



## GUILT, ALIENATION, AND BUREAUCRATIC POWER IN FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE TRIAL*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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### Abstract

*Franz Kafka's The Trial is one of the most significant modernist novels of the twentieth century because it dramatizes the crisis of the modern individual before invisible, irrational, and bureaucratic structures of authority. The novel presents Josef K., a respectable bank officer, who is suddenly arrested without being informed of the crime for which he is accused. This unexplained accusation becomes the basis of Kafka's complex exploration of guilt, alienation, legal absurdity and institutional dehumanization. The present study critically examines how Kafka transforms guilt from a legal category into an existential and psychological condition. It further analyses how alienation operates at social, legal, emotional, spatial and self-reflexive levels in the novel. The study employs qualitative textual analysis, supported by existentialist, modernist, psychoanalytic and socio-legal critical perspectives. The article argues that The Trial is not merely a narrative of legal injustice but a profound critique of modern bureaucratic power, where law exists without transparency, authority operates without accountability, and the individual is reduced to helplessness before an incomprehensible system. The study concludes that Kafka's representation of guilt and alienation remains highly relevant to contemporary institutional life, where individuals continue to experience uncertainty, procedural domination and moral dislocation before impersonal systems.*

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, bureaucracy, existentialism, modernism, Kafkaesque, law, absurdity, Josef K.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka occupies a central position in modern European literature because his fiction powerfully represents the anxiety, alienation and uncertainty of modern existence. His works do not merely narrate strange events; rather, they expose the psychological and institutional structures that shape modern human life. Kafka's literary world is marked by invisible authority, unclear guilt, failed communication, oppressive institutions, and the individual's inability to secure meaning or justice. These features have made Kafka one of the most important writers for understanding the modern condition.

*The Trial*, published posthumously in 1925, is among Kafka's most influential works. The novel begins with the arrest of Josef K., a senior bank officer, who is accused by an unknown authority without being told the nature of his crime. This opening immediately places the reader in a world where the normal logic of justice is suspended. In ordinary legal systems, a person is first charged with a specific offence, evidence is presented, and judgment follows. In Kafka's fictional world, however, accusation precedes explanation, and guilt exists before proof. Josef K. is not imprisoned in the conventional sense, but his entire life becomes dominated by the court. He continues to work, meet people, and move through the city, yet he is psychologically and socially trapped.

The novel's central power lies in its refusal to define Josef K.'s crime. This absence is not a weakness in the plot; it is the philosophical foundation of the novel. Kafka is not primarily interested in whether Josef K. has committed a particular legal offence. Rather, he explores a deeper condition in which the individual feels accused, judged, and alienated without

understanding the source of judgment. In this way, guilt becomes existential rather than merely legal.

Kafka's *The Trial* may be read through several critical perspectives. It is a modernist novel because it rejects narrative certainty and presents a fragmented world. It is existential because it focuses on the individual's search for meaning in an absurd and hostile universe. It is psychoanalytic because guilt operates internally even when the crime remains unknown. It is socio-legal because the court represents an institutional system that is powerful, opaque, and dehumanizing. The present study brings these perspectives together to examine the relationship between guilt, alienation, and bureaucratic power in the novel.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although Franz Kafka's *The Trial* has been widely discussed as a modernist, existential, and symbolic novel, many readings treat its major themes guilt, alienation and bureaucracy as separate concerns. Such an approach limits the deeper understanding of Kafka's artistic vision. The problem is that Josef K.'s guilt cannot be fully understood without examining the institutional structure that produces it, and his alienation cannot be understood without analyzing the bureaucratic court that controls his existence.

In *The Trial*, guilt is not presented as the result of a clearly defined crime. It is produced through accusation, uncertainty, delay, and institutional power. Similarly, alienation is not merely personal loneliness; it is created by the individual's confrontation with an inaccessible system of law and authority. The court does not simply judge Josef K.; it transforms his identity, relationships, and self-perception. Therefore, the central research problem of this study is to investigate how Kafka connects existential guilt, social alienation, and bureaucratic authority in *The Trial* to present the crisis of modern human subjectivity.

