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THE CHARACTER OF JOSEF K.

Reading Kafka can be confusing, and *The Trial* is perhaps, among his works, the one which produces this effect most strongly. It has invited speculations on many interpretative levels; prominent among them are autobiographical, religious, psychoanalytical and other largely impalpable readings. That there is room for all these speculations is in part what makes it fun to engage with Kafka's work, and the texts are ambivalent enough to guarantee that they will never come to a conclusive end.

On the other hand, there are many aspects of his work, and the novels in particular, which merit close, down-to-earth interpretation work. One of them is the way in which the protagonists are portrayed. Far from being understandable only from the larger speculative framework that many seem to take as prerequisite, we can ask questions about their personalities, the particular way in which these personalities are presented, and the way they develop (or fail to develop) over the course of the narrative.

In what follows I shall pursue a close reading of the first chapter of *The Trial*, which I take as a personality study of the protagonist, Josef K.; he is, as I shall argue, displayed as a weak and faulty character through and through. However, the resulting picture is a sharp and coherent portrait, and made neither deliberately inconsistent nor obscure by Kafka.

Lack of decisiveness and strength of will

Especially at the beginning of the chapter the text directly demonstrates a mismatch between what K. wants us (and the other characters) to think of him and the state he is really in. He tries to look firm and determined, but actually he is insecure and hesitant. At the first encounter with the guards, he enters the next room "slower than he wanted to" (8),^{1,2} later on he lets himself into an extensive eye contact with one of the guards, "without intending it" (13–14).³

¹"Im Nebenzimmer, in das K. langsamer eintrat als er wollte [...]"

²All references to *The Trial* are made by page number from the critical edition of Kafka's works: Franz Kafka, *Der Proceß*, ed. Malcolm Pasley, *Schriften. Tagebücher. Kritische Ausgabe*, eds. Jürgen Born et. al., Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2002.

³"K. ließ sich ohne es zu wollen in ein Zwiegespräch der Blicke mit Franz ein"

K.'s weakness of will is more pronounced when he gets emotional. Clearly this is supposed to provide some energetic drive to his actions, but repeatedly fails to do so — not because reason and self-control get the upper hand again in K., but because it simply runs out of steam against the calm composure of the other characters: when K. yells at the guards (18),⁴ and again when he demands to be allowed to phone his friend, the prosecutor Hasterer (23–24).⁵

In addition, when K. deliberates, he typically reaches the conclusion to do nothing and just let things run their course. The long series of instances of this pattern is opened in the first chapter, when K. presumes that by just walking out of the room he might get rid of the whole affair — but then decides to do nothing, preferring the “safety of the solution resulting from the natural course of things”, as he puts it to himself. (Never mind that there isn't the slightest indication what the natural course of things would be, and what a solution would look like.) As in countless later situations, we've got a lack of decisiveness here, supported by questionable rationalization (16).⁶

At this point, let me introduce one of the primary questions guiding my interpretation. I have noted that there is a gap between how K. tries to present himself and what his way of acting tells us about his real condition. He talks firmly to the guards, but when it comes to even minor action (just entering the next room), we learn that this firmness is just a facade. But what does K. himself believe? Is he aware of his insecurity? If that's the case, then his apparent firmness is a deliberate deception, the facade is put up to mislead the other characters, but questionable as this move may be, we can at least ascribe some self-awareness to K. On the other hand, K. may be deceiving himself, he may actually think of himself as firmly in control, not recognizing the episodes of insecurity at all, or discounting them unconsciously. His arrogant behavior wouldn't be a deliberate deception, but rather a symptom of his lack of self-awareness.

⁴“die Wächter, die immer wenn K. schrie, ganz ruhig, ja fast traurig wurden und ihn dadurch verwirrten oder gewissermaßen zur Besinnung brachten”

⁵“Er geriet in eine gewisse Aufregung, gieng auf und ab [...], schob seine Manschetten zurück, befühlte die Brust, strich sein Haar zurecht, kam an den drei Herren vorüber, sagte »es ist ja sinnlos«, worauf sich diese zu ihm umdrehten und ihn entgegenkommend aber ernst ansahen [...]. »Der Staatsanwalt Hasterer ist mein guter Freund«, sagte er, »kann ich ihm telephonieren?« »Gewiß«, sagte der Aufseher, »aber ich weiß nicht, welchen Sinn das haben sollte [...].« »Welchen Sinn?« rief K. mehr bestürzt, als geärgert. »[...] Gut, ich werde nicht telephonieren.« »Aber doch«, sagte der Aufseher und streckte die Hand zum Vorzimmer aus, wo das Telephon war, »bitte telephonieren Sie doch.« »Nein, ich will nicht mehr«, sagte K.”

