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# The Art of Interpretation: A Multitude of Inferences in Franz Kafka's "Before the Law"

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## ABSTRACT

*The Art of interpretation: a multitude of inferences in Franz Kafka's 'Before the Law' is a piece that talks about the interdisciplinary intertwine between Literature and Law by basing it on Franz Kafka's infamous piece 'Before the Law' and how Kafka uses the form of a parable to depict the several possible interpretations possible in both Law and literature. The paper also simultaneously discusses the boundaries between Law and literature whilst talking about how they are essentially the same, though conflicting in certain areas. Both deal with idealizing humankind and society, but there is more emotion in Literature while there is more reason in Law. The story of the man who is trying to enter the door of law, but eventually fails and reaches a stage of complacency and the rugged gatekeeper who denies the man's access to Law leaves readers with the quintessential delineation of the relationship between a common person and the Law in reality. The yearning for ascending the borders of the law is luminously present, but crucially in Kafka's parable, the man does not unshackle himself; he denies life by waiting his entire life before the law. In essence, this essay will cover the role of a parable in conveying the relationship between literature and Law and how both are an open door for interpretations.*

**Keywords:** Literature, Law, Kafka, Parable, Interpretation.

"Before the Law" is one of the prodigious parables written by Franz Kafka in his book *The Trial* that makes readers ponder over the idea that the Law is inaccessible to many. It is a critique of the untraversable legal system and depicts the powerlessness of the man to be proactive and take his own decision to cross the gate. It essentially talks about a man who is befuddled because he has been arrested for a crime he has apparently committed, albeit the man is unaware of it. This reading stands as a testimony to depict how different individuals ascertain situations in distinct fashions. Kafka purposely uses a cryptic method of conveying the message with an intent to put forth a definite point ambiguously. He leaves it to the readers

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to grasp different meanings of this piece to invite us to put ourselves in the man's shoes and relate to the present world. There are numerous questions the reader is left with regarding the plot of the parable, and that is precisely why there is no one single interpretation of the parable. The story of the man who tries to enter the door of Law but eventually fails and reaches a stage of complacency and the rugged gatekeeper who denies the man's access to Law leaves readers with the quintessential delineation of the relationship between a common person and the Law in reality. This piece by Kafka uncompromisingly condemns the Law<sup>2</sup> and makes it tremendously challenging for the readers to draw a line between emotion and reason. Through a reading of Franz Kafka's "Before the Law", this paper argues that Kafka employs the form of a parable to accentuate the diversity of interpretations embedded in both Law and fiction. This essay further explores how Kafka subsumes both Law and literature in a parable and why.

A parable is a type of short text used for illustrating universal truths in the form of a brief "fictional narrative." Contextually, parables frequently involve a character who faces a "moral dilemma", which leads them to make erroneous decisions and, as a result, they face inadvertent repercussions. In a literary sense, a parable is often linked to figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, but it should not be identified with them. Value systems, the background, and the morale of the reader play an integral role in the manner they decipher and shed light on the parable. The text uses "metaphorical ideas", allowing people to discuss complex ideas easily.<sup>3</sup> To summarize, the plot of a parable represents a clear-cut and concise point. Still, the readers encounter ambiguity because of abstract arguments to convey a definite narrative.

"Before the Law" is a parable in which literature makes the Law rich, as both have been neatly integrated. The relationship between the Law and human life unfolds through fiction in this parable. Law and literature may seem like two different poles, but they are essentially the same in this level, even though they seem to conflict with each other. This parable is corroborative evidence to show how the Law and literature are read together; they coexist and overlap in many ways. Though they both deal with different subject areas, both spheres "target humans and society as their research structures, "especially in Franz Kafka's work; this interdisciplinary aspect is evident. They both glamorize humankind and society, as their primary motive is to bring about a change in humanity. Fiction serves the function of self-expression, healing, and empathy that motivates people's minds, while Law is compelled to punish a person for negative behaviour. The commonality between these two functions is that