This study addresses the gap by analyzing guilt, alienation and bureaucracy as interrelated structures rather than isolated themes. It argues that Kafka's novel remains significant because it reveals how modern institutions can produce guilt without explanation, alienation without physical imprisonment, and punishment without moral clarity.

## 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine how guilt is represented in *The Trial* as an existential and psychological condition rather than a clearly defined legal offence.
2. To analyze the forms of alienation experienced by Josef K. in relation to law, society, personal relationships, space, and selfhood.
3. To evaluate how bureaucracy functions as a dehumanizing structure of power in the novel.

## 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Kafka transform guilt from a legal issue into an existential condition in *The Trial*?
2. In what ways does Josef K.'s alienation reflect the crises of modern individuality?
3. How does the court operate as a symbol of bureaucratic and institutional power?

## 5. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative literary research method based on close textual analysis. The primary text is Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. The analysis is interpretive and focuses on the novel's major themes, symbols, narrative structure, and characterization. The study draws upon existentialist, modernist, psychoanalytic, and socio-legal critical perspectives to examine the relationship between guilt, alienation, and bureaucratic power.

The research does not treat *The Trial* as a realistic legal novel. Instead, it reads the court as a symbolic and institutional structure through which Kafka dramatizes the modern individual's confrontation with authority. Secondary sources by major Kafka critics and theorists, including Max Brod, Walter Benjamin, Albert Camus, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Deleuze and

Guattari, Ritchie Robertson, Walter H. Sokel, Richard Posner, and Reza Banakar, are used to support the discussion.

## 6. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Kafka criticism was strongly shaped by theological and metaphysical interpretations. Max Brod, Kafka's close friend and literary executor, viewed Kafka's works as spiritual narratives concerned with divine judgment, grace, and the human struggle to reach transcendence. In this reading, the court in *The Trial* may be seen as a symbolic representation of a higher authority before which human beings remain guilty, limited, and uncertain. Josef K.'s inability to understand his case reflects the human inability to comprehend ultimate truth. This theological approach is especially relevant to the parable "Before the Law," where the man from the country waits throughout his life before the gate of the Law but never gains entry. The Law appears sacred and powerful, yet it remains inaccessible. For Brod, such images suggest a spiritual dimension in Kafka's fiction. However, while this reading highlights the metaphysical depth of the novel, it may underemphasize the social, political, and bureaucratic dimensions of the court.

Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka offers a more complex understanding of Kafka's fictional world. Benjamin argues that Kafka's texts are filled with parables, gestures, delays, and incomplete meanings. Kafka's characters live in a world where meaning is constantly suggested but never fully disclosed. This is highly relevant to *The Trial*, where Josef K. repeatedly seeks explanation but receives only further confusion. Benjamin's reading helps explain why the novel resists final interpretation. The reader, like Josef K., is placed before a system that seems meaningful but remains unreadable. The court has documents, officials, procedures, and hierarchies, but none of these provides access to truth. Thus, Kafka's narrative becomes a literary structure of deferred meaning. The act of interpretation itself becomes part of the problem.

Albert Camus places Kafka within the tradition of absurd literature. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus discusses Kafka as a writer who represents the human search for meaning in a world that refuses clear answers. This existential perspective is central to *The Trial*. Josef K. assumes that reason, argument, and innocence should protect him. Yet he is trapped in a system where rational explanation has no power. The absurdity of *The Trial* lies in the fact that the court possesses authority without moral clarity. Josef K. is accused, judged, and finally executed without ever understanding the basis of the accusation. This situation reflects the existential condition of modern man: he is thrown into a world that demands response but provides no stable meaning. However, Camus also warns that Kafka should not be reduced only to absurdism, because Kafka's fiction contains theological, symbolic, and ethical dimensions as well.

