

**Kafka at Work: Refractions of the Kafkaesque across the Second Half of
the Twentieth Century**

Julian Francalanza

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English (Modern and Contemporary
Literature and Criticism) at the University of Malta

June 2025



University of Malta Library – Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETD) Repository

The copyright of this thesis/dissertation belongs to the author. The author's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text thesis/dissertation and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.



FACULTY/INSTITUTE/CENTRE/SCHOOL Faculty of Arts

DECLARATIONS BY POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

(a) Authenticity of Dissertation

I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Dissertation and that it is my original work.

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institution of higher education.

I hold the University of Malta harmless against any third party claims with regard to copyright violation, breach of confidentiality, defamation and any other third party right infringement.

(b) Research Code of Practice and Ethics Review Procedures

I declare that I have abided by the University's Research Ethics Review Procedures.

Research Ethics & Data Protection form code ARTS-2025-00369

As a Master's student, as per Regulation 77 of the General Regulations for University Postgraduate Awards 2021, I accept that should my dissertation be awarded a Grade A, it will be made publicly available on the University of Malta Institutional Repository.

To my father, Alex, who first inspired my love of poesy,

My wife, Charlene, who suffers it to this day,

My mother, Therese, the rock who makes life rosy,

And my brother, Adrian, who insists that 'a poet could not but be gay'

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Ivan Callus, my academic supervisor during this project, who has been an invaluable fount of guidance, wisdom, and deep insight from the very first days of my higher academic journey. It has been a privilege to work under his guidance, and it is no exaggeration to say that every aspect of this study has been vastly improved thanks to his contributions. I would also like to thank my co-supervisor, Prof. Maria Frendo, for her many erudite comments and sound advice, which helped me gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the subject matter in hand.

Thanks also go to my family, most particularly my wife, Charlene, and my mother and brother, Therese and Adrian. It is thanks to their enduring patience, encouragement, and staunch support that this project has been completed, and I would like to say how grateful I am to have such people in my life. Similarly, I would like to thank my friends, who have now been bombarded by the Kafkaesque for months on end, and who have provided a much-needed source of both discussion and distraction in equal measure.

Finally, and in what has possibly become a bit of a cliché, I would like to thank Franz Kafka himself, a troubled yet relatable soul who left an enduring legacy that has challenged, haunted, and inspired me in countless ways, and will, I am sure, continue to live on within me for many more years yet to come.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the evolving influence and cultural significance of the Kafkaesque in the second half of the twentieth century, tracing its literary refractions across a diverse range of texts and discourse, with a particular focus on Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, as it examines how the Kafkaesque persists and adapts across divergent geopolitical and narrative terrains.

Beginning by acknowledging that the term has transcended its literary origins to become a widely recognised descriptor for situations marked by absurdity and bureaucratic oppression, this study first sets out to explore the roots of the Kafkaesque, arguing for a historically and theoretically grounded understanding of the term, and revisiting Kafka's own texts to distil key thematic and formal elements. Through close reading of the three case studies, it will then demonstrate how Kafka's legacy is not merely replicated but reconfigured, with Heller employing it for social commentary through satire set against a military backdrop; Coetzee engaging it as a vehicle for political critique under apartheid; and Ishiguro invoking it to map psychic fragmentation and existential drift.

Subsequently, the study will delve more deeply into the possible reasons behind the pervasiveness of the Kafkaesque during this time. It engages with thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Theodor Adorno to contend that the enduring resonance of the Kafkaesque stems from its attuning to the ideological mechanisms of modernity and postmodernity. Ultimately, it concludes that the Kafkaesque remains of vital relevance to this very day, uniquely equipped to articulate the entanglements of power, selfhood, and systems that continue to define contemporary life.

Table of Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>v</i>
Introduction: The Birth of the Kafkaesque	1
Joseph Heller's Reworking of the Kafkaesque in <i>Catch-22</i>	21
J. M. Coetzee and the Political Kafkaesque in <i>Life & Times of Michael K</i>	41
Shades of the Kafkaesque in Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>The Unconsoled</i>	62
Conclusion: 'Not of an Age, but for All Time'?	82
List of Works Cited	97

Introduction:

The Birth of the Kafkaesque

On the 22nd of August 2019, the Supreme Court of the United States heard, and denied, an application for a stay of execution in the case of Gary Ray Bowles v. Florida. In a statement issued after this decision, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, while agreeing with the outcome, criticised part of Florida's procedural rules as being contradictory to other elements within the state's laws. The word she used to convey her criticism was simple – “Kafkaesque”.¹

The use of what is ostensibly a literary term by a member of one of the world's most influential legal institutions is significant, and a marker of the degree to which the concept of the Kafkaesque, or at least the word itself, has penetrated within society. A brief look at popular culture at large simply confirms this impression, with the term cropping up in all manner of scenarios. In a 2016 episode of *The Simpsons*, for instance, Marge is arrested for letting her son go to a playground unsupervised, with her daughter declaring that ““This is Kafkaesque!””,² while in 2010, the series *Breaking Bad* released an episode with the word as its solitary title.³ It would seem, as *The Guardian*'s Claire Armitstead notes in a 2024 article whose very existence is in itself indicative, that ‘[a] century after Franz Kafka's death [...] [t]he word kafkaesque [sic], meanwhile, is everywhere’.⁴

¹ Sonia Sotomayor, ‘On Application for Stay and On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the Supreme Court of Florida’, 22 August 2019, par. 3 of 4 https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/18pdf/19-5617%20_apl1.pdf [accessed 15 October 2024].

² ‘Orange is the New Yellow’, *The Simpsons*, dir. by Matthew Faughnan (Fox Broadcasting Company, 22 May 2016).

³ ‘Kafkaesque’, *Breaking Bad*, dir. by Michael Slovis (AMC, 16 May 2010).

⁴ Claire Armitstead, ‘Can't get you out of my head: why pop culture is still under Kafka's spell’, *The Guardian*, 1 June 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/jun/01/how-franz-kafka-inspired-word-of-our-times-kafkaesque> [accessed 15 October 2024].

The evidence for this is widespread, ranging from an individual incensed at his government's decision to do away with daylight savings,⁵ to an academic expressing his frustration after a bank 'froze his account when he complained about their "absurd demands"',⁶ and all the way to a review of a series that explores the UK's response to the Covid-19 pandemic,⁷ and thousands of posts on platforms like TikTok, as Armitstead notes.⁸ What this brief, but eclectic, series of examples serves to highlight, however, is not merely the ubiquity of the term, but also the ease with which people see fit to employ it for any disparate number of scenarios, prompting one to question what it is exactly that the adjective signifies more than a century after the death of the man who inspired it.

In fact, this points to a wider issue with the Kafkaesque, and one which must be explored before engaging in any discussion on it, namely, the perceived difficulty of pinning down a fixed meaning to the term. This becomes immediately evident when one looks at some of its dictionary entries, with the *Cambridge Dictionary*, for instance, stating that it describes something 'extremely unpleasant, frightening, and confusing, and similar to situations described in the novels of Franz Kafka'.⁹ While appearing straightforward enough, such a definition has the misfortune of being simultaneously too wide and too narrow, with the first part being somewhat too imprecise, and the second omitting any reference to Kafka's

⁵ 'Morocco abruptly drops clock change', *BBC*, 26 October 2018
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45995634> [accessed 15 October 2024].

⁶ Miles Brignall, "'Kafkaesque': bank blocks cash transfer, saying it could be an AI scam", *The Guardian*, 17 August 2024
<https://www.theguardian.com/money/article/2024/aug/17/bank-blocks-cash-transfer-ai-scam-fraud> [accessed 15 October 2024].

⁷ Jonny Walfisz, "'Kafkaesque' new medical drama 'Breathtaking' goes right to the heart of the UK's pandemic response", *Euronews*, 22 February 2024
<https://www.euronews.com/culture/2024/02/22/kafkaesque-new-medical-drama-breathtaking-goes-right-to-the-heart-of-the-uks-pandemic-resp> [accessed 15 October 2024].

⁸ Armitstead, par. 3 of 17.

⁹ *Cambridge Dictionary*, 'Kafkaesque'
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/Kafkaesque> [accessed 17 October 2024].

short stories, which means that a work like ‘The Metamorphosis’ would have to be excluded from any discussions of the Kafkaesque.¹⁰

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, on the other hand, while still not unproblematic, provides both more breadth and detail, defining the term as describing something ‘[o]f, relating to, or characteristic of the writings of Franz Kafka; resembling the state of affairs or a state of mind described by Kafka; *esp.* characterized by nightmarish or perplexing circumstances, or subjection to a complex, oppressive, and seemingly illogical bureaucracy’.¹¹ This is far more helpful, with the final segment in particular providing a set of characteristics that can be used to identify the Kafkaesque with some certainty. The preceding section, however, is where the issue may arise, since, as immediately becomes clear if one picks up any collected edition of Kafka’s works, his literary worlds are not one uniform, unwavering entity. This means that, while the novels and certain short stories, like ‘The Judgement’, or ‘In the Penal Colony’,¹² may certainly contain ‘nightmarish or perplexing circumstances, or subjection to a complex, oppressive, and seemingly illogical bureaucracy’, one can also find other works which have none of these, such as ‘Absent-minded Window Gazing’, ‘The Street Window’, or ‘The Wish to be a Red Indian’.¹³ Working with this definition, however, all these stories could indeed still be labelled Kafkaesque.

This is a question that is alluded to in Jorge Luis Borges’s seminal essay, ‘Kafka and His Precursors’, with Borges identifying the divergence between the Kafka of *Meditation*, his first published collection of short stories, and ‘the Kafka of the gloomy myths and terrifying

¹⁰ Franz Kafka, ‘The Metamorphosis’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 73-128; ‘A Hunger Artist’ in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, pp. 222-232. Note: All references to Kafka’s short stories, unless otherwise stated, shall be taken from this collection.

¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘Kafkaesque’
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/kafkaesque_adj?tab=meaning_and_use
 [accessed 16 October 2024].

¹² Franz Kafka, ‘The Judgement’, pp. 25-39; ‘In the Penal Colony’, pp. 129-160.

¹³ Franz Kafka, ‘Absent-minded Window Gazing’, p. 15; ‘The Street Window’, pp. 19-20; ‘The Wish to be a Red Indian’, p. 20.

institutions’.¹⁴ The *OED*, however, does not make this distinction, preferring to envelope these disparate realities under the same term, which is a choice echoed by *Merriam-Webster*, whose entry similarly maintains that ‘Kafkaesque’ signifies something ‘of, relating to, or suggestive of Franz Kafka or his writings especially: having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality’.¹⁵ This state of affairs has led some, including *Merriam-Webster* itself back in 2016, to argue that “‘Kafkaesque’ is so overused that it’s begun to lose its meaning’, noting that ‘[i]t describes anything of, relating to, or suggestive of Franz Kafka or his writings’, and has thus, lost its ability to refer to something specific, becoming instead a vague term with no firm signification.¹⁶

As will be explored soon, this perception is not necessarily an accurate one, and in fact, as the undeniable degree of convergence between the definitions quoted above may already indicate, there is a lot more specificity to the term than some might believe. It is fair to note, however, that formulating a fixed understanding as to what constitutes the Kafkaesque is something that has occupied critics for many years. Borges, for instance, attempts to put forward a clear-cut demarcation, differentiating between ‘the first Kafka of “Betrachtung” [*Meditation*]’ and ‘the Kafka of the gloomy myths and terrifying institutions’,¹⁷ with the implication being that the latter works exhibit the Kafkaesque, while the earlier ones do not. Such a distinction, however, becomes troublesome when one notes that some of the stories within *Meditation* already include a number of the elements which are readily identifiable with the Kafkaesque.

¹⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Kafka and His Precursors’, trans. by Eliot Weinberger, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger, trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), pp. 363-365 (p. 365).

¹⁵ *Merriam-Webster*, ‘Kafkaesque’

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Kafkaesque> [accessed 17 October 2024].

¹⁶ *Merriam-Webster*, ‘Kafkaesque’,

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/kafkaesque-2016-05-17> [accessed 19 October 2019].

Archived at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20191218120340/https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/kafkaesque-2016-05-17> [accessed 22 October 2024].

¹⁷ Borges, p. 365.

Kafka's 'The Tradesman', for instance, deals with the domineering influence of work to the point where it practically takes over one's life, with the protagonist writing that, although at the end of the work day he feels a wave of excitement at 'see[ing] before me hours in which I shall be able to do nothing to satisfy its [his occupation's] never-ending demands', this quickly recedes as he discovers that 'I can make no use of this impulse', since his life consists solely of his work.¹⁸ This is an element that emerges once more in works like 'The Metamorphosis' and *The Trial*, to give two examples, where both Gregor Samsa and Joseph K., the respective protagonists, remain obsessed with their jobs in spite of the terrifying situations which they find themselves in, with Samsa inexplicably transforming into an insect, and K. being arrested and put on trial for an unknown crime which is never disclosed to him, and yet against which he must defend himself.

At this point, and in light of this ostensible ambiguity, it may be pertinent to clarify what exactly, for the purposes of this study, will be considered as being the primary Kafkaesque elements, as well as, by extension, what will be signified by the word 'Kafkaesque'. As a general starting point, the *OED* comes in useful, particularly with the second part of their definition which identifies the Kafkaesque as being 'characterized by nightmarish or perplexing circumstances, or subjection to a complex, oppressive, and seemingly illogical bureaucracy'.¹⁹ This denotation will broadly inform what will be understood by 'Kafkaesque' over the next few chapters, but it will be further bolstered by Milan Kundera, among others, who puts forward a breakdown of the main aspects of what he calls 'the *Kafkan*' in his work, *The Art of the Novel*.²⁰

Chief among these is an element that is identified by both sources, namely the presence of an institution which has 'the character of a boundless labyrinth', as Kundera puts

¹⁸ Franz Kafka, 'The Tradesman', pp. 13-15.

¹⁹ See Note 11 above.

²⁰ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Perennial Classics, 1988), pp. 109-110.

it.²¹ Especially evident in works like *The Trial* and *The Castle*, but also present, perhaps less explicitly, in short stories such as ‘In the Penal Colony’, and ‘Poseidon’,²² this characteristic of the Kafkaesque is possibly one of the most prominent, and is also alluded to by other critics, such as Borges with his reference to Kafka’s ‘terrifying institutions’,²³ as well as Walter Benjamin, who believes that this element is informed by Kafka’s experience of living in a modern metropolis, and the resulting awareness that ‘he is at the mercy of a vast machinery of officialdom whose functioning is directed by authorities that remain nebulous’.²⁴ Its presence is responsible for a sense of hopelessness in Kafka’s works, as many of his protagonists face up to an organisation which they cannot possibly comprehend, and which, as Kundera notes, ‘obeys its own laws’ that ‘have nothing to do with human concerns and are thus unintelligible’.²⁵ As a result, they often feel lost, and trapped, with the sense of there being no way out of their conundrum. In fact, Benjamin posits that, for Kafka, bureaucratic organisation in itself is akin to destiny, stating that ‘[i]f Napoleon, in his famous conversation with Goethe at Erfurt, substituted politics for fate, Kafka, in a variation of this statement, could have defined organization as destiny’, found ‘in the extensive hierarchy of officialdom’ that pervades his novels,²⁶ it determines one’s entire existence, and there is no way to combat it.

On a similar note to the vast, labyrinthine, bureaucratic institution in which the protagonist is trapped, and against which he must struggle, one also finds the issue of employment, or rather, the characters’ occupations, which, in the Kafkaesque world, seem to hold a similarly domineering position over the individual. In ‘Poseidon’, for instance, the god

²¹ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 101.

²² Franz Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, pp. 129-160; ‘Poseidon’, trans. by Tania and James Stern, pp. 401-402.

²³ Borges, p. 365.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Some Reflections on Kafka’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 141-145 (p. 141).

²⁵ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 101.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death’, in *Illuminations*, pp. 111-140 (p. 123).

of the seas is bemoaning the fact that, in contrast to the myths surrounding his life, he has to spend all his days ‘endlessly going over the accounts’, and as a result, has in fact, barely ever seen the world’s oceans.²⁷ Additionally, as has already been touched upon in relation to *The Trial* and ‘The Metamorphosis’, Kafka’s protagonists often continue to obsess over their occupations, even when finding themselves in horrifying scenarios. As Kundera argues, this is because in the Kafkaesque world, each individual ‘has nothing but the obedience and discipline to which his profession has accustomed him’, and is merely a ‘*functionary*’ in a bureaucratic machine, whose life has been completely taken over by his work, and who cannot imagine himself distinct from it.²⁸

Kundera also addresses the absurdist element of the Kafkaesque, observing that the rules by which its worlds work often make no sense.²⁹ This is a crucial aspect of the Kafkaesque, and a feature that has been identified as being central to Kafka’s writings by many critics, including Albert Camus, who observes that ‘Kafka’s world is in truth an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the tormenting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come of it. Consequently, I recognize here a work that is absurd in its principles’.³⁰ John Hoyles goes even further, declaring that ‘[i]n his three novels Kafka registers the world as absurd, resists it via the absurd, and takes refuge from it in the absurd’,³¹ while Neil Cornwell insists that ‘Kafka has commonly, if not universally, been regarded as a staple of absurdism’.³²

Of course, the exact nature of the absurd as it is manifested in Kafka, as well as how it relates to and differs from the wider tradition of the literary absurd, is a vast question that

²⁷ ‘Poseidon’, p. 402.

²⁸ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 112.

²⁹ *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 102-103.

³⁰ Albert Camus, ‘Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka’, in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by Justin O’Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1975), pp. 112-124 (pp. 116-117).

³¹ John Hoyles, *The Literary Underground: Writers and the Totalitarian Experience, 1900–1950* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 219.

³² Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 184.

goes beyond the scope of this study. What is certain, however, is that, as these critics have noted, it is a staple of the Kafkaesque world. As Kundera observes, for instance, while, under normal circumstances, one is convicted of a crime and then punished for it, in the Kafkaesque, one is punished without ever being informed of what the offence is,³³ a state of affairs so absurd that, as a coping mechanism, the accused himself attempts to identify his crime so as to make sense of what he is going through. However, since he can never be certain of the nature of his crimes, '[t]he "autoculpabilization" machine goes into motion', and he begins to attempt to find himself guilty of any offence, simply to justify his present circumstances.³⁴ This is precisely what happens to Joseph K. in *The Trial*, where, unable to defend himself against a nonexistent charge, he decides to 'pass his whole life in review and describe it right down to the very last detail', in search of a possible offence.³⁵

The last primary characteristic of the Kafkaesque which Kundera speaks of is its humorous nature, or what he sees as the comical element which lies at its essence. As the critic notes, the opening scene of *The Trial*,³⁶ for instance, can almost fit into a comic skit, as two men enter Joseph K.'s bedroom, nonchalantly proclaim that he is their prisoner, and proceed to steal his breakfast, while he 'stands in his nightshirt and gives a lengthy self-defense', in Kundera's words.³⁷ As H. S. Reiss observes, '[t]he existence of humorous moments within the gloomy scene that constitutes Kafka's work is perhaps somewhat surprising',³⁸ and in fact, the precise role of the comic within the Kafkaesque continues to be hotly debated. Reiss, for instance, argues that its presence may 'serve to throw the horrors of Kafka's world into greater relief',³⁹ linking its existence to the absurdist elements discussed

³³ *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 102-103.

³⁴ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 103.

³⁵ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. by Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 91.

³⁶ *The Trial*, pp. 5-9.

³⁷ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 104.

³⁸ H. S. Reiss, 'Franz Kafka's Conception of Humour', *The Modern Language Review*, 4.44 (1949), 534-542 (p. 535).

³⁹ Reiss, p. 535.

above, as he states that '[t]he humour in Kafka [...] depicts the absurd position of man who was seeking to unravel the mystery of the irrational by rational means'.⁴⁰ Jeffrey Meyers, meanwhile, feels that 'Kafka's sardonic wit alleviates his hopeless view of human existence',⁴¹ while Kundera himself believes that the Kafkaesque actually reveals 'the *horror of the comic*', as the reader ceases to view the circumstances from the outside, but is taken within them, and shown their true, terrifying nature.⁴² The fact that it is present, however, and that 'funniness is bound up with the extraordinary power of his stories', as David Foster Wallace puts it, is undeniable, and the manner in which it is utilised, or discarded, by Kafka's successors is an intriguing aspect that shall be discussed in the coming chapters.⁴³

These are far from being the only elements that make up the Kafkaesque, and in fact, there are other factors which are central to Kafka's fictional world, such as 'the rape of privacy', for instance, which Kundera also mentions, where the individual's private life is continuously and progressively intruded upon, until it is virtually non-existent.⁴⁴ The opening scene of *The Trial* already evidences this, while in the case of *The Castle*, K. is assigned two assistants by the faceless institution which he is confronting who literally shadow his every move, even being present during his love-making with Frieda, illustrating how the institution penetrates into the most private aspects of one's life.⁴⁵ Another aspect, meanwhile, is the existence of the Kafkaesque protagonist, who, as showcased by both *The Trial*'s Joseph K. and *The Castle*'s K., as well as Gregor Samsa, and the unnamed narrator in 'Before the Law',⁴⁶ to mention a few instances, is defined by a self-doubting, alienated, and passive nature, with Roman S. Struc noting that they are 'associated with features such as the

⁴⁰ Reiss, p. 542.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Meyers, 'Kafka's Dark Laughter', *The Antioch Review*, 4.70 (2012), 760-768 (p. 761).

⁴² *The Art of the Novel*, p. 104.

⁴³ David Foster Wallace, 'Laughing with Kafka', *Log*, 22 (2011), 47-50 (p. 47). Note: This article is taken from a speech given by David Foster Wallace in March 1998 at the symposium 'Metamorphosis: A New Kafka'.

⁴⁴ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 111.

⁴⁵ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. by Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 19.

⁴⁶ Franz Kafka, 'Before the Law', pp. 173-175.

inability to cope with certain situations', and that, 'in general, [Kafka's] protagonists are known to be doomed to failure'.⁴⁷

All these aspects will be taken into consideration over the coming chapters as this study explores the presence and influence of the Kafkaesque on Kafka's successors. Before embarking upon this, however, it may be interesting, and revealing, to take a step back and look in the opposite direction for a moment, namely at Kafka's predecessors, and at the possible inspiration they may have given to the rise of the Kafkaesque in the first place. After all, while the Kafkaesque can, as illustrated above, be crystallised into a set number of criteria, it is intriguing to note that, as Borges explains in 'Kafka and His Precursors', many of these elements can already be found in works predating Kafka himself. As Borges remarks, 'I had thought, at first, that he was as unique as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; after spending a little time with him, I felt I could recognize his voice, or his habit, in the texts of various literatures and ages'.⁴⁸

The examples which Borges brings up include figures like Soren Kierkegaard, Lord Dunsany, and Léon Bloy, with Borges discerning Kafkaesque qualities within their writings. The story from Dunsany which Borges cites, for instance, entitled 'Carcassonne', tells of a great king who sets out with a vast army in search of the famous city of Carcassonne.⁴⁹ They spend decades on their quest, overcoming all manner of enemies and obstacles, warring with armies and tribes, and declaring war on Fate itself, and yet never come any closer to their ultimate goal. Finally, most of their number lie dead, and, with 'aged eyes' and white beards, they concede that they do not know how to get to Carcassonne, but, after a brief moment of

⁴⁷ Roman S. Struc, "'Negative Capability" and Kafka's Protagonists', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 11 (1978), 87-103 (p. 87).

⁴⁸ Borges, p. 363.

