

УДК 821.112.2(436):82.07

DOI 10.58423/2786-6726/2024-2-170-177

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The fourth interpretation of the novel “The Trial” by Franz Kafka

1. Research problem

“The Trial” (“Der Prozess”) is one of three novels written by the Austrian novelist Franz Kafka (1883–1924). It was originally published in 1925. Kafka worked on the novel for several months, from August 1914 to January 1915. Western researchers correctly consider “The Trial” to be the most prominent and important literary novel of the 20th century. Like all of Franz Kafka’s works, his first novel contains many themes and sub-themes, motifs and meaningful lines, and it is not surprising that the number of interpretations is ever increasing.

The most obvious characteristic of the novel is the following: “Together with another novel “The Castle”, “The Trial” constitutes the basis of Franz Kafka’s literary heritage. The plots of both novels englobe events that could have happened anytime and anywhere. However, in “The Trial” similarities to Austrian and Czech life at the beginning of the 20th century can be identified. Each episode of “The Trial” describes Joseph’s confrontation with the mystifying justice system and compares it with man’s confrontation with supernatural forces that exceed a human being’s physical capacities and understanding. Unlike other characters subject to trial, Joseph K. not only tries to find out which forces hold power over him, but also acts according to the belief that they are not all-powerful, that there is certainly a higher justice which simultaneously worsens his situation. While Joseph initially tries to obtain justice from the mysterious judges by following their rules, the trial becomes for him a vicious circle, in which the only possible move is to start over from the beginning. After becoming conscious of the uselessness of the battle with the rules, Joseph himself determines his life. The plot of “The Trial” develops throughout the year and ends the same day as it begins. Although resistance leads to death, Joseph manages to quit the trial and becomes free. In the end, he does not follow his murderers as much as he himself leads them, triumphing over fate” (Keba, 2013, p. 167).

Thus, the purpose of this article is to present one more assessment, the fourth interpretation of the novel. In our opinion, the key to the solution lies in the last phrase of the work.

The methodological basis of this article is thematology based on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and his concept of "continuity of cultural tradition". Thanks to the principles of thematology, an attempt will be made to update the perception of the Austrian author's work by formulating another variant of its interpretation.

2. Synthesis of three interpretations

In one of the collections of Franz Kafka's works, three main interpretations of the novel can be found. The first one consists of the following: "This is the metaphor of human life. Not coincidentally the action begins on the day of Joseph's birth. Also, the word "judgment" is similar to the word "fate" ... From birth and until death, the human being inevitably feels subject to judgment: every person is judged by friends, enemies, society and by some entity called God. In the case of "The Trial" we should first discuss judging ourselves. Joseph K. is not immediately sent to prison, but is allowed to live his normal life. He creates a prison around himself by constantly returning to thoughts of the trial, breathing out a sense of guilt. According to Kafka, guilt generally determines our sense of being and our sense of consciousness. And this is where everybody needs to decide how to evaluate the death of the hero in the book's finale: is it a punishment or a reward?" (Kafka, 2005, p. 6).

The second interpretation is as follows: "Joseph K. might be a criminal. People are used to doing bad things and refusing to take responsibility for themselves. It is inconceivable that by the age of thirty, our hero had not committed any bad acts against anyone. Indeed, we do not know the severity of the crimes he is accused of committing: he could have killed a man or he could have crushed a fly. Any action can be deemed criminal, depending on who is judging you. Given the presence of biblical allusions in the novel, Kafka clearly holds into Christian dogmas. "The Trial" should be considered a religious and philosophical work" (Kafka, 2005, p. 7).

Lastly, the third interpretation: "The novel "The Trial" was written prior to World War I, when society was experiencing global changes. Some individuals felt empowered by these changes and considered themselves to be creating history. Joseph K., to the contrary, remains passive. He is a small man who sees no further than his own nose and in his own mind he understands that history is created by the ruthless and unruly masses. For the individual to resist this process is in vain" (Kafka, 2005, p. 7).

Stanley Corngold (1988), a leading contemporary researcher of Kafka's works, who lives and works in the United States, concurs with the three above interpretations (Corngold, 1988, p. 135). However, a German researcher, Reiner Stach (2002), summarizes: "One of the possible interpretations could be to read the novel as an autobiographical work. This thesis could be confirmed by the similarities of the initials in the names of Franz K. and Joseph K." (Stach, 2002, p. 98). Another writer and compatriot of Kafka, Elias Canetti, notes that an intensively detailed description of the judicial system reflects Kafka's professional work as an insurance lawyer (Canetti, 1974; cited by Stach, 2002, p. 98). Conversely, the philosopher Theodor Adorno has the opposite opinion (Adorno, 1997; cited by Stach, 2002, p. 98). According to him, "The Trial" does not tell the story of an individual's fate, but contains more broad-scale political aspects which could be interpreted as an omen that foresees the rise of the Nazi terror. German literary scientist Rolf Goebel (Goebel, 1997; cited by Stach, 2002) proposes a synthesis of these two positions and points out that the negotiating strategy used by the bureaucratic judicial system during the process of demoralization of K. is similar to a shortcoming of the judicial system of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that K. and the court are not confronted by one another as separate entities, but are intertwined. The friction between K. and the judicial system intensifies during the trial. At the end of the process, he understands that everything that happens comes out of his inner "Ego" or self and is the result of his own sense of guilt and his own imagining of punishment. The fantasy component of the events is also worth mentioning: as in the dream, the internal and external worlds of K. are being mixed up. It is possible to make a jump from the fantasy and realistic levels to some allegoric and psychological ones as even the work environment of K. is becoming merged with the fantasy fairy tale world. Moreover, according to friends of Kafka, he loudly laughed several times while reading his book. Thus, we can assume the existence of humorous aspects in "The Trial", despite its dark content.

