

The Narrative Art of Kafka's *The Trial*

Han Wu

School of Literature and Journalism, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia,
China

Abstract

Franz Kafka is regarded as one of the most important authors of 20th century. He, throughout his whole life, had produced a plethora of profound yet influential masterpieces. All of them have left a significant mark on the modernist literature development. Kafka, as a master of Expressionism, continues to provoke reflection by his art. And *The Trial*, one of the "loneliness trilogy," unfolds the exact his style. And the novel shifts between a dual perspective. And it could make a sense of immediacy and reality for the reader, besides it also allows own presence to emerge at certain moments. He employs the "anti-novel" technique, arranging the plots, time and space. This way enables it could present deeper meanings. As for the narrative method, Kafka's calm and objective prose deliver the absurd with an almost matter-of-fact reality. Consequently, it reveals the sophistication of his narrative art into full view.

Keywords

Franz Kafka; *The Trial*; narrative art; narrative style.

1. Introduction

Franz Kafka is regarded as one of the founding figures of Western modernist literature. Little known during his lifetime, this extraordinary writer would, after his death, become perhaps the most renowned of all modernist authors. His work exerted a profound and lasting influence on the development of twentieth-century Western modernist literature. Although Kafka's literary output was not particularly extensive, each of his works is distinguished by a depth of thought that gives it an enduring brilliance. As one of his "loneliness trilogy," *The Trial* fully reveals Kafka's distinctive vision and remarkable narrative craftsmanship through its use of narrative perspective, structure, and technique.

2. Narrative Perspective

The choice and accurate use of narrative perspective are the factors that pertaining to the way a literary work generates its meaning and value.[1] Unlike the omniscient perspective commonly employed in traditional third-person novels, *The Trial* adopts a restricted view. As a result, the reader "sees" the world through the eyes of the protagonist, K.

The Use of a Restricted View

Like *The Castle* and *A Hunger Artist*, *The Trial* is narrated in the third person perspective. Frankly speaking, one of the defining features of Kafka's style is the use of an external third-person view. Such writing technique tends to deliver readers a sense of rationality, objectivity, and reliability.[2] And *The Trial* employs a single, fixed form of internal focalization.

The very first phrase in the novel goes, "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K.,"[3] and the story unfolds right from it. It's easy to tell the reader is by no means placed in an omniscient, "God's-eye" position. It is only when K opens the door behind the painter's bed that he discovers that he is, somehow, in a court office. And to his much surprise, even the painter's room forms a part of the court. Only then does the reader was informed of that "almost every

attic in the building contains a court office". Besides, the novel contains extensive descriptions of K's inner thoughts. It is precisely this internal focus that "subjectivize" the narrative. So the reader can see closer the protagonist's spiritual world and experience events alongside the K. Additionally, as for his bewilderment, on account of the sudden accusation, he repeated to search the previous 30 years among his life for anything that might possibly have constituted a crime. Consequently, his disdain for and resistance to an irrational legal system and endless red tape can all readily elicit the reader's sympathy. Ultimately, a powerful sense of identification arises. At this point, K remains an ordinary human who has not yet been fully "alienated" or "disciplined." Faced with the unreasonable and unjust, he is still trying to rebel and resist them.

The Dual view in The Trial

Kafka was a writer of what might be called a "disintegrated self": he not only dissected the self from within, but also observed it from its beyond. And the K, likewise, engages in constant self-examination and self-criticism, observing himself from an external position. So in this condition, it gives rise to a dual perspective.

When an author writes as a participant, his consciousness is often projected into the text. The narrator's perspective may overlap with that of a character through the character's inner thoughts or spontaneous utterances. In the conversation between K and the prison chaplain in the cathedral, concerning the parable of the "man from the country" and the door to the Law, K's conclusion about the it is, in effect, the judgment of Kafka:

"You don't need to consider everything true, you must only consider it necessary," said the chaplain. "A dismal conclusion," said K. "It turns lying into a universal principle." [4]

When the author assumes the role of an observer, and speaks through an omniscient narrator, he usually can reveal to the reader some information: the characters themselves remain unaware. Kafka is also a detached observer. As the narrative shifts between the character's perspective and the authorial perspective, the effect of the narration changes accordingly. In fact, K's fate has been determined from the outset. From the moment he is accused by one unknown, everything begins to move inexorably toward an irreversible death. Writing from the standpoint of a detached observer, Kafka depicts K's inevitable destruction, producing an effect of objectivity and neutrality.

Thus, through the mutual penetration and overlap of restricted and unrestricted perspectives, the text acquires a distinctive tension. While, on the one hand, the narrative attracts the reader, on the other hand, it drives the story toward an inevitable conclusion, by an almost irresistible force.

3. Narrative Structure

The structure of narrative refers to the relationships in its various elements or units. In general, traditional novels place greater emphasis on chronological order and the coherence of the plot.