⁴⁹ Lord Dunsany, 'Carcassonne', in *A Dreamer's Tales* (California: CreateSpace, 2015), pp. 75-86.

silence, perhaps in contemplation of the impossible quest which has taken up their lives, ‘they drew their swords, and side by side went down into the forest, still seeking Carcassonne’.⁵⁰

One need not dig deep to find the parallels between this story and works like *The Castle*, for instance, or ‘Before the Law’, with both showcasing a similar concept of an impossible goal that appears close but which the protagonist seems fated never to accomplish. As a result, Borges’s work invites the implication that, as Rex Butler notes in an article on this essay, ‘Kafka once read and was influenced by these precursors and tried to incorporate aspects of them into his work’.⁵¹ However, in Butler’s eyes, it soon becomes evident that this cannot be the case, arguing that ‘as we move through this various and far-flung list featuring authors from such vastly different times and places [which include among them works by pre-Socratic philosophers and mediaeval Chinese writers], we become more and more doubtful whether Kafka could actually have read all of them’.⁵²

Instead, Butler believes that the true import of ‘Kafka and His Precursors’ is found in its conclusion,⁵³ where Borges notes that, although all of these works exhibit ‘Kafka’s idiosyncrasy’ to a certain extent, none of them manage to wholly encapsulate the Kafkaesque in the same way that Kafka himself is able to accomplish, thereby rejecting the idea that the Kafkaesque could have truly existed before Kafka.⁵⁴ ‘If I am not mistaken’, Borges writes, ‘the heterogenous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This last fact is what is most significant. Kafka’s idiosyncrasy is present in each of these writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist’.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Dunsany, p. 85.

⁵¹ Rex Butler, ‘Everything and Nothing: On Jorge Luis Borges’s “Kafka and His Precursors”’, *Romance Quarterly*, 57.2 (2010), 129-141 (p. 132).

⁵² Butler, p. 132.

⁵³ Butler, pp. 132-133.

⁵⁴ Borges, p. 365.

⁵⁵ Borges, p. 365.

This immediately brings to mind T. S. Eliot's seminal essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', where Eliot presents literary tradition as being akin to a monument which is transformed as a whole whenever a new work comes along, adding that, in light of this, the idea 'that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' should in no way be a shocking one.⁵⁶ Butler credits Borges with essentially demonstrating this idea in practice, claiming that 'it is for this idea of a writer creating his or her own precursors, influencing not only the future but also the past, that "Kafka and His Precursors" is best remembered'.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, while Borges's primary intention may have been to prove that the Kafkaesque did originate with Kafka, not just in name but also in substance, his essay does highlight a number of potential sources of influence. After all, despite Butler's insistence that Kafka could not have possibly read all the writers mentioned by Borges, it is certain that he did read at least some of them, since he comments on them, and it is not at all inconceivable to suppose that they influenced his writing.⁵⁸ The significance of this should not be overstated. The myth of pure originality within literary creation has long been debunked, with individuals like Eliot,⁵⁹ or Roland Barthes highlighting the importance and inescapable influence of literary tradition.⁶⁰ However, Borges's revelation of a potential literary source of inspiration for the Kafkaesque remains intriguing, particularly in the context of a study dealing with the impact of the Kafkaesque after Kafka, as it indicates that the very origin of

⁵⁶ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 39-49 (p. 42).

⁵⁷ Butler, p. 133.

⁵⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, for instance, one of the 'precursors' listed by Borges, is referred to multiple times in many of Kafka's letters, including a number penned to Max Brod in 1918 as can be found in Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), pp. 195-203.

⁵⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'; T. S. Eliot, 'The Frontiers of Criticism', *The Sewanee Review*, 64.4 (1956), 525-543.

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 142-148.

the Kafkaesque itself may in part be a crystallisation of a number of different elements found within various writers, all filtered through the mind of the Czech author.

Of course, this is not to say that the experience of living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire towards the beginning of the twentieth century had no part to play in the birth of the Kafkaesque. In fact, the question of how Kafka's personal life and historical context may have contributed to its development is one which is touched upon by multiple critics. Malcolm Pasley, for instance, suggests that all of Kafka's works are filtered through the lens of his own existence, stating that, for Kafka, 'nothing really true or significant could be expressed except through the channel of personal experience', and that in this wide sense all his writing is autobiographical.⁶¹ Anthony Northey, meanwhile, writes that '[i]t is indubitable that reality in the shape of stimuli from the outside world entered Kafka's work',⁶² while Julian Preece agrees with this, noting that Kafka's 'images of fractured perception, his figures' search for wholeness, and their experience of authority divorced from responsibility are modernist images of Europe on the brink of its most awful hour'.⁶³

Perhaps two of the most prominent academic voices in this regard are those of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who, in their groundbreaking work, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, delve deeply into the impact of Kafka's historical context on the creation of his works.⁶⁴ To recapitulate the most salient points of this lengthy discussion in brief, the two philosophers claim that Kafka's writings are a perfect example of what they term as minor literature, which is a literature that is created when a member of a social minority writes using a major, or established, language. As they put it, '[a] minor literature doesn't come

⁶¹ Malcolm Pasley, 'Kafka's Semi-private Games', *Oxford German Studies*, 6.1 (1971), 112-131 (p. 119).

⁶² Anthony Northey, 'Myths and realities in Kafka biography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 189-205 (p. 189).

⁶³ Julian Preece, 'Introduction: Kafka's Europe', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, pp. 1-8 (p. 2).

⁶⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language',⁶⁵ just as in the case of Kafka, who is a Czech Jew writing in German.⁶⁶

In Deleuze and Guattari's eyes, the overriding concern of such literature is always dominated by the conditions in which it is created, and that 'everything in them is political', irrespective of what the actual subject of the work may appear to be about.⁶⁷ In minor literature, they argue, the 'cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics', so much so that even the familial issues that haunted Kafka's life are, to their minds, 'connect[ed] to other triangles – commercial, economic, bureaucratic, juridical – that determine its values', with the main issue at heart being not one 'of an Oedipal phantasm but of a political program'.⁶⁸ Even Kafka's very language, they insist, must be viewed within this paradigm, arguing that in minor literature, the language used is always 'affected with a high coefficient for deterritorialization', with the writers in question making it their own.⁶⁹ Kafka does so, they believe, by consciously choosing to 'opt for the German language of Prague as it is and in its very poverty' in a revolutionary act which allows him to 'challenge the language' and become a 'revolutionary force for all literature',⁷⁰ by 'tear[ing] out of Prague German all the qualities of underdevelopment that it has tried to hide',⁷¹ and then making it 'vibrate with a new intensity'.⁷²

⁶⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Other examples put forward by Deleuze and Guattari include James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, both of whom 'live within the genial conditions of a minor literature' since they are Irishmen writing in English (Deleuze and Guattari, p. 19.)

⁶⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 17.

⁶⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 17.

⁶⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 16.

⁷⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 19.

⁷¹ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 26.

⁷² Deleuze and Guattari, p. 19. At this point, it must be acknowledged that Deleuze and Guattari's work does have its dissenters, with Stanley Corngold, for instance, taking aim at their claims about Kafka's language in his essay 'Kafka and the Dialect of Minor Literature', where he insists that the distinctions between Kafka's German and the high standard are in fact very subtle, with Kafka's language being 'at most only a faintly dialectical coloration of High German, barely audible as regional sociolect and not the distinctive language of a community', and further posits that the two critics 'valorized' the subtle variations 'in order to turn Kafka's literary German into a kind of polemical idelect [*sic*] aimed against high German literature', without this necessarily being the case. (Stanley Corngold, 'Kafka and the Dialect of Minor Literature', *College Literature*, 21.1 (1994), 89-101 (p. 89)).

Thus, Kafka's works, and with them, the Kafkaesque, can be seen as arising out of the reality of early twentieth-century Europe, and being in turn a reflection, and an indictment, of this period, as Georg Lukács notes when he states that Kafka 'described and "demonized" [...] the world of the Hapsburg [sic] Monarchy',⁷³ since his fictional worlds are never portrayed as positive realities. Furthermore, the labyrinthine bureaucratic institutions that pervade his writings have also been traced to his historical context. Northey, for instance, observes that 'bureaucracy formed one of the mainstays of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of its life',⁷⁴ while Hannah Arendt insists that the fact '[t]hat *The Trial* implies a critique of the pre-war Austro-Hungarian bureaucratic regime [...] has been understood from the first appearance of the novel',⁷⁵ which Struc also maintains when he notes that one of the major readings of *The Trial* 'views the novel as a *Verfremdung* of recognizable contemporary reality associated with vicissitudes of bureaucratic labyrinths of the Danube Monarchy'.⁷⁶ Of course, Kafka himself also worked within a highly bureaucratic institution, namely the 'Workers' Accident Insurance Institute', and as Northey points out, it has become '[a]n accepted part of Kafkan mythology [...] that the bureaucracy, bureaucratic red tape, endless files, and even the woodworking machines, for which Kafka advertised safety features, went into the conception of his work'.⁷⁷

Perhaps Kundera best brings out the extent of the influence which Kafka's own life had on the establishment of the Kafkaesque when he looks at the dynamics of Kafka's family – in particular, the dysfunctional relationship between the author and his father, who was an overbearing figure – and notes that it was from this lived experience 'that Kafka drew his knowledge of the *technique of culpabilization* which became a major theme in his fiction',

⁷³ Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. by John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), pp. 77-78.

⁷⁴ Northey, p. 198.

⁷⁵ Hannah Arendt, 'Franz Kafka: A Revaluation', in *Essays in understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), pp. 69-80 (p. 71).

⁷⁶ Struc, p. 88.

⁷⁷ Northey, p. 200.

and a notable element of the Kafkaesque.⁷⁸ The difficult relationship between Kafka and his father is well documented in many works, including Reiner Stach's *Kafka: The Decisive Years*,⁷⁹ as well as Kafka's own *Letter to The Father*, a letter written, but never sent, by the author himself where he breaks down the negative impact which his father has had on him.⁸⁰

As mentioned above, critics like Deleuze and Guattari believe that the impact of such familial, or 'Oedipal', concerns is overstated, with the two even bemoaning *Letter to The Father* as being the source of 'so many unfortunate psychoanalytic interpretations' of Kafka's works,⁸¹ and yet the influence of such factors cannot be completely dismissed, especially when one looks at stories like 'The Judgement', for instance, as Kundera points out.⁸² Here, an elderly and ostensibly ailing father lays a number of seemingly absurd accusations on his son, finally condemning him to death by drowning, whereupon the young man, obediently and without question, rushes to the nearest bridge and launches himself off it, as if it is unthinkable for him to even suppose that he may not be deserving of the blame which his father is accusing him of.⁸³

Thus, as has been illustrated, the potential influences on the birth of the Kafkaesque range from the literary, to the historical, and to the familial context of Kafka himself. Certain critics do emphasise one or another of these factors, but it is difficult to rule out, or determine the supremacy of any one element with any certainty. As Kundera notes in *Testaments Betrayed*, the temptation to do so inevitably leads to a thwarted and limited understanding of the writer or the work.⁸⁴ The critic speaks of the desire to view Kafka as the manifestation of

⁷⁸ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 110.

⁷⁹ Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Decisive Years*, trans. by Shelley Frisch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁸⁰ Franz Kafka, *Letter to The Father*, trans. by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 2015).

⁸¹ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 9.

⁸² *The Art of the Novel*, p. 110.

⁸³ Franz Kafka, 'The Judgment', pp. 25-39.

⁸⁴ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Perennial, 2001), pp. 262-269.

a ‘perfect correspondence between lived experience and literary expression’, but insists that if we restrict our understanding of Kafka to this alone, we would be detracting from his accomplishments and a true comprehension of what his work is achieving in the wider context of literary history.⁸⁵

Testaments Betrayed also deals with another essential issue in the context of the Kafkaesque, namely, the question of translation. Kafka’s works were all originally written in German, and yet he is often read, understood, and analysed in translation, which can carry with it a number of concerns, especially in light of the insistence by critics like Deleuze and Guattari on just how closely interwoven Kafka’s language is with the power and import of his texts. As Kundera explains in his own writings on the subject, the intention and effect of Kafka’s work are often linked to the specific words and stylistic features employed by the author, which can be considerably impacted by the translator’s choices, resulting in a final product that varies from the original in its effects.⁸⁶ Indeed, a similar complaint is put forward by Breon Mitchell, who argues that Kafka’s work owes much of its power to ‘a closely woven web of linguistic motifs that must be rendered consistently’, since they complement each other and have a cumulative effect.⁸⁷ With this in mind, Mitchell criticises certain translations of Kafka, since he claims that they strive so hard to ‘create a readable and stylistically refined version’ of Kafka, that in the process, ‘they consistently overlooked or deliberately varied the repetitions or interconnections that echo so meaningfully in the ear of every attentive reader’.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Testaments Betrayed*, p. 268.

⁸⁶ *Testaments Betrayed*, pp. 99-116.

⁸⁷ Breon Mitchell, ‘Translator’s Preface’, in *The Trial*, trans. by Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998) pp. xv-xxvi (p. xviii).

⁸⁸ Mitchell, p. xviii.

These concerns are noteworthy, and while it must be said that there is a more positive view on translation that is championed by many, including, most notably, Benjamin,⁸⁹ it would be futile to deny that there are potential pitfalls present when dealing with a work in translation. This is relevant to the purposes of this study in a number of ways, with the most significant being that, as a result, there will not be any concrete conclusions being drawn with regard to the stylistic or tonal aspects of the Kafkaesque, since these can vary depending on the translation. Instead, to minimise this fallacy as much as possible, this project will be focusing on those tangible elements that make up the Kafkaesque, as listed above, which are far less dependent on the language being used.

As will now be discussed in the following chapters, these elements feature prominently in many literary works that follow Kafka's own, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, evidencing the presence and influence of the Kafkaesque on the literature of this era. The general extent of Kafka's impact on literary tradition and popular culture is already widely acknowledged, with Iris Bruce, for instance, observing how the author has inspired works from different genres and varying mediums, including comic books and even cinema, with examples like Woody Allen's *Zelig*,⁹⁰ and David Cronenberg's *The Fly*,⁹¹ both of which she sees as being influenced by 'The Metamorphosis'.⁹² This influence, as critics like Joseph Strelka have noted, can be of a direct nature, as in some of the works

⁸⁹ In his seminal work, 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin speaks of how this process reveals the underlying relationships between languages, which, he claims, 'are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express', suggesting that what is expressed in one language should be capable of being identically expressed in another (p. 72). In fact, for Benjamin, the primary concern with regard to translation should be the intention, or 'intended effect' of a work, and that one should seek to identify and reproduce 'the echo of the original' in the target language (p. 76). Consequently, from such a viewpoint, it should then be possible for the full force of Kafka's works to be accurately rendered in another language, and for the Kafkaesque to survive this process unblemished. (Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 69-82).

⁹⁰ *Zelig*, dir. by Woody Allen (Warner Bros., 1983).

⁹¹ *The Fly*, dir. by David Cronenberg (20th Century Fox, 1986).

⁹² Iris Bruce, 'Kafka and popular culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, pp. 242-246 (p. 244).

seen in the collection *Kafkaesque*, where exact parallels with Kafka stories can be traced,⁹³ but it can also be of a more indirect and complex manner.⁹⁴ The question which now follows is that of how exactly have these elements been appropriated, altered, and evolved by the twentieth-century writers who have followed Kafka, and what, in turn, can such insights reveal about the nature of the Kafkaesque itself, if at all.

The three novels chosen for this exercise, namely Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*,⁹⁵ J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*,⁹⁶ and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*,⁹⁷ are separated by both time and space – being written in different decades and emerging from different literary traditions – which makes it even more intriguing to note that they are all unified by one thing – a distinct indebtedness to Kafka, with their worlds being inspired and influenced by the Kafkaesque in different ways and to varying degrees. While this divergence in publication date and country of origin is one of the reasons behind their selection, since it allows for a more comprehensive view of the presence of the Kafkaesque within the literary sphere, these novels are also significant since their authors do not simply offer a mere imitation of Kafka, but rather utilise the Kafkaesque for their own ends, transporting it to their ages and making it relevant and applicable to their own contexts.

Heller, for instance, brings it to the field of battle, and to the world of contemporary American social reality, while Coetzee uses it to engage with the complex political situation of apartheid-era South Africa, and Ishiguro applies it to his deeply introspective journey into the human psyche. In the process, each of them creates something which is unmistakably distinct from Kafka's literary worlds, and yet which can still be confidently labelled

⁹³ One such example is T. Coraghessan Boyle's 'The Big Garage', which is almost a perfect mirror of *The Trial* (T. Coraghessan Boyle, 'The Big Garage', in *Kafkaesque: Stories Inspired by Franz Kafka*, ed. by John Kessel, and James Patrick Kelly (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2011), pp. 85-104).

⁹⁴ Joseph Strelka, 'Kafkaesque Elements in Kafka's Novels and in Contemporary Narrative Prose', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 21.4 (1984), 434-444 (p. 434).

⁹⁵ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

⁹⁶ J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (South Africa: Ravan Press, 1983).

⁹⁷ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

‘Kafkaesque’, since, in the words of Borges, ‘Kafka’s idiosyncrasy is present’ in them.⁹⁸ By doing so, such writers are not simply illustrating the longevity and continued pertinence of the Kafkaesque, but also its adaptable nature, and uncanny ability to be moulded into situations far removed from Kafka’s own, with all the intriguing implications that this carries with it, as shall be duly explored.

⁹⁸ Borges, p. 365.

Joseph Heller's Reworking of the Kafkaesque in *Catch-22*

Of the novels that will be the focus of this study, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is perhaps the one that most happily dons the cloak of the Kafkaesque.⁹⁹ The elements that make up Heller's fictional world, the rules that govern it, and the events which occur throughout the novel, can, for the most part, be said to fall squarely within its realm, with there even being certain segments that are quasi-exact parallels of corresponding episodes in Kafka's own works. That being said, Heller, as mentioned above, is not providing a mere reworking of the Kafkaesque. Writing in a different context, and with his own goals and motivations, he is both adopting the Kafkaesque as well as deviating from it, and it is the intention of this chapter to explore both these aspects and their ultimate functions.

Before this is undertaken, however, there needs to be a brief discussion of the critical milieu in which *Catch-22* resides, especially with regard to its link to the Kafkaesque. Taking into consideration the palpable presence of the Kafkaesque within the novel, one might expect to come across multiple studies laying out the intricacies of this literary relationship, but, strangely enough, few critics have elected to comment on this connection, with those doing so often choosing to glance over this issue without giving it the attention it deserves. This is not to say that there is a complete absence of any remarks on Kafka and Heller, with Paul McDonald, for instance, noting that '[o]f those writers who have influenced the spirit or atmosphere of *Catch-22*, it is arguably the work of Kafka that seems the most significant', and going on to add that the nonsensical world of Heller's novel mirrors that of Kafka's stories.¹⁰⁰ As he explains, '[t]he world is like a prison in Kafka's works, and his protagonists

⁹⁹ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

¹⁰⁰ Paul McDonald, *Reading 'Catch-22': A Literature Insight* (Penrith: Humanities Ebooks, LLP, 2012), p. 26.

are like Yossarian, trapped by incomprehensible bureaucracy and seemingly senseless decrees'.¹⁰¹

Similarly, Richard Lehan and Jerry Patch argue that the absurdity of Heller's fictional world is fundamentally Kafkaesque at its core, and that 'the overstructured and bureaucratic world of Kafka [...] is the world of Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), where one is dead if his 201-file says he is dead, even if he is there to protest that the file is wrong'.¹⁰² This aspect of the Kafkaesque – where the letter of the law, no matter how illogical, is held to fanatically, even when faced with opposing evidence, or in spite of its self-contradictory nature – lies at the very heart of Heller's novel, with the titular 'catch' being the best example of how central it is to his literary work, as shall be discussed presently.

Such examples are these, however, do appear to be the exceptions that prove the rule, with most commentators appearing to take the substantial debt which Heller's work owes to Kafka for granted. Conversely, and perhaps most crucially, Heller himself has no qualms about acknowledging the influence of his predecessor, stating, with regard to his second novel, *Something Happened*, that:

I was trying very hard to *keep* the context of our society, not only familiar but with nothing extraordinary in it and yet maybe as horrifying as Kafka does in his world [...] I'm trying to get the same sense of imprisonment, of intimidation, of psychological paralysis and enslavement.¹⁰³

Although these comments are not about *Catch-22*, they nevertheless point towards the author's understanding not only of Kafka, but also of some of the chief aspects of the

¹⁰¹ McDonald, p. 26.

¹⁰² Richard Lehan and Jerry Patch, 'Catch-22: The Making of a Novel', in *Joseph Heller's 'Catch-22'*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008), pp. 81-89 (p. 81). Originally published in *Minnesota Review*, 7 (1967), 235-244.

¹⁰³ James Shapiro, 'Work in Progress: An Interview with Joseph Heller', *Intellectual Digest*, 2 (1971), 6-11 (p. 8).

Kafkaesque that were touched upon in the previous chapter, all of which are employed by him in *Catch-22* as well.

To understand precisely why they are being used, it is time to look at the novel itself, and its context, more closely. *Catch-22* is set during the Second World War, with the action taking place, for the most part, on the Mediterranean island of Pianosa, and it primarily follows the exploits of Captain John Yossarian, a US bombardier who is trying his utmost to ‘live forever or die in the attempt’, in the face of an irrational world that seems intent on denying him his reprieve from the war in spite of the fact that he has fulfilled all criteria to conclude his tour of duty.¹⁰⁴

With his choice of setting, Heller is already deviating from his precursor since, unlike Kafka’s vague and undefined locations, he is grounding his work in a real, definite place. It must be noted that, in the foreword to the novel, Heller declares that his Pianosa is a fictionalised version, since the actual island ‘is very small and obviously could not accommodate all of the actions described’.¹⁰⁵ However, as James Nagel explains, in Heller’s original manuscript this island was actually Corsica, where the author himself was stationed during the war, before being changed to Pianosa at the last minute.¹⁰⁶ The reasons behind this revision were never explained, but one may surmise that Heller may have wished to distance the novel from his own biography somewhat,¹⁰⁷ while nonetheless ensuring that it was close

¹⁰⁴ *Catch-22*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Foreword’, in *Catch-22*.

¹⁰⁶ James Nagel, ‘The *Catch-22* Note Cards’, in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, ed. by James Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 51–61 (p. 55).

¹⁰⁷ Heller’s reluctance for his works to be read as autobiographical comes across in an interview with Barbara Gelb about *Closing Time*, the 1994 sequel to *Catch-22*. Here, Gelb questions him about the similarities between Yossarian and Sammy Singer – the protagonist of *Closing Time* – on the one hand, and Heller himself on the other. The author’s response is emphatic: ‘This is not autobiography. I am not the subject of this novel,’ he states, before going on to acknowledge that many aspects of both characters are indeed drawn from his own experiences. (Barbara Gelb, ‘Catch-22 Plus: A Conversation With Joseph Heller’, *The New York Times*, 28 August 1994, par. 16 of 67) <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/15/home/heller-conversation.html> [accessed 20 November 2024].

enough to real life for readers to readily understand that it is ‘a setting which suggests a microcosm of the modern world’, as Thomas Allen Nelson observes.¹⁰⁸

All this begins to make sense when one realises that, contrary to the impression of critics like Harold Bloom, who berates a portrayal of the Second World War ‘characterised by Heller’s parodistic cast of con-men, schemers, profiteers, and mad commanders’, which belittles ‘the war against Hitler, the SS, and the death camps’, *Catch-22* is not an anti-war novel at all, in spite of the work’s setting and its proximity to the Vietnam War, as is asserted by the author himself multiple times.¹⁰⁹ In ‘*Catch-22* Revisited’, for instance, Heller insists that his own experience of the war was actually ‘a pretty good life’, since there was plenty to do between missions, and ‘[t]he food was good – better, in fact, than most of us had ever eaten before’,¹¹⁰ in sharp contrast to the chocolate-covered cotton that Milo Minderbinder, the mess officer, attempts to feed the pilots in Pianosa.¹¹¹ In fact, as the author explains, ‘all of the spirit [of *Catch-22*] derive[s] from civilian experience in the years following the war’,¹¹² which means that the work is a commentary and reflection on his contemporary context – or as he calls it, ‘an encyclopaedia of the current mental atmosphere’ – as opposed to a criticism of a historical event or even of war in general.¹¹³

Furthermore, the author fiercely attacks any notion that *Catch-22* is attempting to deride or parody war, asserting that ‘it may, in fact, be impossible to “satirize” war’, and declaring that the novel’s true concern is with ‘the contemporary, regimented business society’ of his time.¹¹⁴ Essentially, as Robert Brustein observes, ‘Heller, at war with much

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Allen Nelson, ‘Theme and Structure in *Catch-22*’, in *Joseph Heller’s ‘Catch-22’*, pp. 99-108 (p. 100). Originally published in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, 4.23 (1971), 173–182.

