

On the Absurdity and Reality in Kafka's "The Castle"

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Abstract: The 20th-century capitalist world was turbulent and crisis-ridden, and Western literary creation as a whole presented a state of nihilism, loneliness, loss, and anxiety. Many writers regarded ugliness as beauty, using absurdity to represent reality, among whom Kafka was one. "The Castle," as a representative of his short stories, constructs many bizarre events that do not exist in real life, enhancing the absurdity of the work. The author combines absurdity with reality, integrating philosophical parables and his own real-life reflections into the work, aiming to express the ruthless satire on human indifference as well as a deep call for genuine human emotions.

Keywords: Kafka, The Castle, Absurdity, Reality

1. Introduction

Absurdity, as a form of literary aesthetic, especially in Western literature, has been precipitated over time and reached its climax in the modernist literature of the 20th century. Kafka's "The Castle" is a classic example of absurd aesthetic.

"The Castle" displays the widespread existence of absurdity in relationships between individuals and society, and between people themselves, through unique techniques. Its bizarre plots and absurd characters form a unique narrative, revealing the alienation of relationships and the indifference of humanity in modern society. The absurdity in the work is closely connected to the author's experiences and social reality: Kafka's own loneliness and sense of drift are fully reflected in the protagonist "K"; the feudal autocracy and multicultural impact of Prague society provide a rich real background for the creation of the work. This makes the work, though filled with absurd plots, constantly reflect the real social reality.

This paper takes "The Castle" as an example, analyzing the absurdity and reality within the work by combining the writer's personal experiences with social reality, exploring the significance of absurdity as an aesthetic form in Western literature.

2. Absurdity and Western Literature

The term absurd originally referred to the disharmony of musical tones. Through evolution, in the field of aesthetics, it has come to represent a form of aesthetic expression. [1]

Elements of the absurd in Western traditional literature can be traced back to ancient literary periods. In "Oedipus the King," Oedipus investigates the murderer of his father, only to find that he himself killed his biological father and chooses suicide to cleanse his sins. This dramatically ironic

coincidence is a primitive form of absurdity. "Faust," where Faust makes a bet with the devil, traverses through time and experiences the five great tragedies of life before being taken away by an angel, also contains elements of the absurd. However, Western traditional literature as a whole still adheres to rationality. Under this framework, the main purpose of writers creating absurd plots is to denounce irrationality; whereas, in Western modernist literature, "absurdity" comes closer to absurdity itself, directly displaying the inherent absurdity of the world and life. It has already broken through the scope of what absurdity could express in traditional literature. [2]

Existentialism in 20th-century Western modernist literature believes that the world is absurd, and life is meaningless; existence equates to nothingness. Under such a worldview, people find it difficult to understand their own situations and disintegrate into non-human entities in a disorderly manner. Hence, they present their loss of value in an irrational form, expressing their feelings of despair and loneliness caused by being squeezed by reality, affirmatively acknowledging human freedom in a convoluted, negating manner [3]. This is the significance of "absurdity" in Western modernist literature.

3. Absurdity in "The Castle"

The absurdity in "The Castle" unfolds around the realms of human relationships with society and with one another. In the story, a supernatural, omnipresent mysterious force manipulates human destiny, which remains unnoticed from beginning to end. This grotesque imagery pervades the artistic arrangement, reflecting one of the specific characteristics of absurdity as an aesthetic form: fragmentation of form and ugliness. [3]

3.1. Absurdity of Plot and Characters

From the beginning, "The Castle" plants a foreshadowing, describing the place K arrives at as a "vague and ethereal space," hinting that it is a place beyond reality, an unreal place. Initially, when K enters the inn, the inn's youth calls the Castle to confirm K's identity, only to receive a negative answer: "What land surveyor... a despicable lying vagabond..." [4] Yet, shortly after, news comes from the Castle that a mistake was made, the Director himself called, acknowledging K's identity as a land surveyor. In fact, the Castle had not hired K, so why suddenly acknowledge his identity? Most strangely, not a single character in the novel questions this, everyone silently accepts K's identity, including K himself, who believes that the Castle's internal arrangements have been made for his position. This "insider's confusion" setting establishes the work's absurdity from the start.

Moreover, there are many bizarre plots, such as: despite K's efforts to make his way, the Castle always appears distant or close in his sight, and he can never find the road that leads to the Castle; only an hour or two after K leaves the inn in the morning, it suddenly becomes night; K hasn't secured any work yet receives a letter of commendation from the Director of the Castle's office, Klamm; the Castle's secretary, Bürgel, spends almost 24 hours in bed, even completing his work from there...

The article never explains these bizarre plots from start to finish. All absurdities, in the narrator and the characters of the work, seem to be normal phenomena. This purely objective narrative style, devoid of any emotional coloring, constitutes Kafka's unique artistic style. [1] "The Castle" employs extensive character dialogue, allowing the writer not to control the characters in the text but to let them develop naturally, giving "The Castle" characteristics of a polyphonic novel to some extent. Underneath the absurd storylines lies a deep meaning, prompting further reflection, a clever aspect of Kafka's storytelling.

