

غياب المؤلف وإشكالية المعنى في رواية «القلعة» لفرانز كافكا

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الملخص:

يُثير فرانز كافكا، في روايته غير المكتملة "القلعة"، حيرة القراء والنقاد على حدٍ سواء؛ فهي عملٌ غير مكتمل تم اكماله وتنقيحه لاحقاً، يدور حول مسّاحٍ يُدعى ك.، يسعى إلى الاستيلاء على سلطة القلعة، ولكنه يفشل مراراً وتكراراً. تُجادل هذه الورقة البحثية بأنّ قراءات رواية "القلعة" لفرانز كافكا، التي تُركّز على غياب المؤلف أو اختفائه الفعلي. يُدرك دارسو كافكا، أو القراء، عند قراءة "القلعة" من خلال مفهوم رولان بارت النظري "موت المؤلف"، أنها تُعدّ مناسبةً بشكلٍ خاص لهذا المفهوم وكيف أنّ عدم التحديد النصي في الرواية سمةً جماليةً وأخلاقيةً تُغيّر المعنى في السياق التفسيري، والبنى السردية، والنص نفسه. لا يقتصر الأمر على كون هذه الرواية سرّداً غير مكتمل أو نتيجةً لمشاركة أحد ما في تأليفها. تُشير التقنيات الشكلية للرواية، والغموض البيروقراطي، وبحث ك. المُتوقّف، والقراءات المُتمعّنة للفجوات السردية، إلى أنّ المعنى لا ينبع من مركزٍ تألّفيٍّ دائم، بل من التلاعب النصي، واللغة المؤسسية، وتفاعل القارئ. تُظهر رواية "القلعة" لفرانز كافكا غياب المؤلف، على الرغم من كونها عملاً غير مكتمل. ويُبين رأي بارت بأن دور المؤلف يقتصر على التأثير التصنيفي لا على كونه مصدراً نهائياً. والنتيجة عملٌ يتطلب مسؤولية تفسيرية: على القراء تجاهل الاختلافات والتناقضات. يُبرز غياب المؤلف الأهمية الحرفية والأخلاقية لرواية "القلعة" بدلاً من التقليل من قيمتها الأدبية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن غياب المؤلف في "القلعة" لا يُعيق فقط السعي وراء تفسير نهائي، بل يُقدّم أيضاً تقييماً نقدياً لفهم معناها، وهو تفسير يُعتبر حيويّاً للنظرية الأدبية المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رواية القلعة، فرانز كافكا، موت المؤلف، رولان بارت.

**Interpreting Kafka's *The Castle* Through the Lens of Authorial Absence: A
Study of Meaning Beyond the Author**

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Abstract

Franz Kafka, in his incomplete novel *The Castle*, constantly confuses readers and critics; it is a subsequently revised work concerning a surveyor named K., who wants to attain the Castle's power and is continually unsuccessful. This paper argues that readings of Franz Kafka's *The Castle* that emphasize the author's absence or efficient elimination are particularly suitable. Kafka scholarship, or readers, during reading *The Castle* through the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," understands how textual indeterminacy in the book is an aesthetic and ethical feature that shifts meaning in the interpretive community, narrative structures, and the text itself. It is not just because this novel is an incomplete narrative or due to editorial intervention. The novel's formal techniques, bureaucratic opacity, K.'s halted search, and close readings of narrative gaps suggest that meaning is not derived from a permanent authorial center but rather from textual play, institutional language, and readerly negotiation. *The Castle* by Franz Kafka shows author absence, while it is unfinished work. Utilizing Barthes makes clear that the author works as a classificatory impact rather than a definitive source. The outcome is a work that needs interpretive responsibility: readers must ignore disagreements and contradictions. The absence of the author emphasizes the literal and ethical importance of *The Castle* rather than decreasing its literary worth. The study concludes that the author's absence in *The Castle* not only disrupts the pursuit of a definitive interpretation but also offers a critical examination of interpretation and authority that remains vital to contemporary literary theory.

Keywords: *The Castle, Franz Kafka, the death of the author, and Roland Barthes.*

1.Introduction

Franz Kafka remains one of the most enigmatic and influential figures of twentieth-century literature, a writer whose works continue to resist definitive interpretation despite decades of critical engagement. Among his novels, *The Castle* (Das Schloss, 1926) occupies a particularly complex position, not only because of its unfinished state but also because of the elusive quality of its meaning. The text depicts the futile attempts of the protagonist, K., to gain access to the mysterious authorities of the Castle, whose bureaucracy dominates every aspect of the village. The sequence of narration resolved the tensions, and the unfinished structure and suggestive symbols led to different readings and responses, varying from religious parables to critiques of modern administration. Surprisingly, one of the most productive critical approaches to *The Castle* arises from the notion of authorial absence-the theoretical move away from the authority of the author in exploring the sense of the novel.

This paper explores *The Castle* through the theoretical concept presented in Roland Barthes's seminal 1967 article "The Death of the Author." Barthes reveals that the text and the reader's engagement with it in isolation from the author's life story, desires, or authority, should establish the foundation of the novel's meaning. Kafka's refusal to complete or publish his works and *The Castle's* interpretive permeability are striking similarities.

In this essay, I will analyze K. not as a hero in the traditional sense, but as a metaphor for the interpretive subject, or one whose identity and understanding are gathered not through responding to eternal truths but instead through the continual encounter with indeterminate signs and absent authority. In exploring K.'s relation to the castle, K.'s relationships with villagers, and K.'s constant yet unrewarded attempts to manage the semiotic world, we will see how Kafka establishes K. as an allegory for the reader, who is always engaged in the work of interpretation while never arriving at a final resolution.

