

The Castle: The Struggle to Remain Human in the Bureaucratic Machine

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Abstract

In this article I argue that Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) is a work that defends the individual's right to be himself in the totalitarian institution of the modern bureaucratic state. By creating the strange symbolic reality of the Castle and the village the novel tries to show how mechanisms of power operate over the individual by hiding and concealing themselves. I interpret the cryptic ending of the novel as K.'s refusal to submit to power and a demand for just recognition which makes his life the universal symbol of a life struggling for dignity.

Keywords: *The Castle*, Kafka, bureaucracy, operations of power, struggle for dignity.

"As soon as a person appears who has something primitive about him, so that he... says, 'However the world is, I shall retain an originality which I do not mean to alter in accordance with the world's wishes: at the moment these words are heard, the whole of existence is transformed. As in the fairy-tale, when the word is spoken, the Castle opens after being enchanted for a hundred years, and everything comes to life: so existence turns into sheer attention.'"

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Book of the Judge*

The Castle (1926) is the story of the outsider K. who enters the village beneath the Castle and struggles to adapt himself to the dominating bureaucracy of the Castle, ruled by an absent allegorical figure called Count Westwest, and the fearful and paranoid people of the village. It chronicles K.'s efforts to make contact with the Castle, the strange and magical way in which it recognizes him by his description of himself as the Land Surveyor, the different ways in which it confounds his understanding of its ways which includes his downgrading to the position

of a janitor and his final inability to gain any meaningful access to the Castle. I read the novel as the outsider K.'s attempt to negotiate with the power and authority of the Castle without compromising on his sense of self and as his attempt to uphold human dignity in face of absolute indifference by demanding a just recognition of his self.

In *The Castle* Kafka writes a kind of science fiction that startles us with its reality. He makes us ask some strange questions: Is reality not plotted — that is, are actions not arranged in a sequence — around individuals? Do individuals not experience 'special effects' in reality? Are coincidences not the result of coordinated effort? Are climaxes not effected in reality to create an enduring memory and is it not then used operatively to orient the individual in preset ways? While reading *The Castle* one does not feel that it is the novel that is plotted, it is reality itself that is plotted. The act of writing the novel is the attempt made by the human mind to demonstrate that it has control over this plotted reality.

In the world of *The Castle* everybody — including the protagonist, the Land Surveyor K. — is playing the role of the confident official or the employee of the Castle despite the insecure and unstable position accorded to them by the Castle. Barnabas whose original occupation is that of a cobbler plays the role of the experienced and indifferent messenger to K. though the job of delivering the letter of the Mayor to K. is the first and the only commission assigned to him by the Castle. K. too who is initially recognized as a Land Surveyor is later downgraded to the position of the Janitor of the village school.

The Castle is the power-centre of the village ruled by Count Westwest and the village is the symbol of the State. The Castle is the bureaucratic epicentre of the State made up of government officials and their lackeys. Through the symbol of the Castle Kafka suggests that at the heart of the everyday there is the dream or nightmare of authority or Power and it is this black hole of reality that is at the heart of modern culture. But why does the Castle exist as

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a Control Authority? Because, Kafka tells us, “the whole economy is one that would rouse one’s apprehension if one could imagine the control failing.” (Kafka 1969, 84)

In *The Castle* Kafka is not trying to understand the mysterious nature of authority or the modern State, he is trying to *express* how we experience life – life as a delirium, dream or nightmare – in the modern State. This is a crucial fact: for the mode of understanding, the attempt to render the mechanisms of power transparent can often be inauthentic as we do not always understand when we are affected by power. And fiction does not succeed by pretending that the rational mind can tame power by understanding it; it succeeds by creating a verisimilitude of the truth of reality. Kafka’s mode therefore is the mode of expression; he expresses the effect of power on the life of individuals and this fictional mode, because it is evocative of the universal experience of living in the modern State, can be joyous and satisfying at the same time. Kafka’s narrative must therefore be enjoyed for how he evokes the strangeness, mystery, and ambiguity of modern experience by immersing us in the world of fiction—for fiction is the expressive mode through which he celebrates the strangeness of reality. Because Kafka’s world is one in which hiddenness and concealment of the mechanisms of power and authority is central to the conception of reality any attempt to understand this reality by disrespecting its hidden and concealed nature can be very disturbing. Kafka himself evokes this world by treating power as a kind of absence, and everybody in his world, from the officials of the Castle to the humble messengers and assistants, play roles and do things that display not their power but their insecurity, instability, and impower. K.’s non-binary condition of being neither the bearer nor victim of power reveals the technology and soul of authority which often operates through the consensus of networks. How else does power operate? Through the force of custom. Boa suggests that the Castle can be seen as “an externalization of customary village practice and its imaginary heightening in village minds to the status of law.” (Boa 2003, 72)

The Castle famously ends in mid-sentence in which a statement of the frail old mother of the coachman Gerstäcker to K. remains unsaid. But another version of the ending, appended to the definitive edition of *The Castle* published by The Modern Library in 1969, ends with Gerstäcker talking to K. He tells him that since K.’s

situation in the village, as the Land Surveyor waiting to get the certificate of appointment from the Secretary of the Castle, is delicate, and since he is not being well paid in his current temporary job as the Janitor at the village school, he should come with him, and he could tell him of a job where he would get better pay. K. refuses this invitation but Gerstäcker who finds K., an educated man in dirty ragged clothes and without a fur coat in the cold winter of the village, and with only the barmaid Pepi to take care of him, tells him that he finds his situation quite heartrending and desperate, and remembers what his mother once said about K.: “This man shouldn’t be let go to the dogs.” K. says it’s a good saying but adds “that’s the very reason I’m not coming to you.” The cryptic and defiant note on which the novel ends is suggestive of the struggle of the modern man who is responsive to forces of sympathy but who has a clear understanding of what it means to “go to the dogs.” K. understands that human life – his own life – needs saving and protection but he also knows that he must value his struggle to be recognized by the Castle by being appointed as the Land Surveyor. The Castle recognizes everybody as either a villager, a Castle official, or a stranger who needs papers authorizing his stay from the Castle the moment he enters the village but it is the just and proper recognition of one’s self that everybody strives for. And it is through his demand for a just and proper recognition by the Castle even in his frail and down-and-out condition that K. shows that the ability to safeguard human dignity lies not with the bureaucratic machine of the Castle but with each human who makes up the bureaucracy of the Castle and the human community at large. K.’s situation and Kafka’s novel on it together demonstrate how life and art come together to defend the meaning of the universal symbol of a life when there is an assault on human dignity.

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