sortini’s summons. As he accepts the irrational order of the Castle, K. does not become exiled, but integrated.

What ultimately empowers the Castle is its ambiguity, which engenders ongoing communication between the villagers and gives them purpose and solidarity. Many critics note that Willa and Edwin Muir’s translation of The Castle, the first to be published, employs diction with religious connotations. It seems doubtful that Kafka wrote solely with spiritual motives, but as with all Kafkian literature, The Castle incorporates religion as part of its exploration of authority. Considered as a spiritual authority, the Castle provides structure to the villagers’ religious enterprise; the community has its own form of religion and congregation, one that Kafka advocates as opposed to individualism. Through community, discourse about the Castle becomes possible—and Kafka suggests human community is every bit as important as the Castle itself.
THE SANCTITY OF LAW: THE TRIAL

This final chapter discusses *The Trial*, the last and most famous of Kafka’s three novels. Written in 1914 and 1915 following Kafka’s abandonment of *Amerika*, *The Trial* was similarly left unfinished. Though Max Brod compiled the chapters—the last of which seems to bring the story to an end—Kafka, as he describes in a diary entry of November 30, 1914, considered the work unfinished: “I can’t write anymore. I’ve come up against the last boundary, before which I shall in all likelihood again sit down for years, and then in all likelihood begin another story all over again that will again remain unfinished” (*Diaries* 318). Kafka correctly predicted that he would later begin *The Castle* and similarly abandon it. Though *The Trial* precedes *The Castle*, there are two reasons to leave its discussion last. First, *The Trial* reads as a more complete novel than either *Amerika* or *The Castle*. Like most Kafkian literature, the plot is straightforward: Joseph K., the chief cashier of a bank, is arrested on his thirtieth birthday and accused of an unspecified crime by an inscrutable authority. K. is not imprisoned and continues working. His bourgeois routine as a banker contrasts with the inaccessible and irrational court system, which, as the story becomes increasingly absurd and infused with magical realism, takes on overt theological elements. K. attempts to penetrate the High Court, the symbol of theological authority, to learn his crime and prove his innocence, but his fruitless efforts end with his death when, on the eve of his thirty-first birthday, two men execute him by thrusting a knife into his heart. *The Trial* differs from the other two novels in its ending—though its meaning is likewise ambiguous, the ending is clearly climactic and feels like an ending. According to Brod, Kafka wanted to insert scenes before the final chapter describing the workings of the trial but also felt that K.’s trial
should never go to the highest level, thus rendering the novel simultaneously unfinishable and finished. Regardless, the ending seems to be the logical terminus, and any unfinished elements would have preceded it. Therefore, The Trial can be discussed as a complete novel, partially eliminating the element of speculation involved in discussion of Amerika and The Castle. Second, The Trial parallels the judge-and-defendant relationship between Kafka and Hermann detailed in Letter to His Father and consequently epitomizes the largest Kafkian theme: the conflict between reason and authority. Kafka consistently refers to his relationship with Hermann as a “prozess,” or trial, using legal terms such as “urteil,” judgment or sentence, and “schuld,” guilt. When he sent the letter to Milena Jesenka, Kafka wrote: “And as you read it understand all the lawyer’s tricks: it is a lawyer’s letter” (Letters to Milena 65). In The Trial, K. is similarly beset by an inscrutable authority, and he, too, assumes the role of a lawyer in his own defense, though to little avail. Letter to His Father is neither an attempt at reconciliation nor an indictment but an allegory of authority. Likewise, The Trial transcends its outward political and theological themes to center on the nature of authority and the human response to authority.

In The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus proposes that The Trial “propounds a problem” that The Castle “to a certain degree, solves” (The Myth of Sisyphus 130). Certainly, The Trial and The Castle share similar themes and perhaps ask similar questions—Kafka was undoubtedly preoccupied with authority—but Camus, who asserts that The Trial ends without “treatment” of the absurdity it “diagnoses” (130), undervalues The Trial. Rather than relying on another novel to answer its questions, The Trial is self-contained and answers the problems shared between itself and The Castle, albeit with a
different approach. In *The Castle*, K. seeks admittance to the Castle, which, while spiritually remote, is physically present, with a form like that of the village. During his quest, K. becomes part of the village community, finding meaning in social life and communal identity. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. is alone. His quest is solitary. His goal, the High Court, is so far removed that K. never sets foot in it, never sees it, and never meets any official belonging to it. K.’s solitary struggle epitomizes the unreconcilable conflict between rationality and absurdity, an internal struggle that must be faced alone. Where *The Castle* depicts a communal search for meaning, *The Trial* denies the benefit of community and depicts an individual search for meaning. Believing truth to be unreachable, Kafka rejects the romantic ideal of the individual unraveling the absurdity of the world. Before his death, K. realizes his failings and experiences an epiphany, but K.’s epiphany is not supernatural, and he does not achieve communion with God. Instead, K. learns a simple truth: that his failing was succumbing to the temptation to arrogantly interpret the world. Like the K. of *The Castle*, Joseph K. of *The Trial* commits no crime in seeking to understand the unknown authority, but his fault lies in his dogged belief in reason. During his quest, K. moves away from earthly, bourgeois trappings—his work as a banker, his lust for women—towards the truth of the High Court, but K. continuously seeks systematic explanation; K. wants logic and reasoning that justifies the authority of the High Court. But Kafka believed that humanity is not owed justification. Law exists independently. Order is maintained, not despite, but simply without need of human understanding. Kafka suggests human understanding has no bearings on the world order—and to believe that the world is flawed, because humanity lacks comprehension of its law, is arrogant. Kafka’s response to absurdity is acceptance of absurdity. Had he
accepted what he perceived as the irrationality of the High Court, K. would have been freed—and in the moments before his death, as he sees a human figure rather than a god, K. seems to achieve something of this understanding, of the place of humanity in the world.