The "Anti-Novel" Narrative Structure

As a formative start in modernist fiction, Kafka gradually shifted the emphasis of the novel away from plot and storytelling toward subjective authenticity. His novels often seem to have neither a clear beginning nor an ending, as though they could continue indefinitely without ever reaching completion.

In *The Trial*, textual time bears no close correspondence to story time. The causal relationships between events are deliberately deemphasized, and the plot lacks rises and falls. So the result is that there is not even a defined ending. This constitutes what may be called an "anti-novel"

narrative structure. The ambiguity of time dilutes the causal links between successive events. And at the same time, it foregrounds the effect of juxtaposing different narrative spaces.[5] The whole work is composed of a number of episodes, which could be defined as “loosely connected”, and, to much exaggeration, some chapters could even be rearranged, but it will not disrupt the reader’s understanding. And there is also an obvious part in his novel, lack of dramatic fluctuation. And along with the long yet “boring” prose, much space depictions in dialogue, the textual structure is hard for us to grasp. As a consequence, the text ultimately creates a sense of distance or resistance.

Kafka, well, he possessed a strong space consciousness. In modern novel narrative structure, “space” does not, to some extent, refers to certain objects or places in reality. Instead, it stands an abstract, perceptual, and even “illusory” space.[6] The writer dissolves chronological time, for the purpose of diminishing its function. The novel can actually represent a futile cycle: the character acts—encounters an obstacle—fails—acts again—encounters another obstacle—fails again. Through this infinite repetitive structure, the distance between the character’s actions and his goal is stretched. And a profound sense of “deferral” emerges.

Space in *The Trial* is also embodied concretely in the invasion against K’s personal space. The court that K searches for everywhere, yet can never escape, is precisely a networked space. It exists in Miss Bürstner’s room, outside the painter’s door, and in the attics of the strange buildings in the poorer districts. In the novel, space itself becomes indistinguishable; there is no longer any clear boundary between inside and outside. One of its features is the overlap between private space and the court, or even the court’s progressive penetration into his private life.[7] From the unexpected yet sudden invasion, by two “unexpected visitors”, to K’s room, his personal space is gradually squeezed out by the space of the court.

And in the end, two more “unexpected visitors” break into his home in the middle of the night and carry out his final execution. It is clear that his living space is progressively constricted, and his dignity, in the very same sense, is gradually stripped away. In the end, he becomes an object entirely at the mercy of others, dying “like a dog.”

Surface Structure and Deep Structure

The Trial consists of two narrative structures. At the surface level, the narrative follows the actions of its characters, linking different spaces together and dictating the protagonist’s journey from accusation to death. At a deeper level, the novel becomes an act of self-examination and self-judgment, carried out by the author through the protagonist’s stream of consciousness and self-revelation

At the level of surface structure, the sudden “trial” at the very inception of the novel leaves a mystery for the reader; functionally, it serves as Ariadne’s thread connecting the chapters. Every character and event in the novel revolves around this “trial.” Some are people who intersect with K’s personal life and either offer assistance in his case or observe it with indifference. Such as his landlady, his uncle, and Miss Bürstner. While, others are directly or indirectly connected with the “court,” including the examining magistrate and the court warders.

These figures gradually reveal, from different angles, to K the true nature of the legal system. And K, meanwhile, moves restlessly from one to another in attempt to deal with his case with a hope to expose the absurdity of it. With the case’s development, his inner moves from determined resistance to an increasingly conflicted form of submission. It is these seemingly unrelated characters who propel K’s actions forward. Through subtle connections hidden beneath the surface, they gradually sketch out the underlying contours of the story and drive its development.

At the deeper level, however, the novel can be understood as the author’s own “trial” of himself. Living at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and influenced by the waves of

irrationalism, Kafka experienced the desolation of the world around him, while also seeing himself isolated by questions of ethnic identity and faith.[8] “I” accuse “I”: the person who has brought the accusation against K never appears. If there is no accuser, then the accuser must ultimately be K himself. The court is mysterious as well. No one knows exactly where it is, yet it is everywhere. In this respect, it resembles human consciousness itself—intangible, elusive, and impossible to locate with certainty. K records the details of his life in the hope that the court will declare him innocent, yet he does not know what crime he has committed or why he is being judged. Kafka, in his own way, finds himself in much the same predicament.

At the same time, “I” execute “I”. On his thirty-first birthday, K is ultimately sentenced to death by the “legal system”: “I” kills “I”, bringing the process of self-judgment to its conclusion. This is Kafka’s distinctive way of representing suicide, and it also reflects his deeply ambivalent attitude toward it.[9] Everything K suffers in *The Trial* can be read as a metaphor for Kafka’s own formative experience, marked by a profound sense of inadequacy, his struggle between competing identities without ever feeling fully recognized by either, and his persistent reflections on the nature of the world around him.

The interweaving of the deep and surface structures thus produces a multidimensional narrative structure. It not only gives the novel greater depth and significance, but also leaves the reader with ample space for reflection.