On other hand, this research paper, therefore, aims to examine *The Castle* through the theoretical lens of authorial absence, situating the novel within the

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critical discourse shaped by Barthes, Foucault, and later theorists of textuality. It will explore how the absence of the author not only complicates but also enriches the reading of Kafka's novel, allowing us to uncover layers of meaning that would otherwise remain obscured by author-centered approaches. Rather than searching for Kafka's "true" intention, the analysis will focus on the interplay between text and reader, the instability of narrative structures, and the inexhaustibility of the novel's symbolic possibilities.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to ongoing debates in literary theory and Kafka scholarship. By foregrounding the author's absence, the paper aligns with broader critical movements that challenge hierarchical and essentialist models of interpretation. At the same time, it underscores the continuing relevance of Kafka as a writer whose works anticipate and exemplify key theoretical concerns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In doing so, it highlights how *The Castle*, far from being a closed artifact of Kafka's personal life, emerges as a living text that continues to generate meaning across different contexts, readers, and interpretive communities.

In summary, this introduction lays the foundation for a critical journey that parallels K.'s own futile yet illuminating quest. Just as the protagonist's pursuit of the Castle illuminates the mechanisms of power and the limits of human understanding, so too does the reader's engagement with Kafka's text illuminate the processes by which meaning is produced, deferred, and transformed. To read *The Castle* through the lens of authorial absence is not to diminish Kafka's genius but to recognize the text as an open field of signification, one that thrives precisely because it resists being anchored to a single authorial voice.

2. *The Castle*, the novel

Franz Kafka's *The Castle* is one of the most enigmatic and unfinished books written in the twentieth century. Despite Kafka's wishes, Max Brod published the piece after death of Kafka in 1926. It resists conclusion, authority, and coherent

interpretation. Our hero, K., is a field surveyor who visits a mysterious village ruled by a mysterious bureaucracy whose goal is to conceal its true nature and purpose behind a fortress. The work's narrative vagueness, lack of resolution, and puzzling symbols have enthralled readers and professionals alike for quite some time.

Through its structure, content, and publishing history, this article argues that *The Castle* embodies the ideals outlined by Barthes and Michel Foucault. These concepts include the author as a tool rather than a creator of meaning and the text as a space of plurality rather than authority. This reading accomplishes two goals at once: first, it illuminates Kafka's aesthetics; second, it draws attention to the way his works anticipate significant debates in literary theory.

The novel's stylistic flaws, such as gaps, sharp breaks, redundancies, and an unfinished story, have led to biographical interpretations, editorial disagreements (especially about Max Brod's role), and theoretical discussions. This study offers a different viewpoint on *The Castle*, arguing that it is better understood as an artistic representation of authorial absence rather than only a fact (Kafka died before finishing the book) but also as an ideological and structural condition that shapes interpretation. The displacement of authorial intention is demonstrated in *The Castle* by the interaction of textual elements, institutional language (the Castle bureaucracy), and readers' interpretive actions. This perspective is supported by Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author," Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" and relevant theoretical frameworks. This reading reimagines the novel's unfinished business as an inventive strategy that exposes the building and contestation of power, meaning, and subjectivity, rather than a shortcoming.

Kafka's *The Castle* provides rich background for exploring this theoretical framework. The novel has often been interpreted through the lens of Kafka's personal life—his Jewish heritage, his complicated relationship with his father, his position within Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, and his struggle with sickness

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and isolation. While these biographical readings have granted valuable understanding, they risk reducing the richness of the novel to a mere extension of Kafka's spirit or life story [1]. By applying the lens of authorial absence, this study seeks to move beyond biographical reductionism and examine how *The Castle* creates meaning independent of Kafka's intentionality. The novel's unfinished and fragmented state, rather than being a limitation, in fact strengthens its openness to multiple interpretations and underscores the very impossibility of pinning down an ultimate meaning.

Furthermore, *The Castle* represents the tension between structure and indeterminacy. The narrative sets up a recognizable framework—K.'s quest to enter the castle—yet consistently frustrates narrative closure and readerly expectations. This paradox invites us to consider the novel as a space of interpretive play rather than a closed system. Barthes's notion of the "writerly text," which demands active engagement from the reader in producing meaning, finds a striking parallel here. The endless rearrangements, the complicated establishments, and the absence of resolution put the reader in a position of continuous negotiation with the text. From this perspective, *The Castle* ceases to be a puzzle awaiting solution and instead becomes an unlimited site of interpretive possibility.

The exploration of authorial absence in relation to Kafka is particularly significant because Kafka's works themselves dramatize the condition of absence, adjournment, and silence. His protagonists often confront inaccessible authorities, unanswerable questions, and unreachable goals, mirroring the critical predicament of readers and scholars attempting to locate definitive meaning in his works. K.'s inability to enter the Castle mirrors readers' inability to reach a final interpretive conclusion. These structural parallels foreground the novel's self-reflexive commentary on interpretation itself, making it a particularly

appropriate text for engaging with post-structuralist ideas about language, meaning, and authorship.

3.Theoretical Framework: Authorial Absence and the Death/Displacement of the Author.

The main argument of this paper is that *The Castle*—because of its form, content, and publishing history—performs the same ideas that were expressed by Barthes and later by Michel Foucault: the author as a function of meaning rather than the producer of meaning, and the text as a site of multiplicity instead of authority. This reading can enhance our understanding of Kafka's aesthetics and demonstrate how his work foreshadows important discussions in literary theory.