¹⁰⁹ Harold Bloom, ‘Introduction’, in *Joseph Heller’s ‘Catch-22’*, pp. 1-2 (p. 2).

¹¹⁰ Joseph Heller, ‘*Catch-22* Revisited’, in *Catch As Catch Can: The Collected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Park Bucker (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 275-297 (p. 287).

¹¹¹ *Catch-22*, p. 261.

¹¹² Joseph Heller, ‘A Special Message to Subscribers’, in *Joseph Heller’s ‘Catch-22’*, pp. 123-124 (p. 123). Originally published in Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, Franklin Library Edition (Washington D.C.: Franklin Mint, 1978).

¹¹³ ‘An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller’, *The Realist*, 39 (1962), 18-31 (p. 18).

¹¹⁴ Joseph Heller, ‘Joseph Heller Replies’, *The Realist*, 50 (1964), 30.

larger forces than the army, has provided his book with much wider implications than a war novel', with Pianosa becoming 'a satirical microcosm for many of the macrocosmic idiocies of our time'.¹¹⁵ This is an important detail, since it indicates that Heller has a very specific purpose in his novel, and, as he puts it, that 'the content of the book really derives from our present atmosphere which is one of chaos, of disorganisation, of absurdity, of cruelty, of brutality, [and] of insensitivity'.¹¹⁶ It is in response to these 'very tragic situations' of his times that the world of *Catch-22* is created,¹¹⁷ and, tellingly, it is to the Kafkaesque that the author turns to in order to get this scathing message across.

With this context in mind we can now turn to look more closely at how exactly the Kafkaesque is manifested in his novel to this end. The natural starting point to this discussion are those episodes which, as mentioned earlier, stand out as being almost exact reflections of certain events in Kafka's works, while nevertheless acquiring a different significance in Heller's hands. The two chief examples in this regard are the trials that take place in *Catch-22*, both of which parallel the circumstances of Kafka's *The Trial*.

The initial case concerns the idealistic Clevinger, a cadet described by Yossarian as 'a very serious, very earnest and very conscientious dope'.¹¹⁸ Full of naivety, Clevinger decides to speak honestly when questioned about problems on the parade ground,¹¹⁹ and upon doing so, is immediately branded as one of the 'people with minds', which, in his superiors' eyes, is worthy of a court martial, since 'people with minds tended to get pretty smart at times', and '[s]uch men were dangerous'.¹²⁰ 'The only thing missing', Heller writes, 'was something to charge him with', but this is not an issue within the novel's Kafkaesque world.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ Robert Brustein, 'The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World', *New Republic*, 23 September 2013 <https://newrepublic.com/article/114827/rubert-brustein-joseph-hellers-catch-22> [accessed 23 November 2024] (para. 5 of 8). Originally published in *New Republic*, 13 November 1961, pp. xx–xx.

¹¹⁶ 'An Impolite Interview', p. 19.

¹¹⁷ 'Joseph Heller Replies', p. 30.

¹¹⁸ *Catch-22*, p. 69.

¹¹⁹ *Catch-22*, pp. 69–70.

¹²⁰ *Catch-22*, p. 71.

¹²¹ *Catch-22*, p. 71.

In fact, the Kafkaesque nature of this trial quickly becomes evident when the reader learns of the absurd accusations being put forward – including a charge that ‘he had stumbled while marching to class’ – and it turns even more palpable when we learn that the same officer who has it in for Clevinger is one of the judges presiding over the case, as well as being both the prosecutor and the defending officer.¹²² Ultimately, the reader is informed that ‘Clevinger was guilty, of course, or he would not have been accused, and since the only way to prove it was to find him guilty, it was their patriotic duty to do so’, which is what the judges go on to do, without ever informing him just exactly what he is guilty of.¹²³

The links to Kafka’s own treatment of this subject matter are clear, with Joseph K. being left similarly uninformed of the charges being brought against him, while nevertheless being expected to defend himself against them. Furthermore, the conclusion to the trial of the earlier novel also appears to be a foregone one, confirmed before it even begins, as K. is told when he meets the painter Titorelli, who states that ‘[t]he court can never be persuaded to change its mind’ in its conviction of the accused’s guilt, irrespective of what arguments are made or what evidence is brought forward.¹²⁴ The result is that, as K. says, ‘[t]he whole court could be replaced by a single executioner’, such is the inevitability of the process, and it is this same sense of inevitability that one can find in Heller’s work, even if the sentence is not as fatal.¹²⁵

A similar situation occurs with the second trial, the Kafkaesque nature of which has also been commented upon by Robert Merrill, who labels it as an ‘inquisition’.¹²⁶ In this instance, the squadron’s Chaplain Tappman is arrested for a crime whose exact nature even his accusers appear to be unaware of, much as in the case of *The Trial*.¹²⁷ When he protests

¹²² *Catch-22*, pp. 75-76.

¹²³ *Catch-22*, p. 81.

¹²⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. by Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 107.

¹²⁵ *The Trial*, p. 110.

¹²⁶ Robert Merrill, *Joseph Heller* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), p. 43.

¹²⁷ *Catch-22*, p. 380.

his innocence his prosecutors quickly retort with the Kafkaesque question, '[t]hen why would we be questioning you if you weren't guilty?', as if the accusation itself is already proof of guilt.¹²⁸ Heller then amplifies things further, with his chaplain also being charged with 'the commission of crimes and infractions we don't even know about yet'.¹²⁹ When Tappman insists that he needs to know his crimes in order to defend himself against them, he is simply told, '[h]ow can we tell you if we don't know?', before being promptly found guilty on all charges.¹³⁰ In spite of this sentence, however, the chaplain is allowed to walk free, albeit with the promise of an imminent yet undefined punishment constantly hanging over his head.¹³¹

Despite their non-fatality, Heller manages to evoke a considerably ominous tone through these events, primarily through his choice to place the Kafkaesque, with all its surrealistic qualities, within a grounded and familiar setting (especially to readers at the time) that emphasises how realistic these seemingly fantastical scenarios can actually be. Reading *The Trial*, one can be forgiven for supposing that K.'s misfortunes could never befall anyone in real life, but Heller denies us this comforting illusion by showing, time and time again, that no one is safe, and moreover, by departing from Kafka, who leaves the motivations behind K.'s ill-treatment undeclared, to provide an explanation for these situations, revealing that what at first appears to be irrational behaviour is not irrational at all, but rather a terrifying, twisted, and '[i]mmoral logic', as the Chaplain calls it.¹³²

Thus, for instance, when Yossarian is contemplating challenging the tyrannical Colonel Cathcart, he is told that this would force the colonel to court-martial him, where he would then be found guilty 'of rape, extensive black-market operations, acts of sabotage and the sale of military secrets to the enemy', even though, as Yossarian protests, he 'never did a

¹²⁸ *Catch-22*, p. 384.

¹²⁹ *Catch-22*, p. 386.

¹³⁰ *Catch-22*, p. 386.

¹³¹ *Catch-22*, pp. 386-357.

¹³² *Catch-22*, p. 387.

single one of those things'.¹³³ Up to this point, the events appear to be following the Kafkaesque template seen in works like *The Trial*, or 'The Judgement', where the question of whether one is truly innocent or guilty appears to be ultimately inconsequential. However, Heller then adds a passage in which this absurd scenario is given a justificatory logic, with Major Danby stating that

[...] it would not help the war effort to bring Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn into disrepute now. [...] If you were court-martialed and found innocent, other men would probably refuse to fly missions, too. [...] So in that way it *would* be for the good of the country to have you found guilty and put in prison, even though you *are* innocent.¹³⁴

By having Danby explain the rationalisation behind this ostensibly absurd world, Heller is highlighting how close to reality his Kafkaesque circumstances can actually be, through which the reader can see that the same state of affairs that initially appears far-fetched and ridiculous can quickly become normalised and acceptable. It is this didactic and critical impulse behind his work that leads Heller to employ the Kafkaesque in a slightly different manner to Kafka, even if the same features and traits appear in both.

In fact, absurdist though it may be, the Kafkaesque in Heller's world is also backed up by the notion (not present in Kafka's works) that any protest or opposition to such absurdities is inherently wrong and should be eliminated, with the aim being, of course, for this to be a warning against the justification of anything and everything as being for the good of one's country. As the author states, '[w]hat distresses me very much is that the ethic that is often dictated by a wartime emergency [...] is carried over into areas of peace [...] where the same demands are made upon the individual in the cause of national interest'.¹³⁵ This, he argues,

¹³³ *Catch-22*, p. 443.

¹³⁴ *Catch-22*, p. 443.

¹³⁵ 'An Impolite Interview', p. 26.

‘leads not only to absurd situations but to very tragic situations’,¹³⁶ and perhaps this notion is most succinctly brought out in the novel with Milo’s warning to Yossarian that ‘he was jeopardizing his traditional rights of freedom and independence by daring to exercise them’, as one realises that this excuse can be easily implemented to quash all opposition to any decree whatsoever.¹³⁷

On a similar note, the presence in the world of the Kafkaesque of a labyrinthine and seemingly omnipotent institution which one can never truly understand or escape from is also a feature which Heller appropriates, but this too is slightly modified, as the American’s fictional institution is a military one, as opposed to the judicial or governmental organisations which can be found in *The Trial* and *The Castle* respectively. Heller also amplifies the power which his institution wields, once more intensifying an element which Kafka provides, but the establishment at the heart of *Catch-22* nevertheless directly parallels those found within Kafka’s works in many ways.

Thus, as in Kafka’s novels, Heller’s institution is ultimately a faceless one, where, although some representatives might be encountered, the individuals in charge of the entire organisation remain invisible. In *The Castle*, for instance, K. does come across certain castle officials like Mr Klammer,¹³⁸ but he never comes close to meeting Count Westwest, who is described as the owner of the castle as well as the entire village.¹³⁹ Similarly, in *Catch-22*, the reader does meet Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn, who may be regarded as the military institution’s primary representatives in the novel, and is also introduced to even more superior officers, such as General Peckem and General Dreedle, but the people from whom their authority flows remain both absent and nameless.

¹³⁶ ‘An Impolite Interview’, p. 26.

¹³⁷ *Catch-22*, p. 405.

¹³⁸ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. by Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 36.

¹³⁹ *The Castle*, p. 5.

This means that when some pilots begin to question the point of their missions, the only response is that ‘it apparently makes some difference to Headquarters’, followed by the declaration that ‘we’ve got to have some confidence in the people above us who issue orders’, without, it would seem, questioning the sensibility of the orders, or even who is issuing them.¹⁴⁰ As John W. Aldridge sharply notes,

the deeply lodged suspicion in both *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* is that there is no one at all in charge, that Kafka’s castle is in fact empty, that there is no crime for which one eternally stands condemned, no order behind organization, no system behind bureaucratic structure, no governing principle behind government, that what is happening is happening for no reason, and that there is absolutely nothing to be done about it because the causes responsible cannot be located and the very idea of responsibility may have lost all meaning.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, the world of *Catch-22* is also inundated with bureaucracy, which adds to both its absurdist and labyrinthine aspects, while also helping to create the feeling of entrapment that Yossarian is terrorised by. The fathomless bureaucracies of this fictional realm are illustrated at multiple points throughout the novel, but perhaps the true power of bureaucracy – or as the *OED* defines it, the ‘excessive concern with formal processes’¹⁴² – in Heller’s Kafkaesque emerges in those instances where it can almost, but not quite, literally alter reality. During one of their stretches in hospital, for instance, Yossarian and his friend Dunbar decide to occupy the beds of other invalids so as to be nearer to each other. The moment they do so, they, to all intents and purposes, *become* these other individuals.¹⁴³ At first, Yossarian thinks that Dunbar has gone mad when the latter insists that he is not actually

¹⁴⁰ *Catch-22*, p. 326.

¹⁴¹ John W. Aldridge, ‘The Deceits of Black Humour’, in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, pp. 157-163 (p. 160).

¹⁴² *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘bureaucracy’

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bureaucracy_n?tab=meaning_and_use [accessed 19 November 2024].

¹⁴³ *Catch-22*, pp. 290-291.

Dunbar, but then, after ‘he limped across the aisle to peruse the name on the temperature card on the foot of Dunbar’s bed’, he realises that ‘Dunbar was right; he was not Dunbar any more but Second Lieutenant Anthony F. Fortiori’.¹⁴⁴

Such is the power which the ‘formal processes’ of this world wield that, if the name of one’s card is changed, then their entire identity is revised with it. The identity shifts are narrated as if they were natural and commonplace, which is how all the surrounding characters treat them, as no one appears to even contemplate questioning what the official papers state. As such, the reader is told that ‘A. Fortiori climbed into [Dunbar’s] bed and became Dunbar again’,¹⁴⁵ while a short while later, Yossarian is encouraged to ‘try becoming Warrant Officer Homer Lumley for a while’, which he does for an hour or so until he grows tired of it.¹⁴⁶

The crowning episode that evidences what may be termed as the ‘administrative determinism’ at play in *Catch-22* is that involving Doc Daneeka, the squadron’s flight surgeon, who is officially declared dead, and treated as such until it practically becomes true, even though he is still alive. This comes about since, wishing to collect his monthly flight allowance but abhorring the experience of flight, the doctor decides to have his name put down in the flight logs without actually boarding the plane.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately, this means that when a plane which he is supposed to be on crashes, he is declared officially dead, since no one sees him parachuting out, despite the fact that he is physically present on the ground during the incident alongside the other spectators.¹⁴⁸

In the world of *Catch-22*, where official documentation matters more than sensory perception of fact, Daneeka’s living presence is not enough to refute the inflexible official

¹⁴⁴ *Catch-22*, p. 290.

¹⁴⁵ *Catch-22*, p. 290.

¹⁴⁶ *Catch-22*, p. 291.

¹⁴⁷ *Catch-22*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁸ *Catch-22*, p. 340.

statements, and his death is immediately taken as fact, in spite of his protests to the contrary. Rather than oppose the official stance, his comrades simply choose to discreetly avoid any interaction with the doctor, or, when forced to do so, politely inform him that he is, in fact, dead, as in the case of this interaction below:

“You’re dead, sir,” one of his two enlisted men explained.

Doc Daneeka jerked his head up quickly with resentful distrust. “What’s that?”

“You’re dead, sir”, repeated the other. “That’s probably the reason you always feel so cold.”

[...]

“What the *hell* are you both talking about?” Doc Daneeka cried shrilly with a surging, petrifying sensation of some onrushing unavoidable disaster.

“It’s true sir,” said one of the enlisted men. “The records show that you went up in McWatt’s plane to collect some flight time. You didn’t come down in a parachute, so you must have been killed in the crash.”¹⁴⁹

Once Daneeka has his name listed on the flight log, the bureaucratic process is set in motion, and in Heller’s world, nothing can stop it, not even reality itself. Thus, reality is effectively altered to fit what the records are saying, in a manner far more powerful and thorough than anything found in Kafka’s own works, since a man is practically wiped out from existence due to a document. This ludicrous situation is treated with the same matter-of-factness shown here by practically everyone else who runs into the doctor, but its potentially humorous side quickly dissipates when one learns that, as a dead man, he is no longer allowed to draw any pay or rations, quickly becoming dependent ‘on the charity of

¹⁴⁹ *Catch-22*, p, 341.

Sergeant Towser and Milo, who both knew he was dead', and yet help him anyway, as if the two actions were not completely contradictory.¹⁵⁰ It takes the doctor a while, but he eventually does discover that, 'to all intents and purposes, he really was dead', made so not by the bombs of war, but by the bureaucracies of this world which are strictly abided by without question.¹⁵¹

At this point it should be becoming clear just how closely the world of *Catch-22* is patterned on the Kafkaesque. Practically all of its central features, as discussed in the previous chapter, can be found in Heller's work, albeit altered in order to better fit his context and intentions, including its inherent absurdities, intricate bureaucracies, and the fact that it usually constitutes 'a world that is nothing but a single, huge labyrinthine institution they cannot escape and cannot understand'.¹⁵² Additionally, as in Kafka's works, the perplexing nature of the organisation at the heart of Kafkaesque realities also leads to a powerful feeling of entrapment and helplessness within Heller's cast of characters, which is particularly prominent in Yossarian's case, but is also ubiquitous among his colleagues, as in the example of Daneeka in the passage quoted above, whose 'surging, petrifying sensation of some onrushing unavoidable disaster', perfectly captures his sense of utter powerlessness, as it begins to dawn on him that he has fallen into a trap from which he can never escape.¹⁵³

In Yossarian's regard, this Kafkaesque motif is continuously evoked through his repeated, yet futile attempts to evade Colonel Cathcart's strategy of constantly increasing the number of missions that his men are expected to fly, with this being the Colonel's 'most tangible achievement' in his quest for promotion.¹⁵⁴ For Yossarian, who has 'decided to live forever or die in the attempt',¹⁵⁵ after having the revelation that '[i]t doesn't make a damned

¹⁵⁰ *Catch-22*, p. 343.

¹⁵¹ *Catch-22*, p. 344.

¹⁵² Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Perennial Classics, 1988), p. 101.

¹⁵³ *Catch-22*, p. 341.

¹⁵⁴ *Catch-22*, p. 214.

¹⁵⁵ *Catch-22*, p. 29.

bit of difference *who* wins the war to someone who's dead',¹⁵⁶ this is unacceptable, but his efforts to extract himself from Cathcart's machinations are inevitably obstructed by the absurd bureaucracies of his world, which are most frequently manifested as the titular Catch-22.

Thus, when Yossarian attempts to gain exemption from flying any more combat missions by deciding 'right there and then to go crazy',¹⁵⁷ he is quickly informed that

[t]here was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr [one of Yossarian's fellow pilots] was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. [...] If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to, but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to.¹⁵⁸

As David M. Craig sums it up, '[t]he sanity of recognizing the insanity of war subjects one to the very insanity that one recognises, and insanity merely leads to unknowing cooperation in the war', which means that one is inescapably caught in this impossible situation, with no hope of a way out of what is essentially a feedback loop.¹⁵⁹ In fact, this absurd caveat, which Brustein describes as 'the unwritten loophole in every written law which empowers the authorities to revoke your rights whenever it suits their cruel whims', continues to pop up throughout the novel in ever different guises, always seemingly specifically tailored to frustrate Yossarian's attempts to engineer an escape route from the certain death he seems powerless to evade.¹⁶⁰ Like Gregor Samsa in 'The Metamorphosis', unable to stop his hideous

¹⁵⁶ *Catch-22*, p. 123.

¹⁵⁷ *Catch-22*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁸ *Catch-22*, p. 46.

¹⁵⁹ David M. Craig, *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), p. 62.

¹⁶⁰ Brustein, para. 1.

transformation until he is confined within his new grotesque form,¹⁶¹ not to mention the protagonists of both *The Trial* and *The Castle*, each caught within institutions which they can never truly fathom, let alone overcome, Yossarian remains trapped in Heller's mad world, helpless to resist.

Meanwhile, another central aspect of the Kafkaesque which Heller adopts and makes his own is the presence of the comic. As H. S. Reiss notes about Kafka, '[t]he humour [...] depicts the absurd position of man who was seeking to unravel the mystery of the irrational by rational means', which is precisely what Yossarian attempts to do throughout the novel in his struggles against *Catch-22* and a world that seems to readily accept it.¹⁶² This means that, at its core, the nature of Kafka's humour and that of Heller's are identical, even if it is decidedly more palpable in the latter work. This becomes even more evident when one notes the duality of comedy and nightmarish reality that in *Catch-22*, as in the Kafkaesque, tend to go hand-in-hand. Kundera speaks of this feature of Kafka's writings, noting that, rather than being merely humorous, 'the *Kafkan* takes us inside, into the guts of a joke', revealing 'the *horror of the comic*'.¹⁶³ This can also be an apt description of *Catch-22*, where many episodes have an ostensible hilarity which quickly fades to reveal the true horror of the situation as the reader is forced to contemplate these scenarios from the point-of-view of the individuals caught within them.

Daneeka's 'death', for instance, would not be out of place in a comic skit, yet its intrinsic horror emerges when Heller shows the reader the consequences from the character's perspective. And indeed, the novel is inundated with such instances, for as Daniel Green notes, '[n]o situation, not even the bloodiest or most fearful, is insulated from the further

¹⁶¹ Franz Kafka, 'The Metamorphosis', in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman's Library, 1993), pp. 73-128.

¹⁶² H. S. Reiss, 'Franz Kafka's Conception of Humour', *The Modern Language Review*, 4.44 (1949), 534-542 (p. 542).

¹⁶³ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 104.

indignity of the joke, or exempt from the comedic *reduction ad absurdum*, with the humour being used in order to exacerbate the impact of the harrowing situations, since the reader is caught unawares.¹⁶⁴ As Heller himself states, ‘I wanted people to laugh and then look back with horror at what they were laughing at’,¹⁶⁵ and it is to this end that he makes use of humour, much in the same way as the comic within the Kafkaesque may ‘serve to throw the horrors of Kafka’s world into greater relief’, as Reiss opines.¹⁶⁶

Thus, for instance, the letters of condolence which Corporal Whitcomb begins to draft are explicitly farcical, with Whitcomb coming up with a ‘basic form letter that takes case of just about every situation’:

Dear Mrs., Mr., or Mr. and Mrs.: Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action.¹⁶⁷

This becomes even more comical when one sees how it is used in practice, with barely any deviation from the template, as in the case of the letter sent to Doc Daneeka’s wife following his supposed death:

Dear Mrs., Mr., or Mr. and Mrs. Daneeka:
Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action.¹⁶⁸

However, the hilarity quickly dissipates when one recalls that these letters’ recipients are the families of dead relatives, and, furthermore, that, as Lehan and Patch note, these comically

¹⁶⁴ Daniel Green, ‘A World Worth Laughing At: *Catch-22* and the Humour of Black Humour’, in *Joseph Heller’s ‘Catch-22’*, pp. 183-193 (p. 185). Originally published in *Studies in the Novel*, 27.2 (1995), 186-196.

¹⁶⁵ ‘So They Say: Guest Editors Interview Six Creative People’, *Mademoiselle*, 57 (1963), 234-235 (p. 234).

¹⁶⁶ Reiss, p. 535.

¹⁶⁷ *Catch-22*, p. 281.

¹⁶⁸ *Catch-22*, p. 344.

exaggerated examples are merely marginal distortions of reality, and reflect the so-called sincerity of condolence letters in general.¹⁶⁹

As the two critics observe, '[t]he farfetched and ludicrous events in the novel sometimes contain truths that freeze the smile in horror',¹⁷⁰ which is precisely what Heller intends, and which is something that Brustein also picks up on as he writes that '[t]hrough the agency of grotesque comedy, Heller has found a way to confront the humbug, hypocrisy, cruelty, and sheer stupidity of our mass society'.¹⁷¹ Once more, Heller is borrowing from the Kafkaesque in order to serve his own needs, adapting, intensifying, and making widespread use of Kafka's tendency to craft scenes which are simultaneously funny and frightening in order to make his readers laugh at terrifying events before realising that they are often simply amplifications of contemporary tendencies, and that Pianosa, as Brustein mentions, is merely 'a satirical microcosm for many of the macrocosmic idiocies of our time'.¹⁷²

However, as has been remarked at different points throughout this chapter, although the author has created a literary realm that is unmistakably Kafkaesque, it is not precisely Kafka's Kafkaesque, but an adaptation of it that may be labelled as Heller's Kafkaesque, and perhaps this becomes most evident if one looks to the concluding movement of Heller's work, for it is here that the greatest deviation from his predecessor occurs.

One common feature in many of Kafka's stories, including works like *The Trial*, 'The Metamorphosis', 'The Judgement', and 'A Hunger Artist', is that they all end with the protagonist's death, thereby cementing the sense of hopelessness which pervades throughout his Kafkaesque.¹⁷³ Initially, Heller's novel appears to be heading this same way, with Yossarian realising, in its concluding chapters, that '[t]hey've got all my pals, haven't they?',

¹⁶⁹ Lehan and Patch, p. 82.