⁶“Deshalb zog er die Sicherheit der Lösung vor, wie sie der natürliche Verlauf bringen mußte, und ging in sein Zimmer zurück, ohne daß von seiner Seite oder von Seite der Wächter ein weiteres Wort gefallen wäre.”

At any rate, the narrator is on our side: in all the episodes where K. is acting in a way contrary to his own decisions or feelings, we promptly are not only told about the events that go on objectively (in the world of the novel), but *also* about K.'s subjective states. Otherwise, we wouldn't be in a position to even know of the mismatch; insight into K.'s mind is a necessary ingredient for that. Thus the working hypothesis: The function of the narrator's giving us insights into K.'s feelings and intentions is precisely to expose that mismatch. In these first passages, there isn't yet so much unusual about it, but we will see many more instances of the same pattern during the novel, exposing more and more of the tensions and tears in K.'s personality.

Dealing with surprise

The supervisor of the guards opens the dialogue with Josef K. by asking him whether he was "very surprised" by the events of the morning. This is followed by a particularly incoherent statement from K.: he says that he certainly is surprised, but hardly *very* surprised, just to correct himself a moment later, claiming that he is indeed *very* surprised, but he is used to taking surprises lightly, especially this one; he justifies that attitude by referring to his being thirty years on the world and having had to fight his way all the time, being all on his own (20–21).⁷

Leaving aside the somewhat pathetic tone (what does it have to do with his age, which isn't that high anyway? — also, as we learn later in the novel, K. isn't by far the lone wolf type as which he presents himself), this is not cogent: while it is true that, with experience, one can become competent in mastering difficult, even challenging situations (what K. refers to as "sich durchschlagen"), this has nothing in particular to do with how one deals with *unexpected* situations. Unexpected situations may be difficult to handle, not least because they characteristically leave not much time for consideration and planning. That's why they require quick, reliable responses, which is a talent that not everybody has, and a talent that at any rate must be developed. But neither is every unexpected situation hard to cope with, nor is any challenging situation unexpected. The fact that one has successfully

⁷ »Sie sind durch die Vorgänge des heutigen Morgens wohl sehr überrascht?« fragte der Aufseher [...] »Gewiß«, sagte K. [...], »gewiß ich bin überrascht, aber ich bin keineswegs sehr überrascht.« »Nicht sehr überrascht?« fragte der Aufseher [...]. »Sie mißverstehen mich vielleicht«, beeilte sich K. zu bemerken. »Ich meine [...] ich bin allerdings sehr überrascht, aber man ist, wenn man dreißig Jahre auf der Welt ist und sich allein hat durchschlagen müssen, wie es mir beschieden war, gegen Überraschungen abgehärtet und nimmt sie nicht zu schwer.« »

dealt with complicated constellations in one's life doesn't show directly that one has the talent to deal with surprises.

Moreover, the latter talent is based on several character traits that Josef K. obviously hasn't. One is decisiveness, which we have seen he lacks. Another is the ability to learn from experience, which isn't K.'s habit, as we are told in passing (12).⁸ Even more useful would be a habit of preparing oneself for future events: thinking about the ways things may develop, about likely turns of events, and indeed surprises that the future may bring. By contemplating what might happen next, and how one could react, what the options would be and which of them one would prefer, one is to a certain extent safeguarded against being taken by surprise. Being prepared enables caution as well as some provisional action. But then, as it is bluntly stated, that's what Josef K. never does: He's always tended to take things lightly, to believe the worst only when the worst happened, to take no precautions whatever was imminent (11).⁹ Given all this, K.'s claim to be proficient in handling surprises is not credible.

We can note two things he decidedly doesn't do in this entire scene: he does not keep his cool, and he never actually asks about the accusation. On the contrary, he is clearly agitated, and uninterested in the basis of the accusation; he's just outraged at the way the business is handled. But later on, in the first hearing, what he claims repeatedly is the opposite: he claims to have remained calm and asked what the accusation was. At this point, he must be either lying, or else he must have a self-image that is widely off the mark (66).¹⁰

This gets us back to the reflection in the previous section. Again we find a gap between how K. presents himself (at least to others, but possibly also to himself) and what we learn from the insights the narrator gives us. The interesting new constellation is that the evidence here is distributed over several passages. K.'s action in the "surprise"-exchange doesn't match what we learn about his character's dispositions earlier in the chapter; K.'s description of the exchange later in the novel (at the hearing) doesn't match the insight we are given by the narrator during the exchange. Again, the point of letting us know about K.'s internal life seems to be to expose the difference between how he wants us to perceive him and how we should realistically view

⁸ "[...] ohne daß es sonst seine Gewohnheit gewesen wäre, aus Erfahrungen zu lernen"

⁹ "Er neigte stets dazu, alles möglichst leicht zu nehmen, das Schlimmste erst beim Eintritt des Schlimmsten zu glauben, keine Vorsorge für die Zukunft zu treffen, selbst wenn alles drohte."