Literature Review Scholarly discussions of Kafka's *The Castle* have, until recently, occurred along two broad lines of inquiry: biographical and philosophical. The earliest Kafka criticism, including that by Max Brod and his contemporaries, focused on Kafka's tensions with authority, his religious practices, and his feelings of alienation from his family and faith, interpreting *The Castle* as an allegory of divine grace, existential exile, or bureaucratic oppression. The biographical work was trying to get to Kafka's "true" meaning in his fiction as presented through letters, diaries, and the social-religious realities of his life.

But as the authority of the author over the text has been challenged by structuralism and post-structuralism in the latter part of the twentieth century, it presented an alternative as to who gets to privilege the meaning from a work, or what the meaning is—and that is the work itself, its structure, and its contradictions. Roland Barthes, for example, challenged the traditional privilege of authorship, with a primary motivation to investigate how literary structures create doubling, flips, disorientation, and other complexities of meaning in literary texts.

The interpretive complexities of Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) have captivated scholars seeking to understand its obscure narrative structures, ambiguous symbolism, and various resistances to ascription of closure. At the

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heart of this complication arises the question of the author's role in constituting—of failing to constitute—meaning against a text's own meaning-making authority, and then inevitably, the author. The novel's posthumous, incomplete, and fragmented composition begs the reader to consider whether it is appropriate to locate the figure of the author as the locus of meaning. Contemporary literary theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing the issue of authorial absence and for conceptualizing the 'death' of the author. By employing the arguments of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, amongst others, shifting the author from the determining locus of textual meaning offers a new lens to approach reading. *The Castle* moves toward a reading where the text is less a product of Kafka's intention and instead becomes a field of discursive play, where meaning arises from the interplay of the text and language through the gaps of narrative and the labor of interpretation. This framework positions *The Castle* engages with poststructuralist critiques of authorship by examining how the themes of the novel reflect authorial absence in both its previously established and thematically relevant concerns.

The primary focus of this research is two theoretical interventions from the mid-1900s. Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) argues that the life and intentions of the author should not embody the meaning of a book; rather, it is necessary to liberate the text to enable the play of signification to take place. Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969) muddles the picture by examining how the notion of "author" is representative of both a classificatory and legal figure that contains discourse. For Foucault, the author is not simply a person; rather, it is a category that organizes texts. Likewise, the author is not just a function of interpretation. When these ideas are applied to Kafka, a rich line of questioning emerges. Kafka's diaries, letters, and editorial history of his work (particularly Max Brod's publishing of manuscripts in direct opposition to Kafka's request to eliminate them) further entangle the connection between the author's

will and the text's destiny and potential discursive play. However, purely considering his biography to source meaning does not allow for sufficient interpretive insight considering what the linguistic methods are doing in *The Castle*. Instead, putting the with respect to the narrative, *The Castle* has a deceptively simple plot: a surveyor called K. arrives in a village to claim that the Castle—a mysterious government agency—has summoned him. Throughout the narrative, K. seeks, but ultimately fails, to gain the admission and attention of the Castle. However, the structure of the narrative features repetitions, digressions, and no progression; information is sometimes presented elliptically, and chapters often bring the reader back to previous interests. Characters often give competing descriptions of procedures and permissions, sometimes giving multiple renditions of the same narrative. The fact that the narrative is unfinished brings indeterminacy to the forefront, but it is more than just an example of literary desolation; it is a formal device that underscores the elusiveness of authority. There are also several formal aspects that contribute to the overall effect of the work, including narrative disruption, solid institutional jargon, competing accounts in the narrative, and layers of editorial work under Max Brod. Together, these formal strategies construct a context in which meaning is not given down from above by the author but rather is realized in the reader's engagement with the text and the institution.

4. Barthes and the concept of the “Death of the Author.”

In his influential work, “The Death of the Author” (1967), Roland Barthes takes apart the conventional view of the author having final authority over the meaning of any given text. For Barthes, writing begins when the author disappears, and the text is open to multiple interpretations. The author becomes a “scriptor,” a figure who does not hold any transcendent authority and, in this case, is subsumed in the materiality of language. In other words, meaning does not belong to a singular consciousness; rather, it emerges intertextually because of the interplay with cultural codes, conventions, and the reader’s investments. [1]

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4.1. Authorial Absence in *The Castle*

Kafka's work explicates the problem of authority—both authorial and institutional—in its narrative structure. The protagonist, K., spends the course of the novel trying to obtain recognition and legitimacy from the castle authorities, who are always just beyond reach. This conflict parallels the reader's interpretative dilemma; we are similarly denied the very authority that might ground this meaning. The novel performs a structural analogy between the bureaucratic absence of authority and the theoretical absence of the author. An endless process of seeking validation or closure, which never arrives, ensnares both K. and the reader.

Kafka's *The Castle* demonstrates this theoretical assertion in multiple ways. First, it is unfinished, and therefore denies any fixed, authorial intention precisely when Kafka left it incomplete, as a work stripped of a true or definitive ending defies closure. Instead, the text becomes a site of interpretive pluralism, as opposed to authorial dominion. Next, its stylistic aspects, the writing is both exactly detailed and persistently elusive, meaning the text conveys excess meanings that even an author could not fully capture in a single explanation. Specifically, the role of the castle itself does not attach to any definitive reading, whether it operates as bureaucratic authority, divine transcendence, or a symbol for the absurd. In this way, it manifests Barthes' claim.

The novel's narrative approaches also contribute to the absence of the author. The voice of the narrator is strangely understated and restrained in judgment and does not offer us much in the way of interpretation. Nineteenth-century realist-style narration intervenes to add discussion or moral guidance, whereas Kafka's narrator minimizes his existence and opens interpretative voids. The indecision for Kafka allows us, the reader, to assign meaning, coinciding with Barthes' conception of the text being a location of readerly production and not of authorial precepts.