¹⁷⁰ Lehan and Patch, p. 82.

¹⁷¹ Brustein, para. 5.

¹⁷² Brustein, para. 5.

¹⁷³ Franz Kafka, 'The Judgement', in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, pp. 25-39; 'A Hunger Artist', in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, pp. 222-232.

as he recalls all his friends who have fallen victim to the world of *Catch-22*.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, it appears that the bombardier himself is in a similarly irremediable position as Kafka's protagonists, since he discovers that his only two options are to either accept a deal with Colonel Cathcart, but at the expense of his soul (as explained below), or to speak out against him in the knowledge that this would lead to a court martial that would inevitably end with the confirmation of his guilt and subsequent imprisonment.¹⁷⁵

'It's a way to save yourself,' Major Danby tells Yossarian, as he attempts to convince Heller's protagonist to accept a deal that will see him head home, but at the cost of having to lavish praise on Colonels Cathcart and Korn. As Yossarian replies, however, it is no such thing, but rather, 'a way to lose myself', as he would be joining forces with everyone and everything that he has been resisting all along.¹⁷⁶ Throughout the novel, Heller manages to retain the sense that there might eventually be some escape for Yossarian, and that he may, ultimately, succeed in coming out on top after all, in spite of all indications to the contrary, but now at the end, even this slim ray of light is snuffed out, as is evidenced in this exchange between Yossarian and the Major, with its repeated emphasis on there being 'no hope' left:

"Then there is no hope for us, is there?"

"No hope."

"No hope at all, is there?"

"No, no hope at all," Major Danby conceded.¹⁷⁷

However, Heller's Kafkaesque refuses to be characterised by this sense of fatality, and in the final few pages the author introduces the possibility of freedom in the shape of a pilot with the suggestive name of Orr, who was thought by everyone to be dead, but who, it

¹⁷⁴ *Catch-22*, p. 435.

¹⁷⁵ *Catch-22*, pp. 441-443.

¹⁷⁶ *Catch-22*, p. 447.

¹⁷⁷ *Catch-22*, p. 448.

transpires, purposefully got himself shot down and then rowed all the way to Sweden.¹⁷⁸

‘There is hope, after all’, Heller’s protagonist excitedly exclaims, deciding there and then that he will not choose either of the two options on offer, but will instead run away to Sweden as well, even though he knows that it is practically impossible.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, as he tells Danby, ‘at least I’ll be trying’.¹⁸⁰

Yossarian ‘took off’, as the last words of the novel inform the reader, with no indication of whether he will be successful or not, but with an unmistakable note of hopeful optimism, which is patently absent from Kafka’s literary output.¹⁸¹ Irrespective of what happens after (and incidentally, Yossarian does feature in *Closing Time*, the sequel to *Catch-22*, so we know that he, at least, survives) ‘Yossarian is alive when the novel ends’, as Heller states, which allows for any conceivable possibility, as opposed to the fatalistic sense of finality that is usually associated with the Kafkaesque.¹⁸² Thus, Heller’s Kafkaesque is, once again, and perhaps in the most significant manner, altered from its source in the Czech author’s writings.

The influence of Kafka on Heller’s novel, as this chapter has sought to illustrate, is both profound and central to his ulterior designs, which is quite unsurprising when one notes that he is providing a ‘recurring lament concerning the modern bureaucracy’, as Merrill puts it, and as Heller himself has expressed multiple times in his interviews, several of which have been referenced here.¹⁸³ This, of course, is also a primary concern of Kafka’s works, and indeed, what we find in *Catch-22* is a situation very similar to that described by Leonard Michaels in relation to *Good as Gold*, when he states that in it, ‘Kafka’s agonies of personal

¹⁷⁸ *Catch-22*, pp. 448-449.

¹⁷⁹ *Catch-22*, p. 449.

¹⁸⁰ *Catch-22*, p. 450.

¹⁸¹ *Catch-22*, p. 453.

¹⁸² Joseph Heller, ‘Preface to the special edition of *Catch-22*’, in *Catch-22* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 1-6 (p. 6).

¹⁸³ Merrill, p. 78.

identity are brought up to date by Heller and remade American', except that in this case it is Kafka's unease with bureaucracy that is 'brought up to date [...] and remade American'.¹⁸⁴

Consequently, Heller appropriates the Kafkaesque – concurrently showcasing its longevity and versatility – shifting the context to a military one, adding a systematic and authoritarian motive behind its absurd elements while accentuating the power which its institutions and bureaucracies wield, stressing its faculties towards physical and psychological entrapment, and illustrating how unthinkable notions can quickly become normalised and acceptable, all in the process of creating a reality which I have chosen to designate as Heller's Kafkaesque, due to its identifiable distinctions from Kafka's own.

In fact, the world which he has created has become iconic in its own right, with writers like Aldridge insisting, twenty-five years later, that it 'has become more and more clearly a reflection of the altogether uncomic and horrifying realities of the world in which we live and hope to survive'.¹⁸⁵ However, it is ultimately thanks to Kafka that it exists as we know it at all, and one must acknowledge this, even while simultaneously recognising Heller's achievements, and keeping in mind, particularly in the face of comments like Aldridge's about the novel's harrowing warnings, that one may do well to recall Heller's greatest deviation from the traditional Kafkaesque – namely, that even in the bleakest of scenarios, '[t]here is hope, after all'.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Leonard Michaels, 'Bruce Gold's American Experience', in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, pp. 167-172 (p. 168).

¹⁸⁵ John W. Aldridge, 'The Loony Horror Of It All: *Catch-22* Turns 25', *The New York Times*, 26 October 1986, section 7, p. 3.

¹⁸⁶ *Catch-22*, p. 449.

J. M. Coetzee and the Political Kafkaesque in *Life & Times of Michael K*

As the analysis of *Catch-22* has sought to elucidate, the Kafkaesque can serve as a uniquely useful tool for authors seeking to comment on contemporary society. This should come as no surprise, since, as was discussed in the first chapter, thanks in part to critics like Julian Preece, Georg Lukács, Hannah Arendt, and Anthony Northey, amongst others, the Kafkaesque within the works of Franz Kafka himself may similarly be acting as a form of commentary on the author's own time and space.¹⁸⁷ This detail, however, does take on a new pertinence when one approaches the works of J. M. Coetzee, possibly one of Kafka's most unabashed descendants, who takes a far more nuanced and deliberate approach to the Kafkaesque, as shall be explored presently.

Born in South Africa in 1940, Coetzee grew up within a society marked by apartheid, and this political context is intrinsically intertwined with much of his literary output, particularly in the case of earlier works such as *Life & Times of Michael K*.¹⁸⁸ Published in 1983, the novel follows its titular protagonist – a social outcast officially designated as a 'CM',¹⁸⁹ or 'coloured male', as Susan VanZanten Gallagher notes¹⁹⁰ – as he travels across an apartheid-era South Africa ravaged by a fictitious civil war, coming across a host of individuals from different strata of society – ranging from destitute vagabonds and deserters, to soldiers, revolutionaries, nurses, and doctors – and meeting with oppression and imprisonment along the way.

¹⁸⁷ See 'Introduction: The Birth of the Kafkaesque', pp. 13-16.

¹⁸⁸ J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (South Africa: Ravan Press, 1983).

¹⁸⁹ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 70.

¹⁹⁰ Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 144.

As this brief synopsis may already indicate, the novel, as fellow South African writer Nadine Gordimer puts it, is ‘implicitly and highly political’.¹⁹¹ Just what its precise political message may be, to be clear, has been the subject of voracious debate for decades, but for now the establishment of the very existence of a political motivation is what is of primary importance. The presence of such a motive should come as no shock to anyone familiar with Coetzee’s oeuvre up to this point¹⁹²— which, as Tim Mehigan notes, ‘faces directly onto a problematic of postcolonial consciousness’¹⁹³— or indeed with his own public comments, with the author, for instance, opening his acceptance speech for the 1987 Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society with a sharp rebuke of his country, as he asks, ‘[h]ow does it come about that someone who not only comes from but also lives in so notably unfree a country as my own is honored with a prize for freedom?’¹⁹⁴

Indeed, the novel, Engelhard Weigl explains, is a response to its times, representing ‘a specific reaction to dramatically escalating political developments in that country in the 1970s and 1980s’,¹⁹⁵ a period where, as VanZanten Gallagher observes, ‘South Africa seemed mired in an ever deepening crisis’.¹⁹⁶ *Life & Times of Michael K*, she continues, ‘reflects and participates in this national unease about the future direction of South Africa’,¹⁹⁷ and throughout the work, Coetzee uses the Kafkaesque in order to help formulate his own complex response to this turbulent epoch.

¹⁹¹ Nadine Gordimer, ‘The Idea of Gardening’, *New York Review*, 2 February 1984, para. 15 of 22 https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/02/02/the-idea-of-gardening/?lp_txn_id=1599133 [accessed 22 December 2024].

¹⁹² Each of the three novels that preceded *Life & Times of Michael K*, namely *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, are all of political nature, with the latter, for instance, being labelled as a ‘political thriller’ by the Nobel Prize Committee when they awarded the author the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003 (The Swedish Academy, ‘Press Release’, para. 6 of 11 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/press-release/>, [accessed 20 December 2024]).

¹⁹³ Tim Mehigan, ‘Introduction’, in *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee*, ed. by Tim Mehigan (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), pp. 1-8 (p. 5).

¹⁹⁴ J. M. Coetzee, ‘Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)’, in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 96-99 (p. 96).

¹⁹⁵ Engelhard Weigl, ‘*Life & Times of Michael K* (1983)’, in *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee*, pp. 76-90 (p. 76).

¹⁹⁶ VanZanten Gallagher, p. 136.

¹⁹⁷ VanZanten Gallagher, p. 136.

At this point it may be pertinent to explore, at least in brief, the relationship between Coetzee and Kafka, which is a connection that has been widely recognised and commented upon over the years. Daniel L. Medin, for instance, labels the author as being one of Kafka's 'three "sons"', alongside Philip Roth and W. G. Sebald,¹⁹⁸ adding that while 'resemblances to Samuel Beckett, Daniel Defoe, and Fyodor Dostoevsky have flitted in and out of Coetzee's prose over the years, [...] Franz Kafka's influence has been by far the most consistently salient of the group'.¹⁹⁹ Richard A. Barney, meanwhile, in a discussion of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, notes that '[a]s has been evident in a great deal of his work for the past decades [...] Coetzee's fiction has powerful resonances with Kafka's work',²⁰⁰ while in a study focusing on Kafka, Vladimir Biti identifies him as the Czech author's 'postcolonial successor', to mention just a few examples.²⁰¹

Moreover, as Medin observes, Coetzee has also 'approached Kafka professorially' throughout his career,²⁰² with two notable examples of this being his study, 'Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow"',²⁰³ as well as the essay 'Translating Kafka',²⁰⁴ which was initially written as a review for a translation of *The Castle* by Mark Harman.²⁰⁵ These point towards a close familiarity with Kafka which Coetzee himself has freely acknowledged, declaring emphatically in a 1986 interview cited by VanZanten Gallagher that

Kafka is such an enormous presence in modern literature that for one to deny totally that he has been affected by Kafka would be extremely foolish. I have not only read

¹⁹⁸ Daniel L. Medin, *Three Sons: Franz Kafka and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, and W. G. Sebald* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁹⁹ Medin, p. 147.

²⁰⁰ Richard A. Barney, 'Between Swift and Kafka: Coetzee's Elusive Fiction', *World Literature Today*, 78.1 (2004), 17-23 (p. 19).

²⁰¹ Vladimir Biti, 'State of Exception: The Birthplace of Kafka's Narrative Authority', *Primerjalna Knjizevnost*, 43.20 (2020), 115-125 (p. 115).

²⁰² Medin, p. 147.

²⁰³ J. M. Coetzee, 'Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow"', *MLN*, 96.3 (1981), 556-579.

²⁰⁴ J. M. Coetzee, 'Translating Kafka', in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986-1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), pp. 74-87.

²⁰⁵ J. M. Coetzee, 'Kafka: Translators on Trial', *The New York Review*, May 14, 1998 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/05/14/kafka-translators-on-trial/> [accessed 28 December 2024].

Kafka – and in fact have been reading Kafka since I was an adolescent – but I have worked very closely with some of Kafka’s texts in German, so it would be even more foolish for me to deny that Kafka has left his traces on me.²⁰⁶

This is a crucial remark, since it points towards a very self-aware approach to Kafka and the Kafkaesque that is readily exhibited in Coetzee’s writing, emerging most clearly in works like *Elizabeth Costello*,²⁰⁷ and indeed in *Life & Times of Michael K*, as shall be demonstrated in the coming few pages.

The first, and most obvious, manner in which this engagement occurs is through explicit references by Coetzee to his predecessor’s works. This is perfectly exemplified in the very title of the novel itself, with the ‘K’ in Michael K’s name appearing to point to the protagonists of *The Trial* and *The Castle*, as many critics, among them Weigl,²⁰⁸ David Attwell,²⁰⁹ and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, have observed, with the latter even stating that ‘the references to “K”’ are a clear example of the work’s ‘heavy debt to Franz Kafka’.²¹⁰ Another instance takes place later on in the text, when a doctor looking after Michael talks about an unnamed governmental authority that is referred to only as ‘the Castle’,²¹¹ arguing with his superior that they should issue a fake death certificate for Michael, and then ‘some clerk in the Castle will file it away without giving it a glance’,²¹² in what seems to be a

²⁰⁶ Jean Sévry, ‘An Interview with J. M. Coetzee’, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 9.1 (1986), 1-7 (p. 5), cited in VanZanten Gallagher, pp. 221-222.

²⁰⁷ Coetzee makes several direct references to Kafka throughout this novel, such as in the case of Elizabeth Costello’s award acceptance speech towards the beginning of the text, which explicitly builds on Kafka’s ‘A Report to an Academy’ (pp. 16-20), or indeed, the novel’s very conclusion, which finds Costello in a purgatorial setting where both the milieu and the circumstances are sharply reminiscent of the Kafkaesque, with the protagonist herself noting that ‘[t]he wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka. So is the demand for a confession, so is the courtroom with the dozing bailiff and the panel of old men in their crows’ robes’ (p. 209). J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004).

²⁰⁸ Weigl, p. 76.

²⁰⁹ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 101.

²¹⁰ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, ‘Books of The Times’, *New York Times*, 6 December 1983, para. 7 of 12 <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/06/books/books-of-the-times.html> [accessed 5 January 2025].

²¹¹ These references appear in *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 152, p. 155, and p. 160.

²¹² *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 155.

second nod to Kafka's last novel. In addition to this, there are also distinct allusions to 'The Metamorphosis' throughout the book, or, as Lehmann-Haupt phrases it, 'insistent comparisons of Michael K to various insects'.²¹³ Indeed, at one point, Coetzee's protagonist is said to be 'waving an arm like an insect's claw',²¹⁴ while later on he is described as being 'like a stick insect',²¹⁵ to mention two examples, with both cases alluding towards a merging of man and insect that is also present, albeit more drastically, in Kafka's renowned story.

The potential reasons behind such direct references seem straightforward enough. As discussed earlier, Coetzee is writing in an era, and about a society, that he is critical of, and by invoking the spirit of the Kafkaesque, with all its negative connotations, in such a concrete manner, he is drawing a parallel between his novel and the writings of his predecessor, and providing a firm indication of the nature, and political bent, of his work. After all, when one reads the title of the novel, one cannot help but think of Kafka and the 'extremely unpleasant, frightening, and confusing' situations of the Kafkaesque,²¹⁶ and this is precisely what Coetzee wishes to elicit in his readers, before they would have even had the chance to read a single word, with the later references in the text then serving to further compound this impression.

With this being said, it must be noted that, as clear as these allusions may appear to be, their association to Kafka is nevertheless not one that is universally accepted. Gordimer, for instance, declares that 'the initial [in Michael K] probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer and has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka',²¹⁷ and while it is true that, as VanZanten Gallagher posits, this assertion may be inspired by Gordimer's own biases,²¹⁸ it is actually

²¹³ Lehmann-Haupt, para. 7 of 12.

²¹⁴ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 135.

²¹⁵ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 149.

²¹⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary*, 'Kafkaesque'

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/Kafkaesque> [accessed 28 December 2024].

²¹⁷ Gordimer, para. 4.

²¹⁸ VanZanten Gallagher argues that, out of her desire to read the novel as a strictly realist text, Gordimer 'brushes off the apparent reference to Kafka in the protagonist's name', offering instead two alternate options — Kotze or Koekemoer — that are both 'common surnames among Cape Town coloured people' (VanZanten Gallagher, p. 13).

somewhat supported by Coetzee himself, who insists that '[t]here is no monopoly on the letter K', indicating that its presence is not necessarily a callback to Kafka.²¹⁹ Meanwhile, in the case of the perceived reference to *The Castle*, it is VanZanten Gallagher herself who casts doubt on the possible allusion, arguing that, while she can 'see parallels between the nightmarish worlds depicted by Coetzee and Kafka', this institution is more likely to be referring to the Castle of Good Hope, a fort that 'held the Cape's administrative offices since the time of the original Dutch settlers'.²²⁰

Ultimately, however, while it may be impossible to locate the source of Coetzee's references beyond any doubt, the fact is that, fundamentally, this may not matter that much at all. Given Coetzee's proven familiarity with Kafka, it is safe to assume that he was fully aware of the associations which the use of the letter K, especially coupled with his mentioning of the Castle and repeated references to Michael's similarity to insects, would evoke, even if this was not his primary intention. As Lois Parkinson Zamora observes,

Ms Gordimer is right that K may stand for Kotze or Koekemoer, but wrong to assert that it has no reference to Kafka. It is untenable to dismiss the existence of any of the meanings of a literary symbol, though one may wish to dismiss their importance. There is no possibility of avoiding the reference to Kafka in this character's name, however many other names or meanings may also be contained in that single and singular letter.²²¹

Since this is something that Coetzee undoubtedly knew as well, it is fair to suppose that, in deciding to make use of such references anyway, he is indeed intentionally choosing to bring

²¹⁹ J. M. Coetzee, 'Interview', in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, pp. 197-209 (p. 199).

²²⁰ VanZanten Gallagher, p. 230.

²²¹ Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Allegories of power in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 2.1 (1986), 1-14 (p. 13).

the spirit of the Kafkaesque to bear upon his work for his own purposes, irrespective of what Gordimer may be saying to the contrary.

Indeed, the author himself never flatly rejects the influence of Kafka on his fourth novel. On the contrary in fact, he openly states in one of his interviews that, ‘you ask about the impact of Kafka on my own fiction. I acknowledge it, and acknowledge it with what I hope is a proper humility’.²²² This in turn brings us to the second, and most extensive manner in which Coetzee makes use of the Kafkaesque, and that is as a template of sorts for the creation of his own literary world. As Attwell writes, ‘[t]here are obvious links between the state of civil anomie through which South Africa is passing in *Michael K* and the nightmarish world of *The Trial* and *The Castle*’,²²³ and at this point, it may be useful to look back upon the primary Kafkaesque characteristics that were identified in the first chapter so as to better understand these links, as well as how Coetzee is interacting with his literary predecessor for his own political ends.

The first of these, namely the existence of ‘nightmarish or perplexing circumstances’, as the *OED* denotes, is straightforward enough.²²⁴ The novel’s setting, as has been discussed, is within an apartheid-era South Africa torn asunder by civil war. As it opens, Michael and his mother are in Sea Point, a suburb of Cape Town, living in a ‘room under the stairs’ that ‘had been intended for air-conditioning equipment’,²²⁵ in fear of eviction, and with dreams ‘of escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew’, and, in short, a society that is on the brink of collapse.²²⁶ Hospitals are overcrowded, with Anna, Michael’s mother, having to

²²² Interview, p. 199.

²²³ Attwell, p. 101.

²²⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘Kafkaesque’
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/kafkaesque_adj?tab=meaning_and_use
 [accessed 16 October 2024].

²²⁵ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 6.

²²⁶ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 8.

spend ‘five days lying in a corridor among scores of victims of stabbings and beatings and gunshot wounds’,²²⁷ violence and looting are a common affair,²²⁸ and every day, ‘K rubbed shoulders [...] with the army of the homeless and destitute who in the last years had taken over the streets of the central district’,²²⁹ creating a ‘sea of hungry mouths’.²³⁰

The situation outside the city is no better. Attempting to make his way to the farm in Prince Albert where his mother had grown up, the protagonist meets with violence and subjugation at every turn. Following the rather abrupt death of his sickly mother, he is robbed of his meagre possessions by corrupt soldiers,²³¹ pressed into a work gang by the Railway Police,²³² and then faces forced labour at the Jakkalsdrif camp, described by Michael himself as ‘a nightmare’.²³³ Eventually managing to escape and make a home of sorts on the abandoned Visage farm which was supposed to be the original goal of his quest, this reprieve is short-lived, with his attempts at cultivation being utterly destroyed by a troop of soldiers who, suspecting him of being a revolutionary, uproot his crops and detonate the farmhouse, before imprisoning him in a rehabilitation camp.²³⁴ Escaping once again, he finally makes his way to a Sea Point full of vagrants, car husks and abandoned buildings, returning to the room he had shared with his mother amidst the ‘wail [...] of sirens and hooters across the city’.²³⁵

What is of particular interest to note, however, is that, while Coetzee’s world is certainly a realm of nightmarish circumstances, it is a decidedly grounded horror, with none of the explicit surreal or absurdist elements that are found in Kafka’s work, or indeed, in *Catch-22* or *The Unconsoled*. The events of the novel and the behaviour of the characters

²²⁷ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 5.

²²⁸ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 11-13.

²²⁹ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 13.

²³⁰ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 14.

²³¹ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 38.

²³² *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 41.

²³³ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 77.

²³⁴ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 124-125.

²³⁵ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 181.

within it are, for the most part, rational actions that can be clearly understood within the context of their world. This deviation from the traditional Kafkaesque is an intentional one. As Attwell observes, *Life & Times of Michael K* is not just a text that is meant to criticise contemporary society, but also act as a warning about the possible future that lay in store for South Africa.²³⁶ '[I]n its projections of civil war', Attwell states, '*Michael K* shows the *consequences* of the state's spectacular failure to address the essentials of the crisis it was facing',²³⁷ and Coetzee wants to make this warning a clear one. To this end, even while using the Kafkaesque to inform his vision of this future, the author simultaneously roots it in the conventions of realism, going so far as to give exact locations such as Sea Point, Prince Albert, Cape Peninsula, De Waal Park, and Beach Road,²³⁸ to list a few examples, thereby firmly establishing it within a set geographical space that is far removed from Kafka's vague settings.

This type of interplay with the Kafkaesque, with Coetzee borrowing from it while simultaneously adapting elements to suit his needs, is one that is repeated throughout the novel, as the author allows the Kafkaesque to inspire and influence him, yet without letting it dominate over his work. Another notable absence, for instance, is that of any form of humour whatsoever across the text, in contrast to Kafka's own works, and in the face of critics like Milan Kundera who argue that '[t]he comic is inseparable from the very essence' of the Kafkaesque.²³⁹ Coetzee does separate them, however, and while it is true that, as was explored in earlier chapters, the presence of humour within Kafkaesque worlds can serve to emphasise their nightmarish features, by refusing to incorporate it within his own literary realm, the author is ensuring that there are no moments of lighthearted distraction that may potentially detract from the stark message he is sending out.

²³⁶ Attwell, pp. 89-91.

²³⁷ Attwell, p. 91.

²³⁸ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 4-10.

²³⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Perennial Classics, 1988), p. 104.

Conversely, one aspect which Coetzee does adopt quite faithfully is the existence of a vast, anonymous, bureaucratic institution that looms heavily over the characters in the novel. Kafkaesque protagonists exist ‘in a world that is nothing but a single, huge labyrinthine institution they cannot escape and cannot understand’, to quote Kundera,²⁴⁰ and this is certainly a prominent feature of *Life & Times of Michael K*, with the institution in question being the South African government and its proxies, who are constant figures of oppression across the text.