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<sup>2</sup> Li Ching Chang, "The Research of Comparison between Law and Literature: As illustrated by Kafka's 'The Trial'." Vol 3:1, NTULR, 70, 75 (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Angus Stewart Fletcher, 'Fable, parable, allegory' (Britannica, Jan. 2, 2019), <https://www.britannica.com/art/fable-parable-and-allegory>.

we aspire to bring to light superficial restraint of human behaviour and merely mirror the human world of experience.<sup>4</sup> However, the Law and literature also need to maintain a distance because the Law owns the authority to do its work, while literature does not hold any power. The influence of literature comes from the ability of the reader to either accept or reject the ethical imperatives presented to them. Hence, it is safe to say that Literature holds implicit power. Literature does not need to follow any norms, except its own generic conventions, and therefore, has the freedom to transgress boundaries. However, Law is something that people look up to and follow that solves the issues of people's relationships. That is precisely why there is a greater emphasis on clarity, stability, and reason in Law. Parallel to that, the parable depicts the juxtaposition between literature and Law, as we see how the man is confused between his want to break barriers and hear his truth, even as the authority of the Law holds him back. Law would not restrict literature, but there is a huge conflict between emotion and reason as literature inclines towards more emotion while Law does to reason.<sup>5</sup> The form of a parable represents how the openness of the Law is similar to literature, as both operate within certain value systems and also propagate them through an ethical system, but at the same time, open to several interpretations.

This piece by Franz Kafka portrays a present-day relationship between a common person and the Law, inaccessible to one's truth despite his unwavering persistence to wait his entire life trying to seek entrance into the door of Law. In the last and bleak stages of the man's life, the gatekeeper tells him, "Nobody else could obtain permission here. This entrance was destined only for you. And now I am going to shut it."<sup>6</sup> He encapsulates the "menace of the law"<sup>7</sup> to those for whom it is a challenging mystery to solve, and the insouciant cruelty shown by those who easily have access to it. The lack of clarity of a particular goal and the inability of the Law to be intelligible to a common person has always plagued the legal sphere.<sup>8</sup> This parable leaves more questions for the readers instead of answers. Why does the man not dare to fight the gatekeeper and enter the door instead of choosing to wait all his life? The readers ponder over this question the most as the "waiting" period of the man serves as the main plot. The entire process of waiting is taxing on a person since he is barred from living his daily life. The man is frazzled in the end because he tries everything, including bribing the gatekeeper, but he languishes as his efforts turn futile.<sup>9</sup> We are disciplined to pedestalize the Law and are

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<sup>4</sup> Chang, *supra* note 1 at 72.

<sup>5</sup> Chang, *supra* note 1 at 74.

<sup>6</sup> FRANZ KAFKA, *THE TRIAL* 157 (English translation by David Wyllie 1925).

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey L. Brackett, 'Franz Kafka's *Before the Law: A parable*', 35 *PLR*, 1107, 1107 (2015).

<sup>8</sup> *id.* at 1110.

<sup>9</sup> Raphael Foshay, 'Derrida on Kafka's *Before the Law*' 63 *RMR* 194, 194-206 (2009).

subconsciously made to believe that it is the Law that has the power to pronounce the truth. The ones subjected to "waiting" before the Law are those who internalize the Law, hoping for liberation. "The man thinks for a moment and then asks whether he will be able to enter later on." "This much is possible," says the gatekeeper. "But not now."<sup>10</sup> The "not now" revolves around a whole phase of uncertainty and gives a feeling of endlessness to the man. The gatekeeper warns him about how it gets harder and more demanding to find the truth, "And I am but the lowest of the gatekeepers. There are gatekeepers from each hall to the next, each one mightier than before."<sup>11</sup> This story conveys that there is no final truth, and it is almost impossible to hear our truth, considering how corruption is plaguing the legal system. The man, however, does not have the option of defying the gatekeeper by going in, which depicts the interrelation between Law and authority. The Law is inaccessible, and individuals are subject to the brutal side of Law if they are unaware of the subject's underpinnings. In the meantime, to fill that void, we create an imaginary home by waiting before the Law since we cannot refrain from hearing the truth. The irony in this parable is that the man hopes for freedom to listen to the truth by alienating and subjecting himself to the emptiness of the truth that the "society" has to offer him. The yearning for ascending the borders of the Law is luminously present, but crucially in Kafka's parable, the man does not unshackle himself; he denies life by waiting his entire life before the Law.