Psychoanalytic readings of Kafka focus on guilt, anxiety, repression, and authority. In *The Trial*, guilt appears before any known crime. Josef K. insists on his innocence, but as the novel progresses, he increasingly behaves like a guilty man. His mind becomes occupied by the trial, and his sense of self begins to weaken. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the court may be interpreted as an externalized form of the superego. It accuses without fully explaining, judges without sympathy, and demands submission without rational justification. Josef K.'s guilt is therefore not only imposed from outside; it becomes internalized. The court succeeds because Josef K. gradually accepts its psychological authority, even while resisting it intellectually. Kafka's personal life, particularly his strained relationship with his father, has often been used to support psychoanalytic readings. However, reducing *The Trial* only to biography would limit its broader significance. The novel transforms personal guilt into a universal condition of modern existence.

Kafka's *The Trial* is a modernist novel because it rejects traditional narrative order and certainty. Modernist literature often represents fragmentation, anxiety, moral ambiguity, and the collapse of stable meanings. In Kafka's novel, these features are visible in the absence of a clear crime, the instability of legal procedure, the incompleteness of explanation, and the unresolved nature of the narrative. The novel does not provide a conventional plot of crime, investigation, and resolution. Instead, it presents a sequence of unsettling episodes: Josef K.'s arrest, his first court appearance, his interaction with the lawyer, his visit to the painter, the cathedral scene, and his execution. These episodes do not move toward legal clarity. Rather, they deepen uncertainty. This narrative structure reflects the modernist crisis of meaning.

Theodor Adorno's interpretation of Kafka emphasizes the social and ideological significance of his work. Adorno argues that Kafka's strange fictional worlds do not escape reality; they reveal the hidden irrationality of modern society. From this perspective, the court in *The Trial* is not merely a fantasy. It is an intensified image of real institutional domination. Kafka's bureaucracy is terrifying because it is impersonal and dispersed. There is no single tyrant whom Josef K. can confront. Power is distributed through officials, lawyers, clerks, documents, offices, and procedures. This makes the system almost impossible to resist. Bureaucracy dehumanizes Josef K. by reducing him to a case. His individuality, emotions, and arguments are irrelevant before the court.

Deleuze and Guattari also read Kafka as a political writer. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, they argue that Kafka's writing maps systems of power rather than merely expressing private anxiety. This view is useful because *The Trial* is not only the story of one man's psychological crisis. It is also the representation of a whole institutional machine that absorbs the individual into its procedures. Legal scholars have found *The Trial* especially important because it presents law as inaccessible, procedural, and alienating. Richard Posner examines Kafka as a writer deeply familiar with legal and bureaucratic structures, while Reza Banakar reads Kafka's legal imagination as a critique of law's alienating force. In *The Trial*, the law does not function as a source of justice. Instead, it becomes a source of fear and confusion.

The court has authority but lacks transparency. It has procedures but lacks moral accountability. It produces judgment but does not provide explanation. This separation between law and justice is one of Kafka's central achievements. The novel shows that law can become oppressive not only through violence but also through opacity, delay, hierarchy, and inaccessible procedure.

## RESEARCH GAP

The existing scholarship on *The Trial* has examined Kafka through theological, existential, psychoanalytic, modernist, and legal frameworks. However, many studies tend to privilege one framework over the others. Theological readings focus on divine judgment; existential readings emphasize absurdity; psychoanalytic readings stress inner guilt; legal readings examine institutional injustice. The gap lies in the need to study guilt, alienation, and bureaucracy as interconnected structures. This study fills that gap by arguing that Josef K.'s guilt is produced through bureaucratic power, and his alienation is intensified by his inability to understand or resist that power. Therefore, the novel should be read as a complex representation of modern subjectivity under institutional domination.

## 7. ANALYSIS

The most important feature of *The Trial* is that Josef K. is arrested without being told his crime. This creates the central paradox of the novel. In ordinary legal logic, guilt depends on a specific offence. In Kafka's fictional world, however, guilt exists before the offence is known. Josef K. is not asked whether he has committed a crime; he is simply placed under accusation. This reversal is central to Kafka's critique of modern authority. The court does not need to prove guilt because accusation itself becomes a form of punishment. Josef K.'s life is

transformed from the moment he is accused. His work, relationships, movements, and thoughts become dominated by the trial. He is physically free but mentally imprisoned.