The Nature of the Court

In discussing the Court, the Lower Court and High Court must be differentiated; K. is ultimately accused by the highest levels of the High Court, but all proceedings are undertaken by the Lower Court. As an example of bureaucratic inefficiency, the Lower and High Courts seem uncoordinated in their handling of the case. Officials of the Lower Court admit their ignorance of the Law of the High Court, and the lowest officials hardly know more than the average citizen. When they arrest K., the officials Willem and Franz are unable to disclose what crime he has committed because they are “humble subordinates who can scarcely find [their] way through a legal document” (11). Like the bumbling officials of the Castle, the officials of the Court, while part of the Court and therefore invested with authority over K., are still themselves distinct from the Court. While the High Court itself is beyond humanity, most officials whom K. meets are, like him, flawed in their understanding of the Law—because they, like him, are human. Thus, the Lower Court, comprised of humans, takes on bourgeois characteristics seemingly absent in the High Court. The primary difference between K. and the officials is their attitude towards the Law. While K. combatively seeks to overturn the Law that deems him guilty, the officials obey the Law despite their ignorance: “Our officials...as the Law
decrees…are drawn towards the guilty and must then send out us warders” (12). Court officials never presume to know why K. is guilty, but their faith in the Law that condemns K. confirms K.’s guilt.

Why does the Court command such obedience? At K.’s first interrogation, the undignified Examining Magistrate shows little aptitude for the Law and makes a fool of himself by erroneously referring to K. as a “house-painter” (40), soliciting laughter from the crowd. With his minimal authority, he can only respond by “[springing] up and scowling” (41). K. seems not unjustified when he refers to his bizarre case as “contemptible” and “misguided” (41–42). K. is correct when he lambastes Willem and Franz, who, as he accuses, did try “to induce [him] to bribe them…to get [his] clothes and underclothes under dishonest pretexts…to eat [his] breakfast under [his] eyes” (43). But the perceived failings of the Lower Court do not reflect on the High Court. At the beginning of the novel, K.’s situation, while strange, seems plausible; Kafka may well have meant to criticize an unjust judicial system neither transparent nor logical, might have intended *The Trial* as a political allegory. But Kafka soon introduces an element of magical realism when, in a store room of his own bank, K. witnesses Willem and Franz being flogged because of the complaints he had made in the Lower Court—and the next day, K. returns to witness the very same scene repeating itself: “Everything was still the same…the files of old papers and the ink-bottles were still tumbled behind the threshold, the Whipper with his rod and the warders with all their clothes on were still standing there, the candle was burning on the bookcase” (85). This surreal interjection signals that the world is not as it seems. Kafka hints, therefore, that the Court is more than just an earthly establishment, and that above the bourgeois Lower Court exists the true,
overseeing authority, the High Court. Perhaps realizing this truth, K. flees, “almost weeping” (86), and he leaves for home, “tired, his mind quite blank” (86). At this moment, K. begins to see the error of the rationalizing mindset; Kafka oscillates between acceptance and rejection of the irrational, but readers, like K., must abandon preconceived notions of rationality, which are insufficient to understand the Court. As the novel progresses, logic breaks down, and earthly rationality moves towards theological awe of the High Court. Most strikingly, the flogger-and-warders scene suggests that the order is cruel and inscrutable, but that cruelty and inscrutability do not mitigate absolute authority. During his punishment, Willem tells K.: “We are only being punished because you accused us; if you hadn’t, nothing would have happened, not even if they had discovered what we did” (81). But the flogger insists that the Court’s punishment is “as just as it is inevitable” (81). In other words, regardless of accusation and evidence, the guilty are convicted and punished; the guilty are objectively, definitively guilty. K’s charge is issued and adjudicated, not by humanity, but by the High Court. Rather than a human construct, Law is a divine, self-enacting decree. To K., whose crime is unknown but guilt is pre-established, the High Court is both plaintiff and judge.

Architecture further sheds light on the theological nature of the High Court. As indicated by its name, the High Court exists on a higher, perhaps metaphysical level. When summoned to his first interrogation, K. is “given the number of the house where he had to go…a house in an outlying suburban street where he had never been before” (33). Though it is associated with the Lower Court, this location is removed from the world familiar to K. Immediately, the vagueness of the directions confuses him, and K. is
unable to choose between the first staircase that he sees, three other sets of stairs
elsewhere in the house’s courtyard, and a passage to an altogether different courtyard.
Finally, K. chooses to climb the first staircase. He remembers Willem’s previous
assertion of an attraction between Law and guilt and muses that, were he guilty, “it
should follow that the Interrogation Chamber must lie in the particular flight of stairs
which [he] happened to choose” (37). K.’s choice indeed leads him to the Interrogation
Chamber, an unlikely coincidence that lends credence to both his guilt and the authority
of the High Court. Furthermore, the courthouse is situated in an attic in which people can
stand only “in a bent posture with their heads and backs knocking against the ceiling”
(38). There are two reasons for this forced posture: the crowd of people and the
architecture of the courthouse. Kafka suggests that humanity contributes to the
impenetrability of the Law, perhaps through their misguided attempts to understand it, by
filling the room with a “crowd of the most variegated people” that is too large for the
small space (38). In addition, the low ceiling forces humanity to bow its head, indicating
that the Law demands obedience. K. feels that the air is “too thick for him” (38), a
recurring sensation whenever K. visits locations associated with the Court. When he later
revisits the courthouse, K. is taken to a still higher level where the airless offices contain
“hot roof-beams [that] make the air dull and heavy…[and] hardly breathable” (66).
When he visits Titorelli, a painter with connections to the Court, K. must climb so many
stairs that he feels “quite out of breath” because of the “stifling” air (132). Once he
arrives, K. finds the heat “almost unbearable” (144) because he has been “desperately cut
off from fresh air” (145). These elevated spaces suggest the lofty remoteness of the
Court. Titorelli also claims that there are “Law-Court offices in almost every attic” (152),
at once suggesting height, because of their height, omnipresence, and perpetual oversight. Though he ascends to these higher planes, K. learns nothing insightful about the Court and instead feels the oppression of stifling air and heat. Kafka suggests that no enlightenment is to be found—that the High Court, the Law, does not promise comfort or even benevolence, but embodies an unyielding, incontestable authority.