Kafka employs a parable to dwell on the multiplicities rooted in fiction to depict the ambiguity present in both Law and fiction. Kafka uses the modernist literary approach that focuses on the character of the plot to convey a strong message to the readers. The whole plot is based on the interaction between the man and the gatekeeper. Kafka writes the piece in such a way that the meaning is not readily available to the readers just to unfold how the Law is similarly quite impenetrable to a layperson and sometimes, even a lawyer. However, the paradoxical nature of this parable is enthralling because if we had not tried to understand the parable firstly, we would have never been able to fathom the underlying meaning behind the parable. Kafka also makes the "man a representative of the readers"<sup>12</sup> in the sense that we too want to gain an understanding of the parable corresponding to the experience of the man in the parable, seeking access to something that is concealed and inexistent. The Law is camouflaged in a never-ending mystery which represents the connotation of parables themselves,<sup>13</sup> as the

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<sup>10</sup> Kafka, *supra* note 5, at 157.

<sup>11</sup> *id.* at 157.

<sup>12</sup> Kayla Leung, "Franz Kafka's *Before the Law*", ITS POSSIBLE LAB (May 16, 2016) [itspossiblelab.com/2016/05/16/kafkas-before-the-law/](https://itspossiblelab.com/2016/05/16/kafkas-before-the-law/).

<sup>13</sup> *id.*

process of deriving meaning from parables cannot be arrived at in a single instance; just like how Law strives for precision, which is mostly why it ends up in a convoluted state. We, as readers, are also in the same position as we try so hard to unveil the meaning behind this parable, which ends up leaving us in a confused state than we were in. The most interesting part of the parable is when Kafka emphasizes the position of the gatekeeper as he only stands on the side and does not pose a direct physical barrier to the man. Similarly, while interpreting the parable, although we may not have direct hurdles, we may face obstacles at the personal level, including psychological barriers like skepticism, as we are doubtful if we are taking the right approach to interpret it. In the last scene especially, Kafka dissuades our determination and motivation to find a proper meaning behind the parable, as we are represented parallel to the fate of the man in the parable who not only ends up dying, but he dies without hearing the truth. Kafka indirectly conveys to the readers that we have to stop trying to find a meaning behind the parable; else, in a metaphorical sense, we may end up in the same place as the man in the parable.

In conclusion, "Before the Law" is "simple and mysterious".<sup>14</sup> It is written in such a way that it poses to have a basal meaning and a moral message, but the reader misses the fact that there is probably no real meaning in the parable, just like how the Law is covered in a veil of mystery. Why was the man there? What if the man had crossed the door and entered? Would the gatekeepers have stopped him? Kafka tells us nothing. He purposely does not provide theoretical evidence to point out that a parable has no 'correct' meaning to it. The parable creates a world of dubiety for the readers since we do not know what the man should have or should not have done without delving deep into its essence. As a reader, nothing seems concrete because the man is reduced to a personification of failed persistence, the gatekeeper is represented as the function of an obstacle or barrier, and the role of Law seems obscure. However, this piece is one of Kafka's most erudite and admirable works of art. The lack of adequate characterization is not considered a blemish since Kafka purposely wanted readers to engage in a creative interpretation. The beauty in this work is that Kafka never makes the readers sympathize with the fate of the character; instead, we are appalled by the callousness and sadism this world has to offer by depriving one's right to hear their truth. Kafka has approached this subject from different vantage points, making the parable so powerful.

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert Deinert, 'Kafka's parable *Before the Law*' CORNELL EDU (May 1964), <https://courses.cit.cornell.edu/hd11/BeforeTheLaw.html>.