The fact that *The Castle* was unfinished and published after the author's death complicates his absence even more. Kafka told his friend Max Brod to burn all his writings, and Brod did not, which means that the text's existence is an effect of the dislocation of authorial intention. If the author oversees the fate of their work, then the publication of a posthumous work represents a radical denial of that control. The mere fact that *The Castle* exists is an example of the dissolution of authorial intent. *The Castle* demonstrates how the meaning of a text is produced and circulated outside of an author's will.

4.2. Displacement of the Author and Readerly Responsibility

The theoretical displacement of the author inevitably transfers the burden of interpretative work onto the reader. This burden in *The Castle* parallels K.'s arduous pursuit of access, recognition, and comprehension. Just as K. tries to manage the porous bureaucratic maze, readers contend with the semantic vagueness of the text. Every time that an interpreter attempts to synthesize an interpretative key—be it allegorical, theological, or psychoanalytic—the text, in part, is designed to resist full or easy interpretation. The lack of authorial explanation does not indicate failure; rather, openness is the spectacle of the text. The dislocation of the author suggests a surplus of meaning that invites multiple, even contradictory, meanings.

The text demonstrates Umberto Eco's idea of the "open work" (1962). *The Castle* does not lend itself to closure and requires a reader who will participate in the reading process. The reader must negotiate the novel's silences and ambiguities, unsure if they will arrive at a closed, author-approved interpretation. The kinetic engagement of Kafka as the only source of meaning effectively frees the novel into an intersubjective arena in which multiple meanings are possible and needed. Through the years, scholarly attempts to make sense of Kafka's texts, and specifically *The Castle*, have followed two broad avenues of meaning: biographical and philosophical. The early Kafka criticism of people like Max Brod and his contemporaries used Kafka's own struggles with authority, religion,

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and alienation to interpret *The Castle*, considering it a work that allegorized divine grace, existential exile, or bureaucratic oppression. It was an effort to uncover the "real" meaning of Kafka's fiction through his letters, diaries, and his own socio-religious background. [2]

But with the "structuralist" and "post-structuralist" turns into literary criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars began to take a skeptical view of the authority over the text. As Roland Barthes famously claimed...

5.Foucault and the “Author Function”

Michel Foucault, in *What Is an Author?* (1969), makes Barthes' challenge more complicated. He describes authorship as an institutional and discursive function, rather than the individual source of meaning. The 'author function' is operating in cultural systems of classification, ownership, and authority that are implicated in how texts are read and circulated. Foucault does not make the claim that the author disappears; he makes the claim that we should take care to remain aware of how the authorial name functions to organize the reception and reading of a text. There is a clear resonance in applying it to Kafka's *The Castle*, with the 'author function' being especially freighted. Kafka's biography—one of alienation, illness, and bureaucracy—is often read as inseparable from his fiction. Scholars often read *The Castle* as an allegory of Kafka's confrontation with authority, religion, and his father. A Foucaultian approach animates us to see "Kafka" less as a psychological key and instead as a classificatory device to establish meaning. "Kafka" is shorthand not for Franz Kafka the individual but for a discursive category: a "Kafkaesque" aesthetic of alienation, ambiguous authority, and unresolved existential uncertainty. If we accept this, we can see *The Castle* less as a transparent window into Kafka's psyche and instead as a text that participates in larger discursive movements about modernity, power, and alienation. [3]

6.Interpretive Subjectivity:

6.1- A Theoretical Context

To conceptualize K. as an example of interpretive subjectivity, it can be productive to consider the literary theoretical frameworks that undermine the author as the guarantor of meaning and privilege readers' actions as active participants. Roland Barthes' argument in *The Death of the Author* (1967) reminds us that the unity of a text resides not in its origins but in its destination, or in the engagement of reading. In a similar way, Michel Foucault's notion of the "author function" complicates textual authority by showing that meaning arises in systems of discourse and not as an expression of individual consciousness.

K. also embodies this interpretive indeterminacy. If the reader must negotiate Kafka's evasive text as they read, K. must negotiate the ambiguous bureaucratic and social codes of the village. K.'s subjectivity is not formulated through stable knowledge but through continuous interpretation. Every convening with a character—be it the official Klammer, the intermediary Barnabas and his family, or K.'s fiancée Frieda—demands K. to interpret opaque signals and grapple with contradictions. K.'s interpretive failures resemble the reader's inability to fully correspond with Kafka's unfinished and enigmatic narrative.

Consequently, K. can be viewed as a dramatization of the interpretative subject, one whose identity is entangled with the activity of trying to make sense of an unreadable script or unreadable text. His trouble makes evident the necessity but also the impossibility of interpretation: K. cannot stop reading signs but will never arrive at certainty.

6.2.K. serves as a figure representing interpretive subjectivity.

Since its publication in 1926, Franz Kafka's *The Castle* has stood as one of modernist literature's most baffling novels, a text that willfully defies definitive interpretations and challenges the standard assumptions of meaning, authority, and resolution. At the foreground of this very opaque novel is K., a land surveyor who has come to a town situated beneath a faraway and inscrutable castle. K., who seeks acknowledgment, a sense of legitimacy, and companionship with the

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castle text itself, has frequently been read as a personification of humanity's struggle with bureaucracy, theology, or absurdity. Yet, even beyond allegorical readings, K. can also be used in a more robust fashion to examine interpretive subjectivity; K. embodies the questing, questioning, and meaning-making that occur in a world rife with unpredictability and ambiguity.