K’s Guilt

Is K. truly guilty? Professor Herbert Deinert argues against the presumption of guilt, claiming that the reader “certainly knows of no crime K. has committed” (197). Indeed, K. seems not to have violated any written, statutory laws, but Deinert’s assertion ignores customary laws that deal with standards of community. K. is certainly not an innocent or upstanding man. He may not be a statutory criminal, but he “puts work before all else, browbeats his landlady, sexually harasses a fellow lodger, neglects his ailing mother and impressionable niece, and breathes not a second’s hesitation at the propriety of his conduct” (Conti 100). Critics largely agree that K. is an avatar of Kafka, but Deinert claims that Kafka’s “critical self-consciousness” and “guilt-consciousness” is not transposed to K., and therefore, “Kafka might have considered this kind of punishment just, [but] K. is a hapless victim” (198). Deinert’s suggestion implies that guilt is subjective and does not exist outside of human perception—but Kafka evidently disagreed. As discussed, the High Court transcends humanity, and its judgments are incontestable. There is little reason to doubt its verdict and little reason to believe that its verdict can be doubted at all. During his flogging, Willem, who claims that his punishment is a result of K.’s accusation, echoes K. Willem seems to believe that the Law is a human construct and that, in the absence of human accusation, there can be no
guilt. Likewise, K. muses: “How can any man be called guilty? We are all simply men here, one as much as the other” (195). Willem and K. believe that, because the Law is created by humanity, guilt is determined by humanity, and K. hypothesizes further that, because men are equal, no man can determine guilt—and thus, no man can be guilty. But Kafka contests the premise that Law belongs to humanity. Instead, the transcendental nature of the High Court suggests that Law exists independently of humanity, presides over humanity, and needs no justification.

What is K.’s crime? The Trial begins thus: “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning” (7). Without knowledge of the crime of which he has been accused, K. presumes his innocence, and The Trial details his quest to prove it by unraveling the workings of the High Court—but K. only seems to prove and further deepen his guilt. Assimilated into the bourgeois world, K. not only misunderstands but debases the higher order of the High Court with his misguided, human interpretations. As Herr Huld the Advocate tells K., “What makes [him] so wrong-headed is…the fact that [he has] been treated too well, although [he is] an accused man, or rather, more precisely, that [he has] been treated with negligence, with apparent negligence” (175). Because of the remoteness of the authority that Kafka, too, struggled to accept, K. succumbs to the temptation of interpreting the law as social, neglecting the reality of a higher order. Upon his arrest, K.’s first impulse is to think that he has not “done anything wrong,” but the ideas of right and wrong are human concepts inapplicable to the High Court. K. then tries to solicit help in his quest from his Uncle Karl; the Advocate, Herr Huld; the Court Painter, Titorelli; and finally, the Priest. But Kafka’s depiction of community in The
Trial differs from that in The Castle. While K. of The Castle forges meaningful relationships that offer varying but meaningful interpretations of the Castle, K. of The Trial is only impeded by others, save for the Priest. K.’s quest is solitary, and it must be solitary. As he removes himself from bourgeois influences and earthly, human distractions, K. gains a modicum of insight into the High Court and learns the futility of his efforts to interpret it from a human perspective. Once he understands his guilt, he is punished with death. K. receives his punishment only at the end of his quest because K., finally understanding why he must die, finally can die. To understand this process, this section follows K.’s quest and his deepening character, which finally enables his death.

K. begins the novel as the chief cashier of a bank, having been assimilated into a bourgeois lifestyle characterized by routine: “K. had been accustomed to pass his evenings in this way: after work whenever possible—he was usually in his office until nine—he would take a short walk, alone or with some of his colleagues, and then go to a beer hall, where until eleven he sat at a table patronized mostly by elder men” (21). K. is the archetypal bourgeois man of solid social standing and respectability, high-ranking and trusted yet petty and paranoid. His insecurity about his social standing causes him to imagine the Deputy Manager scheming against him and “prowling every now and then into his office, sitting down at his desk, running through his papers” (183), demonstrating the insecurity that Hesse attributes to the bourgeoisie. However, K. is not entirely absorbed into the bourgeoisie and deviates from the norm by partaking in sexual affairs. According to Hesse, the bourgeois man preserves his self by moderation and avoidance of extremes: “The one path leads to the saint, to the martyrdom of the spirit and surrender to God. The other path leads to the profligate, the martyrdom of the flesh, the surrender
to corruption” (52). K. is unable to find spiritual meaning and resorts to the opposite extreme: corruption. Tempted by lust, K. both preys on and is himself preyed upon by hypersexualized women. These sexual encounters typically have vampiric undertones. When he makes advances towards his neighbor, Fraulein Burstner, K. seizes her and kisses her first on the lips, then “all over the face, like some thirsty animal lapping greedily at a spring of long sought fresh water,” before finally kissing her “on the neck, right on the throat,” where he keeps his lips “for a long time” (32). K. later visits an Advocate, Herr Huld, to help him with his case, and he begins an affair with Huld’s attendant and possible mistress, Leni. During this encounter, Leni is described as bending over K. to bite and kiss his neck, even “biting into the very hairs on his head” (104). Both incidents involve kissing the neck, the implied vampirism of which indicates unwholesome, parasitic relationships. Though sexuality enables K. momentarily to escape the bourgeois world, women also distract him from the transcendental truth of the High Court. In contrast to the sanctity of Law, Kafka depicts sexuality as an earthly distraction and a symbol of an inscrutable world. Sexuality is an ever-present temptation, but the more wholesome authority—the High Court or, perhaps, God—is silent and distant. When he considers breaking from Herr Huld to handle his own case, K. thinks it fortunate that he “should have no chance of discussing it beforehand with Leni,” not only because he considers the matter “beyond her scope,” but because, should they speak, she would try “to dissuade him…and he would have continued to be a prey to doubts and fears” (159). K. implies that Leni herself is a source of confusion, suggesting that Kafka believed sexuality detrimental to the search for meaning; K., who indulges in sexuality, neglects divinity and impedes his quest.
Ironically, K.’s prosecution is at the hands of a bourgeois organization, the Lower Court. K. is therefore punished by the same bourgeois world to which he belongs, and his attempts at defense are also characteristically bourgeois—creating a cycle of futility. Unlike the High Court, the Lower Court cannot determine his guilt, because the Lower Court, like K., is human; K. likewise cannot claim innocence, because he, like the Lower Court, does not possess the authority of the High Court, yet K. defends himself only by repeatedly claiming his innocence. K. breaks with the bourgeois world when his priorities shift from women and the bank to “the thought of his case, [which] never left him” (107). Compare the K. who thought his case a waste of time to the K. who, having spent two hours thinking about his case and neglecting his work, thinks that this “long stretch of precious time…had not been quite lost,” simply because he had “come to decisions which might prove valuable” (121). But though this prioritizing represents progress, K.’s mindset remains mired in human defense: “He had often considered whether it would not be better to draw up a written defence and hand it in to the Court…he would give a short account of his life, and when he came to an event of any important explain for what reasons he had acted as he did” (107). K.’s acknowledgment that he may be guilty represents progress, but he still thinks defense possible. What K. must learn is the futility of human effort, and what he must accept is the presence of divinity, of something beyond humanity. Kafka introduces pseudo-father figures—Uncle Karl, Herr Huld, Titorelli—who seem to help K., but these human figures, like the female characters, impede the true father-son, authority-subject relationship between the High Court and K. Only by shaking the influence of false fathers does K. manage some form of understanding; Kafka deviates from his typically positive portrayal of community by
depicting individual effort as a path to understanding.

