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The Castle

Franz Kafka · *written 1922; published 1926 · Willa and Edwin Muir translation (1930)*

On a winter evening a stranger, K., arrives in a village deep in snow, above which stands a Castle hidden in mist. He says that he is the Land Surveyor whom the Count has sent for. He never reaches the Castle and never learns whether he is wanted. Kafka's last novel was left unfinished at his death in 1924, and it ends in mid-sentence.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a person do when he has been given a place by a power that will not explain itself, and how long can he go on trying to belong?

K. is stubborn and often wrong, and he tries one path after another: the telephone, a messenger, an official, a woman who knows an official. The villagers treat the Castle as the center of their lives, and the book shows what it does to them. Frieda loves K., then drifts away. Olga's family is cast out for a refusal. Bürgel explains the system while K. falls asleep. The book offers no answer, and its power lies in the reader's feeling of being inside the problem.

KEY CHARACTERS

K.
The stranger who says he is the Land Surveyor.

Frieda
A barmaid who becomes K.'s lover.

Klamm
A Castle official whom K. cannot reach.

Barnabas
A messenger from the Castle.

Olga and Amalia
Barnabas's sisters, outcasts.

Arthur and Jeremiah
K.'s odd assistants.

Bürgel
A Castle secretary.

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Arrival
CHAPTERS 1–5

K. arrives in the snow, claims to be the Land Surveyor, and is given assistants. He meets Barnabas and Frieda.

- The first phone call to the Castle gives two contradictory answers.
- The assistants are an odd pair.
- Barnabas is a messenger whose work is unclear.

02
Klamm and Frieda
CHAPTERS 6–13

K. lives with Frieda in the inn and receives contradictory letters from Klamm, while trying to see the official.

- Klamm is a distant figure.
- Frieda is bound to K. and to Klamm's memory.
- The letters leave K. no wiser.

03
The Barnabas Family
CHAPTERS 14–18

K. learns from Olga how her family fell into disgrace when Amalia refused an official's request.

- Amalia's refusal is the family's ruin.
- The village's shunning is complete.
- Olga's story is the book's long digression.

04
The Herrenhof and Bürgel
CHAPTERS 19–22

K. is drawn into the officials' inn, where Bürgel explains the system while K. falls asleep.

- The officials' inn is a world of its own.
- Bürgel's explanation is full of detail.
- K. misses the one chance he has.

05
The Ending
UNFINISHED

The book breaks off, with K.'s case unresolved.

- The last chapter breaks off in mid-sentence.
- K. is still waiting.
- Kafka left no ending.

Bureaucracy | Belonging | Authority | The Unreachable

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Notice how K.'s story is told. Do we know what he knows?
2. The Castle never explains itself. Ask why.
3. Look at how the villagers speak of the Castle.
4. The book is unfinished. Think about what an ending would change.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Willa and Edwin Muir translation (1930) (Standard Ebooks, The Castle (from the 1930 Knopf edition; page scans at the Internet Archive)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/kafka-the-castle/.