It seems that the scientist Rolf Goebel was the closest to the truth. We will try to further develop his interpretation.

3. The fourth interpretation

The final paragraph of "The Trial" states the following: "But the hands of one of the gentlemen were laid on K.'s throat, while the other pushed the knife deep into his heart and twisted it there, twice. As his eyesight failed, K. saw the two

gentlemen cheek by cheek, close in front of his face, watching the result. "Like a dog!", he said, and he would never outlive the shame" (Kafka, 2005, p. 238).

After reading the novel's last sentence, any reader would notice an obvious contradiction. If Joseph K. is evolving spiritually, "becomes free", "does not follow his murderers as much as he himself leads them, triumphing over fate" and if the main character of the novel is a metaphor for a man who reflects the historical and societal context, why does he die "Like a dog!" and "would never outlive the shame"?

This contradiction is most often explained by the specificity of the world that Kafka created, all of his texts are "strange" and rich in all kinds of "wonders". However, a simple chain of logical assumptions could show that this is not the point.

In the above quote, the following is mentioned: "Given the presence of biblical allusions in the novel, Kafka clearly holds into Christian dogmas". This could be incorrect: for the Austrian writer, the Christian theme (including theology) is not especially close. Franz was a Jew by birth and Judaist by religion. He kept a deep connection with Judaism throughout his entire life (for example, specific attention should be paid to his text "In our Synagogue").

Considering this aspect, we will make the following step: the "guilt" concept in the Bible (especially in the Old Testament) resulted from original Sin and is considered a reminder of the first crime of man and the memory of it. The "guilty conscience" is not a curse, but something good: a human being remembering his or her own mistakes can adequately build relationships with the world.

This should probably be the key to understanding "The Trial" which could be considered a novel about memory and the consequences of its loss.

Joseph K. did commit a crime. This, for example, can be confirmed by the fact that throughout the work he does not deny his guilt. His fatal flaw is that he has forgotten his sin and does not remember anything (perhaps, the prosecutors do not remember either). Therefore, his death is shameful: human memory is the part of consciousness which is the differentiating factor between people and animals and is that which makes us human. Thus, one who has lost his memory is one who ceases to be a human being and becomes a non-human.

4. Conclusions

In the science of literature, there are three main interpretations of "The Trial" which lead to the following motif: the lyrical hero has become the victim of an unjust world. Now, the fourth interpretation has been suggested, one in which the entire development of Franz Kafka's novel's plot is an

interpretation of the biblical story of Mankind's fall and the complex guilt with which it is associated.

The interpretation proposed in this article is based mainly on one, the last, sentence of the novel. In this regard, this interpretation cannot be exhaustive, which, however, does not deprive it of scientific interest and the possibility of development in further research.

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The article examines one of the most famous novels of the 20th century – “The Trial” by the Austrian writer Franz Kafka. Published in 1925 after the death of the author, this book constantly continues to attract attention because of the multiple meanings that can be found in the text. Literary critics throughout the world have developed several interpretations of “The Trial”. The dominant idea is that this novel is a metaphor for the life of a modern person, who is a pawn in the hands of subhuman (albeit self-created) institutions. The article gives a brief overview of the novel’s main interpretations developed over the decades since its publication. Concurrently, an attempt is made at another possible interpretation, for the purpose of which the final sentence of the novel is emphasized. According to this (the fourth) version, Kafka’s work is considered primarily through the prism of memory. It is proved that “The Trial” is a book about the loss of memory and the resulting consequences. The authors of the study propose an interpretation that Joseph K. (the main character) committed the crime he is accused of, but forgot about it, so his death is “shameful”. Given the specifics of Kafka’s entire work, the proposed article does not establish the final version of the interpretation. The study’s authors offer one of the options that may be either close to the Austrian writer’s intention or the farthest away from it. Ultimately, the presented article demonstrates in its own way that each of Kafka’s works, and “The Trial” in particular, has limitless possibilities for interpretations so that each subsequent generation of researchers will discover this novel from a new angle. The studies of Franz Kafka’s work, which are almost unknown in Ukraine, play an important role in the article. Among them is a book by Elias Canetti, laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature, a compatriot of Franz Kafka who devoted almost half of his life to the study of his work. In addition, a literary encyclopedia is also taken into consideration, where it seems that all aspects of the life and work of one of the most famous writers of the 20th century are considered, but the interpretation of the novel “The Trial” proposed in this article is overlooked.