Kafka therefore presents guilt as existential. Josef K. is guilty not because he has committed a known crime but because he exists within a system that has already judged him. The absence of a specific crime universalizes his situation. The reader cannot separate himself from Josef K. by saying that Josef K. committed a particular offence. Since the offence remains unknown, the condition of guilt becomes general and universal. At the beginning of the novel, Josef K. appears confident and rational. He treats the arrest as absurd and assumes that the situation can be corrected. However, as the trial progresses, his confidence weakens. He begins to seek legal advice, attend court sessions, consult intermediaries, and organize his life around the accusation.

This shows how external accusation becomes internal guilt. The court does not need to imprison Josef K. physically because it succeeds in occupying his consciousness. He thinks about the court, fears it, resists it, and finally becomes dependent on its procedures. His identity changes from a bank officer to an accused man. The psychological power of the court lies in uncertainty. Josef K. does not know the charge, the judges, the rules, or the possible outcome. This uncertainty produces anxiety. The court's silence becomes more powerful than direct explanation. Kafka shows that modern systems often control individuals not by telling them everything, but by withholding essential knowledge. Josef K.'s first major alienation is from law. Law should ideally provide order, justice, and protection. In *The Trial*, however, law produces fear, confusion, and helplessness. Josef K. is subject to the law, but he cannot access it. He is judged by the court, but he cannot understand its procedures.

The court's physical spaces reflect this alienation. It is not located in a dignified public building but in attics, crowded rooms, and suffocating offices. These spaces suggest that law has become degraded and hidden. It is everywhere, yet nowhere clearly visible. Josef K. enters court spaces, but he never truly enters the Law. This alienation from law reveals a major modern anxiety: individuals may live under systems that regulate their lives without understanding how those systems work. Kafka's court is therefore symbolic of any institution that exercises authority without transparency. Josef K. is also alienated from society. Throughout the novel, he meets people who appear to help him: his uncle, the lawyer Huld, Leni, Titorelli, and the priest. However, none of these figures provides genuine assistance. Instead, each person draws him deeper into the world of the court. Human relationships in the novel are therefore unstable and contaminated by institutional power. Josef K. cannot determine who is trustworthy. The lawyer does not solve his case. The painter offers technical knowledge but no real hope. The priest explains the parable but does not liberate him. Even intimacy becomes uncertain and ambiguous.

Kafka presents a world in which social relations no longer provide comfort or solidarity. People communicate, but communication does not produce clarity. They advise, but advice increases confusion. This is one of the strongest expressions of modern alienation in the novel. The deepest form of alienation is Josef K.'s separation from himself. At first, he sees himself as respectable, rational, and socially secure. As the trial continues, this identity collapses. He becomes anxious, suspicious, aggressive, and increasingly uncertain. Kafka does not present Josef K. as a purely innocent victim. He is often arrogant, impatient, and insensitive. Yet these flaws do not explain his legal condemnation. This is important because Kafka does not offer a simple moral lesson. Josef K. may be flawed, but his flaws do not justify the court's absurd authority.

By the end of the novel, Josef K. loses his dignity completely. His execution "like a dog" symbolizes the final dehumanization of the individual before impersonal power. The phrase suggests that the system has succeeded in reducing him from a human subject to an object of

disposal. The court in *The Trial* functions as a bureaucratic machine. It has officials, clerks, lawyers, records, offices, messengers, and procedures. Yet it remains inaccessible and irrational. Its power does not depend on clarity but on complexity. No one fully understands the system, yet everyone submits to it. This is one of Kafka's major insights into modern bureaucracy. Bureaucratic power is terrifying because responsibility is dispersed. Josef K. cannot identify the final authority. Minor officials appear powerful, but they are also subordinate to higher officials whom Josef K. never reaches. This endless hierarchy produces helplessness.