4. Narrative Technique

Throughout *The Trial*, Kafka’s stroke is rarely filled with emotion. Instead, it remains almost consistently objective, austere, and restrained. Beneath this detached mode of narration lies a deeper concern with the subject’s authentic condition of existence.

A Calm and Objective Writing Style

Symbolism is pervasive throughout the novel. Through its symbols emerges a pervasive sense of fear: the feeling that one’s living space is continually being constricted, that there is no way to escape, and that an oppressive force may appear at any moment and in any place.

The first form of symbolism lies in objects themselves. The “door” functions as a threshold between two worlds. Inside and outside represent two contrasting states—freedom and unfreedom. Beyond the door, the “court” continually encroaches upon K’s life, gradually depriving him of his freedom. Those who have long lived within the legal system, meanwhile, have themselves become increasingly alienated.

Unlike K, who can barely endure the stifling air of the court offices in the attics, they, the above-mentioned, find it difficult to adapt to the normal air outside. Their contrasting responses embody the conflict between freedom and unfreedom. Even the court, which repeatedly appears throughout the novel, becomes merely a “form,” one permeated by a sense of despair and impossible to escape. Kafka provides neither a specific historical context nor a precise geographical setting; he tells us only that the court occupies the attics at the very top of buildings. In this way, it becomes a symbol of the pervasive power through which the capitalist state exercises its oppressive and destructive authority over individuals.

The second form of symbolism lies in the characters themselves. Kafka’s characters are portrayed with so-deliberate ordinariness that they seem almost to lose their individual identities. Josef K. could be anyone. Through K., Kafka perceives a predicament shared by humanity as a whole. Although he himself writes from a position of despair, he nevertheless allows his characters to continue searching for justice and truth until the very end of their lives—even when truth remains forever beyond their reach.

Without explicit commentary, such recounting mode is a kind of the Expressionist character of Kafka’s writing.[10] An observer, arranged by him, stands at a distance, coolly recording K’s

experiences. And he coldly watches K's struggle and madness. We all know K is an innocent man but made to suffer. So allow the protagonist to sink deeper into confusion and isolation, but refuses to offer a help hand.. It is precisely this unwaveringly impassive, austere, and objective attitude that gives his writing its distinctive climate.

The Interweaving of Reality and the Absurd

Kafka extensively uses symbolism and metaphor in his works. His works have both existentialism and Expressionism influence, and lingering a sense of absurdity. At the same time, its details also count, because they carry the theme itself. This combination, of the absurd and the logical reality, is one of the defining features of Kafka's style.

The absurd introduces uncertainty. The meaning of *The Trial* has been interpreted in different ways. Some regard it as a satire of the corruption of Western political institutions; others understand it from ethical and moral perspectives. While others try to understand it through jurisprudence. Kafka deliberately distorts reality, and exaggerates it even as readers are shocked by what they encounter. So it is quite easy for them to be led to recognize that the world, distortion and deformity, devoid of vitality.[10]

But the realism is concealed under the details. The absurdity rests upon the individual. Kafka is really good at using seemingly illogical details to construct an elusive and difficult-to-grasp story.

These details are hidden in conversations, physical settings and the characters' subjective feelings. We shall learn much information about the court, through the conversations with the washerwoman, the attendant and the student. The court's physical organization, rules of operation, and the corruption and filth, we can know them from the conversation. Whether K's living quarters, his office, or the cathedral, each setting bears some connection to the recognizable world of everyday reality. Kafka's grotesque transformations, however strange they may appear, are often grounded in something fundamentally real.

Through the allegorical and symbolic mode of his fiction, Kafka presents the absurd predicament in which modern human beings find themselves. His method is to record this predicament in an objective tone. The confusion he portrays is not merely personal; it is shared by modern people. As irrationalism currents spread throughout twentieth-century society, Kafka looked at the world through the eyes of an ordinary individual. Out of the interplay between reality and absurdity, he created what has come to be recognized as a distinctly "Kafkaesque" form of the absurd. While this narrative mode may initially create a certain resistance to reading, it also generates an inexhaustible aesthetic appeal that continually draws the reader back into the text.

5. Conclusion

Kafka's works are often deeply autobiographical. His fiction is, above all, a profoundly personal form of writing, and through his portrayal of Josef K., we can glimpse the author's own thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

As an unfinished work, *The Trial* was abandoned by Kafka before he had completed it. Yet it remains one of the works that most fully embodies his narrative art and perhaps the clearest expression of what has come to be called the "Kafkaesque." The novel reflects Kafka's reflections on the social reality of his time, the meaning of human existence, and the nature of the self, while its narrative is marked by a profound sense of contradiction and tension. Through his sophisticated narrative craft, Kafka projects his own bewilderment and oppression onto the figure of Josef K. K. is, in one sense, a reflection of Kafka himself; at the same time, he is also a reflection of the countless modern individuals who found themselves lost and disoriented in the twentieth century.

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