Keywords: *novel, guilt, fear, memory, person, court, trial.*

Четверта інтерпретація роману «Процес» Франца Кафки

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У статті розглянуто один із найвідоміших літературних творів XX ст. – роман «Процес» австрійського письменника Франца Кафки. Зазначено, що виданий уже після смерті автора, твір постійно привертає увагу читачів, причиною чого є множинність смислів, які можна знайти в тексті. За безмаль сторіччя від часу виходу друком (1925 р.) літературознавці виробили кілька основних варіантів трактування «Процесу», у яких домінує уявлення, що цей роман – метафора життя людини новітнього часу, котра є безправною іграшкою в руках надлюдських (хоч і власноруч створених) інституцій. У статті подано стислий огляд основних інтерпретацій роману, зокрема й не відомих донині в Україні. Серед них – книга австрійського письменника, лауреата Нобелівської премії з літератури Еліаса Канетті (співвітчизник Франца Кафки присвятив вивченню його творчості чимало років свого життя), а також профільна енциклопедія, у якій розглянуто всі аспекти життя і творчості Кафки, окрім інтерпретацій роману «Процес», що й спонукало нас дослідити дану тему. Здійснено нову спробу прочитання «Процесу»: головний твір Франца Кафки розглядається насамперед через призму пам'яті. Доведено, що фактично це розповідь про втрату пам'яті та подальшу розплату за це. Наголошено на тому, що зважаючи на постмодерну сутність тексту, автори дослідження пропонують один із варіантів його прочитання в контексті цілісної творчості митця, крізь трагізм його світобачення, зумовлений автобіографічними чинниками. Зрештою, представлена стаття по-своєму демонструє, що кожен твір Франца Кафки, й «Процес» зокрема, має, без перебільшення, бездонний простір для інтерпретацій, отож кожне наступне покоління дослідників відкриватиме цей роман із нового боку.

Ключові слова: роман, вина, страх, пам'ять, людина, суд, процес.

Franz Kafka „A per” című regényének negyedik értelmezése

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A tanulmány a 20. század egyik leghíresebb regényét, Franz Kafka osztrák író „A per” című művét vizsgálja. A szerző halála után, 1925-ben megjelent könyv mind a mai napig felkelti az olvasók figyelmét a szövegben rejlő többféle jelentéstartalom miatt. Az irodalomkritikusok szerte a világon számos értelmezést dolgoztak ki a regényhez kapcsolódóan. Az általános szemlélet az, hogy ez a regény egy modern ember életének metaforája, aki egy sakkbábu a félállati (habár saját maga által létrehozott) intézmények kezében. A tanulmány rövid áttekintést ad a regény megjelenése óta eltelt évtizedek során kialakult főbb értelmezésekről. Ezzel párhuzamosan egy másik lehetséges interpretációra tesznek kísérletet a szerzők, aminek érdekében a mű utolsó mondatát emelik ki. E negyedik értelmezés szerint Kafka munkásságát elsősorban az emlékezet prizmáján keresztül vizsgálhatjuk. Bebizonyosodott, hogy „A per” valójában az emlékezet elvesztéséről és az ebből eredő következményekről szól. A tanulmány szerzői azt az értelmezést javasolják, hogy Josef K. (a főszereplő) tényleg elkövette azt a bűncselekményt, amivel vádolják, de megferdkezett róla, így halála „gyalázatos”. Tekintettel Kafka egész munkásságának sajátosságaira, a szerzők nem határozzák meg az értelmezés végső változatát. A tanulmány szerzői csak az egyik interpretációs lehetőséget kínálják, amely közel állhat az osztrák író eredeti szándékához, de az is lehet, hogy a legtávolabb áll tőle. Végső soron a tanulmány a maga módján bizonyítja, hogy Kafka minden egyes művének, és különösen „A per” című regénynek korlátlan számú értelmezési lehetőségei vannak, így a kutatók minden generációja új szemszögből fedezheti fel ezt a regényt. A tanulmányban fontos szerepet kapnak azok az Ukrajnában szinte ismeretlen kutatók, akik Franz Kafka munkásságát tanulmányozták. Közöttük van Elias Canetti, Nobel-díjas regény- és drámaíró, Franz Kafka egyik honfitársa, aki élete majdnem felét az író munkássága tanulmányozásának szentelte. Emellett egy irodalmi enciklopédiát is tárgyalnak a szerzők, amelyben úgy tűnik, hogy a 20. század egyik leghíresebb írója életének és munkásságának minden aspektusát figyelembe veszik, de „A per” című regény jelen tanulmányban javasolt értelmezését figyelmen kívül hagyják.

Kulcsszavak: *regény, büntudat, félelem, emlékezet, személy, bíróság, tárgyalás.*