The bureaucracy also dehumanizes the individual. Josef K. becomes a case rather than a person. His moral arguments are irrelevant because the system recognizes only procedure. Kafka shows that bureaucracy can destroy human dignity without appearing openly violent. It operates through documents, waiting, delay, and inaccessible authority. The parable "Before the Law" is the philosophical centre of the novel. The man from the country waits before the gate of the Law throughout his life, hoping for permission to enter. The gate is open, yet he never enters. At the end, he is told that the entrance was meant only for him. This parable reflects Josef K.'s entire situation. He seeks access to justice, but justice remains beyond reach. The Law appears near but inaccessible. The man's tragedy lies not only in being denied entry but also in accepting the authority of the doorkeeper. He waits because he believes permission must come from outside. Similarly, Josef K. waits for explanation, judgment, and acquittal from the court. He never realizes that the system's power depends partly on his participation in it. The parable suggests that modern authority often controls individuals through obedience, delay, and the promise of access.

The court's procedures are absurd because they do not lead to justice. Josef K. attends hearings, consults lawyers, meets intermediaries, and listens to explanations, but none of these actions brings him closer to truth. Procedure becomes an end in itself. Kafka separates procedure from justice. The court appears active and organized, but its activity produces no moral clarity. This is a central criticism of modern institutions. A system may be procedurally complex and still be ethically empty. Kafka exposes the danger of institutions that value process over humanity.

## 8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that guilt, alienation, and bureaucracy are deeply interconnected in *The Trial*. Josef K.'s guilt is not based on a known crime; it is produced by the structure of accusation. This finding is significant because it challenges traditional legal and moral understandings of guilt. Kafka presents guilt as a condition imposed by power and internalized by the individual. The study also finds that alienation in the novel is multidimensional. Josef K. is alienated from law because he cannot understand the court. He is alienated from society because human relationships fail to provide real support. He is alienated from himself because the trial transforms his identity and destroys his confidence. This shows that alienation in Kafka is not simple loneliness; it is a structural condition created by modern institutions. Another important finding is that bureaucracy in *The Trial* functions as a dehumanizing form of power. The court is not terrifying because it is openly violent from the beginning. It is terrifying because it is invisible, procedural, and incomprehensible. It controls Josef K. through uncertainty, delay, and psychological pressure. This makes Kafka's critique highly relevant to modern institutional life. The parable "Before the Law" further confirms the novel's central concern with inaccessible justice. The man from the country and Josef K. both seek entry into the meaning of the Law, but both remain excluded. Their failure suggests that modern systems often create the illusion of access while preventing genuine justice.

The discussion also shows that *The Trial* remains contemporary because individuals today continue to experience Kafkaesque situations. People often confront legal, academic, administrative, corporate, or technological systems that are difficult to understand and

challenge. Kafka's novel therefore continues to speak to the modern experience of helplessness before impersonal authority. Overall, the findings support the argument that *The Trial* should not be read only as a story of one man's legal misfortune. It is a broader literary representation of modern subjectivity under bureaucratic domination. Kafka shows that the most dangerous systems are not always those that openly announce their violence. Sometimes they operate silently through procedures, files, waiting rooms, unclear rules, and inaccessible decision-makers.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* is a profound modernist exploration of guilt, alienation, and bureaucratic power. Through the unexplained arrest and eventual execution of Josef K., Kafka presents a world in which law loses its connection with justice, authority operates without transparency, and the individual is reduced to helplessness before an incomprehensible system. The study has shown that guilt in the novel is not a legal conclusion but an existential condition. Josef K. is never told his crime, yet the accusation transforms his life. The court produces guilt by placing him under judgment and forcing him to organize his existence around the trial. His guilt is therefore both externally imposed and internally absorbed. The analysis has also demonstrated that alienation operates at multiple levels. Josef K. is alienated from the law, from society, from relationships, from space, and finally from himself. His tragedy lies not simply in being condemned but in losing the ability to understand the world that condemns him. The court represents modern bureaucracy as a system that is powerful precisely because it is unclear. It does not need to explain itself; it only needs to continue functioning. Kafka's representation of bureaucracy remains significant because modern individuals still encounter institutions that are complex, impersonal, and morally opaque. Ultimately, *The Trial* is not only a novel about Josef K. It is a literary diagnosis of the modern human condition. Kafka reveals a world where people stand before the Law, seeking justice and meaning, yet find only silence, delay, and judgment. This is why *The Trial* remains one of the most enduring and academically significant novels of modern literature.

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