In fact, as Dominic Head notes, ‘Michael K’s experiences are punctuated with episodes of state interference or institutionalization’,²⁴¹ and indeed, this state bureaucracy makes its first appearance at the very beginning of the narrative, when, while trying to leave Cape Town, Michael is immediately told that he ‘should not expect to board the train without both a seat reservation and a permit to leave the proclaimed Cape Peninsula police area’.²⁴² After queuing for hours and filling in various forms, Michael is informed that the ‘[p]ermits would be mailed in due course’, but, weeks later, his life has ground to a halt since ‘[e]verything was suspended while they waited for the permits, which did not come’.²⁴³ Michael’s further enquiries are met with a blunt response that amounts to nothing more than a demand for quiet subservience – “‘Don’t waste my time. I am telling you for the last time, *if the permit is granted the permit will come!*’” – and he decides to defy the system and set out without a permit,²⁴⁴ only to be met with ‘the full force of the state’s control’, as Weigl puts it,²⁴⁵ culminating in a checkpoint of soldiers who force him to turn back.

²⁴⁰ Kundera, p. 101.

²⁴¹ Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 56.

²⁴² *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 9.

²⁴³ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 9-10.

²⁴⁴ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 20.

²⁴⁵ Weigl, p. 80.

Eventually managing to find a way out of the city, it is not long before he runs into the institution's representatives once again, first being made to join the aforementioned railway work gang,²⁴⁶ and then taken to Jakkalsdrif, which is run by the Free Corps, a unit within the government's army.²⁴⁷ Although nominally a resettlement camp for vagrants, Michael quickly learns that '[t]he only way to leave is with the work party',²⁴⁸ with the camp, as Head writes, being 'an obvious instrument of social control, transforming the homeless into a workforce'.²⁴⁹ Michael is essentially trapped within it unless he obeys the government's whims, and in this novel, Head continues, 'incarceration carries the broader connotation of discipline exercised through institutions',²⁵⁰ with the specific institutions appearing in the text being merely synecdoches for the overbearing entity that is the government. Indeed, the true intent behind Jakkalsdrif as a vehicle for oppression emerges after a nearby police station is vandalised, and the enraged captain, suspecting the camp's residents, descends upon Jakkalsdrif, declaring that 'It's a work camp, man! It's a camp to teach lazy people to work! *Work!*'.²⁵¹

Notably, and in line with a pattern that should by now be emerging quite clearly, this Kafkaesque element is once again entrenched within the political in Coetzee's work. Through such situations, as VanZanten Gallagher argues, the author 'concentrates on the institutional violence of South Africa', with the critic adding that one of the novel's greatest achievements lies in 'its ability to depict this kind of war, the war of the bureaucracy against the individual', and to 'condemn and expose corrupt structures' of the state.²⁵² This comes across even more clearly in the novel's second section, which is wholly dedicated to Michael's imprisonment in

²⁴⁶ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 40.

²⁴⁷ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 73.

²⁴⁸ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 85.

²⁴⁹ Head, p. 59.

²⁵⁰ Head, p. 59.

²⁵¹ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 91-92.

²⁵² VanZanten Gallagher, p. 146.

Kenilworth, the rehabilitation camp designed to ‘effect a change in men’s souls’, ‘turn enemies into friends’, and transform would-be revolutionaries into labour battalions.²⁵³

Michael’s time at the camp is filtered through the eyes of the Medical Officer, a man who cuts a much kinder figure than most of the state’s representatives. Realising that Michael is ‘a poor helpless soul’,²⁵⁴ who ‘barely knows there is a war on’,²⁵⁵ he does his best to ensure that the now-sickly protagonist remains alive, even going on to argue, after Michael escapes, that ‘Michaels should have never come to this camp’, and that ‘[n]ow at least let him go in peace’.²⁵⁶ In spite of this, however, and even while questioning whether ‘any of us believe in what we are doing here’,²⁵⁷ the doctor is still a functionary within the state’s apparatus, and, after Michael attempts to assert his neutrality by insisting that ‘I am not in the war’, he angrily declares that

[o]f course you are in the war, man, whether you like it or not! This is a camp, not a holiday resort, not a convalescent home: it is a camp where we rehabilitate people like you and make you work! [...] And if you don't co-operate you will go to a place that is a lot worse than this!

Crucially, even in those instances when he is empathising with Michael, he does not realise that he is playing directly into the institution’s hands by coercing him to submit to them in order to survive. ‘If you will not compromise you are going to die’, he tells the protagonist, warning him that ‘the laws of nations have you in their grip now: [...] they will grind you in the dirt if necessary. [...] No matter how thin you make yourself, they will not

²⁵³ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 134.

²⁵⁴ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 141.

²⁵⁵ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 130.

²⁵⁶ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 155. Incidentally, the misidentification of Michael as ‘Michaels’, as evidenced here, is a sign of the bureaucracy’s power within this world, much as was seen in the case of *Catch-22* in the previous chapter. Despite being told that ‘his name is not Michaels but Michael’ by the protagonist himself (p. 131), the doctor and other camp officials continue using the wrong name, since this is what the police captain decides he is called when arresting him (p. 124), and presumably when taking him in at the camp.

²⁵⁷ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 134.

relax'.²⁵⁸ Failing to realise that Michael may see no value in living in confinement and subjugation, he acknowledges that 'I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are',²⁵⁹ but simultaneously entreats him to subsume himself into the system – 'I appeal to you Michaels: *yield!*'.²⁶⁰ In fact, while undeniably speaking with good intentions, the Medical Officer is ultimately little more than a representative of those who, while possessing an acute awareness of the 'unimaginable bureaucracy above', as he calls it,²⁶¹ and its oppressive role in their lives, never achieve the strength to truly oppose it. Even his brief thought that he 'should take a leaf out of Michaels' book' and desert the camp is quickly snuffed out, as he convinces himself that '[t]he truth is that the only chance I had is gone, and gone before I knew', and instead wastes his time ruminating on what he would have done had he actually escaped.²⁶²

At this stage, it should be quite clear that Coetzee is engineering the Kafkaesque to send out an explicit anti-apartheid message of political condemnation through this work. However, the relationship between his novel and the literary convention he is working in goes deeper than a mere adoption of the Kafkaesque as a vehicle for critique, for there is another facet of the Kafkaesque that fits in neatly with Coetzee's approach in *Life & Times of Michael K*, and that, namely, is its ambivalence when it comes to offering solutions. If the Kafkaesque worlds of stories like *The Trial*, *The Castle*, 'The Metamorphosis', 'In the Penal Colony', and so many more, are united by the presence of a nightmarish situation, then they are also equally joined by the lack of any alternative to such grim realities. While content to depict the horrific, the Kafkaesque is not concerned with seeking a way out, or offering a solution that may resolve its dystopian settings. This attitude, of course, is not one that is merely limited to

²⁵⁸ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 151.

²⁵⁹ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 151.

²⁶⁰ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 152.

²⁶¹ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 159.

²⁶² *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 160-161.

the Kafkaesque, but it is certainly present within it, and Coetzee is happy to adopt this aspect of its nature since it is very well suited to his goals, allowing him to berate the present without necessarily having to dictate a vision for the future.

In fact, as Andrew Dean notes, the novel, ‘following Coetzee’s literary forebears Samuel Beckett and Kafka, [...] empties itself of the desire to make determinate interventions or take settled positions’,²⁶³ in what is a very deliberate choice by Coetzee, as I will attempt to demonstrate by looking more closely at one of the most contentious episodes in the text — Michael’s decision not to join the guerillas. Taking place towards the end of the novel’s first section, Michael is attempting to make a life for himself away from society when he is interrupted by a band of guerillas.²⁶⁴ While showing evident sympathy for their cause, and even momentarily entertaining the thought of joining them, Michael almost instantly backtracks on this, stating that

[he] knew that he would not crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself. He even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why.²⁶⁵

This decision, and the excuse given for it, has caused umbrage amongst Coetzee’s critics, particularly those who, as VanZanten Gallagher notes, ‘often manifest an underlying uneasiness about his work’s political implications’,²⁶⁶ with some even going so far as to

²⁶³ Andrew Dean, “‘Why Will He Not Join the Guerrillas?’: J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* and the Politics of the Postcolonial Novel”, *Modern Fiction Studies*; 65.4 (2019), 676-699 (p. 685).

²⁶⁴ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 108.

²⁶⁵ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 109.

²⁶⁶ VanZanten Gallagher, p. 11.

‘suspect him of acquiescing to the oppressive system’.²⁶⁷ While it is unfortunately impossible to faithfully render the full intricacies of this debate here, it may be beneficial to look at what Gordimer, one of the most notable critics of this passage, has to say about it, in order to better understand Coetzee’s own position.

As she explains in her review of the work, Michael’s choice, in her eyes, is symptomatic of the passivity shown by Coetzee’s protagonist throughout the novel, which she famously decries, lamenting that ‘Coetzee’s heroes are those who ignore history, not make it’.²⁶⁸ Throughout her article, she bemoans that none of those characters who express displeasure with their political reality seem ready to challenge it directly, preferring instead to cooperate or, at the most, take on an evasive approach, as Michael does. Insisting that this depiction runs counter to, and ‘denies the energy of the will to resist evil’ that is present within the nation’s black community, she even accuses the author that, ‘while fiercely moved far beyond commonplace understanding of their plight, [Coetzee] does not believe in the possibility of blacks establishing a new regime that will do much better’.²⁶⁹ In her reading, Michael’s thoughts about ‘the idea of gardening’ are an idealistic notion which betray a ‘revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions’,²⁷⁰ a sentiment which she feels is further emphasised by the protagonist’s belief, at the end of the novel, that ‘[p]erhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time’,²⁷¹ including the camps of the guerillas.

Gordimer’s position, it must be stated, has received pushback from many quarters, with Dean noting that ‘Coetzee scholars have long tended to agree that Gordimer misunderstood the political intervention *Michael K* levels’, and adding that her ‘Lukácsian

²⁶⁷ VanZanten Gallagher, p. 12.

²⁶⁸ Gordimer, para. 15.

²⁶⁹ Gordimer, para. 16-18.

²⁷⁰ Gordimer, para. 18.

²⁷¹ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 182.

commitments' to critical realism may have blinded her to some of the novel's nuances.²⁷² In fact, Coetzee's own motivations behind this passage differ greatly from Gordimer's insinuations, as is clearly evident from the drafts and notes he compiled while writing the book. As Dean reveals in his discussion of these notebooks, the author wrestled heavily with this exact segment while writing it, precisely due to his awareness of the political import that it carries. In one particularly prescient entry from August 1981, for instance, which is quoted in Dean, the author notes that '[t]he thesis seems to be a rejection of both sides in the war. The question remains: why will he not join the guerrillas?'.²⁷³

Indeed, as Dean observes, Coetzee finds himself at an impasse, forced to choose between having Michael go along with the revolutionaries, 'at the cost of seemingly turning the novel into a revolutionary manifesto', or stay behind, 'at the cost of making the novel seem politically quietist',²⁷⁴ and neither of those options are ones he desires, in spite of Gordimer's claims. Instead, what he is trying to do, Dean explains, is to 'have K occupy a wide variety of positions, without ever fully fitting any particular one', which is the true bent of Coetzee's political intentions in the work,²⁷⁵ and the reason why Michael desires to be 'out of all the camps at the same time'.²⁷⁶ One of the ways in which the novelist expresses this is by undermining Michael's own stated intentions for not joining the revolutionaries, with the protagonist conceding, just mere moments after declaring that 'there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive', that

[b]etween this reason and the truth that he would never announce himself, however, lay a gap wider than the distance separating him from the firelight. Always, when he

²⁷² Dean, p. 677.

²⁷³ J. M. Coetzee, "Life & Times of Michael K", 27 August 1981, The J. M. Coetzee Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 7, folder 3. Manuscript. Cited in Dean, p. 685.

²⁷⁴ Dean, p. 687.

²⁷⁵ Dean, p. 689.

²⁷⁶ *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 182.

tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words.²⁷⁷

Coetzee thus refuses to allow for any simple, reductive explanation for Michael's actions, simply because even Michael cannot 'explain himself to himself'. While perhaps frustrating, the author sees this 'gap' as something that exists in the hearts of many South Africans, including himself, writing in a 1982 entry that

[Michael's] not going off with the guerrillas is thematized as a lacuna in his story. It is a lacuna in the logic of his political progression, a lacuna in my own position. It is an unbridgeable gap (and must be so with all comfortable liberal whites), and the best one can do is not to leave it out but to represent it as a gap.²⁷⁸

Coetzee then, at least at the time of writing this work, is a novelist of gaps, and not of firm, decisive positions; while more than happy to condemn the atrocities of apartheid, he is simply not ready to dictate what the path forward should be, as he himself is still 'negotiating concepts of commitment and quietism',²⁷⁹ in the words of Dean. This is a point which Attwell too agrees on, as he concedes that 'Coetzee chooses not to represent mass resistance or project, however tentatively, a utopian future', adding that it may very well be a sage choice, since 'this degree of caution, even sobriety, about historical knowledge is more responsive to history than is sometimes recognized'.²⁸⁰ By adopting the Kafkaesque for this text, with its double-edged ability to expose the flaws of the system without any obligation to posit a solution, he is giving himself the space to explore, and project, this complex and nuanced position.

²⁷⁷ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 109-110.

²⁷⁸ J. M. Coetzee, "Life & Times of Michael K", 23 July 1982, The J. M. Coetzee Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 7, folder 5. Manuscript. Cited in Dean, p. 690..

²⁷⁹ Dean, p. 690.

²⁸⁰ Attwell, p. 93.

However, as ever in Coetzee's hands, the Kafkaesque is skillfully crafted to suit his needs, and even this aspect is adjusted to this end. The most notable shift in this regard is that, while refusing to impart any solutions for the future, Coetzee, like Heller before him, nevertheless integrates a sense of hope in his text, in contrast to Kafka's own grimly fatalistic narratives. This shines through thanks to two intertwined aspects of the work – the ultimate fate of Michael K himself, and, even more significantly, the vaguely optimistic note which the author introduces at the narrative's conclusion.

For much of the novel, Michael is a character cut straight from the cloth of the Kafkaesque protagonist. As Weigl observes, '[I]ike Josef K. and most of Kafka's heroes, Michael K is a loner',²⁸¹ and indeed, paralleling the central figures of *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and even short stories like 'The Metamorphosis', and 'The Hunger Artist', he is a solitary figure and an outcast, more fittingly suited to the fringes of his world rather than in its midst. Born with 'a hare lip [...] curled like a snail's foot', he is quickly separated from the rest of society '[b]ecause of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick', and very soon the reader is told that '[h]e was easiest when he was by himself'.²⁸² Much like his Kafkaesque compatriots, he is also stuck in nightmarish circumstances, a victim to the whims of a faceless bureaucratic institution, and unable to make sense of the world around him, not, in this instance, because it is an outrightly absurdist one, but due to the fact that his mindset and outlook are different to those around him, which in turn, give the impression that he is 'doomed to failure', as Roman S. Struc remarks with regard to Kafka's protagonists.²⁸³

So far, so Kafkaesque. When it comes to the question of Michael's fate, however, Coetzee takes a significant deviation from the conventions of the tradition. Despite being on

²⁸¹ Weigl, p. 97.

²⁸² *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 3-4.

²⁸³ Roman S. Struc, "'Negative Capability' and Kafka's Protagonists", *Modern Austrian Literature*, 11 (1978), 87-103 (p. 87).

the verge of death multiple times, Michael, unlike most of Kafka's protagonists, survives, and is even given a conclusion with a hint of hope to it, potentially arising from a desire to instill some faith in the future for a country racked by conflict. Indeed, the novel's closing pages find the protagonist somewhat optimistic about what is to come, in spite of being stranded in the same rundown city that he departed from in the first place. Going over the mistakes he believes he made during his journey, he conjures up a vision where he, joined by an imagined companion, returns to the destroyed farm with multiple packets of seeds with the intent to settle there.²⁸⁴ This builds up to a closing passage that carries a tone of 'tentative hope', as VanZanten Gallagher describes it,²⁸⁵ and which is worth quoting in full:

And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself (things were gathering pace now) and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying, 'What are we going to do about water?', he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live.²⁸⁶

Whether this is meant to be read as a real possibility or simply a fool's utopian dream is left up to the reader's discretion. The note of defiance in the final clause, however, is unmissable, as is the image of rebirth and community that is put forward. Ultimately, as Kelly Hewson remarks, '[t]he conditional tense of the final line of the novel points to a

²⁸⁴ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 182-184.

²⁸⁵ VanZanten Gallagher, p. 161.

²⁸⁶ *Life & Times of Michael K*, pp. 183-184.

possibility'.²⁸⁷ What that possibility may be may not really matter that much, but its very presence should not be understated. After all, whereas the Kafkaesque in Kafka's stories tends to close with death and finality, Coetzee's own Kafkaesque world lets a shard of light in right at the end, giving a glimpse of a potential future that may have even left all of its Kafkaesque elements behind it once and for all.

Thus, in the hands of Coetzee, the Kafkaesque acquires a political dimension greater, perhaps, than at any other point in its history. While this may very well have been present within it since the time of Kafka himself, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others, have argued,²⁸⁸ Coetzee explicitly makes it the central tenet around which his entire work is structured, with all other elements being subordinated to this driving force. Inspired by the tumultuous period in which he is writing, the author readily adopts both the associations which the Kafkaesque carries with it, as well as many of its conventions, allowing him to vehemently critique the apartheid government, and the state of South Africa under its rule.

Evidencing a self-awareness born out of his own scholarly dealings with Kafka, however, Coetzee uses the Kafkaesque as little more than a means to an end, showcasing an easy willingness to swerve away from its traditions when he feels it best suits his goals. As such, his is a Kafkaesque world with no absurdity, no humour, and a conclusion that sees both a living protagonist as well as a (small) show of faith that a better tomorrow may yet still come to pass. As T. S. Eliot famously once said, '[i]mmature poets imitate; mature poets steal',²⁸⁹ and the latter is precisely what Coetzee is doing with this text, appropriating his literary ancestor and imbuing him with a new purpose in the fight for South Africa's future,

²⁸⁷ Kelly Hewson, 'Making the "Revolutionary Gesture": Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer's Responsibility', *Ariel*, 19 (1988), 55-72 (p. 68).

²⁸⁸ See 'Introduction: The Birth of the Kafkaesque', pp. 14-15.

²⁸⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), pp. 112-130 (p. 114).

and at the same time, to borrow another phrase from Eliot, allowing Kafka to ‘assert [his] immortality most vigorously’.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, pp. 42-53 (p. 43).

Shades of the Kafkaesque in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*

In contrast to the quasi-palimpsestic situations seen with *Life & Times of Michael K*, and, to a lesser degree, *Catch-22*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* offers up a different example entirely in its dealings with the Kafkaesque.²⁹¹ Indeed, this novel, which was published in 1995, lies in a disparate realm in relation to the social and political concerns exhibited by the works discussed so far, with this striking divergence showcasing the variance in how a literary inheritance can be handled by different writers in order to suit individual goals, as this chapter will explore.

In truth, Ishiguro's fourth novel is one which deviates greatly from even his own previous literary offerings, which, as in the case of his Booker Prize-winning *The Remains of the Day*,²⁹² tend to be characterised by social and psychological realism, in direct opposition to the surrealist and malleable world he puts forward in what has been described as 'essentially a five-hundred-page dream-narrative'.²⁹³ This shift has given rise to criticism from certain quarters, with Gary Adelman, for instance, observing that '[m]ost everyone laments Ishiguro's misdirection, his abandoning plasticity and psychological realism [...] for his Kafkaesque experiment',²⁹⁴ and James Wood berating the author for having 'published a strange novel', going so far as to state that 'one might say that *The Unconsoled* has the virtue of being unlike anything else, since it invented its own category of badness'.²⁹⁵

Nevertheless, in spite of such reservations, Ishiguro himself is quite sure of what he is doing in moving away from his traditional style, with the author speaking of his desire to

²⁹¹ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

²⁹² Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

²⁹³ James Wood, 'The Unconsoled', *The New Republic*, 16 October 2000, 43-49 (p. 43).

²⁹⁴ Gary Adelman, 'Doubles on the Rocks: Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*', *Critique*, 42.2 (2001), 166-179 (p. 166).

²⁹⁵ Wood, pp. 43-44.

‘take a more risky approach’,²⁹⁶ and of trying ‘so many new things technically’.²⁹⁷ Tellingly, as Adelman aptly discerns, it is to the Kafkaesque that he turns to for inspiration in this regard, which he himself readily admits, stating in a conversation with Maya Jaggi that ‘Kafka is an obvious model once you move away from straight social or psychological realism’, and adding that Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky are ‘[t]he two writers I ripped off’ in the creation of this work.²⁹⁸ These comments are significant, since they evidence Ishiguro’s own awareness of his sources of influence, which have also been remarked upon by many critics, with Tim Jarvis observing that ‘[i]n their discussions of Kazuo Ishiguro’s most “difficult” work, *The Unconsoled* (1995), critics often refer to the work of Franz Kafka’.²⁹⁹ In fact, in addition to Adelman, who, as quoted above, calls the work a ‘Kafkaesque experiment’,³⁰⁰ Cynthia Quarrie, for example, makes reference to its ‘Kafkaesque circuitousness’,³⁰¹ while Robert Lemon, writing in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, dedicates an entire chapter to discussing how the novel borrows elements from Kafka’s works, as will be explored shortly.³⁰²

This is intriguing since, unlike the two previous case studies, this novel does not neatly follow the Kafkaesque mould, or even incorporate all of its major characteristics, but this has not stopped critics from readily identifying it as being Kafkaesque in nature. In order to investigate this further, it may be prudent to first provide a short synopsis of Ishiguro’s

²⁹⁶ Maya Jaggi, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro Talks to Maya Jaggi’, *Wasafiri*, 11.22 (1995), 20-24 (p. 21).

²⁹⁷ Dylan Otto Krider, ‘Rooted in a Small Space: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’, in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 125-134 (p. 128). Originally published in *The Kenyan Review*, New Series, 20.2 (1998).

²⁹⁸ Jaggi, pp. 21-22.

²⁹⁹ Tim Jarvis, ‘“Into Ever Stranger Territories”: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* and Minor Literature’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (London: Red Globe Press, 2011), pp. 157-168 (p. 157).

³⁰⁰ Adelman, p. 166.

³⁰¹ Cynthia Quarrie, ‘Impossible Inheritance: Filiation and Patrimony in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*’, *Critique*, 55 (2014), 138-151 (p. 138).

³⁰² Robert Lemon, ‘The Comfort of Strangeness: Correlating the Kafkaesque and the Kafkan in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*’, in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross (New York: Camden House, 2011), pp. 207-221.

text, which will also serve to illustrate some of the parallels and points of contrast between this work and Kafka's oeuvre.

In brief, *The Unconsoled* follows an internationally renowned concert pianist called Ryder, who arrives at an indeterminate European city with the ostensible aim of giving a concert, which, however, never actually takes place. Moreover, as the novel progresses, he quickly realises that '[c]learly, this city was expecting of me something more than a simple recital',³⁰³ both on an individual level – as many of its inhabitants begin making requests for special favours, constantly interrupting his concert preparations as well as his attempts to attend to some other, earlier, request³⁰⁴ – as well as from the city itself as a whole, which appears to view him as a saviour who will rescue its fortunes by correcting the direction in which its artistic endeavours have been going for the past few years.

To further compound an already all-too-vague situation, Ryder appears to have misplaced the 'tight', 'heavy schedule', which was prepared for him,³⁰⁵ and notes in dismay that, 'try as I might, I could remember nothing of what had been written' in it, which means that he never truly knows what is going on, where he should be, or which engagement of the many which he has crammed into his three-day visit is coming up.³⁰⁶ Additionally, although the novel presents Ryder as an outsider who had never set foot in this city, it soon becomes apparent that he does have some links to it, which he himself may have forgotten, as some of the people he is introduced to, such as Sophie, the daughter of the hotel porter, already seem to know him, with the novel even hinting that Sophie may be Ryder's wife, although this is never made clear either way.³⁰⁷ Even more mysteriously, this city seems to be populated with a surprising number of Ryder's childhood friends, like Geoffrey Saunders, who, Ryder

³⁰³ *The Unconsoled*, p. 15.