K.’s first father-figure is Uncle Karl, who appears at the behest of his daughter Erna, K.’s cousin, to “find out the real state of things, and if necessary get some of [his] influential friends to intervene” (89). Note the interference of another female character who, though her intentions seem benevolent, ultimately represents another distraction. Uncle Karl himself seems less concerned with K. than their family name: “Joseph, my dear Joseph, think of yourself, think of your relatives, think of your good name. You have been a credit to us until now, you can’t become a family disgrace” (90). Uncle Karl’s preoccupations signify that he, too, represents the shallow bourgeois, a “petty squire” despite being “from the country” (87). He suggests that K. travel with him to the country, where he might flee “the clutches of the Court” (91), but the country does not free Uncle Karl from the bourgeois world. Instead, Uncle Karl, a wealthy landowner obsessed with his family name, remains entrenched in earthly considerations. Compared to the hypothetical ending of Amerika, in which Karl—coincidentally possessing the same name as Uncle Karl—travels to the countryside of Oklahoma putatively to achieve freedom, The Trial depicts the country, like the rest of human society, as part of the bourgeois world. Uncle Karl cannot escape even in the country. He conversely becomes more absorbed into the bourgeois world, because the vastness of the country bolsters his wealth, leaving him “harassed by the disastrous idea that...he must get through all the programme he had drawn up for himself” (87). Like K., Uncle Karl’s life is dominated by schedule and routine, and though he attempts to fulfill a father-role to K., his obvious ineffectuality renders him powerless. Uncle Karl may reflect Kafka’s disappointment in his Uncle Alfred, Julie Kafka’s elder brother who, as the general manager of the Spanish
railways of Madrid, was a frequent traveler and inspired in Kafka a longing for “far-off lands” and freedom; Kafka reportedly asked if Alfred “couldn’t somehow help [him] to get out of all this, and…take [him] somewhere [he] could at last set [his] hand to something fresh” (Brod 7). Alfred disappointed Kafka, leaving him under Hermann’s authority, and likewise Uncle Karl cannot protect K. from the High Court.

Uncle Karl introduces K. to Herr Huld, an Advocate who “has quite a considerable reputation as a defending counsel and a poor man’s lawyer” (93). As K.’s lawyer, Huld not only handles his case but shares with K. information about the Court, becoming another father figure—but again, an ineffectual one whose work yields few results. Huld does offer useful interpretations of the Court, but his fault, like K.’s, is over-interpretation. For instance, K. learns from Huld that “the Defence was not actually countenanced by the Law, but only tolerated, and there were differences of opinion even on that point, whether the Law could be interpreted to admit such tolerance at all” (109). However, the flaw of this interpretation is its very nature as an interpretation. It is not an objective fact. Huld evidently believes that the Law tolerates defense, else he could not be an Advocate, but as he himself states, the Law does not expressly permit defense. Thus, Huld’s personal interpretations deviate from the Law. Huld symbolizes human systems of understanding that perhaps mimic the higher order of the world, the divine—statutory law and religion, for instance—but that Kafka deems insufficient. Advocates know and can navigate the system, but they are not enlightened, demonstrating the limits of human understanding: “For although the pettiest Advocate might be to some extent capable of analysing the state of things in the Court, it never occurred to the Advocates that they should suggest or insist on any improvements in the system” (114). Kafka’s
complaint about his home was Hermann’s inscrutable authority. Kafka’s complaint about the world was the remoteness and inscrutability of divine order and authority, raising the question: Why is the world as it is? But Kafka agreed with the Advocates insofar as the inefficacy of suggesting improvement. Kafka realized that the absurdity of his relationship with Hermann had some basis, and he undertook, in Letter to the Father, not to improve their relationship but merely to explore it. Likewise, Kafka believed that humanity cannot comprehend the world on the scale required truly to know that it requires improvement or what form these improvements might take. However, Huld and the other Advocates are complacent in their flawed understanding of the Court, which, while sufficient for their purposes, ultimately falls short of enlightenment. Huld tells K. that the sensible thing is to “adapt oneself to existing conditions…to understand that this great organization [remains], so to speak, in a state of delicate balance” (114). His first claim is true enough—Kafka would agree with piety and adaptation—but Huld is mistaken to attribute delicacy to the inexorable High Court. What remains in “delicate balance” is Huld’s complacency. Huld clings to the idea that he can fully navigate the Court, refusing to explore it further and penetrate its secrets, because while he acknowledges his flawed understanding, he maintains a tenuous peace. In this regard, K.’s insistence on truth and transparency, while misguided in its combative undertones, seems more in line with Kafka’s rejection of complacency and advocacy of struggle.

