



# Kafka's Prose: Rebellion against Realism

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**Abstract**— *Kafka's 'Before the Law' showcases his modernist approach to literature that marks a break from literary Realism. Through analysing the text, the essay would aim at exploring Kafka's rebellion against Realism with regard to the content and form he devises, and his peculiar relationship with language.*

**Keywords**— *Realism, art and literature, glamour, idealisation.*

The Modernist Movement is characterized by the deliberate and radical shift from Realist traditions of doing art and literature. Several historical factors, such as the First World War had left behind a society which was completely shattered and lopsided. People became more cynical and pessimistic, and this sense of frustration permeated into the literature of the day. Modernist writings often represent an era in human history where life has become a pointless struggle against a man-made fate. In Franz Kafka's writings, this predicament occupies the central place. This paper intends to read "Before the Law" to explore Kafka's method of breaking away from the Realist tradition, in terms of theme and language, and speculate on its artistic and political significance.

According to Peter Childs, Realism is "literature that attempts to depict life in an entirely objective manner, without idealisation and glamour, and without moral or didactic ends" (Childs 2000, 1) meaning it is literature which is completely lacking any form of allure in the literary sense. It presented life as it was, mostly without any significant augmentations in terms of the morals behind the text; they were not meant to teach, particularly having moral instruction as an ulterior motive. Perhaps the most compelling evidence that Kafka does not fit in with the group of writers belonging to the Realist tradition is that a reading of his works induces a feeling of unreality in the mind of the reader. The protagonists in his writings, as in 'Before the Law', do not possess names and are referred to using initials (such as K.), and this is

mostly the case with other characters too. These characters are certainly not animate people who we can meet in reality; despite detailed descriptions, they are short of the eminent attributes that make up for a real human being (Arendt 2001, 102). They live in a world where everyone's lives are strictly confined to the roles they play in society and do not have an objective existence. Additionally, Kafka's protagonists seemingly lack any other purpose than the quest that they are on – be it winning a trial or gaining access to the law. This contrasts with the characters figuring in the Realist tradition where even though the characters might be on similar quests, but their approach to its fulfilment is quite realistic; they seem to have a sense of identity and a realisation of the boundaries which they can't cross on the path of their quests' fulfilment.

Kafka's revolt against Realism is also discernible from the way he worked with language. Besides the fact that he was fluent in neither Czech nor German, the very languages in which he wrote and spoke (Butler 2011), he used a simple and precise language in his prose, as opposed to the resplendent and elaborate articulation attributable to Realist works. This attitude was common amongst Kafka's contemporary Modernist writers. Modernist and avant-garde writers seem to have discrepancies with the unfair nature of life and therefore with Realism which portrayed life as it was - it appears as though, through their works, they sought to assert resistance against the prevalent norms in society. Therefore, this preference of Modernist writers to

use a distinct and precarious form of language in their works might possibly be one of the ways through which they sought to express their discontent and unsettle the binding construct of language. This is fuelled by the philosophy that language is a law which governs the social world of linguistic communications, intersubjective relations, literature of the day and knowledge of ideological conventions. As per Jacques Lacan, when a person enters a novel environment, he/she is subjected to the place's native language and once this person adjusts to the language of the region, he/she accepts the dictates of the said society. According to Lacan, this phenomenon is interlinked to the 'Oedipus complex' (Lacan 1969-70, 84-140), a Freudian concept according to which in the natural course of its growth, a child develops a sexual attraction towards one parent and a concomitant sense of rivalry against the parent of the same sex.

The theme of frustration and hopelessness, central to Modernist writings, is also reflected in Kafka's prose. Kafka, who was an employee in a worker's insurance company as well as a close friend of many eastern European Jews for whom he worked to gain residential permits, had deep knowledge of his country's political environs. He knew that a man caught in the bureaucratic machine was already damned. Various instances in "Before the Law" seem to underline this claim - the gatekeeper asks 'indifferent questions' to the man from the country, but in the end always tells him that he cannot allow the man to enter the edifice of Law yet. Years pass by and the man grows old lying in wait for the gatekeeper's permission, but the gatekeeper's mind does not change; frustrated, the man from the country "begs the fleas as well to help him and to change the gatekeeper's mind" (Kafka 1937, 4). Also, the gatekeeper doesn't seem to put any material or physical restraints on the countryman, only warning him about the fearsome gatekeepers ahead; the man seems to have options but is powerless to use them. One interpretation of this is that it could be an allusion - just like the countryman, every other common man stuck in the vicious tentacles of the legal system is doomed to suffer, waiting for some Godot<sup>1</sup>. Another important observation is the capitalization of the term 'law' throughout the excerpt possibly meaning that Kafka has tried to showcase the law as a divine figure which is unreachable for the common man.

The question remains, after all why did Kafka adopt such an avant-garde approach in his writings? An avant-garde approach here means one which was ahead of its

time and never seen before. Kafka can be classified as an avant-garde writer because his writings, which he was reluctant to publish and had also instructed his friend Max Brod to burn, were indeed quite cutting-edge in the literary sense. They played a momentous role in the creation of new ways of writing and the development of new ideologies. He passionately refused to submit to any kind of destiny and was not at all attached to the world as it was presented to us. He believed in the genesis of a human society where the actions of people depended on nothing but themselves, and which was governed by man-made laws and not skewed mysterious forces, unknown to the common people. In such a society, he did not intend to be an extraordinary case, but a fellow citizen, a "member of the community" (Arendt 2007, 108) and in order to be a fellow citizen in such a society, he had to anticipate the destruction of the prevalent society. His works are this anticipation, through which he seeks to present the creation of a society modelled on the goodwill of the human heart (Arendt 2007, 109). In the words of Franz Kafka himself "A book should be an ice-axe break to the frozen sea within us", signifying why Kafka wrote the way he did - to perhaps impact the readers deeply and in such a way that it "wounds" and "stabs" or rather "wakes the reader up with a blow to the head" (Franz Kafka, letter to Oscar Pollak, January 27, 1904).

## CONCLUSION

Considering the aforementioned arguments, it can be inferred that Franz Kafka was an avant-garde writer whose increasingly complex prose coupled with an unembellished and straightforward language, reflected a sense of frustration characteristic of the era. Kafka, through his works, anticipated the abolition of the unfair society he lived in, and the creation of a utopia where equality and justice prevailed. His prose was therefore far removed from that of the Realist tradition and marked a shift towards the Modernist form of literature. Kafka's work has heavily buttressed the growth of a form of expression distinct from Realist notions. His prominence as an eminent writer has led to the recognition of not only his works, but also his name as a metaphor for what he stood for - 'kafkaesque'.

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<sup>1</sup> In reference to Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot".

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