

A Deconstructive reading of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*

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Abstract:

Kafka's The Trial, an invisible and a unique piece of fiction, provides the readers with an ambience of uncertainty and sense of ambiguous and mysterious environment. Written in 1915 and posthumously published in 1925, Kafka's The Trial narrates the story of Josef K, a banker, unexpectedly arrested and prosecuted by a remote, inaccessible and unspecified court system for a crime he says he was unaware of. Josef finds himself in an impossible, nightmarish and tormenting situation here charge which he is accused of and the justice is unknown and uncertain. The Trial it can be interpreted on many levels such as; as a brutal satire of the absurdity of unfair judicial systems, a frighteningly disturbing examination of the peculiarity of bureaucracy and a vivid demonstration of human weaknesses in face of authority such as the corporate control of the human lives exploiting people's fear of losing jobs, the subjection of authority at the hands of accused being, thus destabilizing the hierarchies, de-centering between the conscious and subconscious existence of K because the world revolving around himself is unpredictable and unclear. And this deconstructive reading has attempted to limit and differentiate what is "inside" or "outside" the work.

Full Paper:

The aim of my paper is to attempt a deconstructive reading of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. This deconstructive analysis of the text is done by concentrating on conflicts inherent within the process of signification. Thus, my reading would underline the possibility of multiple interpretations to certain "events" without proposing any objective reality or truth.

Deconstruction has been defined by M.H. Abrams as "a theory and practice of reading that questions and claims to "subvert" or "undermine" the assumption that the system of language is based on the grounds that are adequate to

establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a literary text. Typically, a deconstructive reading sets out to show that conflicting forces within the text itself serve to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structures and meanings into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities” (Abrams 77). However, the originator and namer of deconstruction is the French thinker Jacques Derrida who has inaugurated this theory in the late 1960s. According to him, the meaning of a sign, in some sense, is always absent from it and thus there is an endless deferment of meanings since the union of signifier and signified is not straightforward.

The analysis of my paper is attempted by taking into consideration certain objectives such as: exploring interpretations from the ambiguous and uncertainty of certain episodes, especially pertaining to the court scene pervading the text; to study the system of legal proceedings, that is, court, justice, and law which is structured, and at the same time, chaotic; to study the character of Josef K, whose interior and exterior spaces of the world is problematic.

Written in 1915 and posthumously published in 1925, Kafka’s *The Trial* narrates the story of Josef K, a banker, unexpectedly arrested and prosecuted by a remote, inaccessible and unspecified court system for a crime he says he was unaware of. Josef finds himself in an impossible, nightmarish and tormenting situation here charge which he is accused of and the justice is unknown and uncertain. By most standards, he is denied anything resembling a fair trial: he is never informed of how he has broken the law, he is forbidden from learning essential details of his case and is eventually executed without any deeper understanding of how his conviction was reached or what he could have done to oppose it. He is entrapped in an oppressive legal apparatus where the very the principles of law and justice are inverted, irrational and the lawyers of bureaucracy resembles endless circles. The entire court structure is clandestine, the judges are fact less and the rules are ambiguous, the courtrooms are hidden and the shrouded with utmost secrecy, causing the condemned protagonist and the reader to feel frustrating, anxious and helpless:

“Most of them were dressed in black, in old, long, formal frock... the only thing that puzzled K, ... have taken the whole assembly for a political meeting.” (Kafka 29)

K thought that he has entered a meeting, where he was called for the cross-examination because it was “a medium sized, two windowed room...filled with most diverse crowd of people...” (Kafka 27).

Josef’s protracted mission to understand the law never culminates in any comprehension. The more he explores the system that holds him captive, the less that system appears to be undergirded by any logical, predictable structure whatsoever.

There is no decisive way to make sense of Josef’s situation. This is because the narrative is equivocal in *The Trial*’s universe, where every fact can be re-casted in different ways. Moreover, the facts themselves are often dubious or altogether inaccessible. This is evident from the very first words in the beginning of the text:

“Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K” (Kafka 1). This vague and unsatisfying conjecture is the closest the text ever comes to the explanation of Josef’s arrest. As Josef navigates, or fails to navigate the judicial

system, crucial information is withheld at every step. Court documents, legal proceedings and even the text of the law that determines his fate are all forbidden to Josef and oftentimes to the officials or court functionaries that control and dominate him as well. For instance, the judge asks some irrelevant questions to K, as such: “you are a house-painter?”(Kafka 29). and which K replies with : “your question ,My Lord, as to whether I am a house painter- in fact even more than that, you did not ask at all but merely imposed it on me- is symptomatic of the whole way these proceedings against me are being carried out”(Kafka 29).

