The Issue Of Bureaucracy In Franz Kafka’s “The Trial”

Written at the beginning of the 20th century “The Trial” depicts “the rise of bureaucracy, the power of law, and the atomization of the individual” (Smith, 2008, p. 9), which are allegorically reflected in a story about Joseph K., a bank employee who is accused of unspecified crimes. This rather surreal and pessimistic narrative begins when two guards show up on K.’s 30th birthday and put him under arrest. Even though K. is allowed to continue living his life “normally”, he is trying to make sense of his trial until being executed without any progress or clarity in his case. There is no single interpretation of “The Trial”, however, the essay will only focus on the mindless bureaucratic processes the protagonist has to face. Franz Kafka himself was, in a sense, a member of the bureaucratic world as his official profession was a lawyer; presumably, his writings were inspired by his formal day job, not to mention contemporary historical events which were at least of some inspiration as well (Löwy, 2009, p. 153). “The Trial” lets the reader to have a deep look into the chaotic, senseless, and confusing hierarchical chain of the bureaucracy, which imprisons its victims in often unreasonbale circle of formalities and personal businesses.

From the beginning of the novel it is strongly felt how bureaucracy interferes with people’s lives making them meaninglessly complicated and what a multilayered and unstable phenomenon is judicial system. The moment official guards showed up, the usual order of K.’s life was interrupted and bound to change. His daily routine was disturbed, and it was one of the first signs of the anxiety, tension, and misunderstandings he was about to face in the future. The information about the arrest, which no reason or explanation was given for, was immediately followed by a couple of other events that only confirmed the shadiness and dirtiness of the court: the officers made it quite clear (almost insisted) that bribing is welcome (even though it would not benefit K. in any way), besides, the men who were sent by the court to arrest K. were junior officers who admitted themselves they were non-professionals and “hardly know one end of an ID card from another” (Kafka, 1995, p. 3). The officers were only taking the authorities’ orders without any knowledge about the situation – in the court‘s eyes the accused people are not important enough to deserve direct communication with the authorities; such attitude only declares how distant is the judicial system from any personal relation with an accused individual and confirms bureaucracy being some kind of hierarchical web where the closest possible contact with the court is a touch of “the lower orders who cannot take ultimate responsibility for anything they do” (Luban, Strudler, Wasserman, 1992, p. 2349). This is a reflection of how the whole system works – a lot of officially necessary but fruitless formalities which only get one as close to the end as a labyrinth without an exit. The officers who came for K. are described as “significantly bigger” (Kafka, 1995, p. 2). In the novel it is some kind of pattern – people directly related to the court actually were (or at least K. felt they were, or a visual illusion was created) physically bigger. For instance, during one of his meetings with a lawyer, Joseph K. gets to see a portrait of a judge, who “has himself painted in this awe-inspiring manner because he is as vain as everybody connected to the court (…) the picture clearly demonstrates the court’s tendency to self-aggrandisement,” (Kafka, 1995). It is to emphasize the inequality in status and power between K. (or anyone else in a similar position) and the court. No matter what, the court is more powerful, and its decisions are significant; this interpretation gives a metaphorical hint about the helplessness of K. against the whole system, of which the officials are the embodiment.

Vital episodes of the novel are K.'s conversations with a painter Titorelli, who paints portraits for the court, and a lawyer Dr. Huld, who was introduced to K. by his uncle. They both revealed a lot of illustrative ins and outs of how the court works. For example, Joseph K. finds out from the lawyer about the importance of the first submitted documents, even though, the court might not even read them (not to mention that in a lot of cases they get lost). To put it briefly, submitting documents is considered to be a necessity, even though in the reality these formalities do not have any impact at all, which means the court does not value and take into account the work of their "clients". Besides, the accused and his defence are not allowed to get any information about the court records, therefore, the actual process remains unknown to them. Even the conditions of the courthouse could be interpreted as a symbol of all the bureaucratic proceedings – there is always a risk of getting trapped, "In the floor of this room (...) there is a hole that's been there for more than a year, it's not so big that a man could fall through, but it is big enough for your foot to disappear through it." (Kafka, 1995, p. 62). The moment someone enters the territory of bureaucracy, it is bound for them to experience the anxiety of walking through a mine field. It is also learnt from the conversation with the lawyer about the power of personal connections. Dr. Huld states without any hesitation the court is corrupted and a part of his job is to pay bribes and use "honest personal contacts" as it "is the only way the progress of the trial can be influenced," (Kafka, 1995, p. 63). Therefore, as much as the accused is expected to follow the proceedings and submit the documents, none of the work has actual value. Also, personal disagreements with the court officials might, and usually will, have a negative impact on the process – professional and personal lives are not separated and are of high influence on one another. Hence, the impression of the trial is more of a business than the empowerment of justice. The meeting with Titorelli, who is closely related to the court, is particularly interesting as it actually ends in sort of a business agreement between K. and the painter – K. buys three paintings, which also have quite a symbolic meaning. All of the paintings are of the same landscape, thus, no matter how much is done to make some progress in the trial and given (paid, in a way) to the court, it leaves the accused in the same place. As Rolf J. Goebel argues, "By flaunting their inauthenticity and non-mimetic techniques, all these pictures suggest what K. has been fearing all along. There may indeed be no substance, no legal justice or moral truth behind the court's pitifully self-important representatives and their (pseudo-)legal, endlessly proliferating arguments" (Goebel, 2002, p. 54). The air in the painter's flat is also a detail worth paying attention to as it is a leitmotif – K. experienced difficulties breathing, felt weakness and dizziness in all spaces which were related to the court in one way or another. The stuffiness of the air makes him uncomfortable; his bodily reaction reflects the pressure that is put on him, which results in anxiety.