¹⁰ " »[...] Es war nicht leicht ruhig zu bleiben. Es gelang mir aber und ich fragte den Aufseher vollständig ruhig — wenn er hier wäre, müßte er es bestätigen — warum ich verhaftet sei.« "

him. Another thing that is new is that character traits come into play, i.e. stable, long-term *dispositions* to acting and feeling, whereas in the previous section, we had simply to do with *episodes* of acting and feeling.

Awareness of others

The way it is written, it can easily seem that there are no real *persons* in *The Trial*, apart from Josef K. himself. All the other characters, beginning from the two guards Franz and Willem (in the opening chapter) and ending with the two executioners (in the final chapter), are just moving into and passing out of view with the circumstances of K.'s life; we only get a glimpse at them when he does; and we never see them differently than from his dim point of view.

Repeatedly, Kafka shows us expressly how limited K.'s awareness of others is. For instance, in a brief episode in the second chapter, K. encounters a young man who introduces himself, at K.'s inquiry, as the son of the caretaker ("Sohn des Hausmeisters"). K. has to move his face close to him because of the bad lighting conditions. When walking on, he turns around once more, impulsively as it seems, presumably to get another look (31).¹¹ This action mirrors an impulse K. has in the first chapter, when driving away in the car from the scene of his arrest. Telling himself that he didn't notice the officers leaving, he resolves to be more attentive next time — but then, inconsequentially, turns around to check if he can see them yet (an attempt that he abandons as quickly as he made it, and resultless with that, 28–29).¹² Until he is prompted by the supervisor of the guards, he doesn't notice that some of the people on the scene of his arrest are his co-workers (27).¹³ In a

¹¹ « »Wer sind Sie« , fragte K. sofort und brachte sein Gesicht nahe an den Burschen, man sah nicht viel im Halbdunkel des Flurs.[. . . Er] gieng weiter, aber ehe er die Treppe hinaufstieg, drehte er sich noch einmal um.» (With this, the paragraph ends, and the text continues with K. arriving at his flat.)

¹² «Da erinnerte sich K. daß er das Weggehen des Aufsehers und der Wächter gar nicht bemerkt hatte, der Aufseher hatte ihm die drei Beamten verdeckt und nun wieder die Beamten den Aufseher. Viel Geistesgegenwart bewies das nicht und K. nahm sich vor, sich in dieser Hinsicht genauer zu beobachten. Doch drehte er sich noch unwillkürlich um und beugte sich über das Hinterdeck des Automobils vor, um möglicherweise den Aufseher und die Wächter noch zu sehn. Aber gleich wendete er sich wieder zurück ohne auch nur den Versuch gemacht zu haben jemanden zu suchen, und lehnte sich bequem in die Wagenecke.»

¹³ « »Wie?« rief K. und staunte die drei an. Diese so uncharakteristischen blutarmen jungen Leute, die er immer noch nur als Gruppe bei den Photographien in der Erinnerung hatte, waren tatsächlich Beamte aus seiner Bank, nicht Kollegen, das war zu viel gesagt [. . .], aber untergeordnete Beamte aus der Bank waren es allerdings. Wie hatte K. das

similar way, K. feels the need to look closer at his executioners only when the three of them are already on their way, although he has met them (and even formed a strong opinion about them) earlier at his home (306–307).¹⁴

These episodes show an extensive lack of perceptiveness, and an extraordinary lack of interest in, and awareness of, other people. At the same time K. doesn't hesitate to judge them by what little impression he can have of them — and his judgments are typically condescending, rarely sympathetic (and if so, then in a patronizing manner).