The courtroom has also been projected in a way where the purpose of a law turns to be illogical and purposeless. The court is located in an odd place, “monotonous, grey constructions, tall blocks of flat occupied by poor people”(Kafka 25). This space with its stifling environment was also been responsible for Josef’s physical suffering. Everything seems to be in disharmony inside the courtroom which were devoid of reason such as some people started laughing for no certain reason, which irritated K to such an extent that he finally had to scream to make them silent. This also shows the inversion of order in its authority. The judge seems to possess less or no power to rule over them and maintain the structure of court system.

“The judge had become quite cross but seemed to have no power over those below him in the hall, he tried to reduce what harm had been done in the gallery and jumped up threatening them...” (Kafka 29)

Through the conversations, during the cross-examination process, it can be seen that rather than the judge, it was the accused Josef K, the one who was interrogating the judge out of curiosity. Thus, the judge, here becomes the “subjected” subject .K raised questions such as:

“And what, gentlemen is the purpose of this enormous organization...How are we to avoid those in office becoming deeply corrupt when everything is devoid of meaning?” (Kafka 33)

The judge is also ambivalent and equivocal in his pronouncements regarding Josef K as he was forbidden to know the truth, and he could not arrive at clear meanings from the movements and gestures made by the people and the judge in the courtroom. K smiled and said; “And now the judge, right next to me, is giving a secret sign to someone among you. There seems to be someone among you who is taking directions from above. I don’t know whether the sign is meant to produce boing or applause, but I’ll resist trying to guess what its meaning is too soon.” (Kafka 33).

Thus, analyzing the conversation between Josef K and the judge on the level of “speech-acts”, it seems as if K’s words have illocutionary authority unlike the judge lacks .The accused person seems to be more assertive to the judge, whose authorial position has been reduced at the hands of Josef K, the one who is charged with crime. The judge is found to be voiceless at times, and K’s voice is much more assertive than the judge, such as when K says,

“I have nearly finished what I have to say...None of this concerns me, and I am therefore able to make a calm assessment of it, assuming that this so-called court is of any real importance...I don’t have any time to waste and I’ll soon be leaving”(Kafka 33). After this forceful commanding statement, there was an immediate silence in the courtroom, and the judge couldn’t reply over him, thus implying that “power” was invested upon the accused. In reality, a court is seen a part of what Althusser terms as a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), with many formal

norms which have to be maintained by one and all. The judge is supposed to be the authority figure invested with “repressive” power and the charged person tends to be powerless. But in *The Trial*, through the episode of “cross-examination” we can see a destabilized structure of the courtroom. Instead of being an ordered space, there was total chaos in its functioning. Josef K, thus, attempts to restore order in this carnivalesque situation. Therefore, there is nothing an individual be it defendant, lawyer or functionary do to bring a semblance of order in the justice system. For the accused, every course of action is equally couched in ambivalence: Block’s wretchedness shows that even the most obsessive devotion to one’s trial provides no advantage. The absence of logic forces defendant to seek meaning in bizarre rituals and superstitions, such as trying to foretell a defendant’s verdict from the shape of his lips. Thus, it can be said that, there are times when reason, logic and superstitions overlap to form a mixed logic where both the “science of rationality” and the “dogma” of superstition goes together. Moreover, Titorelli’s explanation of the three sorts of acquittal illustrates that the struggles of the defendant are almost always in vain. Of the three sorts of acquittal, he explains only one, that is, “absolute acquittal” actually being able to restore the defendant to the status quo he had prior being accused of. However, the truth was that this exoneration had never actually been granted to any accused.

In the text, we can see that K has been provided with various possibilities such as the lawyers who could have helped him to prove his innocence. But at the same time, these possibilities are only theoretical in their assumptions, uncertainty prevails over its achievement. The lawyers deprived of legal authority argue cases as if accustomed practice of their profession, have been seen to give no effort to their duty such as Dr. Huld, who was responsible for not protecting K and to free him from the absent cage which he is incarcerated. In fact, in the explanations of the three sorts of acquittal by Titorelli (the painter), he says that his trial may have been favourable. On the other hand, he says that the most favourable acquittal rarely happens. It disappoints K, realizing that all his hopes are now in vain:

“I don’t think there’s anyone who could do anything to get an absolute acquittal.” (Kafka 110)

This opposition in its action can also be seen in the character of K, the person who was very conscious of his trial at the beginning and had also tried to free himself from being the object of surveillance. However, he ultimately surrenders and submits to his fate ruling the ambivalent nature of justice.