³⁰⁴ *The Unconsoled*, p. 20.

³⁰⁵ *The Unconsoled*, p. 11.

³⁰⁶ *The Unconsoled*, p. 15.

³⁰⁷ *The Unconsoled*, p. 32.

recalls, ‘had been in my year at school in England’,³⁰⁸ or Fiona Roberts, ‘a girl from my village primary school in Worcestershire’ who suddenly turns up as a tram ticket inspector,³⁰⁹ while even the locations he visits appear to be surreal echoes of his own past, with the protagonist suddenly realising, for instance, that his hotel room is actually, and impossibly, ‘the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt’s house on the borders of England and Wales’.³¹⁰

As this summarization may demonstrate, one can certainly find tantalising parallels between this work and some of Kafka’s own, in particular *The Castle*, which similarly features a central character about whom the reader is given very little certain information, and who also arrives at an unidentified location where he has to navigate a surreal environment with a vague goal which is never achieved.³¹¹ Jarvis makes a note of this, stating that ‘Ishiguro’s setting resembles Kafka’s in its lack of spatiotemporal specificity’, further adding that *The Unconsoled*’s protagonist also emulates those of Kafka, being ‘unable to comprehend fully what is happening around him, yet [...] strangely willing to accede to the demands of others’.³¹²

However, this is where the comparisons appear to end, since, unlike the central figures of the Kafkaesque, Ryder is no outsider facing a hostile world, but is fondly welcomed and revered wherever he goes, as he himself notes when he tells Sophie that ‘people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems. Deep-seated, seemingly intractable problems, and people are so grateful I’ve come’.³¹³ This is in direct contrast to Kafkaesque protagonists, who tend to be treated with a mixture of suspicion and outright revulsion, as in the case of *The Castle*’s K., for instance, who is

³⁰⁸ *The Unconsoled*, p. 44.

³⁰⁹ *The Unconsoled*, p. 171.

³¹⁰ *The Unconsoled*, p. 16.

³¹¹ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. by Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹² Jarvis, pp. 157-158.

³¹³ *The Unconsoled*, p. 37.

roundly lambasted by his landlady as she declares that '[y]ou're not from the castle, you're not from the village, you're nothing [...] you *are* a stranger, a superfluous person getting in everyone's way'.³¹⁴ Additionally, none of the concerns with official institutions or bureaucratic systems, which are so prevalent in the Kafkaesque, make any appearance in Ishiguro's novel.³¹⁵

On the other hand, however, there are certain commentators, such as Lemon, who see deeper affinities between Ishiguro and Kafka, with the critic arguing that *The Unconsoled* is not merely imbued with 'broadly Kafkaesque characteristics', but can actually be described as being 'Kafkan', which, in his interpretation of the term, 'implies a greater degree of similarity with, and/or the direct, attributable influence of, Kafka's actual works'.³¹⁶ Lemon proceeds to investigate a series of 'thematic and narrative correlations' between Ishiguro's text and Kafka's writings,³¹⁷ arguing, for instance, that the parent-child discord which is present in *The Unconsoled* mirrors that found in Kafka stories like 'The Judgement', and 'The Metamorphosis', and thus, 'reveals the thematic influence of Kafka's shorter prose fiction'.³¹⁸

Indeed, this is a major theme in Ishiguro's work, brought out most prominently in the relationship between Ryder and Boris, Sophie's son – who is initially introduced to Ryder as a stranger,³¹⁹ but soon begins to be regarded and treated as his son³²⁰ – which is marked by significant friction between the two, as well as in other parent-child relationships in the novel, such as that of the grown-up Sophie and her father, Gustav, for instance. The two entered upon an '*understanding*' when the girl was eight years old that they would not address each

³¹⁴ *The Castle*, p. 46.

³¹⁵ Elizabeth Boa, 'The Castle', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 61-79 (p. 62).

³¹⁶ Lemon, p. 207.

³¹⁷ Lemon, p. 207.

³¹⁸ Lemon, p. 208.

³¹⁹ *The Unconsoled*, p. 32.

³²⁰ The two meet in the third chapter of the novel, and Ryder is already referring to him as 'my boy' in the fourth (p. 50).

other directly, and as Gustav remarks, ‘we somehow never resumed’, with the result that, although they both claim to care for each other, they never speak, communicating only through third parties.³²¹ This even extends to moments of sadness or crisis, such as when the young girl’s missing hamster turns up dead,³²² or when Gustav himself is dying, towards the end of the novel.³²³

Furthermore, as Lemon notes, *The Unconsoled* parallels ‘The Judgement’ in that ‘[b]oth depict dutiful sons who are driven by a desire to please their parents’ that is overwhelming,³²⁴ with one of Ryder’s strongest motivations being his wish to receive his parents’ affirmation with regard to his musical abilities, despite being a world-renowned pianist and hailed as such by all who meet him, since they, it transpires, have never even attended one of his concerts. Such is the magnitude of this dream that Ryder convinces himself that ‘[t]hey’re coming at last, tonight’,³²⁵ leading the city to go to great lengths to provide for them, establishing a committee with the specific task of looking after them,³²⁶ and even preparing a horse and carriage to take them to the concert hall.³²⁷ When they fail to materialise, Ryder discloses that ‘suddenly I felt something inside me beginning to collapse’, and sheepishly tries to convince himself that ‘[s]urely, it wasn’t unreasonable of me to assume they would come this time’, even while remembering ‘all at once just how tenuous had been the whole possibility of my parents’ coming to this town’, which, however, never stopped him from convincing himself that it might happen.³²⁸

Such observations are extremely interesting, since they point towards an undeniable parallel between Kafka’s tropes and thematic concerns and Ishiguro’s own. However, while

³²¹ *The Unconsoled*, pp. 82-83.

³²² *The Unconsoled*, pp. 83-85.

³²³ *The Unconsoled*, pp. 453-454.

³²⁴ Lemon, p. 214.

³²⁵ *The Unconsoled*, p. 444.

³²⁶ *The Unconsoled*, p. 174.

³²⁷ *The Unconsoled*, p. 379.

³²⁸ *The Unconsoled*, p. 512.

hinting at the wide-ranging nature of Ishiguro's literary debt, such examples alone do not seem enough to justify the novel's readily identifiable Kafkaesque quality, which indicates that Ishiguro is doing far more than simply echoing some of Kafka's central themes. After all, the author himself states that he 'learned more in terms of technique than vision or theme' from his literary ancestor, which points towards one of the most intriguing things that Ishiguro is doing with the Kafkaesque, namely, identifying the techniques that lie at its heart, and using them as the cornerstone on which to build his own literary realm.³²⁹

One such technique has to do with the sense of 'dream-narrative' that pervades through *The Unconsoled*,³³⁰ with Ishiguro himself identifying the 'dream-like quality to Kafka' as being one of his major influences.³³¹ Indeed, Lemon speaks of this 'dream-like tone' as being one of the novel's 'broadly Kafkaesque characteristics',³³² and while this is certainly the case, since the surrealist, absurdist elements which Milan Kundera and others have identified as being a core element of the Kafkaesque can indeed be described as being dream-like in nature,³³³ what is of even more interest is the question of how this is achieved in both the Kafkaesque and Ishiguro's text.

Dreams are a topic of some significance to Kafka, as is evidenced by his diaries,³³⁴ in which he records a large number of them, and which, as Julian Preece notes, 'he has a knack for remembering completely'.³³⁵ Even more significantly, he also labels his own 'inner life' as 'dreamlike', and, in one of his diary entries, names it as the inspiration for his writings,

³²⁹ Jaggi, p. 22.

³³⁰ Wood, p. 43.

³³¹ Jaggi, p. 22. It must be noted that the concept of a surreal or dream-like narrative is not, of course, one that is exclusive to the Kafkaesque, with both the Japanese and British literary traditions having copious examples of such works. Ishiguro's own words in this instance, however, point towards the Kafkaesque as being a significant source of influence in his decision to adopt such an approach, as shall become even more evident in the pages to come.

³³² Lemon, p. 207.

³³³ See 'Introduction: The Birth of the Kafkaesque', pp. 8-9.

³³⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries: 1910-1923*, trans. by Joseph Kresh, Martin Greenberg, and Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1988).

³³⁵ Julian Preece, 'The letters and diaries', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, pp. 111-130 (p. 123).

claiming that ‘my talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background’.³³⁶ Since the source of his art is ‘dreamlike’, it is perhaps no surprise that the Kafkaesque itself also shares this quality, and it is, in fact, seen as a characteristic of his writing by critics like Walter H. Sokel, who believes that it is part and parcel of the desire ‘to lift his inner world, the dreamlike visions that crowded in on and haunted him, into the light of day’.³³⁷ Because of this, Sokel argues, Kafka’s work ‘free[s] us from the shackles of mimesis, the dictate that bound art to the portrayal of nature’,³³⁸ with the scholar claiming that Kafka’s writings ‘opened [...] another dimension of reality in which the rules of waking life were overthrown’, and where ‘banal everyday bourgeois reality and the miraculous interpenetrated each other and formed a unity’.³³⁹

Therefore, Kafka’s Kafkaesque can be said to be dream-like in the sense that it does not attempt to faithfully reflect external reality, as seen in cases like *The Trial*, ‘The Metamorphosis’, ‘The Judgement’, and many more, all of which showcase the liberation from ‘the shackles of mimesis’, and the intermingling of ‘banal everyday bourgeois reality and the miraculous’. This dream-like property, however, may go beyond the mere inclusion of fantastical components, with various critics arguing that Kafka’s fictional worlds are, like dreams themselves, creations of the protagonist’s psyche, with the text thus being, as Sokel puts it, ‘a disguised *expression* or projection of the protagonist’s feelings, tendencies, and desires’, as opposed to an entity separate from them.³⁴⁰ There is some support for this from the side of Kafka himself, who remarks, in a letter to Felice Bauer, that the mysterious, unnamed friend of Georg Bendemann in ‘The Judgement’, who never makes an appearance and yet appears to be in contact with both of the work’s major characters, ‘is hardly a real

³³⁶ *The Diaries: 1910-1923*, p. 302.

³³⁷ Walter H. Sokel, ‘Beyond Self-Assertion: A Life of Reading Kafka’, in *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka*, ed. by James Rolleston (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), pp. 33-69 (p. 56).

³³⁸ Sokel, p. 37.

³³⁹ Sokel, p. 37.

³⁴⁰ Sokel, p. 38.

person, perhaps he is more whatever the father and Georg have in common', and thus, a projection of their relationship.³⁴¹

This technique, which lies at the heart of many of Kafka's literary worlds, and thus, by extension, the Kafkaesque, also emerges in other texts, such as in *The Trial*, for instance, which, as Roman. S. Struc notes, is often interpreted 'essentially as a psychodrama in which everything is an emanation of Joseph K.'s psyche',³⁴² and where, Simon O. Lesser argues, '[w]hole scenes [...] bear the mark of being born of K.'s wishes and fears, of being dramatizations of half-desired, half-dreaded events'.³⁴³ Perhaps one of the most memorable examples of this is the whipping episode, in which K. finds two of the men who had arrested him on the cusp of getting a beating in punishment for their earlier behaviour.³⁴⁴ The protagonist soon departs the scene, unable to bear this cruel spectacle, but returns to the room the following day since 'he could not get the guards out of his mind', only to find, much to his horror, that '[e]verything was unchanged, was just as it had been when he has opened the door the previous evening', with the guards still in the early stages of their punishment.³⁴⁵ Since the event is still present in his mind, it is also still going on in the external world.

Lesser believes that, although not always as blatant, 'the entire novel may be said to be composed of such scenes', being 'a series of objectified dreams mirroring K.'s thought processes', with the critic also positing that even many of the novel's characters 'can be regarded as projections – as evocations of the father, the mother, siblings, splinters of K. himself', while the domineering Court itself becomes in turn a projection of K.'s 'persecuting superego'.³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ Franz Kafka, June 10, 1913, in *Letters to Felice*, ed. by Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, trans. by James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 267.

³⁴² Roman S. Struc, "Negative Capability" and Kafka's Protagonists', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 11 (1978), 87-103 (p. 88).

³⁴³ Simon O. Lesser, 'The Source Of Guilt and The Sense Of Guilt – Kafka's *The Trial*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 8.1 (1962), 44-60 (p. 47).

³⁴⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. by Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 58-62.

³⁴⁵ *The Trial*, p. 62.

³⁴⁶ Lesser, p. 48.

Intriguing though these readings of Kafka's works may be, it is the technique itself which is of most interest in the context of this chapter, since it is that aspect of the Kafkaesque which Ishiguro is appropriating and setting as the cornerstone to his own novel, as becomes evident when one looks to what the author himself says about his text:

The whole thing is supposed to take place in some strange world, where Ryder appropriates the people he encounters to work out parts of his life and his past.

[...]

So this is a biography of a person, but instead of using memory and flashback, you have him wandering about this dream world where he bumps into earlier, or later, versions of himself. They're not literally so. They are to some extent other people, but he gives a reading of their life in such a way that they're memories of how his own childhood was, or projections of how he fears he might end up.³⁴⁷

Hence, the technique at the heart of *The Unconsoled* is taken straight from the Kafkaesque, with the entire novel being essentially the projection of the protagonist's psyche on the world around him, albeit without his being aware that this is so, much as in the case of the Kafkaesque protagonists in Sokel's and Lesser's readings above.

Thus, if Ryder, as mentioned earlier, is obsessed with obtaining his parents' affirmation and their acknowledgement of his musical talent, he soon runs into Stephan Hoffman, who is in an uncannily similar situation, albeit at an earlier stage of its development. Unlike Ryder, Stephan has never yet given a concert, but he is scheduled to perform at the same function as the older man, and also suffers from parents who are notably unsupportive, being wholly convinced that their son has no talent for music, and that even watching him perform will be too much of an embarrassment. Consequently, although their

³⁴⁷ Jaggi, p. 22.

presence is one of the motivations behind his desire to perform, they leave the auditorium as he soon as he begins to play, with his father telling him that ‘some of us, we’re just not born with the gift’, and that ‘[y]our mother and I, we love you too much to be able to watch it [...] to see our own dear son being made a laughing stock’.³⁴⁸

However, this unflattering impression only exists because of the very fact that they do not stay to witness their son’s performance, since he is actually a very talented musician, with the audience marvelling ‘at discovering one of their own young man capable of scaling such technical heights’, and greeting him with ‘enthusiastic applause’.³⁴⁹ Nevertheless, while the city applauds his abilities, he never receives the same praise from his parents, who, like Ryder’s, never witness him play, and maintain their negative opinion of his abilities, with their insistence on not attending ensuring that this will never change. The obvious implication is that Stephan is a projection of Ryder’s younger self, recreating that first instance when he gained wide renown but was denied the same from his parents, which still haunts him to this day.

Furthermore, as Adelman observes, Stephan is only one example of this phenomenon, since Ryder ‘meets himself at every turn in characters and relationships that refract his history’.³⁵⁰ Thus, if Ryder’s childhood was an unhappy one, dominated by parents who were detached and constantly arguing, as the reader learns from flashbacks,³⁵¹ so too does Ryder meet Boris, through whom he relives his own childhood, with the protagonist taking on the role of his own father in this re-enactment of events. This takes place gradually, since when he first meets Boris and his mother Sophie, Ryder is introduced as a stranger, with Sophie telling the boy to ‘say hello to Mr Ryder’,³⁵² but Ishiguro’s protagonist soon becomes drawn

³⁴⁸ *The Unconsoled*, p. 480.

³⁴⁹ *The Unconsoled*, p. 482.

³⁵⁰ Adelman, p. 167.

³⁵¹ *The Unconsoled*, pp. 263-265.

³⁵² *The Unconsoled*, p. 32.

into reliving his childhood dynamic, as he '[i]ncreasingly [...] plays his own father, re-creating his family of origin' and constantly arguing with Sophie while Boris watches on the side-lines.³⁵³

Additionally, one can also find figures like Brodsky, an old orchestra conductor who has fallen onto hard times and is now a drunk, looked down upon by the entire city, with this character being a projection of Ryder's own fears for his future, and what he believes he may be destined to become. In fact, the entire world of the novel is built around the technique of psychological projection, albeit perhaps in a more conspicuous manner than in Kafka's own works, where '[e]very encounter is Ryder encountering ego projections of himself, Ryder refracted, Ryder in glaring lights', as Adelman phrases it.³⁵⁴ This is an interpretation which Ishiguro appears to concur with, stating that, although 'I don't want to say literally that Stephan is Ryder when he was young, and Boris was Ryder as a kid', they are intended to reflect the protagonist at these stages of his life, and as a result, '[e]ssentially, you're only dealing with one person'.³⁵⁵

Thus, rather than using the Kafkaesque as a form of template, Ishiguro is singling out certain specific aspects and techniques, and appropriating them, as well as expanding upon them, for his own project, which is essentially an exploration of human psychology, following the central character as he works through his traumas and fears.³⁵⁶ In his interviews, the author speaks of his interest in people's attempts to rectify things which may have gone wrong in their past, only to ultimately realise that this is unachievable, stating that '[t]he novel's essentially about the moment when Ryder realises he can't fix the things he

³⁵³ Adelman, p. 167.

³⁵⁴ Adelman, p. 168.

³⁵⁵ Jaggi, p. 22.

³⁵⁶ Ishiguro distances himself from the Freudian parallels that his novel immediately raises, explicitly stating that 'I'm not a great subscriber to Freudian theory' (Jaggi, p. 22), but nevertheless, these affinities have been identified and explored by various critics, most notably Barry Lewis, the University of Sunderland lecturer who gives a Freudian reading of the text in the chapter dedicated to it within his book, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 101-128).

wanted to fix, that it's too late and, at best, all this brilliance is some compensation' for something which cannot be recaptured.³⁵⁷

Significantly, while this Kafkaesque technique is what allows Ishiguro to scrutinise his protagonist's psyche from the inside in the way he does, the author does not simply stop at appropriating from the Kafkaesque, but instead expands upon it, incorporating new elements which are not present in Kafka's works. Ishiguro's Kafkaesque is already differentiated from Kafka's on account of the fact that the later writer is disregarding many of its surface elements and signature characteristics, but this distinction is drawn further with, for instance, the bestowment of a limited omniscience on Ryder, with respect to the thoughts, feelings, and memories of those around him.

This means that, while the novel, for the most part, is narrated in the first person, Ryder occasionally seamlessly moves into the role of an omniscient third-person narrator, describing what some other character is thinking and feeling, as in the example of the passage quoted below in which, while in the midst of a conversation with Stephan, this shift in narratorial stance occurs:

The rain continued to fall steadily as we travelled through the night-time streets. The young man remained silent for a long time and I wondered if he had become angry with me. But then I caught sight of his profile in the changing light and realised he was turning over in his mind a particular incident from several years ago. It was an episode he had pondered many times before – often when lying awake at night or when driving alone – and now his fear that I would prove unable to help him had caused him once more to bring it to the front of his mind.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ Jaggi, p. 22.

³⁵⁸ *The Unconsoled*, p. 65.

Furthermore Ryder's access to Stephan's mind is not limited to his thoughts and emotions, as he then continues by giving the reader a detailed recounting of the event in question, thereby illustrating his awareness of the young man's memories as well.³⁵⁹

The significance of this is that Ishiguro is not merely being a passive recipient of the Kafkaesque, but is taking his literary inheritance and developing it further. The projection of the protagonist's psyche onto the surrounding world already gives the reader an insight into his mind, but by giving Ryder the ability to know, with certainty, what is going through the minds of those around him, Ishiguro is both making this state of affairs more explicit than in Kafka's hands, as well as adding another dimension to it, since the memories Ryder taps into may not belong to these characters at all, but may be his own projected upon them and presented as if they were theirs. This means that, when the reader hears of how Stephan had ruined a rare instance of familial bliss because of his inability to play to the standards his parents expected, leaving his mother 'wearing the frosty expression Stephan was so familiar with', one is probably learning more about Ryder and his troubled past than about Stephan.³⁶⁰

Ishiguro embarks on a similar exercise with another of the Kafkaesque techniques that he appropriates, namely, the manner in which the notion of time is dealt with in Kafka's works, with there being a 'dreamlike quality' to this as well, as Margaret Church notes, primarily because Kafka does not allow time to function in an ordinary manner, opting instead to slow it down at times, or even bring it to a standstill.³⁶¹ One of the most explicit examples of this occurs in *The Trial*, specifically in the whipping episode which was mentioned earlier, where the passage of time within the lumber room appears to come to a

³⁵⁹ *The Unconsoled*, pp. 65-71.

³⁶⁰ *The Unconsoled*, p. 69.

³⁶¹ Margaret Church, 'Time and Reality in Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 2.2 (1956), 62-69 (p. 62).

complete halt, only restarting once more when Joseph K. revisits the room the following day.³⁶²

Here, Kafka is bending the rules of time in order to make the external world reflect his protagonist's mind. Since Joseph K. continues to fixate on what he has seen – with the reader being told that he ‘could not get the guards out of his head’ – and thus, has not moved on in the mental sphere, so too do events around him remain frozen in time.³⁶³ ‘Time has stood still in this back room of K.’s consciousness’, Church observes, and the same happens in the surrounding world.³⁶⁴ Furthermore, there are various other examples, albeit more subtle, of what the critic refers to as Kafka’s ‘abrogation of the time values of the outer world’,³⁶⁵ such as in *The Castle*, for instance, when K., after his first failed attempt to reach his goal, returns to his inn, only to discover ‘to his surprise that the place was already entirely dark’, even though it had been ‘[o]nly one or two hours [before], by his calculations’, that he had departed that morning, with time appearing to have sped up.³⁶⁶ This, in Church’s eyes, is because ‘despite all of K.’s outward reckonings, the inner time of the subconscious mind prevails’, and imposes itself on the external world.³⁶⁷

Similarly, in the world of *The Unconsoled*, time is also a fluid construct, with one of the most significant manifestations of this being the manner in which so many events and occurrences are impossibly fit into an inordinately short period, with time appearing to slow down and stretch so as to accommodate them all. In the first part of the novel alone, Ryder, after arriving in the city in the afternoon, meets and holds conversations of varying lengths with Gustav, Miss Stratmann, Mr Hoffman, Stephan Hoffman, and Geoffrey Saunders. He also acquaints himself with Sophie and Boris; goes for a long walk during which he gets lost;

³⁶² *The Trial*, p. 62.

³⁶³ *The Trial*, p. 62.

³⁶⁴ Church, p. 63.

³⁶⁵ Church, p. 64.

³⁶⁶ *The Castle*, p. 18.

³⁶⁷ Church, p. 65.

rides with Stephan to the house of Miss Collins, with whom she has a lengthy conversation; goes back to the hotel, where he speaks once more with both Gustav and Sophie, individually; goes to watch a movie, and be introduced, while at the screening, to a number of town councillors with whom he also enters into a discussion of considerable length; and finally, be driven by Hoffman to a reception hosted quite some distance away from the town centre, and which also stretches on for a fair period of time, before at last, turning in for the night. This is a pattern which repeats itself throughout Ryder's stay in the city, with the novel putting forward the sense of time as being elongated, perhaps as a reflection of the fact that, for Ryder, this state of affairs does seem to stretch forever, since he cannot break out of this cycle of 'repression and repetition compulsion', as Lemon phrases it.³⁶⁸

Moreover, Ishiguro also develops this Kafkaesque technique further, flouting not only the laws of time, but also those of space, thereby further accentuating the dreamlike tone of the work. Thus, for instance, although the aforementioned reception takes place at a residence outside the city – with Ryder noting that 'the buildings disappeared and we were travelling on a long road with dark open spaces – perhaps farmland – to either side'³⁶⁹ – when he comes to leave, he realises that 'we were in the atrium of the hotel', and that it is now possible for him to simply walk to his room.³⁷⁰ Furthermore, not only do great distances miraculously shrink and separate buildings merge into one another, but Ishiguro also disregards both the laws of time and space simultaneously by taking locations from Ryder's past and making them physically real in the present. Upon arriving at his hotel room, for example, the pianist realises that '[t]he room I was now in [...] was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years that my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house'.³⁷¹ It has been

³⁶⁸ Lemon, p. 214.