Two instances of good advice

Twice during the first chapter, Josef K. receives good advice regarding his own behavior. The guard Willem suggests that he focuses his mind on the upcoming complications in his life, and resists distraction from useless thoughts (15).¹⁵ K. promptly does precisely the opposite: he returns to his room and occupies himself with pointless musings about the far-fetched possibility of himself committing suicide and the question whether the guards had considered this scenario and why they might not have taken precautions. Apart from his ersatz breakfast consisting of a fine apple and a couple of drinks, that seems to be the only thing looking relevant to him. Later on, the supervisor of the guards recommends that K. talked less and more carefully: what he had uttered during the conversation was mostly redundant and also not always to his advantage (22).¹⁶ Again, K. doesn't pay any heed to the advice (and for the rest of the novel, he just continues not giving too much thought to what he is saying).

This lack of prudence and the inability to receive feedback and incorporate it into his own actions is typical. Of course, nobody necessarily has to follow each bit of advice, and surely one doesn't normally take advice from anybody. But a moment's reflection should have shown K., in both cases, that the recommendations made sense. They might have been trivial, and

übersehen können? Wie hatte er doch hingenommen sein müssen, von dem Aufseher und den Wächtern, um diese drei nicht zu erkennen."

¹⁴ " »Alte untergeordnete Schauspieler schickt man um mich« , sagte sich K. und sah sich um, um sich nochmals davon zu überzeugen. [...] Unter den Laternen versuchte K. öfters [...] seine Begleiter deutlicher zu sehn, als es in der Dämmerung seines Zimmers möglich gewesen war."

¹⁵ " »Wir raten Ihnen, zerstreuen Sie sich nicht durch nutzlose Gedanken, sondern sammeln Sie sich, es werden große Anforderungen an Sie gestellt werden.« "

¹⁶ " »[...]Auch sollten Sie überhaupt im Reden zurückhaltender sein, fast alles was Sie vorhin gesagt haben, hätte man auch wenn Sie nur ein paar Worte gesagt hätten, Ihrem Verhalten entnehmen können, außerdem war es nichts für Sie übermäßig Günstiges.« "

even possibly not really been well-meant, but that wouldn't necessarily make them wrong.

Arrogance and contempt

K.'s initial reaction to all the other characters in the first chapter is to view them as inferior, and he tends to interpret any complications in his own situation as brought about by incompetence, stupidity or outright wrongdoing on their part. When he confronts the two guards with questions about legitimation papers and doesn't get anywhere with this strategy, he explains this to himself with their incompetence and concludes that his problem is just that he had no opportunity so far to talk to someone more equal to himself (15).¹⁷ When he later speaks with their supervisor, he sees this opportunity as finally come (20)¹⁸ — but of course the supervisor is likewise not impressed by K.'s incoherent (see above regarding K.'s ramblings about surprise) and arrogant (viz. his thinking out loud about regarding the whole process as a joke) speech, and so K. again changes his perception abruptly and concludes that the person opposite him is just not an equal to himself (23).¹⁹ Generally, whenever people act contrary to K.'s expectations (however unrealistic those may be), his opinion of them falls to very low levels immediately. In the second chapter, this is particularly pronounced when his landlady overlooks his desire for a symbolic handshake (a symbolism that exists in K.'s mind alone anyway, 34–35).²⁰

¹⁷ “[M]uß ich, dachte [K.], durch das Geschwätz dieser niedrigsten Organe — sie geben selbst zu, es zu sein — mich noch mehr verwirren lassen? Sie reden doch jedenfalls von Dingen, die sie gar nicht verstehn. Ihre Sicherheit ist nur durch ihre Dummheit möglich. Ein paar Worte, die ich mit einem mir ebenbürtigen Menschen sprechen werde, werden alles unvergleichlich klarer machen, als die längsten Reden mit diesen.”

¹⁸ “das Wohlgefühl endlich einem vernünftigen Menschen gegenüberzustehn und über seine Angelegenheit mit ihm sprechen zu können ergriff ihn”

¹⁹ “K. starrte den Aufseher an. Schulmäßige Lehren bekam er hier von einem vielleicht jüngern Menschen?”

²⁰ “»[...] Ihr Urteil, das Urteil einer vernünftigen Frau wollte ich hören und bin sehr froh, daß wir darin übereinstimmen. Nun müssen Sie mir aber die Hand reichen, eine solche Übereinstimmung muß durch Handschlag bekräftigt werden.«

Ob sie mir die Hand reichen wird? Der Aufseher hat mir die Hand nicht gereicht, dachte er und sah die Frau anders als früher, prüfend an. [...] S]ie war ein wenig befangen, weil ihr nicht alles was K. gesagt hatte verständlich gewesen war. Infolge dieser Befangenheit sagte sie aber etwas, was sie gar nicht wollte und was auch gar nicht am Platze war: »Nehmen Sie es doch nicht so schwer, Herr K.«, sagte sie, hatte Tränen in der Stimme und vergaß natürlich auch an den Handschlag. »Ich wüßte nicht, daß ich es schwer nehme«, sagte K. plötzlich ermüdet und das Wertlose aller Zustimmungen dieser Frau einsehend.”