3.2. Absurdity in Social Relations

Absurdity is prevalent in the realms of human relationships with society and among individuals. [3]

From the perspective of the relationship between individuals and society, absurd individuals are unable to establish meaningful connections with the world. [3] In "The Castle," the relationship between most people and society is non-benign; they are numb, hollow, and merely accept society's arrangements passively. The jurisdiction of the Castle is not large, yet it requires a large number of officials to manage. These officials are busy all day, even minor matters require a lot of effort. However, many people appear busy but are actually nominal employees, such as Barnabas, who volunteers as a messenger for the Castle but is always waiting, having not received an official task for many years. This social relationship seems orderly but is actually in chaos. Officials working for the Castle, as if adorned with a shiny label, are protected by the Castle: when the village girl Amalia rejects the Castle official Sortini, misfortune befalls her family, even if it's unrelated to the Castle. Her family continually pleads for the Castle's forgiveness, even willing to become enslaved... The Castle represents an intangible oppression, symbolizing supreme power that instills fear. Facing this mysterious Castle, everyone is exceedingly respectful, even though no one has ever seen the real owner of the Castle — Count Westwest. Those living under the Castle's jurisdiction lead busy yet empty lives, consumed by society and having lost their selves.

From the perspective of interpersonal relationships, absurd individuals often show indifference to each other, leading to a sense of fragmentation and desolation. [3] In "The Castle," when K, tired, stays at the tanner's house, he doesn't receive proper hospitality, and everyone inexplicably seems to want him to leave soon. As soon as K steps out of their residence, people's behaviors become strange: an old man... starts clapping, the laundry woman laughs, and the children suddenly start making a racket as if they've gone mad. [4] The coachman Gerstacker offers to take K away, not out of kindness but to quickly get rid of him... The hostility and indifference of these people are unwarranted; when K inquires about their strange behavior, he only receives repeated refusals, as if dealing with emotionless robots. Floating in the rigid city, not only unable to find a place to stay but also treated coldly because of his status as a foreigner, Kafka, through "The Castle," reflects the alienation in modern interpersonal relationships, criticizing and satirizing the indifference towards human nature.

4. Realism in "The Castle"

4.1. The Author's Personal Experiences

Kafka was born into a Jewish family. His authoritarian father dictated his education, forcing Kafka to abandon literature for law and arranging everything in his life. Under such oppressive family circumstances, Kafka felt constantly lonely. Despite his mother's influence, his inner world remained closed off. As a Jew, Kafka did not identify with his Jewish identity. German literary critic André Gide summarized Kafka's ethnic identity as follows: "As a Jew, he was not one of his own among Christians. As a German-speaking Jew, he was not one of his own among Germans. As a Bohemian, he was not fully Austrian." [5] Whether in terms of family or ethnic identity, he was the "odd one out," a loner. This sense of loneliness and drifting laid the foundation for the frequent choice of the "stranger" identity in his writing. Kafka even described himself as "a very strange bird," a "cold crow, —a Kafka bird," [6] forever soaring in a closed cage. This sense of confinement and oppression also influenced the creation of "The Castle."

The creation of "The Castle" reflects Kafka's life: The Castle, like his domineering father, controls everyone's fate; with just one command, it can set the entire vast system in motion. The protagonist K, wandering in this void world, always exists as a stranger, forever seeking but never

able to enter the Castle, which is Kafka's autobiographical narrative; within a reconstructed time and space, freedom and imprisonment mix. [7] The sense of closure brought by the Castle is a true reflection of the writer's inner self.

4.2. The Real Reflection of Social Reality

Kafka was born in Prague, under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty, which adopted feudal autocracy, torturing the people with cruel bureaucratic rule. Yet, they dared not resist, only submitting, with some even seeking divine help and redemption through religion. Based on such social conditions, scholars have divided their analysis of "The Castle" into two camps—one views the Castle as a miniature of the feudal autocratic monarchy, high above the common offices; the other, starting from theology, sees the Castle as a symbol of God, since God's grace is not easily obtained, hence the elusive entrance...

With the end of World War I, Prague saw an influx of immigrants and a clash of multiple cultures, with the war never truly ceasing. The social turmoil made Kafka prematurely aware of the plight of human existence, which also significantly influenced his writing. The protagonist of "The Castle" is designed as K, a nameless character, because K is not just K; he represents the vast majority of people in real society. K is always looking for the road to the Castle, but the text mentions, "The streets only lead near the Castle, then as if deliberately, they change direction..." [4] Whether the road could actually lead to the Castle, even K himself is unsure, sharing commonality with the modern human dilemma to some extent. In a materialistic, money-centric era, people are enslaved by material goods, and the emptiness of their spiritual world makes their ideal goals uncertain, blurring the significance and value of human existence. Nietzsche's proclamation of "God is dead" [8] reflects the self-consciousness of humans. If viewed from an existential perspective, what Kafka depicted in "The Castle" is the existence of the individual after God's death. K's pursuit of the Castle, in a way, represents humanity's search for meaning after the loss of universal significance. [7]

5. Conclusion: The Fusion of Absurdity and Reality

In summary, "The Castle" reflects reality through absurdity: its absurdity is specifically manifested in the novel's plot, characters, and various irrational social relationships; its realism is specifically manifested in the author's creative process, which draws from real life, combining unique personal circumstances and social reality. Therefore, "The Castle" melds absurdity and reality, implying philosophical parables and the author's real-life reflections, providing readers with profound food for thought.

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