

## Before the Law by Franz Kafka

This parable by Kafka is almost as enigmatic as *Waiting for Godot*! Maybe it's even more so. The situation seems as apparently meaningless and bizarre as the one we discussed in Beckett's play: a man from the country sits before a gate waiting for permission to "gain admittance" to the law. Since he is never granted permission, he never enters, though he waits for years—his entire life. He is about to die when the doorkeeper tells him, "This gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it." The reader is left wondering, what can this possibly mean?

This parable, and we call it that because that's what the characters call it in *The Trial*, the novel where it appears, defies all our expectations for a parable, just like *Waiting for Godot* defied all expectations for drama. A parable, like this story, avoids proper names (we have a "man" and a "doorkeeper"), has an intensely concentrated plot, and a point at the end. It purposely speaks in metaphorical language, employing earthy, familiar concrete imagery to communicate abstract, complex ideas. We expect the parable to yield its meaningful message, its moral lesson if we read it allegorically. But allegorical readings, especially of a piece like this, can wind up being "guessing games"—what's the right allegorical correspondence? What is the story or who are the characters "analogous" to? A criticism of allegorical readings is that to read allegorically is in some ways to read "behind" the story rather than "into" it. You are looking at its overall structure, or narrative pattern, rather than the details of the narrative itself.

Trying to read "Before the Law" allegorically, even if you want to, is no easy matter. Instead of down-to-earth concrete images, we have large abstractions like the "law"—and we struggle to figure out what it represents. We have a man from the country—who does he represent? What's the doorkeeper's business? So, although we have a parable, it's not easy to decipher. Is Kafka satirizing this form, or demonstrating how problematic interpretation can be? In *The Trial* the two characters, Joseph K. and the priest who tells the parable argue at length as to its meaning, which is never exactly determined by either. Slowly we may come to the conclusion that the man from the country in the parable is Joseph K. himself. To appreciate that interpretation fully, you'd have to study Kafka's novel *The Trial*.

But this parable has taken on an independent life of its own, and it's often excerpted and presented by itself, as a stand-alone work. Amazingly, in some ways it's the *Inferno* and *Waiting for Godot* all rolled into one.

### The Inferno?

- Do you see any connection between the two works?
- What is the "law" that this man from the country is trying to "gain admittance" to? Why isn't he must get permission to gain admittance? Shouldn't the law be free and accessible to everyone? That's his expectation. Why is he stuck outside?
- Why, since he's not allowed in, does he go on waiting? Is his waiting anything like the waiting you observed in *Waiting for Godot*?

- Why does the doorkeeper give him a stool and allow him to wait? Why doesn't he just chase him away? Why does the man sit on the stool his entire life?

You have this image of a doorkeeper, of a gate, of many gates and many doorkeepers, each one more powerful than the last, which sounds pretty familiar. Each of the gates that marked the major divisions of Dante's *Inferno* were guarded by powerful, fearsome monsters. What did the monsters represent in Dante's work? What do these doorkeeper's represent in Kafka's parable? They are obstacles, barriers, seemingly impenetrable. Dante and Virgil can only pass through the gates with divine assistance. This man from the country has no such aid, it seems, or is it that he just doesn't ask for any? The doorkeepers may represent obstacles to justice—or maybe they are "injustice" personified. They are the essence of "unfairness." They are guarding the law, keeping people out, after all. If you could get past these doorkeepers you'd be getting past injustice.

Both the *Inferno* and "Before the Law" are about "law"—in the *Inferno* we are getting a glimpse of divine law, which is terrible. The consequences for breaking the law are fearsome. In "Before the Law" we don't know if we're dealing with divine law or human law, but since there's no mention of anything divine, it's probably okay to assume we're dealing with human law. But in each case, isn't the law signifying the same thing? It is all *law*. What is law? Isn't it our attempt to impose rationality and order upon chaos? Law is the basis of civilization, what separates us from our "primitive" natures—it's an effort to impose our power of reason upon all of our other impulses, and to give meaning to our actions by imposing consequences on them. In the *Inferno*, to break the law means suffering eternal punishment in hell. But in "Before the Law" the man from the country cannot even be "admitted." He's stuck outside. He can't get in. What does this imply, that the Law is so inaccessible to him?

### **Waiting for Godot**

- Why does the man from the country wait and wait, for years, without taking *any* action?
- Is his waiting like Didi's and Gogo's in *Waiting for Godot*?

This man from the country, like Didi and Gogo who go on waiting and waiting indefinitely, also goes on waiting in a very futile way—except we see that he waits for his *entire* life. We see him about to expire, and we must realize that he has wasted his entire life, all of his time. We're thinking, "the waste! The futility!" much like we do when we're watching or reading *Waiting for Godot*.

You might ask, is the Law something you need to wait for permission to enter into, like you might ask, is salvation something you should spend your time waiting for? Is the man from the country acting in good faith or bad faith?

### **Observations**

Should we understand the meaning of the title as meaning this man from the country has been taken in and placed “before the law”? In that case, is the law hostile to the man? Bringing him there and leaving him there indefinitely? Maybe he’s innocent but powerless. Maybe he’s stuck “before the law” because the law excludes him, or oppresses him. He can’t get permission to enter because he’s not privileged, or advantaged, or powerful enough.

We learn that the doorkeeper can’t be bribed. What does this imply? No amount of material wealth (whether he had it or not) can change who this man from the country really is—and who he is is someone completely inadmissible, or so he thinks. He never actually tries to enter, does he? He’s waiting for permission.

If the man is brought “before the law” because he’s broken the law, then why isn’t he brought through the gate? Why is he left waiting outside? What does his waiting mean?

Is the man “before the law” in the sense that this is how it is before there is any law? We’re in a “pre-law” era, a time when law was not really available, and so there’s just this meaningless waiting for justice? “Before the Law” in the sense that before the law, justice is inaccessible? You can say it’s the law that grants meaning, but he’s “before” the law, so he’s in a meaningless place?

The law is rational, an attempt to impose rationality and order on what is essential irrational, or random. Law “civilizes” us. That this man is excluded from the law seems to imply that he’s excluded from civilization. He’s in the jungle...in a time before the law, in a place without rational law—the survival of the fittest maybe, or the law of averages? Chance?

It’s interesting how the gates keep justice locked in, sealed away. It’s almost like justice, the Law, is in some kind of ironic prison and can’t get out and give this guy justice. And so we’re in the realm of injustice. Paradoxically, it’s the man who is free to wander around in the injustice air and the law that seems locked up and imprisoned—or maybe it’s hiding, like in the Bob Dylan lyric, “Goodness hides behind its gates”.... In the *Inferno* the gates are landmarks for different levels of hell.... Are these gates landmarks signifying anything? Maybe this first gate, with the least of the doorkeepers guarding it, represents your garden variety injustice—nothing personal, just bad “luck,” a kind of random injustice that the man never transcends. Maybe the inner gates are guarding more serious forms of injustice like the injustices caused by lust, violence, corruption, fraud, greed, treachery, psychopathology—and sitting inside a nutshell somewhere deep within the bowels of this prison, the Law is waiting for someone to come and free it. But men, like this man from the country, are completely incapable. Inept. Absurd. They just wait for justice to come to them, they wait for permission to seek it, instead of just getting up and taking action and freeing it....