³⁶⁹ *The Unconsoled*, p. 120.

³⁷⁰ *The Unconsoled*, p. 148.

³⁷¹ *The Unconsoled*, p. 16.

redecorated but is ‘unmistakably’ the same, with Ryder even experiencing ‘a profound feeling of peace’ at ‘being back in my old childhood sanctuary’.³⁷²

As a result, Ishiguro’s take on this Kafkaesque technique is establishing, at an early point in the novel, the existence of a link between his protagonist and this literary realm, and is also pointing towards the notion of repressed, or long-forgotten memories coming to the fore, which is the driving force behind the events of the novel. There is no indication that these particular memories are unhappy ones, since they evoke a sense of contentment in the protagonist, unlike those memories and experiences which are manifested in the other characters who Ryder meets, but through this technique Ishiguro is highlighting, in explicit terms, the impinging of the past onto the present, and the projection of memories onto the external world in a physical, concrete form.

Additionally, the myriad events and occurrences which have been referred to in the discussion on the fluidity of time in *The Unconsoled* also demonstrate in part another Kafkaesque technique which Ishiguro has laced into the fabric of his novel, which Quarrie has labelled as its ‘Kafkaesque circuitousness’.³⁷³ This aspect of Ishiguro’s literary debt has been identified by Lemon as well, who speaks of how ‘the plot frustrates the protagonist’s central aim [...] in a manner that recalls the diversions and detours experienced by K. and Josef K’.³⁷⁴ In fact, as Quarrie notes, while Ryder has ostensibly arrived at this city to bestow upon it ‘a concert that is meant to reinvigorate and console its citizens’, this ultimately never takes place, with the pianist being distracted and detracted from his ultimate goal from the moment he arrives.³⁷⁵

³⁷² *The Unconsoled*, pp. 16-17.

³⁷³ Quarrie, p. 138.

³⁷⁴ Lemon, p. 217.

³⁷⁵ Quarrie, p. 138.

Much as in the case of both of Kafka's major novels, with protagonists who dedicate all their time and energies towards achieving their goals without ever getting any closer to doing so, in part due to a constant stream of distractions and interruptions, so too is Ryder constantly interrupted by an endless litany of unrelated demands. In fact, the pianist is approached by no less than four people in the first part of the novel alone, all coming with requests that divert him from his actual mission, including Mr Hoffman, who asks Ryder if he would mind looking through the 'two albums of cuttings entirely devoted to you',³⁷⁶ Stephan, who is 'just wondering if you would have a few minutes to spare to listen to me run through my piece',³⁷⁷ and Gustav, who wonders if 'he might ask a small favour' of the visiting musician,³⁷⁸ compelling him to intervene with Gustav's depressed daughter, Sophie, who is in need of 'someone to sit down with her for a few minutes and make her look at things clearly'.³⁷⁹ There are also countless impositions on the pianist's time from every faction within the city, including the two opposing groups of the city's artistic elite, the city councillors,³⁸⁰ childhood acquaintances who turn up as local residents and practically demand that Ryder come to visit them,³⁸¹ and of course, Sophie and Boris, who, as mentioned earlier, take on the role of Ryder's family for all practical purposes, and therefore, provide a constant source of distraction.

Mirroring Kafka's works, these occurrences function as an obstacle to stop Ryder from achieving both his daily goals, as well as the reason he has come to the city in the first place, which he seems destined not to reach. This impression reaches its greatest culmination at the novel's conclusion, when the reader learns that the tram which Ryder has boarded is 'running on a continuous circuit', showing how Ishiguro's protagonist is, much like the

³⁷⁶ *The Unconsoled*, p. 20.

³⁷⁷ *The Unconsoled*, p. 25.

³⁷⁸ *The Unconsoled*, p. 28.

³⁷⁹ *The Unconsoled*, p. 28.

³⁸⁰ *The Unconsoled*, pp. 103-108.

³⁸¹ The two primary examples here are Geoffrey Saunders (p. 45), and Fiona Roberts (p. 173).

central figures of the Kafkaesque, entrapped – in his case, in a world of his own psyche – with no way out.³⁸² Ultimately, Ryder ‘is the Unconsoled’, as Ishiguro states in an interview with Peter Oliva,³⁸³ since he can never fix what has gone wrong in his past, or stop it from turning him into what he fears he will become, and the author expresses his protagonist’s inability to fulfil these dreams through the frustration of his mission in the world of the novel as well, through the use of Kafkaesque techniques.

In fact, as this chapter has explored, while *The Unconsoled* may initially appear to deviate from the Kafkaesque due to the omission of many of its characteristic elements, the Kafkaesque can actually be found at practically every level of the work, from the basic plot structure and the nature of its protagonist, to the thematic, and, most crucially, the techniques at its core. In Ishiguro’s hands, the Kafkaesque is used in a foundational role, with the author taking his cue from it, then developing this acknowledged literary influence further so as to better fit the parameters of his own vision. Thus, the writer selectively chooses those particular aspects which enable him to craft his own literary realm, appropriating the core narrative structure, as well as such techniques as the projection or expansion of the protagonist’s psyche onto the external world, the flexible treatment of time, and in his case, space, so as to reflect the central character’s consciousness, and the ‘proliferation of plot complications’, as Lemon puts it, which frustratingly hinder the achievement of Ryder’s ultimate goal.³⁸⁴

Ultimately, this, coupled with the parallels between Ishiguro’s work and Kafka’s own, is what has led so many critics, including Adelman, Quarrie, Lemon, and Jarvis, to identify *The Unconsoled* as being Kafkaesque, because this is what it is, at its roots. Ishiguro’s achievement has been to allow those roots to blossom further, with the result being a work

³⁸² *The Unconsoled*, p. 534.

³⁸³ Peter Oliva, ‘Chaos as Metaphor: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’, in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, pp. 120-124. Originally published in *Filling Station Magazine*, 9 (1996).

³⁸⁴ Lemon, p. 218.

which is both Kafkaesque, and simultaneously something different, with the psychological angle which Ishiguro has chosen to follow, and his own expansions upon Kafka's techniques ensuring that his novel, while echoing those of his predecessor, is far more than a simple mirror of his.

The Unconsoled 'is supposed to be a metaphor for the way most of us have lives that we blunder through, pretending to know where we're going', without having a clue, Ishiguro remarks,³⁸⁵ and at the end of this 'five-hundred-page dream-narrative',³⁸⁶ this is precisely the impression that the reader is left with, seeing Ryder happily head off towards his next destination in blissful self-delusion. However, the opportunity for Ishiguro to explore this question in the manner he does is ultimately made possible thanks to the wide-ranging and versatile nature of the Kafkaesque, which sits at the base of his work, and grants him the ability to reveal so much about his protagonist without ever having to state it directly. Simultaneously, the very existence of this Kafkaesque novel is evidencing the fact that the techniques and approach that Kafka employs in his exploration of human nature at the beginning of the twentieth century remain as effective as ever towards its end, which, especially when seen in tandem with the insights gleaned over the previous chapters, has further interesting ramifications on the intriguing question of the longevity of the Kafkaesque, as will now be discussed in some length over the following pages.

³⁸⁵ Oliva, p. 122.

³⁸⁶ Wood, p. 43.

Conclusion:

‘Not of an Age, but for All Time’?

‘Art is a mirror, which goes “fast”, like a watch – sometimes.’ – Franz Kafka ³⁸⁷

Towards the beginning of this study, a question was posed in relation to the Kafkaesque within the literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Crucially, this question never sought to investigate *whether* the Kafkaesque is present across the literary output of this era, because that, as the discussions referenced across the course of this project may themselves attest, has been so thoroughly explored that it may almost be regarded as a self-evident fact. The query, rather, focused on how, and to what ends, has the Kafkaesque been adopted by the authors of this period, and, implicitly, what this may be able to reveal about the Kafkaesque itself.

The first part of this inquiry has been soundly addressed by the analyses undertaken above. In each of these three novels, one can find the explicit presence of the Kafkaesque, whether it is used as the foundation on which Joseph Heller builds his own, highly distinctive, literary world, as a template by J. M. Coetzee while he grapples with and condemns the realities of apartheid-era South Africa, or as a source of inspiration for strategies, themes and techniques by Kazuo Ishiguro in his deep dive into the psyche of the contemporary human. These writers do not merely use the Kafkaesque as a literary trope, but employ it as a lens through which they interrogate the conditions of their times, engaging with, exploring, and often critiquing these same conditions that define their worlds.

³⁸⁷ Gustave Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. by Goronwy Rees (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), p. 143.

Of course, each author's relation to the Kafkaesque is different, with Coetzee, for instance, exhibiting a more self-aware approach, and Ishiguro eschewing those aspects that are more suitable for overt social or political commentary as opposed to the psychological journey he embarks upon. However, in a testament to their abilities, none of them opt to simply imitate Franz Kafka, but rather borrow, or steal, those aspects of the Kafkaesque that suit their needs – be it, for instance, the presence of a powerful, domineering, yet anonymous institution; the sense of absurd surrealism; the inclusion of a dark comic tone; or the concept of entrapment in a labyrinthine world, to mention a few examples – and then develop their own worlds separately, either by omitting certain staple Kafkaesque characteristics, as both Coetzee and Ishiguro do with their rejection of absurdism, and institutions, respectively, or by introducing elements that run counter to the conventional Kafkaesque, as in the case of the optimistic potential for hope that is present in the endings of both *Catch-22* and *Life & Times of Michael K*.

The second part of the research question, meanwhile, namely with regard to the insights that these novels shed on the Kafkaesque, has also been touched upon, but may nevertheless warrant further discussion. The first, and most immediate takeaway, is, naturally, that these texts evidence the sheer extent of the influence that the Kafkaesque wields on the literature of this time. At this stage, one may wish to argue that the mere presence of Kafkaesque characteristics does not necessarily prove that the Kafkaesque itself is at work within these novels, since, as was discussed in the introductory chapter, primarily through the lens of Jorge Luis Borges, these elements can indeed be found outside of, and even before, the Kafkaesque ever came to be.³⁸⁸ However, while this would be an understandable concern if a novel were to exhibit only one or two features of the Kafkaesque, the sheer proliferation of significant Kafkaesque characteristics in each of these case studies, coupled with the

³⁸⁸ See 'Introduction: The Birth of the Kafkaesque', pp. 10-11.

acknowledgement by every one of their authors of Kafka as a source of inspiration, should serve to counter any such doubts, at least with regard to these particular texts.

Even so of course, this, as mentioned above, is no major revelation in itself, and indeed, Kafka's influence over his literary successors has been widely accepted and commented upon by many scholars, including Iris Bruce,³⁸⁹ and Joseph Strelka,³⁹⁰ who explore this phenomenon more generally, as well as a myriad of scholars who have investigated individual cases, a wide selection of whom are present in the list of works cited below. That being said, it is still noteworthy that the Kafkaesque can be felt so strongly in such a disparate collection of works, since after all, each of these chosen novels is not only from a different decade – with *Catch-22* being published in 1961, *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983, and *The Unconsoled* in 1995 – but they also emerge from different literary traditions – as Heller is an American, while Coetzee is writing within the South African milieu, and Ishiguro is working in a Japanese-British context – and yet the authors all take significant inspiration from Kafka, a Czech national writing in German decades before they picked up their own pens.

Equally of note in this regard is the diverse nature of these texts, which is in part the reason why they were selected, since Heller takes the Kafkaesque into the theatre of conventional war in his stated quest to comment upon his contemporary society, while Coetzee uses it to inform his damning depiction of a ravaged South Africa torn apart by civil strife, and Ishiguro builds a dream-narrative designed to delve into the psychological realm. The fact that, with such distinct settings and motivations, each novelist nevertheless chooses to adopt the Kafkaesque for their work highlights its broad, versatile, and adaptable nature,

³⁸⁹ Iris Bruce, 'Kafka and popular culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 242-246.

³⁹⁰ Joseph Strelka, 'Kafkaesque Elements in Kafka's Novels and in Contemporary Narrative Prose', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 21.4 (1984), 434-444.

but also intriguingly hints at a certain apparent universality, which, in turn, opens the door to further questions.

Indeed, at this juncture, a tributary, and significant, line of enquiry about the nature of the Kafkaesque begins to naturally emerge – namely, why exactly is it that so many mid-to-late twentieth-century authors, writing in such different contexts and with such disparate intentions, should all find it so suitable to their ends as a source of inspiration and influence? One could argue that this could be a question of coincidence, or that the Kafkaesque has become such an ingrained part of literary tradition that its tropes are used unthinkingly, but the prevalence of its presence and the acknowledged nature of the debt is such that it points towards a possible alternate explanation that is worth exploring, since it may have wider ramifications, both with regard to Kafka and the Kafkaesque, as well as our understanding of the mid-to-late twentieth century and beyond.

As was discussed in the introductory segment of this study, the link between Kafka's work and the realities of his own times is well-established, with Georg Lukács stating that Kafka 'described and "demonized" [...] the world of the Hapsburg [sic] Monarchy',³⁹¹ Julian Preece arguing that Kafka's 'images of fractured perception, his figures' search for wholeness, and their experience of authority divorced from responsibility are modernist images of Europe on the brink of its most awful hour',³⁹² and Hannah Arendt insisting that the fact '[t]hat *The Trial* implies a critique of the pre-war Austro-Hungarian bureaucratic regime [...] has been understood from the first appearance of the novel', to mention a few examples.³⁹³ However, even in the years immediately following his death, many commentators were already quick to note that Kafka held a pertinence that extended far

³⁹¹ Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. by John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), pp. 77-78.

³⁹² Julian Preece, 'Introduction: Kafka's Europe', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece, pp. 1-8 (p. 2).

³⁹³ Hannah Arendt, 'Franz Kafka: A Revaluation', in *Essays in understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), pp. 69-80 (p. 71).

beyond his own age as well, with one of the first, and most significant, of these being the German critic Walter Benjamin.

Writing in 1938, Benjamin declares that, in his works, Kafka ‘perceived what was to come’,³⁹⁴ adding that he managed to do so because he is guided ‘on the one hand, by mystical experience (in particular, the experience of tradition) and, on the other, by the experience of the modern big-city dweller’.³⁹⁵ As Jean Bollack notes,³⁹⁶ Benjamin here is moving away from the ideas expressed in his earlier commentary on Kafka, in which the critic attempts to explain Kafka’s apparent prescience by referring to ‘prehistoric forces that dominated Kafka’s creativeness, forces which, to be sure, may justifiably be regarded as belonging to our world as well’.³⁹⁷ In the later text, however, Benjamin asserts that it is not the unconscious presence of any such forces, but rather, Kafka’s ability to actively listen to the past that enables him to create worlds which anticipate the future, even while insisting that it is not Kafka himself who is predicting anything, but is in fact the ‘mystical experience (in particular, the experience of tradition)’ working through him – ‘his experience was based solely on the tradition to which Kafka surrendered’, Benjamin writes; ‘there was no far-sightedness or “prophetic vision”. Kafka listened to tradition, and he who listens hard does not see’.³⁹⁸

Such an interpretation, as Bollack notes, ‘makes Kafka a solitary individual, apart from the world, who has no recourse but to turn toward the past, toward a shining, lost world, as a “complement” or a counterpart to the period in which he is living’.³⁹⁹ In fact, Benjamin

³⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Some Reflections on Kafka’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 141-145 (p. 143).

³⁹⁵ ‘Some Reflections on Kafka’, p. 141.

³⁹⁶ Jean Bollack, ‘Benjamin Reading Kafka’, in *The Art of Reading: From Homer to Paul Celan*, ed. by Christoph Koenig and others, trans. by Catherine Porter, Susan Tarrow, and Bruce King (Cambridge, MA: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2016), pp. 217-316 (pp. 294-296).

³⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, pp. 111-140 (p. 128).

³⁹⁸ ‘Some Reflections on Kafka’, p. 143.

³⁹⁹ Bollack, p. 294.

makes this exact point, arguing that ‘Kafka lives in a *complementary* world’, that is, on the sidelines of reality, and moreover, that Kafka ‘offered the complement without being aware of what surrounded him’.⁴⁰⁰ Thus, the impression put forward here is of a Kafka who has an eye, not on the future or the present, but towards the past, which nevertheless allows him to anticipate what is to come.

While contentious in many ways, Benjamin’s reading is noteworthy for being amongst the first to observe, and attempt to explain, why Kafka’s work, and by extension, the Kafkaesque, continues to have such resonance beyond its time. In this manner, he himself is prefiguring what many others would come to touch upon in following years. W. H. Auden, for instance, writing in 1941, almost two decades after Kafka’s passing, declares that, ‘[h]ad one to name the artist who comes nearest to bearing the same kind of relation to our age that Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare bore to theirs, Kafka is the first one would think of’,⁴⁰¹ while Arendt, in 1944, goes even further, stating that

[t]he reader of Kafka’s stories is very likely to pass through a stage during which he will be inclined to think of Kafka’s nightmare world as a trivial though, perhaps, psychologically interesting forecast of a world to come. But this world actually has come to pass. The generation of the forties and especially those who have the doubtful advantage of having lived under the most terrible regime history has so far produced know that the terror of Kafka adequately represents the true nature of the thing called bureaucracy – the replacing of government by administration and of laws by arbitrary decrees. We know that Kafka’s construction was not a mere nightmare.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ ‘Some Reflections on Kafka’, p. 143.

⁴⁰¹ W. H. Auden, ‘The Wandering Jew’, in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, Volume II: 1939-1948*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, 6 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997-2015), II (2002), pp. 110-113 (p. 110).

⁴⁰² Arendt, pp. 73-74.

In contrast to Benjamin, Arendt believes that Kafka's ability to prefigure his future actually comes from a close analysis of his present. 'In a dissolving society which blindly follows the natural course of ruin, catastrophe can be foreseen', she writes, adding that 'Kafka's so-called prophecies were but a sober analysis of underlying structures which today have come into the open'.⁴⁰³ Decades later, Ritchie Robertson expresses a similar sentiment in his discussion on how Kafka anticipates the rise and power of institutions in contemporary society, insisting that the source of this apparent prescience is found 'not in Kafka's prevision of the future but in his perception of his present'.⁴⁰⁴ As Robertson explains, Kafka 'had an extraordinary insight into the mechanisms of power, authority, and violence, mechanisms that are in some measure common to a wide variety of social systems', in particular, the institutions which dominate the twentieth century and beyond.⁴⁰⁵

Such observations may already go some way to explaining why the authors of the mid-to-late twentieth century find such a fitting source of inspiration in the Kafkaesque, since, through a sharp awareness of his own age, Kafka manages to anticipate their own realities and concerns before they even come to pass, imbuing the Kafkaesque with a relevance that exceeds its epoch. The ages succeeding Kafka's own did not outgrow the Kafkaesque, as much as grow into it. Inversely, of course, this means that its nightmarish and illogical worlds become realised in the reality of the twentieth century, which is in itself a rather damning conclusion. Its prevalence indicates that Kafka's worldview had become accurate, that reality began to resemble fiction, and that what was once a nightmare now became a mirror. As Robertson argues, when the concentration camp guards of Nazi Germany, to give one example, attempted to defend themselves by claiming that they were simply following orders, they 'were not saying anything new; they were simply following out

⁴⁰³ Arendt, p. 74.

⁴⁰⁴ Ritchie Robertson, 'Kafka, Goffman, and the Total Institution', in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross (New York: Camden House, 2011), pp. 136-150 (p. 137).

⁴⁰⁵ Robertson, p. 137.

the logic of institutions, which Kafka had already explored',⁴⁰⁶ and in much the same way, the Kafkaesque prefigures the alienation, bureaucratic oppression, and the struggle against anonymous forces of control that are present not just in the Nazi regime, but also in the respective wider realities that Heller, Coetzee, and Ishiguro are exploring.

Indeed, as Theodor Adorno, another influential critical voice on Kafka, observes,

Kafka sins against an ancient rule of the game by constructing art out of nothing but the refuse of reality. He does not directly outline the image of the society to come [...] but rather depicts it as a montage composed of waste-products which the new order, in the process of forming itself, extracts from the perishing present.⁴⁰⁷

In Adorno's reading, Kafka is able to identify those negative aspects of society that are usually simply accepted and taken for granted. As Brian O'Connor puts it, Kafka 'reproduces society *negatively* by expressing irrational social norms in a way that gives heightened perception to them',⁴⁰⁸ with many of the central tenets of the Kafkaesque that have been explored in this study being just this – examples of 'irrational social norms' that already existed in Kafka's times but have emerged even more powerfully since then. 'His power is one of demolition', Adorno insists, adding that '[h]e tears down the soothing façade to which a repressive reason increasingly conforms',⁴⁰⁹ in order to reveal the dark 'waste-products' that are already germinating within, waiting to emerge into the open in the years to follow.

⁴⁰⁶ Robertson, p. 145. One of the most powerful examples of this, cited by Robertson, can be found in *The Trial*, when Josef K. comes across two warders who are being flogged as punishment for the complaint that he had logged against them. Despite his attempts to stop the flogger, he is told that 'I've been hired to flog, and flog I will', with the flogger exhibiting the same blind, amoral acquiescence to orders that would be displayed by the wardens of concentration camps years later. (Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. by Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), p. 83).

⁴⁰⁷ Theodor Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 243-271 (pp. 251-252).

⁴⁰⁸ Brian O'Connor, 'On the Mimesis of Reification: Adorno's Critical Theoretical Interpretation of Kafka', in *Philosophy and Kafka*, ed. by Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 229-242 (p. 233).

⁴⁰⁹ 'Notes on Kafka', p. 252.

Adorno's views, and the insight they give into why the Kafkaesque has such a resonance across the span of the twentieth century for it to feature so prominently in the literature of this era, are further expounded upon in *Aesthetic Theory*, where he states that 'Kafka [...] codifies in the dregs of the administered world what becomes of people under the total social spell more faithfully and powerfully than do any novels about corrupt industrial trusts', adding that '[i]n his writing, absurdity is as self-evident as it has actually become in society'.⁴¹⁰ Kafka then, is able to peer beyond the veil, as it were, and identify, note, and succinctly express the essence of his times that would go on to manifest itself so strongly in the years that followed, both on a social and individual level, and it is this ability that lies behind the longevity of the Kafkaesque that the novels analysed here have evidenced.

With that being said, however, there remains one tantalising aspect which is not yet thoroughly answered, and that is the question of how it is that Kafka, and the Kafkaesque, manage to so thoroughly capture this essence in a manner that so few other authors have managed to accomplish, at least certainly not to the same extent. Many of the critics mentioned above attribute this to a sharp sense of awareness from Kafka's side, but there are two further voices that may help to shed further light on this issue, namely those of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

In *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, which was already touched upon earlier in this study,⁴¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari place Kafka's works within the category of minor literature – that is, a literature 'which a minority [like Kafka, a Czech Jew] constructs within a major language [in his case, German]'.⁴¹² – going on to argue that among the principal characteristics of such literature is the fact that it is, at its core, a 'collective assemblage of

⁴¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002) pp. 230-231.

⁴¹¹ See 'Introduction: The Birth of the Kafkaesque', pp. 14-15.

⁴¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p. 16.

enunciation’.⁴¹³ What is meant by this is that since minor literature, by definition, is not as plentiful as major literature, and is also going to exist on the outskirts of the language’s established canon, ‘in it everything takes a collective value’, and there can be no such thing as individual utterances which are not at the same time the voice of the collective.⁴¹⁴

As they put it, ‘precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that “master” and that could be separated from a collective enunciation’, which means that an author of minor literature is not merely expressing their own voice, but the voice of a ‘collective’, or of an entire group of people.⁴¹⁵ As a result, Deleuze and Guattari claim that such literature is ‘positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation’, going on to state that, with minor literature,

[t]he literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come, not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu.⁴¹⁶

The ramifications of such a reading on the questions being explored in this chapter are interesting. If one were to follow Deleuze and Guattari’s framework, then Kafka’s writings, and by association, the Kafkaesque with them, can be seen as the voice of his age, expressing a collective enunciation in a manner that no other machine, to use their terminology, can do so well. He is then a mouthpiece for his times, and the anticipatory elements of his work which prefigure what is to come, and which dominate the Kafkaesque, are present precisely because they are already a part of his own context, mired in the dying days of the

⁴¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 18.