Finally, K. is introduced by one of his bank clients to Titorelli, the official Court Painter whose position should lend a deep understanding of the judicial process. While K. works as a Bank Assessor, Titorelli appears to transcend the bourgeois world as an artist; but while K. seeks the truth of the Court, Titorelli, like Huld, is complacent. Titorelli
tells K.: “Perhaps it strikes you that I talk almost like a jurist? It’s my long association with the gentleman of the Court...but I’m losing a great deal of my élan as an artist” (141). That K. learns of Titorelli from a bank client, someone clearly inducted into bourgeois society, foreshadows that Titorelli himself does not escape these trappings. Titorelli’s artistry, which might have placed him outside the bourgeois world, turns out to be manufactured and unoriginal. Titorelli paints according to conventions and rules, having inherited the post as Court Painter from his father and learned the “complicated and various and above all secret rules laid down for the painting of the different grades of functionaries” (141). In Titorelli, Kafka depicts the misguided artist satisfied by scratching the surface of art—art that satisfies convention and does not challenge the norm—because Titorelli, having a minor understanding of the outward form of the Court, misses the deeper truth of the Court. When he outlines methods of escaping trial, Titorelli tells K.: “There are three possibilities, that is, definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement” (142). Definite acquittal, Titorelli says, is impossible, but only because Titorelli does not know enough about it. Titorelli suggests ostensible acquittal, which means obtaining a provisional verdict of innocence from judges of the Lower Court, which can be overturned at any time by the High Court. As Titorelli states, “the charge is lifted from your shoulders for the time being, but it continues to hover above you and can, as soon as an order comes from on high, be laid upon you again” (147). The Lower Court cannot absolve guilt, as that is a power exclusive to the inaccessible High Court, but it can rescind charges. This may allude to Christian confession, in which the sacrament of penance allows believers to confess sins and be absolved by a priest—but Kafka suggests this process is flawed. Having a human
component, the Lower Court has limited power to determine and absolve guilt. Likewise, Kafka suggests that religion and other earthly attempts at divine communion can imitate the form of the divine, but that the form is not enough, and to believe it sufficient disrespects the piety owed to authority. Seeing K.’s hesitance, Titorelli suggests indefinite postponement, which means currying favor with the judges to keep the process from progressing. This will allow K. to “assume with fair certainty that the case will never pass beyond its first stages” (149), but like ostensible acquittal, is only a delusion. Both methods reinforce submission to authority, but the subject lives in complacency, imprisoned under illusory rhetoric. As K.’s foil, Titorelli seems, despite his knowledge, more misguided; K. has the impulse to search for truth, an impulse that Kafka commends.

The Parable, and K.’s Lesson

The penultimate and perhaps key chapter of The Trial, “In the Cathedral,” introduces the titular Cathedral and its priest, both of which are part of the High Court and therefore invest the Court with theological authority. K., requested by the Bank Manager to accompany an Italian client, must meet him at the Cathedral. When the client does not appear, K. explores the Cathedral alone. Because of the rain outside, the Cathedral is dark and visibility is poor, forcing K. to use a pocket-torch. As he waves it “over the rest of the altar-piece” that draws his attention, K. sees that the piece is a “portrayal of Christ being laid in the tomb” (190). If The Castle is a Jewish novel as Hannah Arendt proposes, The Trial can be characterized as a Christian novel. Wayne Stables suggests that K. is “ever in medias res, in the midst of a field of guilt whose originating transition has already occurred” (571). His guilt is predetermined because, perhaps, like all of humanity, he is cursed by the original sin of Adam and Eve in the
“field of guilt” that is the Garden of Eden. In the Cathedral, the altar-piece of Christ reintroduces the theme of sacrifice, briefly mentioned during the earlier flogger-and-warders scene, when K. had been “really very anxious to get the warders off; since he had set himself to fight the whole corrupt administration of this Court” (84). When Franz began to shriek under his flogging, K. had fled, thinking that he “could not afford to let the dispatch clerks and possibly all sorts of other people arrive,” and he concluded: “No one could really demand that sacrifice from him” (84). At the Cathedral, K. learns that sacrifice is truer than the justice he has long sought. Justice is the epitome of rationality, but sacrifice, though it may be undeserved, is the piety that he must demonstrate. K. must become a Christ-figure. If the High Court demands sacrifice, then K. must accept sacrifice.

As he ventures deeper into the Cathedral, K. feels the weight of its solemnity: “K. felt a little forlorn as he advanced, a solitary figure between the rows of empty seats…and the size of the Cathedral struck him as bordering on the limit of what human beings could bear” (193). It is not merely physical size that affects K., but the scope of what the Cathedral symbolizes—the omnipresent, omnipotent authority of the High Court. Like Kafka, K. is stricken by the magnitude of the power that governs him and the world. Unable to understand it, he can hardly bear its weight. K. is on the verge of leaving when a priest calls out his name. Unable to resist the summons, K. approaches, and the priest tells him, “I had you summoned here, to have a talk with you,” to which K. replies, “I didn’t know that. I came here to show an Italian round the Cathedral” (194). K.’s answer supports Titorelli’s previous claim that “everything belongs to the Court” (140). K. had thought Titorelli’s claim nonsensical, but the priest’s summons suggests that all events,
including the Italian client asking to be shown the Cathedral, are under the control of the High Court. Interestingly, the bourgeois Bank leads K. to the Cathedral. Though he seems to criticize the baseness of bourgeois life and the rigidity of organized religion, Kafka qualifies his criticism by showing both as mechanisms through which higher authority might operate. In other words, though they are flawed, human systems have merit as an attempt at understanding and, given that their flaws are not ignored or forgotten, might prove useful. K., led by the Bank to the Cathedral, speaks with the priest and learns his final lesson.

