

Is There Freedom in Kafka?
(Penn State University, Comp. Lit. 470: Fall 1998)
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In Franz Kafka's *The Castle* -- and indeed in much of Kafka's work -- the only constant, it would seem -- the only certainty -- is uncertainty. Characters inhabit a world that is often quite bizarre, seemingly inhuman and unreal, grotesque, yet a world that is also often frighteningly similar to our own, that parallels our world or that is, as Kafka himself might very well argue, an accurate, although perhaps somewhat twisted, reflection of the realities of our lives. We live in a world, Kafka appears to say through the novel, where we can never truly belong, where we are continually alienated from others and even, ultimately, from ourselves -- a world where even our perceived freedoms are themselves restrictions that serve merely to further isolate us, to leave us miserable, desperate and confused, cold and uncertain, clinging to the hope of society and kinship even when we are entirely alone within that society.

Therefore, while in the text of *The Castle* K. realizes that he may indeed be free to act (or not), that his detachment from the world and responsibility to it seemingly afford him the opportunity to do whatever he may choose, this realization is "a victory that gave him no joy" and "would have availed him nothing." While he has what *appears* to be freedom and can stand alone in the dark, unconnected, tied to no one but himself -- the apparent master of his destiny, "at liberty to wait here in this place, usually forbidden to him, as long as he desired" -- K. has no power in this world, no control or comprehension. He is lost, set entirely adrift. He has merely the appearance of choices, shadowy, snowdrift-covered winding paths that he may follow, none of them leading, he realizes, to happiness, to warmth or society -- to the Castle -- which are ultimately the only things that he ever truly craves or attempts to obtain. These paths, no matter where one begins upon them or how far one travels, all lead in the same direction: nowhere.

K. is, of course, correct when he believes that "at last those people had broken off all relations with him," for, indeed, no one will ever "touch him or drive him away, or even speak to him." The townspeople have little use or care for him as an individual; they, like the Castle with its labyrinthine bureaucracy, are largely indifferent and incomprehensible. Logic, strange and dreamlike, is everywhere and inescapable, but reason is inapplicable, understanding impossible. K.'s positions as Land-Surveyor and then as janitor are meaningless titles, without purpose or worth: he cannot obtain an audience with Klamm or anyone who might tell him something -- anything -- of value, and there is no companionship -- no love or sense of belonging -- even with those, like Frieda or Barnabas, who might seem to proffer it. K.'s apparent entrance into society leaves him just as abject and alone as he was before.

And yet, K.'s detachment from this society and his unrelenting confusion, Kafka shows us, are not unique in any way. In such a world, the Castle *cannot* ever be entered, happiness *cannot* be obtained, and one can *never* truly belong -- even if one conforms, as K. is repeatedly informed he should do. There is, as Kafka writes, "nothing more senseless, nothing more hopeless, than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability." K. has apparently nothing, no connections or restraints, and so he yearns for a place in society, even as he, and we ourselves as readers, come to the realization that there is no happiness to be found even there, that this acquiescence to society is itself a restraint. One can be totally alone even when one is surrounded. Therefore, while K. may become Land-Surveyor, janitor, husband and provider, these are all merely masks, designations; they say nothing about him as an individual, nor do they admit him into any circle of friends, understanding, or society.

Kafka further argues, it would then appear, that the very fact that K.'s position is *not* unique, that despair and apathy are commonplace, mundane fixtures of life, makes the situation all the more terrible and disturbing, an intolerable set of circumstances one has no option but to learn to somehow tolerate. K. is alone, then -- but alone like everyone else. He cannot become part of a greater whole, for there *is* no whole of which to become a part. If K. held instead the position of an archetypal outcast in the text, if he were unhappy merely because society had shunned him, or he had tried to break the shackles that society seems so ready to place upon him, then as readers we might possibly view him as a tragic hero. Yet all K. wants is to belong, to fit in, and that is the one thing which this society, this world that Kafka depicts, truly

denies its citizens. K. is not a hero, for this a world in which heroes are never born and dreams are never realized.

The Castle, therefore, and whatever secrets or mysteries -- whatever treasure trove of knowledge or understanding -- one might believe await inside, remain forever elusive, hidden at the end of darkened roads that do not end, but are merely blanketed by fast-approaching night and snowfall and that leave K. disoriented, weak and blinded like an old man, clutching to whomever might lead him into warmth and safety. And yet despite his setbacks, the Castle remains, for K., a symbol of everything that he believes he himself lacks; if he could only reach it, walk through its gates and perhaps obtain an audience with the Count or some other high official, he might finally belong and recognize his place in the true order of things. "When K. looked at the Castle," Kafka writes, "often it seemed to him as if he were observing someone who sat quietly there gazing in front of him, not lost in thought and so oblivious of everything, but free and untroubled, as if he were alone with nobody to observe him..." The Castle, then, represents that freedom of which K. can only find a simulacrum as he stands later, alone in the snow -- "a freedom such as hardly anybody else had ever succeeded in winning" and that is rendered meaningless for those like K., for they cannot have it without also being alone.

Thus, to seek happiness in such a world of petitions and paperwork, of such dark, dizzying and convoluted bureaucracy -- where one must have a permit even to pass the night -- is an exercise in futility, according to Kafka. One might occasionally catch a glimpse of happiness, of knowledge or freedom somewhere just around the corner, "just as one fancies one catches a glimpse of some precious stone that one has lost in a dung-heap, while in reality you wouldn't be able to find it even if it were there..." Freedom is, ultimately, impossible in such a world. The one thing K. lacks, it would seem -- the *one* thing the townspeople have -- is not freedom or happiness or a sense of belonging, but the willingness to be unhappy and realize that no one can belong.