6.3.-The Limits of Interpretation and the Ethics of Reading

While K.'s interpretive action demonstrates the importance of subjective involvement, Kafka also points to its limits. K. frequently interprets aggressively, often forcing meaning where there is none to be had. His desire to find an order often obscures the lived experiences of the villagers, who accept ambiguities along with all one can invest in K. The tension between the lived experience of the villagers and K.'s desire for certainty raises some ethical questions: interpretation is both productive and violent, both an act of meaning-making and an act of bringing one's own frames to another.

The cautionary aspect is worth keeping in mind for readers as well. In the same way that K.'s overinterpretations produce frustration, readers of *The Castle* must resist the urge to collapse the novel into a singular allegory or eliminate the open system, functioning as a closed system. Rather, K. reminds us that interpretation is an open process, requiring humbleness when engaging with the complexities of a text. K.'s subjectivity, shaped by the ceaseless attempts at meaning-making, is a mirror and a warning to the reader.

Our hero, K., is a proto interpreter throughout the text as he attempts to attain validity, a voice, and a place of belonging within the register of official discourse. K. repeatedly plays on the reader's need for answers and resolution when he is waiting to be

6.4-Editorial Mediation and the Ethics of Interpretation

The Castle (Das Schloss) by Franz Kafka is perhaps one of the most esoteric and unfinished novels published in the 20th century—written in the last years of his

life, it ends mid-sentence, has fragmentary chapters, and has an ambiguous overall structure. The text was left unfinished at Kafka's death in 1924, and before he died, he had urged his friend Max Brod to burn all his unpublished writing. Brod did not do this and instead edited and published the text. His editorial choice represents both preservation and betrayal of the text [4]. Thus, *The Castle* cannot be wholly divorced from the problem of the mediation of this editorial facility, and what is potentially lost in interpretation raises its own ethical interpretation, and it cannot dispose of it as a problem.

The case of *The Castle* illustrates how literary meaning is not just a property bestowed by the author but rather produced by the judgments of editors, translators, and readers. This essay considers the ethics of Brod's editorial implication, the manuscript's unfinished state, and the interpretation that is imposed by a text that its author did not finish publishing. At the end of the piece, *The Castle* calls for a reconceptualization of the relationship between editorial mediation and interpretive responsibility, highlighting that literature can only survive the mediation process when it is preserved despite alterations.

If the author's name is all that matters, the reader must interpret the text. To read *The Castle* actively demands that the reader engage in filling in gaps of absence, conflict, and any code that's involved, demanding readerly engagement as part of the construction of meaning in *The Castle*. Two modes jump out: the interpretation of silence and ellipsis and working with contradiction. This phenomenon is an example of a broader theoretical shift in which the power of interpretation is transferred from authors to readers.

6.5-The Ethics of Interpretation

The case of *The Castle* highlights the ethical implications of interpretation. The reader must grapple with a text that is both Kafka's and not Kafka's, one that is both sufficiently finished for reading and perpetually incomplete. Any

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interpretation must therefore face the issue of its provision. To read *The Castle* ethically means resisting the seduction of totalizing interpretations—whether allegorical or biographical. Instead, a text is interpreted ethically if it affirms the openness of the text, its refusal to close, and the many layers of mediation through which it comes to us.

Such an approach does not mean one can throw out interpretation completely, but when one interprets, it can be done ethically, meaning with humility. As Maurice Blanchot suggested, Kafka's work directs us towards infinity precisely in that it is unfinished and undecidable. The reader's task is not to stabilize that infinity but rather to dwell within it, recognizing that the ethics of interpretation lies in openness and not in complete possession. The history of publication for *The Castle*—Kafka's directive to burn all his manuscripts and Brod's rationale for saving and publishing them—creates a whole slew of ethical problems around the will of the author. The work we read is co-constructed, who sequences the chapters and who finds coherence are determined by who made the choices for the reader.

7. K.'s Quest as a Hermeneutic Struggle

K. is established as an outsider, a newcomer without legitimate status, from the first scene. His first instinct is to generate meaning: to find his place within the system, to discover the rules of the village, and to gain access to the castle. The goal is not merely a physical project of entering the castle, but a project of interpretive mastery. He is keen to know more generally what the Castle is, how it works, and how he can be acknowledged in its order.

However, every attempt at interpretation simply creates more confusion. When K. is informed by the village authorities that he has been personally summoned as a land surveyor, he treats himself at first as fulfilled in his vocation. Soon after, conflicting reports suggest that the summons may have caused confusion. The

constant changes in the information are undermining K.'s understanding of his situation.

It is analogous to the experience of the reader of the text itself, who, like K., uses fragments of information to make sense only to find these fragments collapsible upon further examination. In this way, *The Castle* always remains distant and unavailable and is always mediated through unreliable messengers, ultimately serving as an unreadable sign. It is an authority K. cannot reach, but it is also a text he cannot decipher.

7.1.K. and the Role of the Reader

K.'s interpretive subjectivity becomes even clearer when we consider his narrative function as a stand-in for the reader. He is ceaselessly engaged in acts of reading: reading letters, reading the villagers' reactions, reading bureaucratic procedures, and even reading silences. Each interpretation he makes is provisional, tentative, and subject to reversal.

For example, K.'s relationship with Frieda can be considered an interpretive negotiation. Initially, Frieda appears to present K. with a route to legitimacy, because she has a connection with Klamm. K. reads that link to Klamm as a possible form of connection with the castle. However, over the course of the relationship, K.'s interpretive position collapses alongside Frieda's. Similarly, Barnabas presents an analogue of agency by virtue of being K.'s messenger, but it ends up extenuating the opacity of the castle's decrees instead.[4]

Both interpretive failures highlight a fundamental truth: the discovery of meaning is always mediated, deferred, and contested. In this light, K. represents what Wolfgang Iser terms the "implied reader"—a figure that dramatizes the act of interpretation itself. In the same way the implied reader must fill narrative gaps, K. is perpetually casting about to fill the silences and contradictions of his world. In this way, his subjectivity holds together through interpretive work and not through a stable identity.