It is easy to see what the function of this behavior is — to rationalize his failure to engage or cope with the situation, and more specifically, the failure to interact sensibly with the involved people. Neither are K.'s strategies successful, nor is his style suited to improve his standing in all the situations that are described in the novel. But K. attributes the resulting undesirable developments invariably to other people's shortcomings — which guarantees, among other things, that in subsequent interchanges he modifies his approach not in the least, and the outcomes are, predictably, very similar to those he reached earlier. (It also reinforces the contemptuous tone of both his internal monologue and his dialogue with others.)

Kaminer's smile

One of K.'s co-workers summoned by the supervisor to the scene of the arrest, we learn, has a physically distorted facial expression that makes him look as if he was constantly grinning or smiling (27).²¹ At the end of the first chapter, K. abstains from making fun of this feature of his co-worker, because “unfortunately humanity forbids it” (29).²² It is unfortunate that some English translations omit the “unfortunately” here; but the German text says “leider”, and it is important to notice that K. abstains *regretfully* from making a joke. He would have liked to do so.

This makes it doubtful whether it really is humane consideration which motivates him. A considerate person wouldn't probably even have had that impulse, but if explicitly deliberating, such a person would have weighed the (small) pleasure to be gained from initiating a conversation (which seems K.'s motive here, for he is in need of “Zuspruch”, i.e. “a few encouraging words”) against the probable hurting of someone else's feelings; from that comparison at the latest there shouldn't be any more doubt about the appropriate behavior, and thus no more reason for residual regret. Such regret shows that for K., as clearly in contrast to a humanely motivated person, his own needs seem to have enough weight to let him secretly wish for having that option available after all. And this, in turn, shows that what stops him is probably not really humanity, but something else (perhaps social convention, or a desire not to look callous).

This is a general pattern: sometimes K. acts in a way that might look at first glance as if it showed some concern for others — but then it becomes

²¹ “Kaminer mit dem unausstehlichen durch eine chronische Muskelzerrung bewirkten Lächeln.”

²² “Nur Kaminer stand mit seinem Grinsen zur Verfügung, über das einen Spaß zu machen leider die Menschlichkeit verbot.”

clear that the motivation was selfish after all. For instance, in the third chapter K., who is walking up the stairs in the house where his hearing takes place, is slowed down for a moment by two children (who have grabbed his trouser legs to prevent him from spoiling an ongoing game). K. has to wait — what keeps him from shaking off the two kids is that he would have to hurt them (55).²³ Now, a normal person would surely have the kindness and patience necessary to wait a few seconds if the alternative course is hurting a child — that's because hurting children is wrong, the thing one doesn't do (except for situations where there is an overriding concern: if there is a fire alarm for instance, one might well have to use force in order to ensure the safety of persons). But that's not K.'s reasoning. His motivation is that he is afraid of the noise they would make — which, by implication, means that he probably wouldn't hesitate to shake them off (indifferent to the pain he might inflict on them) if he just could ensure nobody would notice.

Reflection on narrative technique

I have argued that the first chapter of *The Trial* exposes a number of unfavorable character traits in Josef K.; but one more aspect needs discussion: the apparent inconsistencies in the text. I shall look at the narrative techniques that bring about these inconsistencies, and at the function they fulfill.

Although the novel is written in third-person mode, it is closely focused on K. as the center of attention. We are told only about developments and events in which K. himself is present, and the narrative content is restricted to what he perceives. Furthermore, it is not only the objective facts of the plot that are restricted — the same applies to information about thoughts, feelings, memories and so on. We are given insight (to a certain degree) into K.'s thought processes, but into no other person's in the novel. In particular, we must do without other person's impressions and estimations of K.'s personality. (Unless they are of course verbalized or otherwise expressed by them, e.g. in body language described in the novel — but in this case we must again be aware that what we learn may be distorted by K.'s perception, which heavily influences the narrative content.)