⁴¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 17.

⁴¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 17.

⁴¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, pp. 17-18.

Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, albeit maybe not yet as pronounced. Even more significantly, Deleuze and Guattari insist that all this is done consciously and intentionally from Kafka's side. Refuting any suggestion that the author simply retreated into his writing in order to escape from the travails of life, they argue that 'he is a political author, prophet of the future world', and that his writing

vacuums up in its movement all politics, all economy, all bureaucracy, all judiciary: it sucks them like a vampire in order to make them render still unknown sounds that come from the near future – Fascism, Stalinism, Americanism, *diabolical powers that are knocking at the door*.⁴¹⁷

While echoing elements of previous critics who speak of Kafka's ability to anticipate what is to come by drawing on his present, Deleuze and Guattari's reading is particularly insightful because it shows how Kafka, as a writer of minor literature, and thus, existing on the sidelines of society as opposed to at its heart, is perfectly placed to hear, and express, 'the sound of a contiguous future, the murmur (*rumeur*) of new assemblages of desire, of machines, and of statements, that insert themselves into the old assemblages and break with them', which would have been harder for him to do had he been situated in the centre of the existing machine.⁴¹⁸ The very conditions of his life and context then, coupled with his talent and intense cognizance, provide the perfect breeding ground for the Kafkaesque to emerge, so much so that one can argue that it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for it to be born as it was at all if the circumstances, or individuals involved, had been any different. These conditions are also the reason why Kafka is able to anticipate and prefigure so many of the concerns that would occupy his literary descendants, and why the twentieth-century

⁴¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 41.

⁴¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 83.

authors analysed here, in turn, find the Kafkaesque so apt when exploring these same concerns.

The twentieth century, however, is not where the story of the Kafkaesque ends, in spite of the necessary limitations of this study. The word itself, as noted earlier, continues to remain in wide use across all strata of society, which is an indication of the relevance it continues to hold. Indeed, at the very time of writing, it has cropped up once more in the midst of one of the contentious court cases being argued by Donald Trump's American government, involving Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia, a US resident who was abruptly separated from his family and deported to a prison in his native country of El Salvador despite an extant court order that nominally protected him from such an act, due to what the administration later described as an 'administrative error'.⁴¹⁹ Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the circumstances, his legal team protested the matter by arguing that '[h]e sits in a foreign prison *solely* at the behest of the United States, as the product of a Kafka-esque mistake'.⁴²⁰

The fact of the matter is that, as Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross write in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, '[i]t has become natural to see Kafka as Auden did, as the inevitable expression of our modernity', who has 'intuited its catastrophes and its scars,

⁴¹⁹ As reported on various major news platforms, including:

Christal Hayes, 'Man mistakenly deported to El Salvador "alive and secure", US says', *BBC*, 12 April 2025

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9qwxwr74jo>;

John Kruzel and Andrew Chung, 'US Supreme Court tells Trump administration to facilitate return of Salvadoran man deported in error', *Reuters*, 11 April 2025

<https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-supreme-court-upholds-order-facilitate-return-deportee-sent-el-salvador-error-2025-04-10/>;

and Ben Finley, 'What to Know About Kilmar Abrego Garcia, the Man Mistakenly Deported to Prison in El Salvador', *Time*, 11 April 2025

<https://time.com/7276642/kilmar-albrego-garcia-error-deportation-el-salvador-prison-supreme-court-return-ms-13/>. Archived at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20250509143917/https://time.com/7276642/kilmar-albrego-garcia-error-deportation-el-salvador-prison-supreme-court-return-ms-13/> [all accessed 14 April 2025].

⁴²⁰ Simon Y. Sandoval-Moshenberg and others, 'Opposition to Application to Vacate the Injunction Issued by the United States District Court for the District Of Maryland and Request for an Immediate Administrative Stay', 7 April 2025, p. 1

https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/24/24A949/354927/20250407153131040_2025.04.07%20Respondents%20Opp%20to%20App%20to%20Vacate.pdf [accessed 14 April 2025].

visible already in this infant twenty-first century'.⁴²¹ The conditions which the Kafkaesque explores, and which emerge so strongly in the twentieth century and in the writings of the time, have not disappeared with the new millennium, but are present as strongly as ever. After all, as Corngold and Gross note, the '[i]nstitutions of the twentieth century have morphed into those of the twenty-first, and their power continues to reside in their pervasiveness, illusory or real, as well as our willingness to acquiesce',⁴²² and in much the same way, so too have the issues of alienation, sense of individual powerlessness and disorientation in the face of arbitrary and inescapable systems, and the presence of systemic absurdities and oppressive, labyrinthine bureaucracies which the Kafkaesque explores continue to be felt in our own times as well.

It is thus no surprise to note that elements of the Kafkaesque can also continue to be found in the media created across the twenty-first century, ranging from novels such as Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*,⁴²³ Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*,⁴²⁴ Ishiguro's own *Never Let Me Go*,⁴²⁵ Dave Eggers's *The Circle*,⁴²⁶ or Jesse Ball's *The Repeat Room*,⁴²⁷ to mention a few, and all the way to movies and TV shows, as in the case of *Severance*, for instance, with its cast of severed workers trapped within, and at the mercy of, the nightmarish, absurd, labyrinthine institution that is Lumon Industries.⁴²⁸ Whether this is a conscious decision on their part, as in the case of the authors of the twentieth century which have been focused on here, or whether it is simply the case that the contemporary realities they are exploring have themselves become so akin to the Kafkaesque that it is practically

⁴²¹ Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, 'Introduction', in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, pp. 1-23 (p. 18).

⁴²² Corngold and Gross, p. 14.

⁴²³ Ian McEwan, *The Cockroach* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019).

⁴²⁴ Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Harvill Press, 2005).

⁴²⁵ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005).

⁴²⁶ Dave Eggers, *The Circle: a novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

⁴²⁷ Jesse Ball, *The Repeat Room: A Novel* (New York: Catapult, 2024).

⁴²⁸ Dan Erickson, *Severance* (Apple TV+, 18 February 2022-ongoing).

impossible to talk about them without invoking its presence, is another question entirely, and one that may well warrant its own further study.

Irrespective of the degree of agency, however, its presence is certain, and moreover, it is not one which is merely limited to the creative sphere either, for there also appears to be a widespread awareness of just how suitable Kafka and the Kafkaesque remain in commentaries on contemporary existence within critical discourse as well. The essays gathered in the aforementioned *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, for instance, touch upon such topics as racial identity and antisemitism,⁴²⁹ contemporary institutions,⁴³⁰ and the Israel/Palestine divide,⁴³¹ amongst others, all of which remain highly pertinent to this very day. Imke Meyer, meanwhile, goes even further, bringing the Kafkaesque to bear upon one of the most topical issues in contemporary discourse, as she tackles the subject of AI and its domineering impact on society, noting that ‘Kafka’s apparatuses and bureaucratic systems, in their powerful and toxic confluence of regularity and opacity, systematicity and arbitrariness, foreshadow the effects of AI upon our embodied existence in the 21st century’.⁴³²

Each of these areas are worthy avenues for further exploration in their own right. Even more significantly however, they collectively showcase the continued relevance of the Kafkaesque, and Kafka himself, deep into our own century, now more than a hundred years after his passing. Indeed, perhaps Auden, when lauding Kafka as ‘bearing the same kind of relation to our age that Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare bore to theirs’, did not actually go far enough in his praise after all,⁴³³ perhaps Kafka, in the immortal words of Ben Jonson, is ‘not

⁴²⁹ Katja Garloff, ‘Kafka’s Racial Melancholy’, in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, pp. 89-104.

⁴³⁰ See Note 404 above.

⁴³¹ Iris Bruce, ‘Kafka’s Journey into the Future: Crossing Borders into Israeli/Palestinian Worlds’, in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, pp. 222-236.

⁴³² Imke Meyer, ‘Ghosts in the Machine: Kafka and AI’, *Humanities*, 14.2 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.3390/h14020025> [accessed 16 April 2025].

⁴³³ See Note 401 above.

of an age, but for all time',⁴³⁴ spanning not just his century but also our own and countless years to come with his prescient insights. If this is the case, and, as has been seen, there is a strong argument for it, then it may very well be true that a continued study of the Kafkaesque would not just be justified for what it can reveal about Kafka's writings, as well as his age and the years that followed him, but may also provide just as sound an understanding and deep perception of our very own times and nature as well, for our own generation and for many more yet to come, precisely as it has already done for so many before us.

⁴³⁴ Ben Jonson, 'To the memory of my beloved, the author Master William Shakespeare and what he hath left us', in *The Poems of Ben Jonson*, ed. by Tom Cain and Ruth Connolly (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 647-653 (p. 650).

List of Works Cited

- Adelman, Gary, 'Doubles on the Rocks: Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*', *Critique*, 42.2 (2001), 166-179
- Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002)
- 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), pp. 243-271
- Aldridge, John W., 'The Deceits of Black Humour', in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, ed. by James Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 157-163
- 'The Loony Horror Of It All: *Catch-22* Turns 25', *The New York Times*, 26 October 1986, section 7, p. 3
- Anonymous, 'An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller', *The Realist*, 39 (1962), 18–31
- Arendt, Hannah, 'Franz Kafka: A Revaluation', in *Essays in understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), pp. 69-80
- Armitstead, Claire, 'Can't get you out of my head: why pop culture is still under Kafka's spell', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2024
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/jun/01/how-franz-kafka-inspired-word-of-our-times-kafkaesque> [accessed 15 October 2024]
- Attwell, David, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)

Auden, W. H., 'The Wandering Jew', in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, Volume II: 1939-1948*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, 6 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997-2015), II (2002), pp. 110-113

Ball, Jesse, *The Repeat Room: A Novel* (New York: Catapult, 2024)

Barney, Richard A., 'Between Swift and Kafka: Coetzee's Elusive Fiction', *World Literature Today*, 78.1 (2004), 17-23

Barthes, Roland, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 142-148

Benjamin, Walter, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 111-140

—— 'Some Reflections on Kafka', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 141-145

—— 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 69-82

Biti, Vladimir, 'State of Exception: The Birthplace of Kafka's Narrative Authority', *Primerjalna Knjizevnost*, 43.20 (2020), 115-125

Bloom, Harold, 'Introduction', in *Joseph Heller's 'Catch-22'*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008), pp. 1-2

Boa, Elizabeth, 'The Castle', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 61-79

- Bollack, Jean, 'Benjamin Reading Kafka', in *The Art of Reading: From Homer to Paul Celan*, ed. by Christoph Koenig and others, trans. by Catherine Porter, Susan Tarrow, and Bruce King (Cambridge, MA: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2016), pp. 217-316
- Borges, Jorge Luis, 'Kafka and His Precursors', trans. by Eliot Weinberger, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger, trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999)
- Brignall, Miles, "'Kafkaesque': bank blocks cash transfer, saying it could be an AI scam", *The Guardian*, 17 August 2024
<https://www.theguardian.com/money/article/2024/aug/17/bank-blocks-cash-transfer-ai-scam-fraud> [accessed 15 October 2024]
- Bruce, Iris, 'Kafka and popular culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 242-246
- 'Kafka's Journey into the Future: Crossing Borders into Israeli/Palestinian Worlds', in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, pp. 222-236
- Brustein, Robert, 'The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World', *New Republic*, 23 September 2013 <https://newrepublic.com/article/114827/rubert-brustein-joseph-hellers-catch-22> [accessed 23 November 2024]. Originally published in *New Republic*, 13 November 1961, p. xx
- Butler, Rex, 'Everything and Nothing: On Jorge Luis Borges's "Kafka and His Precursors"', *Romance Quarterly*, 57.2 (2010), 129-141
- Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/> [accessed 17 October 2024]

- Camus, Albert, 'Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka', in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1975), pp. 112-124
- Church, Margaret, 'Time and Reality in Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 2.2 (1956), 62-69
- Coetzee, J. M., *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004)
- 'Interview', in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 197-209
- 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)', in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 96-99
- 'Kafka: Translators on Trial', *The New York Review*, May 14, 1998
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1998/05/14/kafka-translators-on-trial/> [accessed 28 December 2024]
- *Life & Times of Michael K* (South Africa: Ravan Press, 1983)
- "Life & Times of Michael K", The J. M. Coetzee Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin
- 'Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow"', *MLN*, 96.3 (1981), 556-579
- 'Translating Kafka', in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986-1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), pp. 74-87.

- Coraghessan Boyle, T., 'The Big Garage', in *Kafkaesque: Stories Inspired by Franz Kafka*, ed. by John Kessel, and James Patrick Kelly (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2011), pp. 85-104
- Corngold, Stanley, 'Kafka and the Dialect of Minor Literature', *College Literature*, 21.1 (1994), 89-101
- Corngold, Stanley and Ruth V. Gross, 'Introduction', in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross (New York: Camden House, 2011), pp. 1-23
- Cornwell, Neil, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006)
- Craig, David M., *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000)
- Dean, Andrew, "'Why Will He Not Join the Guerrillas?': J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and the Politics of the Postcolonial Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies*; 65.4 (2019), 676-699
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986)
- Dunsany, Lord, 'Carcassonne', in *A Dreamer's Tales* (California: CreateSpace, 2015), pp. 75-86
- Eggers, Dave, *The Circle: a novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013)
- Eliot, T. S., 'Philip Massinger', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), pp. 112-130

—— ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’, *The Sewanee Review*, 64.4 (1956), 525-543

—— ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), pp. 42-53

Erickson, Dan, *Severance* (Apple TV+, 18 February 2022-ongoing)

Finley, Ben, ‘What to Know About Kilmar Abrego Garcia, the Man Mistakenly Deported to Prison in El Salvador’, *Time*, 11 April 2025

<https://time.com/7276642/kilmar-albrego-garcia-error-deportation-el-salvador-prison-supreme-court-return-ms-13/> [accessed 14 April 2025]

Garloff, Katja, ‘Kafka’s Racial Melancholy’, in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, pp. 89-104

Gelb, Barbara, ‘Catch-22 Plus: A Conversation With Joseph Heller’, *The New York Times*, 28 August 1994

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/15/home/heller-conversation.html> [accessed 20 November 2024]

Gordimer, Nadine, ‘The Idea of Gardening’, *New York Review*, 2 February 1984

https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/02/02/the-idea-of-gardening/?lp_txn_id=1599133 [accessed 22 December 2024]

Green, Daniel, ‘A World Worth Laughing At: *Catch-22* and the Humour of Black Humour’, in *Joseph Heller’s ‘Catch-22’*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2008), pp. 183–193. Originally published in *Studies in the Novel*, 27.2 (1995), 186–196

Hayes, Christal, 'Man mistakenly deported to El Salvador "alive and secure", US says', *BBC*, 12 April 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9qwxwrr74jo> [accessed 14 April 2025]

Head, Dominic, *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Heller, Joseph, 'A Special Message to Subscribers', in *Joseph Heller's 'Catch-22'*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008), pp. 123–124. Originally published in Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, Franklin Library Edition (Washington D.C.: Franklin Mint, 1978)

—— *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961)

—— 'Catch-22 Revisited', in *Catch As Catch Can: The Collected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Park Bucker (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 275–297

—— 'Joseph Heller Replies', *The Realist*, 50 (1964), 30

—— 'Preface to the special edition of *Catch-22*', in *Catch-22* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 1–6

Hewson, Kelly, 'Making the "Revolutionary Gesture": Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer's Responsibility', *Ariel*, 19 (1988), 55–72

Hoyles, John, *The Literary Underground: Writers and the Totalitarian Experience, 1900–1950* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991)

Ishiguro, Kazuo, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005)

—— *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989)

—— *The Unconsoled* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995)

Jaggi, Maya, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro Talks to Maya Jaggi’, *Wasafiri*, 11.22 (1995), 20-24

Janouch, Gustave, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. by Goronwy Rees (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971)

Jarvis, Tim, “‘Into Ever Stranger Territories’: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* and Minor Literature’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (London: Red Globe Press, 2011), pp. 157-168

Jonson, Ben, ‘To the memory of my belovèd, the author Master William Shakespeare and what he hath left us’, in *The Poems of Ben Jonson*, ed. by Tom Cain and Ruth Connolly (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 647-653

Kafka, Franz, ‘A Hunger Artist’ in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 222-232

—— ‘Absent-minded Window Gazing’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 15

—— ‘Before the Law’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993) pp. 173-175

—— ‘In the Penal Colony’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 129-160

—— *Letters to Felice*, ed. by Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, trans. by James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973)

- *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977)
- *Letter to The Father*, trans. by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 2015)
- ‘Poseidon’, trans. by Tania and James Stern, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 401-402
- *The Castle*, trans. by Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- *The Castle*, trans. by Mark Harman (New York: Schocken Books, 1998)
- *The Diaries: 1910-1923*, trans. by Joseph Kresh, Martin Greenberg, and Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1988)
- ‘The Judgement’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 25-39
- ‘The Metamorphosis’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 73–128
- ‘The Street Window’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 19-20
- ‘The Tradesman’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), pp. 13-15
- *The Trial*, trans. by Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998)
- *The Trial*, trans. by Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

- ‘The Wish to be a Red Indian’, in *Franz Kafka: Collected Stories*, ed. by Gabriel Josipovici, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 20
- ‘Kafkaesque’, *Breaking Bad*, dir. by Michael Slovis (AMC, 16 May 2010)
- Krider, Dylan Otto, ‘Rooted in a Small Space: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’, in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 125-134. Originally published in *The Kenyan Review*, New Series, 20.2 (1998)
- Kruzel, John and Chung, Andrew, ‘US Supreme Court tells Trump administration to facilitate return of Salvadoran man deported in error’, *Reuters*, 11 April 2025
<https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-supreme-court-upholds-order-facilitate-return-deportee-sent-el-salvador-error-2025-04-10/> [accessed 14 April 2025]
- Kundera, Milan, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Perennial, 2001)
- *The Art of the Novel*, trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Perennial Classics, 1988)
- Lehan, Richard and Patch, Jerry, ‘*Catch-22*: The Making of a Novel’, in *Joseph Heller’s ‘Catch-22’*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2008), pp. 81–89 (p. 81). Originally published in *Minnesota Review*, 7 (1967), 235–244
- Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher, ‘Books of The Times’, *New York Times*, 6 December 1983
<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/06/books/books-of-the-times.html> [accessed 5 January 2025]

Lemon, Robert, 'The Comfort of Strangeness: Correlating the Kafkaesque and the Kafka in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross (New York: Camden House, 2011)

Lesser, Simon O., 'The Source Of Guilt and The Sense Of Guilt – Kafka's *The Trial*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 8.1 (1962), 44-60

Lewis, Barry, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

Lukács, Georg, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. by John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963)

McDonald, Paul, *Reading 'Catch-22': A Literature Insight* (Penrith: Humanities Ebooks, LLP, 2012)

Medin, Daniel L., *Three Sons: Franz Kafka and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, and W. G. Sebald* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010)

Mehigan, Tim, 'Introduction', in *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee*, ed. by Tim Mehigan (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), pp. 1-8

Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/> [accessed 17 October 2024]

Merrill, Robert, *Joseph Heller* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987)

Meyer, Imke, 'Ghosts in the Machine: Kafka and AI', *Humanities*, 14.2 (2025)
<https://doi.org/10.3390/h14020025> [accessed 16 April 2025]

Meyers, Jeffrey, 'Kafka's Dark Laughter', *The Antioch Review*, 4.70 (2012), 760-768

Michaels, Leonard, 'Bruce Gold's American Experience', in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, ed. by James Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 167-172

Mitchell, Breon, 'Translator's Preface', in *The Trial*, trans. by Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998) pp. xv-xxvi

'Morocco abruptly drops clock change', *BBC*, 26 October 2018

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45995634> [accessed 15 October 2024]

Murakami, Haruki, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (London: Harvill Press, 2005)

Nagel, James, 'The *Catch-22* Note Cards', in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, ed. by James Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 51–61

Nelson, Thomas Allen, 'Theme and Structure in *Catch-22*', in *Joseph Heller's Catch-22*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008), pp. 99-108.
Originally published in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, 4.23 (1971), 173–182

Northey, Anthony, 'Myths and realities in Kafka biography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 189-205

O'Connor, Brian, 'On the Mimesis of Reification: Adorno's Critical Theoretical Interpretation of Kafka', in *Philosophy and Kafka*, ed. by Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 229-242

Oliva, Peter, 'Chaos as Metaphor: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro', in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, pp. 120-124. Originally published in *Filling Station Magazine*, 9 (1996)

'Orange is the New Yellow', *The Simpsons*, dir. by Matthew Faughnan (Fox Broadcasting Company, 22 May 2016)

Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com/> [accessed 19 November 2024]

Pasley, Malcolm, 'Kafka's Semi-private Games', *Oxford German Studies*, 6.1 (1971), 112-131

Preece, Julian, 'Introduction: Kafka's Europe', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-8

—— 'The letters and diaries', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. by Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 111-130

Quarrie, Cynthia, 'Impossible Inheritance: Filiation and Patrimony in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*', *Critique*, 55 (2014), 138-151

Reiss, H. S., 'Franz Kafka's Conception of Humour', *The Modern Language Review*, 4.44 (1949), 534-542

Robertson, Ritchie, 'Kafka, Goffman, and the Total Institution', in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross (New York: Camden House, 2011), pp. 136-150

Sandoval-Moshenberg, Simon Y. and others, 'Opposition to Application to Vacate the Injunction Issued by the United States District Court for the District Of Maryland and Request for an Immediate Administrative Stay', 7 April 2025, p. 1
https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/24/24A949/354927/20250407153131040_2025.04.07%20Respondents%20Opp%20to%20App%20to%20Vacate.pdf [accessed 14 April 2025]

Sévry, Jean, 'An Interview with J. M. Coetzee', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 9.1 (1986), 1-7

Shapiro, James, 'Work in Progress: An Interview with Joseph Heller', *Intellectual Digest*, 2 (1971), 6–11

'So They Say: Guest Editors Interview Six Creative People', *Mademoiselle*, 57 (1963), 234–235

Sokel, Walter H., 'Beyond Self-Assertion: A Life of Reading Kafka', in *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka*, ed. by James Rolleston (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), pp. 33–69

Sotomayor, Sonia. 'On Application for Stay and On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the Supreme Court of Florida', 22 August 2019
https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/18pdf/19-5617%20_apl1.pdf [accessed 15 October 2024]

Stach, Reiner, *Kafka: The Decisive Years*, trans. by Shelley Frisch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)

Strelka, Joseph, 'Kafkaesque Elements in Kafka's Novels and in Contemporary Narrative Prose', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 21.4 (1984), 434–444

Struc, Roman S., '"Negative Capability" and Kafka's Protagonists', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 11 (1978), 87–103

The Fly, dir. by David Cronenberg (20th Century Fox, 1986)

The Swedish Academy, 'Press Release'
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/press-release/> [accessed 20 December 2024]

VanZanten Gallagher, Susan, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991)

Walfisz, Jonny, ““Kafkaesque” new medical drama “Breathtaking” goes right to the heart of the UK's pandemic response’, *Euronews*, 22 February 2024
<https://www.euronews.com/culture/2024/02/22/kafkaesque-new-medical-drama-breathtaking-goes-right-to-the-heart-of-the-uks-pandemic-resp> [accessed 15 October 2024]

Wallace, David Foster, ‘Laughing with Kafka’, *Log*, 22 (2011), 47-50

Weigl, Engelhard, ‘*Life & Times of Michael K* (1983)’, in *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee*, ed. by Tim Mehigan (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), pp. 76-90

Wood, James, ‘The Unconsoled’, *The New Republic*, 16 October 2000, 43-49

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, ‘Allegories of power in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee’, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 2.1 (1986), 1-14

Zelig, dir. by Woody Allen (Warner Bros., 1983)