8.Bureaucracy as a Structure of Absence

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The bureaucracy of *The Castle* embodies delay, contradiction, and opacity. Every interaction K. has with officials or intermediaries serves to reinforce the notion that authority is both ubiquitous and elusive. Letters arrive, but they are hardly reliable; messengers bear contradictory messages, and decrees from above remain vague and open-ended. Authority thus is deferred into an infinite suspension of mediation, which never actually resolves into a decision.

For K., this mirrors Jacques Derrida's concept of difference: meaning is constantly deferred through infinite signifiers, never arriving at its own final presence. The Castle, like language, creates an illusion of authority without the authority itself. For K., as a land surveyor, fiancé, and citizen, the finding of legitimacy is always deferred. For the reader, bureaucracy is also a metaphor for interpretation: a system that gestures toward authority but never actualizes it. [5]

8.1. Bureaucracy, Language, and the De-centering of Authorial Intention

Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) is one of the most significant literary engagements with power, isolation, and interpretation in modernist literature. The novel introduces the protagonist, K., to a snow-covered village under the control of an unapproachable castle and its encircling bureaucracy. What occurs is not only a critique of bureaucratic systems but also a meditation on language, authority, and meaning. The Castle serves as a metaphor for the center of power that is absent, while the bureaucracy acts as a perpetually mediating authority that has no final resolution. In this respect, *The Castle* both dramatizes and performs the decentering of authorial intent, therefore revealing both the instability of meaning and the impossibility of interpretation with any determinacy.

8.2. Mediation, Authority, and the Castle's Bureaucracy

The problem of mediation, thematically, aligns with the content of the novel. *The Castle* is a story about inaccessible authority, mediated communication, and the impossibility of direct contact. K.'s efforts to reach the Castle are constantly mediated by intermediaries—clerks, messengers, and letters. The will of the

Castle is obscured rather than clarified in these exchanges. The authority lies at a distance, deferred through layers of mediation.

The result is a narrative dynamic that mirrors the condition of the text itself. K. never meets the Castle directly, and we never meet Kafka directly. We only meet the text as it is mediated from author to reader—Brod's editorial hand, translators, critics, etc. In this way, the structure of mediation of the novel allegorizes the conditions of its experiencing by us. *The Castle*, like the absent author, was never fully there; it lived through intermediaries. [6]

Thus, the interpretation of *The Castle* is inextricably linked to an ethical awareness of mediation. To ignore Brod is to misrecognize the existence conditions of the text. To take Brod definitively is to bestow on him too much authority. Ethical reading is about navigating the ambiguity, much like K. navigating the bureaucratic impossibilities of the Castle.

8.3. Language as a Medium of Indeterminacy

Bureaucracy undermines authority in the story, while language in the castle undermines meaning. The characters frequently engage in conversations that are riddled with contradictions and evasions. Officials speak in riddles, villagers offer conflicting accounts, and the writing is disorganized. For the most part, language does not clarify, and instead, it obscures meaning, showing the limited value of language in transparent, direct, and accountable communication.

The instability of language also undermines any attempt to modify meaning according to the intention of the author. Even if Kafka intended to communicate one theological, existential, or political allegory, the language of the novel will not allow for the closing off this meaning. Meaning is not derived from a center of stability but emerges from the flow of signs, uncertainties, and gaps in language. In this sense, *The Castle* anticipates Roland Barthes' declaration that the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." It is through the act of reading that Kafka's text lives—not through the intentions of the author.

9. De-centering of Authorial Intention

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The unfinished and posthumously published status of *The Castle* further radicalizes the decentering of authorial intention. Kafka wished for his manuscripts to be destroyed, but their preservation and publication meant Brod had pushed the novel outside the control of its creator. Kafka's authority as "author" is displaced in the text's circulation, where it is assigned a new meaning, independent of his will.

The text itself stages the absence of authorial intention by presenting the Castle without a voice. Authority does not arrive from above in the form of a declaration, decree, or explanation; instead, it is dispersed across intermediaries who speak vaguely. If the Castle withholds its voice, Kafka's novel also withholds a direct or clear authorial entailment. Readers like K., too, operate in uncertainty with no ultimate, authoritative source to revert to gain meaning.

The Castle is full of the traps of bureaucratic language, such as papers, testimony, permissions, and regulations. Bureaucratic logic in its procedural form affords primacy to procedures over individual choice and displaces an individual's intention. *The Castle* illustrates the ways that rules create meaning, unlike more traditional literary models that depict an intrusion of meaning based on an author's imposition. Language operates as a type of signaling that circulates within institutions, as the bureaucratic form illustrates. Files, testimony, and paper trails form an intertextual web that denies assured authorship. Hence, the emphasis of the novel on bureaucracy suggests that meaning is more about the discursive processes than the intended meaning of an author.

10.1-Max Brod's Mediation of *The Castle*

Max Brod was critical in popularizing Kafka's writing to the larger world. If not for Brod, *The Castle* may have never made it to print. But Brod was not just a mere arbiter of the text; he also intervened in preserving the substance of the unpublished work, reorganizing Kafka's unfinished book into a publishable version. He split the text into distinct chapters, resolved grammatical issues, and

arranged some of the fragments into what he thought to be a coherent scarf of the original manuscript.[7]

This action was subjective in its interpretation. By putting the chapters in an obviously organized sequence, he telegraphed a narrative logic that Kafka himself may not have deemed for the text. Brod additionally corrected ‘mistakes’ in Kafka's language is still a debate as to whether they were indeed errors, which is a decision that could risk smoothing some of the ambiguities that were there in Kafka's modernist experimentation in each of the modernist interpretive historical disciplines. Brod in so many ways became a co-writer of *The Castle*, adding a process of scholarly intention, which additionally complicates any attempt to bring back Kafka's original voice.