Immediately, the priest criticizes K.’s methods: “You cast about too much for outside help, especially from women. Don’t you see that it isn’t the right kind of help?” (195). As discussed above, The Trial, unlike The Castle, depicts a solitary quest, in which external intervention only impedes the protagonist. Ironically, K. realizes his mistake of relying on help through, once again, help, which perhaps explains why this conversation does not enlighten K. so much as it shows him why his efforts have been, and are doomed to be, futile. Kafka uses the setting to elucidate K.’s incomprehension: “In the prevailing darkness the priest certainly could not make out K.’s features, while K. saw him distinctly by the light of the small lamp” (196). While the priest stands in the light, K. is hidden in darkness. Even now, K. is preoccupied with finding “a mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the Court” (196). The priest claims that K. is “deluded” (197) before reciting the parable “Before the Law,” to demonstrates K.’s delusion about the High Court.

Superficially understood, the parable is simple. “Before the Law stands a doorkeeper on guard,” and an unnamed man tries in vain to gain entrance to the Law,
thinking it should “be accessible to every man and at all times,” but he spends the rest of his life waiting for permission that is never granted. Before his death, he asks the doorkeeper: “Everyone strives to attain the Law. How does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?” (197–198). The doorkeeper replies: “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it” (198). Deceptively simple, the parable lends itself to a range of interpretations, which the priest gradually explains, but none of these interpretations are meant as truths. K.’s immediate reaction is to rely on concepts of right and wrong, latching on to the idea that the doorkeeper has deluded the man. At this, the priest chides K.: “You have not enough respect for the written word and you are altering the story” (199). As it is written, the parable does not include the word delusion; therefore, it is wrong to speak of delusion. When the priest suggests that the doorkeeper is benevolent—being humble of his position and respectful to his superiors, refusing to be bribed and attending the man—K. is almost convinced, but the priest offers another interpretation, that the doorkeeper is the one deluded. Though he seems to hold power over the man, the doorkeeper is actually subordinate because he must remain to guard the door intended for the man, and though he is in the service of the Law, the doorkeeper only guards its door but has never penetrated the Law. Interpreting the doorkeeper as deluded suggests that religion has lost meaning; Kafka may once again be noting that religion, like the doorkeeper, preserves the form and social structure of authority but, because of its subordination, lacks purpose. Religion is a social construction and holds no power over independent, metaphysical truth. Therefore, the door in the parable does not matter, religion does not matter, and the man who seeks truth, regardless of the form
this quest takes, is already on the right path. But the priest reminds K. that he is only reporting one of many of the “various opinions concerning that point” (201). Though his arguments are logically sound and the “individual steps of the argument seem flawless, the discussion as a whole has reached no conclusion whatsoever” (Deinert 194). These interpretations fail because they depend on logic. As the priest insists, these interpretations are irrelevant, because “the scriptures are unalterable” and the interpretations “often enough merely express the commentator’s bewilderment” (201).

What can be learned from the parable?

K. remains unwilling to abandon the idea that the man is a victim of delusion, because the doorkeeper’s delusion must also delude the man. In response, the priest says: “Whatever he may seem to us, he is yet a servant of the Law…he belongs to the Law and as such is set beyond human judgement” (203). This is the prelude to the final lesson of piety that K. must learn. Nowhere does the text give the right to judge, to pass judgment on the doorkeeper, who exists above the reach of humanity because of his connection to the Law. Doubting him would be “to doubt the Law itself” (203), and the Law cannot be doubted. K. cannot agree, because to do so would mean accepting as truth all that the doorkeeper says, but as the priest has proven, the text does not explicitly validate the doorkeeper’s statements and thus they cannot be interpreted. Solving this paradox, the priest says simply: “It is not necessary to accept everything as true; one must only accept it as necessary” (204). Kafka is less romantic than existential. Here, he makes his most forthright argument that necessity precedes truth. Regardless of interpretation, authority will exist, order will exist, and therefore, interpretations attempting to capture its essence are not only futile but ultimately meaningless. Attempting to free oneself from authority
is “based on the delusion that this is possible” (Deinert 195). Discussion of the parable leads to no conclusion, and the implications escape comprehension, because the parable is meant to demonstrate the impossibility of interpretation. K. defends the man seeking admission to the Law because he, too, seeks admission to the High Court, but his obsession with right and wrong, innocence and guilt, blinds him to the significance of the narrative—that meaning is found not in grand, sweeping truths, but in the individual steps toward understanding. K. is unable to understand the parable because he interprets it and tries to establish a correct interpretation. In doing so, he imposes himself on the narrative. As the priest states, the text is unchangeable. What can be interpreted from it without introducing personal elements? K. should struggle to explore and understand, but his failure is believing that he can interpret the world and judge the Law, when the Law is instead owed his submission and piety. K. must make a sacrifice—abandon rationality and fully embrace the absurdity of Law.

K. does not recognize the significance of the parable, and Deinert argues that, even if he had, K. would not have benefited: “Whoever his accusers are, they reside somewhere in sublime unconcern…. His fate is irreconcilable and will be the same” (197). Deinert is correct about K.’s fate being unchangeable, but to suggest that K.’s quest is ultimately futile implies that personal growth is impossible. Regardless of his fate, understanding the parable would have, at the very least, given him peace of mind. K.’s actions may be unnoticed by the High Court, but acknowledgment by higher authority is unnecessary. If it were, then Letter to His Father would have been utterly meaningless. Like the parable, the letter made little difference. Even if he had read it, Hermann would not have acknowledged it. Kafka likely realized the futility of
reconciliation, but *Letter to His Father* remains meaningful despite being an inadequate bridge between father and son. For Kafka, the letter clarified the absurdity of their relationship and perhaps allowed him to accept it. Likewise, the parable would have allowed K. to accept his fate, unalterable as it is, and the ending of the novel might not have been steeped in hopelessness.