In the novel it is not made clear how much progress had Joseph K. done by the time he was executed but a lot of information about never ending processes is learnt from another encounter whom K. met at the lawyer's house – a businessman named Block. His trial has already been going for five years and the only change he managed to make was the rise in the number of submitted documents, hired lawyers and hearings. Block reveals that "it's only very rare that you see any progress in these proceedings at all" (Kafka, 1995, p. 95). His statement basically summarizes how the court functions and predicts K.'s future. Block could also be seen as symbol of distribution and abuse of power – in every possible situation the court and its representatives are superior to the defendants, who often end up in humiliating positions. This is illustrated by the episode in which the relationship of the lawyer and Block is described. Dr. Huld treats Block in a doglike way – the lawyer does not talk to Block directly, refuses to look at him, his careless and even disgusted attitude towards Block leaves no choice for the businessman but to obey the lawyer. According to Graham M. Smith, "Justice must be considered a

fundamental and inescapable form of force. Justice (as force) is distinct from violence (as force). (…) Indeed, justice is the remedy to violence. (…) the qualities of justice and violence as force are by no means equivalent" (Smith, 2008, p. 21). In this situation, the actions of the lawyer, who is a representative of justice (since the idealistic role of the court is to bring and spread justice), are a form of violence (psychological abuse); in this way the principle of two different forces (justice and violence) presented by Smith merge and therefore, the meanings of both justice and violence are distorted. Thus, the court system is imperfect and lacks order within itself. Besides, K. does not experience this kind of behavior from the lawyer which again is a proof of judicial system being dishonest and corrupt – K.'s uncle is a friend of Dr. Huld. "(…) the overwhelming moral depravity of the court's hierarchy" (Goebel, 2002, p. 51) is also witnessed by K. when he finds pornographic books on the examining magistrate's desk; ironically, those in charge of justice are morally guilty as well.

The process of the trial sort of controls K.'s life – his mind is always occupied with it, even though it is pointless as there is nothing that depends on his actions. K. is so lost that even confessing his whole life starts to make sense to him – K. considers handing in to the court a written defence in which he would explain his life events and choices. The situation K. finds himself in is extremely confusing as "While being considered guilty K. protests that he is not — and yet, K. cannot protest that he is innocent, because he does not know that of which he is innocent" (Smith, 2008, p. 21).

It is worth to discuss the title of the book as well. The German title "Der Prozeß" has the meaning of both "trial" and "process", they overlap each other. The word "process" implies movement and change as it is only real when certain related actions are taken one after another. Therefore, the process happens in a form of the trial as K. has to go through a lot of investigations and legal work, which makes his arrest the whole journey through bureaucratic formalities that he does not complete but learns a lot about. In the end it is finally clear that the process was leading nowhere, nevertheless, it did not lose its meaning as the word "process" does imply a multilayer, dynamic event but does not declare neither regress nor progress. Naturally, one would prefer associating the word with progress but as it is seen in the novel – there is no less possibility of regress or at least stagnation. This complexity could be very well illustrated and explained by stating that "K. never has a formal trial, yet the novel is called The Trial: evidently, K.'s fruitless effort to learn what he is accused of is his trial." (Luban, Strudler, Wasserman, 1992, p. 2349). The effort is the process which is the result and implementation of the trial.

The style the novel was written in is not without meaning and symbolism as well. The language is ironic and satirical, besides, there are many situations which make no sense or have no impact on the storyline (for example, when K. finds two policemen in the junk room being beaten for K. has complained about them; the incident was of no importance to any other event). In this way the absurdity of bureaucracy is revealed, it is impossible for the reader to get rid of the feelings of unfairness, surrealness (which strengthens the impression that it is not rational or reasonable how the system works), pointlessness.

To conclude, "The Trial" is a great reflection of injustice in the states of the 20th century. The world Kafka lived in and the world he depicted in the novel were of not much difference, both "dominated by bureaucracy, power relations, the blurring of public and private" (Smith, 2008, p. 12). The protagonist of the novel Joseph K., an average young man working at a bank, is the victim (metaphorically and directly as he was executed) of processes he was not responsible

for, even though his actions and mind were controlled by illusions of capability to solve the puzzle of his trial. Bound to lose from the beginning but trying to find some reasoning and explanation for his arrest, K. embodies the misery of the times. Every step K. and those on the same boat took only lead them deeper into the labyrinth of bureaucratical hierarchy, in which no progress is possible to be made. K.'s death, perhaps, was the only way for him to escape the bureaucracy web he found himself caught up in. 'Well, everything belongs to the court' (Kafka, 1995, p. 81) states Titorelli and the sentence speaks for itself – the people K. met were in touch with the court in one way or another and even those who were of no direct interest in his case found out about the trial; ironically the court was the power which destroyed the justice.