The ethical question posed here has two aspects—did Brod have the right to override Kafka's explicit wish to destroy the text? Additionally, how much should readers care about the influence Brod had on the text? The text cannot be treated as a transparent expression of Kafka's intention because it is always a hybrid of Kafka's fragments and Brod's editorial judgments.

10.2. The Unfinished Text and the Ethics of Reading

The unfinished status of *The Castle* complicates these ethical issues. Kafka left the novel incomplete, stopping in the middle of a sentence. The absence of closure subverts the normative interpretive instinct to seek meaning in the resolution of a storyline. Brod attempted to counter his argument with narrative notes that described Kafka's intentions for that closure—that K. would ultimately be provisionally accepted in the village—but this additional information itself creates a closure that Kafka never posed.

For readers, this raises the question: Is *The Castle* a work for us to understand as fragmentary and fundamentally unresolvable, or should we accept Brod's mediation to approach its intended meaning? In ethical terms, the significance of Brod's mediation is that by privileging this account, we risk silencing the radical openness of the text, thus limiting the potential ambiguity of the notion of

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narrative altogether to a narrative formally sanctioned by the editor himself. On the other hand, to only recognize Brod's notes entirely ignores the historical reality of the author's creative process, as Brod was one of the few people Kafka shared his works-in-progress with during their lifetime.

In this case, the ethics of interpretation has nothing to do with choosing between author and editor but rather understanding the continued constitution of their togetherness. Thus, readers are left holding the tension between Kafka's absence and Brod's relation to that absence or presence, and meaning emerges from this tension rather than one authoritative source.

10.3. The Politics of Absence: Authority, Judgment, and Resistance

The scenario put forth in *The Castle* emphasizes the ethical implications of interpretation. Readers encounter a text that is simultaneously Kafka's and not Kafka's, complete enough to understand, yet eternally incomplete. Any interpretation thus must reckon with its provision. To read *The Castle* ethically, in this case, is to resist the temptation to totalize its explanations—as allegorical (the Castle as God, or law, or even death) or biographical (the Castle as Kafka's father or his tuberculosis). An ethical interpretation respects the text's transparency, its rejection of closures, its intricacies that transform into mediation, and the complexities of our interaction with it.

Such reading does not mean foregoing interpretation altogether, but it does mean practicing it with humility. In Blanchet's terms, as noted in my introduction, Kafka's work hints at its purposeful openness. The gesture extends to infinity precisely because the proper tensions within would have preferred not to finalize anyone's meaning. In this way, the task of the reader is not to anchor this infinity but rather to be at home within it and to observe that the ethics of interpretation lies in its openness rather than our mastery of it.

The publication history of *The Castle*—that Kafka directed his friends, including Max Brod, to burn his manuscripts, and Brod's decision to save and

subsequently publish both *The Castle* and *The Trial*—raises ethical problems with the will of the author. The work we read is a co-construction: the order of the chapters and coherence is decided by the political logic of absence, which is evident in how judgment works in the novel as well. K.'s entire struggle is governed by a judgment K. will never fully confront: has he been acknowledged as the appointed land surveyor, or is he simply an interloper? *The Castle* both affirms and denies his existence. Villagers will occasionally tell him he has an appointment, and at other times they suggest to him he is merely an administrative mistake. This ambiguity will always remain opaque, and K.'s life becomes suspended in a liminal state removed from the dual oppositions of both acceptance and exclusion. Judgment is always postponed, but the shadow of judgment dictates K.'s every action and movement. This form of judgment has a resonance in contemporary political and legal institutions in which people may exist in systems that remain opaque and concealed. A person can be judged, having never heard the judgment. A subject can be condemned without encountering the judge. Kafka speaks to the reality in which judgment, separated from visibility and presence, becomes a modality of control that is diffuse and uncontested.

In this situation, K.'s resistance is particularly contradictory. He is unable to directly challenge authority due to the Castle's non-existence in his vicinity. He cannot escape it either, since the Castle's rule is always already immanent in all aspects of the village. His resistance, then, is entirely in his stubbornness, in his upholding the quest for cohesion, for belonging, for some identification of his status as alive. He keeps demanding to have himself affirmed, to be recognized, as he endures deferral and humiliation. K. does not give up the assertion of his being, demanding to be let into the conversation and struggling to hold on to his identity as a land surveyor. This assertion does not work; the novel provides no answer and does not offer a revelatory ending in which K. wins the descent into the Castle. Resistance in *The Castle* is not built on success; it is built on the

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endurance of the subject's demands. To keep demanding meaning in the face of absence is itself resistance; it is a refusal to let the absence of it extinguish the subject's voice.

Moreover, the politics of absence in Kafka's novel relates to larger questions of power and modernity. *The Castle* provides many aspects of precursors to twentieth-century bureaucratic states in which authority is largely a faceless entity. The Castle's authority diffuses decision-making across various institutions, making it often unclear who is responsible and what actions the institutions should take to avoid this confusion.