On the evening before K.’s thirty-first birthday, two men arrive to take K. Now realizing the “futility of resistance,” knowing that there “would be nothing heroic in it were he to resist,” K. leads the men to a quarry, where they lay his head against a boulder (208). Preparing to execute him, they draw a “long, thin, double-edged butcher’s knife” (210). It suggests an animalistic death, as though K. were less than human—because K. has not lived up to his humanity. Even now, after learning something of his guilt, K. has not realized his potential. Recall K. at the beginning of the novel. He considered taking his life “such a senseless act that, even if he wished, he could not bring himself to do it because of its very senselessness” (13). Now, at the end of his quest, K. perceives “clearly that he [is] supposed to seize the knife himself…and plunge it into his own breast” (210). Senselessness no longer inhibits K., signifying his maturation beyond bourgeois logic and acceptance of irrationality. However, K. still fails in two important regards. First, despite recognizing that he should, K. fails to take the knife. K. realizes that because he “could not relieve the officials of all their tasks, the responsibility for this last failure of his lay with him” (210). During his quest, K. should have learned not to rely on others, but he still needs the officials to mediate between him and the Court. They must interpret K.’s guilt and punishment for him, enacting something that K. should himself do. Thus, K. fails to achieve personal communion with or even personal
acceptance of the Court. Finally, K. looks up at a house above the quarry moments before his death, and he experiences an epiphany:

With a flicker as of a light going up, the casements of a window there suddenly blew open; a human figure, faint and insubstantial at that distance and that height, leaned abruptly far forward and stretched both arms still farther. Who was it? …A good man? …Where was the Judge whom he had never seen? Where was the High Court, to which he had never penetrated? He raised his fingers and spread out all his fingers. (210)

All the signs point to this experience as a religious epiphany—occurring before death, the flicker of light, the figure gesturing seemingly in welcome—but Kafka specifies that K. sees a human figure, not a godly one. As an epiphany, this experience must incorporate some form of revelation. At the risk of angering the priest, interpretations must be suggested here, but unlike K.’s interpretation of the High Court, these aim to interpret something human and are thus hopefully permissible. There is nothing supernatural about the figure, which metaphorizes the divine in human terms; Kafka may be saying that redemption is human, that redemption, the definite acquittal of guilt that Titorelli deemed impossible, may be possible after all. Why does K. raise his hands? K. may ward off the light, unable to bear its severity just as he was unable to bear the size of the Cathedral, but spread fingers may also be a sign of worship, demonstrating K.’s acceptance of his judgment and death. Ambiguity persists to the final line, which reads: “‘Like a dog!’ K. said: it was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him” (211).

Nothing explains this shame. Nothing specifies that the shame belongs to K. Perhaps the shame belongs to K., that he should die like an animal, or perhaps the shame belongs to
the Court, that it was unable to teach K. It is entirely possible that Kafka himself did not know, that his writing “transcends [him] and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing” (Camus 124), but the passage and the novel are no less meaningful for their ambiguity. Likewise, authority does not need to be immanent to have meaning, because its existence is enough. Christopher Conti argues that K. is Kafka’s “bête noire, the model for the diabolical agencies of self-observation that Kafka alternately solicited and shunned in his diaries” (101). On December 9, 1913, Kafka wrote: “Hatred of active introspection…. To put up with oneself calmly, without being precipitate, to live as one must, not to chase one’s tail like a dog” (Diaries 244–245). K. dies like a dog because, relying on introspection and logic and refusing to accept an inscrutable but unalterable truth, he has “lived in pursuit of his tail” (Conti 101). All of this recalls the priest’s point, Kafka’s ultimate point: acceptance does not depend on understanding.
CONCLUSION

Prominent writers often become adjectives, their visions so distinct and so powerful that their names become synonymous with aspects of experience: the Orwellian, the Chekhovian, the Kafkaesque. Kafka’s name connotes horror and surrealism, but popular usage of “Kafkaesque” often misrepresents his vision. Though he indeed depicted desperate, futile struggles against inscrutable bureaucracies, Kafka transcended this depiction, straddling fantasy and reality to explore truths of humanity and ultimate meaning. Within the world of anxiety and paranoia that he creates, Kafka possesses a strange, haunting elegance. Kafkian literature is characterized by contradiction: terrifying yet beautiful, hopeless yet full of hope; there are “perpetual oscillations between the natural and the extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the everyday, the absurd and the logical” (Camus 126). Written in the second-person perspective, parables are perhaps best suited to Kafka’s message. In “An Imperial Message,” the Emperor sends a message to you, “the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun” (The Complete Stories 4). Despite your insignificance, the message is meant for you and you alone. It speaks to the human desire for communion with a higher being, for meaning and importance behind everyday existence. Perhaps the message is the key to understanding, the answer to all uncertainties and questions. But Kafka emphasizes the impossibility of that message ever arriving. Because “the multitudes are so vast,” the messenger must fight through “the chambers of the innermost palace.” Even should he succeed, he can never travel through the imperial capital, “the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment” (5). This haunting parable ends in futility. Some message of great
importance is meant for you, but you will never hear it. All you can do is “sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself” (5). Kafka combines yearning and intense hope with futility and hopelessness, but for all its bleakness, futility is not so terrible. Though the message never arrives, you still have your dreams. Kafka depicts conflicting emotions that are somehow compatible—reflecting his own intense struggle to reconcile rationality and a reality with no apparent meaning or logic.

Amidst this discussion of bureaucracy and authority and meaning, one might accidentally mythologize Kafka as a perfect author who unwaveringly adhered to his transcendental vision. But like anyone else, Kafka was flawed. Kafka, too, indulged in escapism. Recall that Hermann was the root of Kafka’s theme, the basis of Kafka’s understanding of authority, and that Kafka, in the service of his writing, never broke from Hermann by starting a family of his own. Though he never married, Kafka did, near the end of his life, leave Prague and Hermann. In the summer of 1923, Kafka met Dora Dymant at the Berlin Jewish People’s Home. Like Kafka, Dymant rebelled against the constraint of her father and left Poland for Germany, as Brod describes: “For all the respect she bore her father whom she loved, she couldn’t stand the constraint, the narrowness of the tradition” (97). Perhaps their shared discontent bred kinship between Kafka and Dymant. Kafka soon decided to follow Dymant’s example and, “after offering successful resistance to all his family’s objections” (197), left with her for Berlin. Though he considered this time a period of happiness and salvation for Kafka, Brod also notes that, after leaving with Dymant, Kafka suffered through a particularly frightful winter that aggravated his tuberculosis: “It is that which really killed Franz, so I think” (201). Coincidental though it must be, the timing is bizarrely appropriate. After leaving
Hermann, the catalyst of his creative genius, Kafka began to die. Just as his characters could not escape their subjugation, needed their subjugation, Kafka could not escape and needed Hermann. On March 17, 1924, Kafka returned to Prague and his parents, which he felt “as the shipwreck of all his plans for being independent, as a defeat” (Brod 203). There had never been a chance for independence.

