



# The trial

By Franz Kafka

First published 1925

Genre & subject

Allegories

Classical fiction

## Synopsis

'Someone must have laid false information against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.' From this sentence onwards Josef K. is on trial for his right to exist in a novel which, more than any other is infinitely perceptive about the nature of terror and the futility of human life.

## Author biography

Franz Kafka[a] (3 July 1883 – 3 June 1924) was a German-language writer of novels and short stories, regarded by critics as one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. Kafka strongly influenced genres such as existentialism. Most of his works, such as *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*), *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*), and *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*), are filled with the themes and archetypes of alienation, physical and psychological brutality, parent-child conflict, characters on a terrifying quest, labyrinths of bureaucracy, and mystical transformations.

Kafka was born into a middle-class, German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Jewish community often found itself in between the two sentiments, naturally raising questions about a place to which one belongs. Kafka himself was fluent in both languages, considering German his mother tongue.

Kafka trained as a lawyer and, after completing his legal education, obtained employment with an insurance company. He began to write short stories in his spare time. For the rest of his life, he complained about the little time he had to devote to what he came to regard as his calling.

## Discussion starters

- Analyse the novel's first sentence. In what ways does this sentence establish a pattern for Josef K.'s passivity and for what happens to him in the novel as a whole?
- Discuss the significance of Josef K.'s name. Discuss the other characters' names, noting the use of family names for some characters ("Titorelli," "Huld," "Fraulein Burstner") and first names for others ("Leni" or "Elsa").
- When K. questions his arrest, he is told: "There's been no mistake. [Our department] doesn't seek out guilt among the general population, but, as the Law states, is attracted by guilt and has to send us guards out. That's the Law". In other words, "guilt" seems to precede an actual criminal act. Discuss.
- Why does Josef K. decide to "play along" with his arrest, even though the men who arrest him never show him any proof of their authority and he thinks it might be a "farce"? Does he behave as if he had a guilty conscience? What do we know about his past life and his family?
- One of the unsettling aspects of K.'s arrest is its public nature. Strange men enter his bedroom, neighbours watch through the window while he is arrested; even his colleagues from the bank turn out to be present. How does it influence the way K. reacts?
- How is K. summoned to his first inquiry? What are the social conditions of the people living here? How would you characterize K.'s frame of mind when he leaves the assembly?
- Why does K. decide to return to the courtroom the following Sunday even though he hasn't been summoned? Contrary to his expectations, the assembly room is empty. Describe the strange, uncanny impression made by an empty room that was full of people in the preceding chapter.
- Discuss the section of town where Titorelli resides, his neighbours, and the building he lives in. What role do the girls play in their meeting? Does their physical deformity say anything about their moral character?
- Discuss the importance of the cathedral setting for the chapter "In the Cathedral". What elements suggest a relationship between Josef K.'s trial and the crucifixion of Christ? Why does the priest describe K.'s tourist guidebook as full of "irrelevancies" and tell him to put it aside? What does he think about K.'s relations with women?
- What makes K.'s execution so horrific? K. thinks he dies "like a dog!" Why? Discuss the importance of shame, reputation, and one's "good name" in the novel in light of this scene. Does the execution reflect badly on K. or on the Court? Whose side are you on? Does Kafka make it clear which side we should be on?

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