Now, it is of course not to be expected that K. himself has the same critical attitude towards his own character as we have. In fact, quite in accord with his other character qualities, he displays a considerable arrogance and a strong

²³ “Knapp vor dem ersten Stock mußte er sogar ein Weilchen warten, bis eine Spielkugel ihren Weg vollendet hatte, zwei kleine Jungen mit den verzwickten Gesichtern erwachsener Strolche hielten ihn indessen an den Beinkleidern; hätte er sie abschütteln wollen, hätte er ihnen wehtun müssen und er fürchtete ihr Geschrei.”

tendency towards self-righteousness. Thus we have registered a tension, in the first chapter, between what we learn from observing what goes on and what K.'s own assessment of the situation suggests about it: Although K.'s actions betray character defects, this comes out in a distorted manner, because at the same time K.'s subjective view is actively devising excuses, rationalizations and so on. We are therefore challenged to see through K.'s attempts to deceive himself (and us) when judging the character that is presented to us.

Note that given these observations, there is nothing either particularly inconsistent nor especially obscure about the way the novel introduces the main character. True, we don't have the luxury of an objective narrative that just shows how K. is reacting, without a subjective overlay that comes from his own perceptions and attitudes. So we have to deal with both points of view simultaneously. But then, so are we most of the time in daily life. It makes many of our judgments less clear-cut and more provisional, but in the light of what is possible, they are still good judgments on which it makes sense to proceed. We are thus not in a position with respect to interpreting the novel that is in principle worse than what we are faced with in real life.

The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that insight into K.'s mind is used selectively by the narrator, and the purpose of the selection is not (as is more typical for narrators in literature) to give us a broad or comprehensive character portrait. It's as if the narrator shares K.'s disinterest in other people — he's only interested sporadically, and only when it fits his own agenda. That agenda, as I have argued, is to expose certain aspects of K.'s character. More precisely, the narrator provides insight into K.'s thoughts, feelings and intentions whenever it helps us seeing that they contradict his actions and self-descriptions. But it's not the contradictions themselves in which he is interested. Behind them, there is always an aspect of K.'s personality.

Personality is not just a matter of regularities in behavior, though. It has also long-term aspects — character traits may change, normally resulting from reflection and a conscious effort on the part of the character's bearer. In theory, every episode shown to us by the narrator would be a chance for K. to do so as well, precisely because K. has available to himself exactly the same information that we receive from the narrator, including those inconsistencies.

When we are confronted with a feedback that shows us an inconsistency between what we think and how we act, different options are open to us: we may correct our actions (and possibly our dispositions to act) or we might change our views of ourselves. Or we might, as K. usually does, invent some excuses or rationalizations that let our actions look plausible after all. The narrator of *The Trial* lets us see this aspect of K.'s personality. It's another,

additional character trait, a perverted (as we might say) form of reflection. It's dysfunctional as reflection because reflection normally should help to improve one's character, not to excuse it and re-assure oneself that one is doing just fine.

To summarize, then: the narrator provides us insight into K.'s mind to carve out character traits. Some of these can be simply seen from a mismatch between K.'s thoughts and actions, but there is also his inability to honestly reflect on himself, which needs more elaborate presentation of his thought processes. In all cases, however, we're not given a full picture of K.'s inner life. All we get are the elements necessary for a critical exposition of his bad qualities.

Can we infer from this that K. doesn't have any good qualities, that he is a uniformly bad person? Given the overwhelming evidence of weakness, arrogance and lack of concern for others in what we learn about K., this seems to be a natural conclusion. Still, can we rely on the narrator here? Can we be sure that this portrait is not a deliberately one-sided one? The evidence we are given might have been carefully selected to generate just that impression.

The function of an interpretation is of course not to pass moral judgment on a character. Rather, we should note that such a judgment is strongly suggested by the way the text is narrated, and we can identify the techniques which make that suggestion so strong. We can notice that K. is *presented* as a weak and faulty character, and we can find out exactly how this is achieved by the author's use of narrative techniques. It's not our business to condemn the character of K. (and indeed, what would be the point of such condemning?) We're concerned with how the text works, and why it achieves the effects it does achieve. When doing this, we have to draw in resources like our knowledge about how character shows itself in people, and what indicates good or bad qualities in a personality. We also have to develop an ability to see through the deceptive (and self-deceptive) maneuvers of K., and the deliberative, but purposive holding back of information by the narrator (he only shows us part of K.'s mental life, and that's in accord with his agenda). Having mastered this, we're rewarded with a surprisingly consistent and elegant, albeit disturbingly stern and purely condemning reading. That it is possible to find this behind a text that looks so strange and confusing at first sight is a sure indicator for the great quality of Kafka's work. (More so, I think, than the opportunity it perennially gives for metaphysical speculation.)