During his last days, tortured by tuberculosis, Kafka consoled himself with literature—though he could not read it. Kafka wrote to Brod, “It isn’t that I am really reading; I’m too tired for that. Being closed is my eyes’ natural state, but playing with books and magazines makes me happy” (Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors 414).

On May 20, 1924, two weeks before his death, Kafka thanked Brod for a recently received book but focused on its appearance: “So now the book is here too, just the look of it magnificent, glaring yellow and red with a touch of black, and very tempting” (415).

Kafka could no longer muster the energy to read but his obsession with literature remained—an obsession that comforted him in his dying days, an obsession that ironically ended in his abandonment of content in favor of form. Perhaps Kafka, had he been fully lucid, would have decried his own reliance on the physical form of the novel. It does remind of the Lower Court and the bureaucracy of the Castle, imitations possessing the form of higher truth yet nothing more than imitations. Regardless, literature again became Kafka’s escape, this time from earthly pain, pain that nearly drove him mad. Kafka demanded morphine from Doctor Robert Klopstock, the “friend become father, judge, and God” (Pawel 446). Dependent on Klopstock’s care and liable to die at any moment, Kafka raged: “Kill me, or else you are a murderer” (Pawel 446). Illness murdered any pride or independence Kafka might have possessed. Klopstock,
Kafka’s sole caretaker, held such power over him that Kafka doubtlessly believed
Klopstock the murderer of his dignity. Once again, Kafka was subjugated, having
suffered his entire life from anxiety, insecurity, alienation, and depression. Death might
not have been worse. As Socrates argues in “Apology,” death is an unknown, but “men
fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils” (29b). What should be feared in
death? Socrates denounces baseless knowledge as “blameworthy ignorance” (29b), an
opinion Kafka likely shared. All his writing points to distrust in humanity, which is
entangled in bourgeois society but blind to its entanglement. Nor did Kafka trust his own
ability to achieve enlightenment, and he headed to his death accepting failure.

On May 19, 1924, in what may be his final letter to his parents, Kafka reminisces
about the time they had spent together in Franzensbad, the times Kafka and Hermann
“used to have beer together quite often…when [Hermann] would take [Kafka] along to
the Civilian Swimming Pool” (Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors 414). But this is
not mere wistfulness. Even lying on his deathbed, Kafka remembered Hermann not
merely as his father but as the supreme authority, choosing to recount a memory of
himself, “a little skeleton,” shying away from but also admiring Hermann, “strong, tall,
broad” (Letter to His Father 15). Kafka urged his parents to stay away, perhaps yielding,
one final time, to escapism. Kafka may not have wanted to see his parents, because he
could not “show the visitors major, undeniable progress” in his illness (Letter to Friends
415), and because he no longer wanted to fight. Kafka and Hermann could not have
reconciled. Reconciliation lay outside their nature. Hermann, the root of Kafka’s every
internal conflict, anxiety, and frustration, could not have offered comfort. Kafka died
without Hermann ever reading Letter to His Father, and he asks his parents: “I think we
should rather let it be. So shall we not let it ride for the present, dear parents?” (415).

Kafka had accepted his turbulent relationship with Hermann, accepted his irrational subordination to a distant, inscrutable authority. In his diary entry of January 9, 1920, Kafka writes:

Through a heaven of vice a hell of virtue is reached…. It is no disproof of one’s presentiment of an ultimate liberation if the next day one’s imprisonment continues on unchanged, or is even made straiter, or if it is even expressly stated that it will never end. All this can rather be the necessary preliminary to an ultimate liberation. (Diaries 391)

Though he never escaped Hermann, Kafka had nevertheless been liberated by his acceptance of his fate. On June 12, 1923, Kafka unifies in his final diary entry the three overarching aspects of his life: his relationship with Hermann, his writing, and his desired freedom. Kafka and Hermann existed in discordant harmony, combative to the very end, their every word a “spear turned against the speaker” and their conflict irresoluble, but they needed each other, so much so, Kafka writes, that “it happens whether you like or no, and what you like is of infinitesimally little help.” More consolation: “You too have weapons” (Diaries 423). In the end, Kafka was not defenseless. Writing was his weapon and his freedom. Kafka had already learned everything to be learned from Hermann, written everything to be written about Hermann—and thus had no need to see him.

Kafka died at noon on Tuesday, June 3, 1924. Milena Jesenka’s farewell, which was published in the conservative Národní Listy of June 5, 1924, says of Kafka:

Few knew him, for he was a loner, a recluse wise in the ways of the world and frightened by it. For years he had been suffering from a lung disease, which he
cherished and fostered…. He wrote the most significant works of modern German literature; their stark truth makes them seem naturalistic even where they speak in symbols. They reflect the irony and prophetic vision of a man condemned to see the world with such blinding clarity that he found it unbearable and went to his death. (Pawel 447)

Jesenka spoke truly of Kafka. Kafka was a solitary visionary who scrutinized the world, peeled back layers and layers of falsity to expose truths that he himself could not fully comprehend, and wrote words of brutal beauty. Though Jesenka’s farewell praises Kafka, his life, beset by mental and physical pain, concluded without fanfare. The German-language press ran obituaries and five hundred people attended Kafka’s memorial service at Prague’s German Chamber Theater on June 19, including, presumably, readers of the few short stories he had published. But the world had not yet noticed Kafka. Beyond Prague, Kafka was largely unknown. Three Czech papers published obituaries, but one misspelled Kafka’s name. Kafka would have preferred anonymity, but Brod, who preserved his work, brought Kafka public renown. Kafka distinguishes himself as an author who refused escapism, refused individualism, refused romanticism, for the painful, piercing truth—the truth of a world governed by a higher authority, the truth of a humanity destined to fail, but the truth, also, of hope. The Kafkaesque is not hopelessness, but instead the hope of a man who had much for the world but none for himself.
Bibliography