Judgment in *The Castle* depicts, again, theological and metaphysical aspects. Many critics have read the Castle as an allegory of divine judgment that exists fully yet remains beyond human cognition. Through or irrespective of the availability of such a theological reading, the novel illustrates how absence is also generative of authority through endless interpretation: since the Castle never speaks with clarity—everything is open to exegesis—any gesture, letter, or rumor is, then, made prone to interpretation and under deliberation as 'what' the Castle intends. Villagers argue ad infinitum about what the Castle means, and K. must occupy a world where meaning is always indeterminate. The Castle does not enact authority by issuing commands; instead, the Castle forces one to enter a dialogue with its absence. This hermeneutical politics makes absence the most insidious and powerful type of presence.

For K., to resist means not to acquiesce or commit to silence. He interrogates, he asks for audiences with officials, and he demands to be told the meaning of his relation to their authority. K.'s actions demonstrate the absurdity of authority found upon absence, but the text also suggests the limits of such acts of resistance, for K.'s futile actions ultimately wear him down, alienate him from the community or identity he comes to know as the villagers, and leave him waiting for an audience, in a loop of meaningless waiting. Resistance in *The Castle* is

both necessary and tragic: while they are an assertion of subjectivity in a system...[6]

To K., resist means not submitting to silence. To be resistant means to ask questions, to seek an audience, to even have an audience with the officials, and to keep asking what it means to be in their position. His resistance demonstrates the absurdity of a system that relies on absence. Yet, the novel also indicates there are limits to resistance: K. is worn down, becomes estranged from the villagers, and ultimately becomes stuck in a state of waiting. Resistance in *The Castle* is also necessary and tragic, claiming subjectivity in a system that is meant to repress consciousness. In this way, Kafka dramatizes the existential aspect of politics: the individual must resist even if resistance cannot lead to liberation, because surrendering means sacrificing oneself altogether.

In the end, *The Castle* represents a world in which absence is the basis of power. There is authority ruling without being present, there is judgment passed without being spoken, and there is resistance existing without hope of winning. The politics of absence is not just a subject matter of the novel but rather its whole architecture, the absent chapters, the incomplete ending, and the sudden last sentence all reproduce the deferring and incompleteness that seem to characterize the Castle's power. Moreover, by leaving the novel incomplete, Kafka stages the politics of absence by forcing readers into an unfinished narrative form that refuses closure. Interpretation serves as a form of resistance when readers try to derive meaning from a text that equally resists the Castle's ability to deliver its verdict. Consequently, what results in Kafka's *The Castle* is not just a novel concerned with bureaucracy and alienation but also an astute meditation on the politics of absence. It illustrates how authority can operate decidedly by being absent, how the act of judgment can exert its dominance precisely by being unseen, and how the act of resistance can persist precisely in the act of the subject persisting against the silence. The Castle's power comes from concealing its

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authority, while K.'s dignity remains in his persistence. Thus, Kafka presents a political idea and move for engaging with these matters for readers.

Addressing *The Castle's* absence of the author is both political and methodological. The novel subverts the power of clear access and hides reason. Hence, the novel reveals some features of authoritarian systems. One could view the author's lack of will as a literary form of skepticism, challenging the authority's practices. Moreover, the moments of rejection, the acts of interpretation, and the forming of coalitions between villages are forms of resistance. The non-centered text offers political opportunities for alternative readings and critiques of the opacity of institutions.

Conclusion

Kafka's *The Castle* can be read as a site where, both theoretically and concretely, the death or displacement of the author is staged. Theoretical frameworks, particularly Barthes' dismantling of authorial authority and Foucault's author function, among others, encourage resistance to interpretative closure and do not privilege the author's intentions as a source of meaning. In many ways, an unfinished novel, a posthumously published piece of uncompleted work lacking overall narrative clarity, and staged with lavish and extended absent authority, essentially realizes the same play of authorial absence. In a sense, the reader becomes the location for generating meaning, rather than Kafka. Thus, *The Castle* is a strong example of how the displacement of the author liberates literature to multiple interpretations, where absence can be an active principle of textual engagement.

K. in Kafka's *The Castle* serves not only as a character in an incomplete narrative; K. tells a parable of interpretive subjectivity itself. The character of K. cannot be disentangled from his readerly identity, as someone whose being is defined solely in terms of finding meaning amid uncertainty. K.'s struggle with the Castle, the villagers, and his own unsteady identity plays out the reader's own

struggle with the elusive text of Kafka: both are engaged in hermeneutical labor with no guarantee of resolution.

In reading K. as a figure of interpretative subjectivity, we begin to see how Kafka makes narrative into a meditation on the act of interpretation itself. Meaning cannot rest in authorial intentionality or institutional authority; it emerges with the subject's engagement with ambiguity. K. becomes a figure of the paradox of interpretation: it is inevitable, but it is never final. The story of K. is not one of winning or losing but of becoming under-enamored, mirroring the reader's own endless task found in melancholy before Kafka's unsettling, unassimilable text.

The Castle models the inseparability of editorial mediation and the ethics of interpretation: Brod's choice to publish and shape Kafka's incomplete manuscript preserved it at the expense of authorial presence. The novel's incompleteness and thematic fascination with inaccessible authority intensify this issue, as *The Castle* is both an authored literary text and a reflection on mediation.

The specialized ethical task for readers is to read *The Castle* not simply with a sense of the many layers of production—Kafka's fragments, Brod's mediation, and our inserts—but as responsible readers. This kind of reading is not simply a recovery or reconstruction of a lost intention due to an incomplete text. Instead, responsible reading suspects the openness, ambiguity, and dislocation required by the text itself. In this way, *The Castle* invites us to not only reflect on interpretation but also on the task of interpretation itself—not as a mastering act but as an ethical relation to the absence, mediation, and inexhaustibility of the literary text.

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