K cannot be said to be guilty, if it’s seen through the corrupted lens of the law and justice. K is guilty not of violating any laws that the courts would uphold; these, the norms of bourgeois society, he has always scrupulously obeyed. Rather he is guilty of violating a moral absolute and his feelings of guilt represent his half-conscious recognition that his life has become meaningless because he has lost this sight of law. K is a man with a divided mind; the part of him that feels guilty senses the part that functions in the everyday world knows that he is living in accordance with the law of his culture, having a good job, always observing towards advancement in rank, residing in respectable house, avoiding excess of any kind.

In K’s relationship with his colleagues, it is the law that he most persistently violates. Assertion of the self over others is the law by which the bourgeois society thrives, but it also alienates us from others and that is the reason why Josef K seems to be such an inadequate human being.

“K stopped talking with them; do I he thought to himself, do I really have to carry on getting tangled up with the chattering of base functionaries like this?-and they admit themselves that they are of the lowest position.”(Kafka 5)

Again, his friendship with advocate Hasterer pleases him because this association with the great man gives him a peculiarly privileged position. K is very class-conscious. His concern with status and position forces him to choose what he knows to be callous and unfeeling behavior. He even “had his legs crossed and had thrown one arm over the back rest of the chair”(Kafka 7). K watched the warder's whipping tormented by a sense of responsibility;

“K had quickly thrown the door shut, gone over to one of the windows overlooking the yard and opened it...” (Kafka 5). When the chief clerk asked him if anything is wrong, he simply replied, “No, No, it's only a dog yelping in the yard” (Kafka 5). But irony is that it was he himself who was being killed like a dog and this was being dehumanized.

The protagonist of the novel represents all of us in a world which is devoid of meaning and justice. He has been forced to awake and arrive in an unfathomable situation, perhaps it can be interpreted as a situation stucked between fantasy and reality as he was still in bed when the officers arrived to arrest him as K himself said, “They came for me in the morning when I was still in bed” (Kafka 3).

The events described in the episodes appeal to the subconscious and resemble dreamlike state. It is unclear whether the descriptions are of a dream or real-life events. The universe created in the text, every actions and incidents are very blurred in its visualization and there prevails the doubts and with the beginning of the first chapter, it depicts a tension between truth and falsehood. There are many such impossibilities which is not possible in reality such as Sunday to be chosen for hearings so that K wouldn't be disturbed in the professional work; the location of the court which is far from the city in an odd place whereas in the reality, it is found to be an organized structure followed by strict rules and regulations. But in the text, the court doesn't maintain any norms, K was not informed of his trial's timing but when he entered the court by his own calculations , he was taunted for being late;

“You should have here one hour and five minutes ago.” (Kafka 28)

The court which has itself not being serious in its organization is trying to make the accused Josef realize the importance of being punctual in time. Again, the next day of his cross-examination when he visited the court again, it was empty, which he took advantage of and has come acrossed some pornographic drawings instead of some legal documents, reducing the expectations of a formal court atmosphere and doubts the certainty of its existence. Thus, there can be seen a triviality in its seriousness of an ordered system. However, this can also be seen on the angle of being mysterious that K was forbidden from inquiring knowledge and information regarding his legal case. This might also has been used as a strategy to keep it a secret from K. The ordered court system is totally shattered in *The Trial*.

Thus, through the critical reading of *The Trial* it can be interpreted on many levels such as; as a brutal satire of the absurdity of unfair judicial systems, a frighteningly disturbing examination of the peculiarity of bureaucracy and a vivid demonstration of human weaknesses in face of authority such as the corporate control of the human lives

exploiting people's fear of losing jobs, the subjection of authority at the hands of accused being, thus destabilizing the hierarchies, de-centering between the conscious and subconscious existence of K because the world revolving around himself is unpredictable and unclear. And this deconstructive reading has attempted to limit and differentiate what is "inside" or "outside" the work.

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