In the Penal Colony

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANZ KAFKA

Franz Kafka was born into a middle-class Jewish family in 1883 in Prague. Throughout his life, Kafka identified strongly with qualities of his Jewish heritage—intellectualism, mysticism, and devotion to learning—but was culturally German. Kafka's relationship to his father and his struggle with depression and social anxiety dominated his life. He never married, despite taking three different lovers, and he felt isolated all his life, unable to commune with other human beings or God. Upon obtaining a law degree in 1906 from Charles University of Prague, Kafka entered the civil service and though well-liked by his colleagues, despised this work, which took a toll on his physical and mental health. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1917, and this persisted until his death in 1924. Having strong misgivings about his work, Kafka published few of his stories in his lifetime and asked that his work be destroyed, a wish that was ignored by Max Brod, a close friend from college and executor of his estate, who had the foresight to recognize the importance of Kafka's work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kafka wrote "In the Penal Colony," on the cusp of World War I in Prague—a key center of the Austro-Hungarian empire that would collapse after the war. The war began after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie by a Serbian protestor acting in defiance of the empire's claim on his country. In addition to the psychological chaos at the start of the war, Kafka's Jewish heritage would have made him a target of derision. However, it is not clear that Kafka himself had political motivations that were inspired by the times. Kafka's work appears to be motivated by his personal experiences, dominance of his father, his mental and physical illness, and the taxing nature of his professional work.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kafka's writing is widely considered to be some of the most important in Western literature. A feature of Kafka's work that makes it so enduring is the ambiguity of the tales and the vast array of different interpretations that can be rendered from the text. His work even has its own adjective, Kafkaesque, which means having nightmarish, complex, and illogical qualities. Often situations in Kafka's work involve individuals who are hopelessly overpowered by terrifying and confusing systems. Such themes appear in Kafka's other works, such as *The Trial*, a novel written in the same year, where an unassuming worker is arrested and held captive to stand trial without knowing the charges against him. Viewed from a dystopian lens, the short story by Harlan Ellison "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" is another example of a tale that reveals the inhumane treatment of individuals within abusive power structures. Perhaps the most famous dystopian novel, George Orwell's novel *1984*, aligns with the oppressive and grotesque struggles of individuals living in an oppressive authoritarian state that is depicted in "In the Penal Colony."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** In the Penal Colony
- **When Written:** October 1914
- **Where Written:** Prague, Austria-Hungary
- **When Published:** 1919 (German), 1941 (English)
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, allegorical fantasy
- **Setting:** A penal colony on a tropical island
- **Climax:** The officer fails to achieve redemption on the apparatus and instead dies a brutal death.
- **Antagonist:** The officer and the system of authoritarian structures that do not value human life
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Prophesy. Some suggest that "In the Penal Colony" was a prophetic vision of the fate of the Jews in the Nazi death camps in World War II.

In Print. "In the Penal Colony" was one of the few stories that *was* published in Kafka's lifetime.

PLOT SUMMARY

The apparatus, the machine used to execute prisoners in the penal colony, is the focus of attention for the officer despite an unenthusiastic response from the residents of the penal colony. The prisoner, who is to be executed, is guarded by a soldier, who looks on as the officer explains the nature of the apparatus and the methods of execution to the explorer, a visitor to the penal colony whose fame and notoriety comes from his background as a Westerner with a European education. Giving a brief history of the penal colony in the tropical heat, the officer talks of the old Commandant, who he believes perfected society on the penal colony, including inventing the apparatus, and made the officer his right-hand man.

As the officer gets into the detailed components of the

machine, the explorer's interest is piqued. Even the prisoner moves to get a closer look at the intricate machine that will eventually write out his sentence onto his flesh. The explorer derails the officer's long-winded explanation of the apparatus by inquiring about the prisoner's sentence and trial. Frustrated at the new Commandant for not explaining his methods to the guest (a duty the old Commandant always took seriously), the officer explains the prisoner is never told of his crime, instead, he learns of his wrongdoing when the apparatus writes the sentence on his body right before his death. To the officer, who, conveniently, is also the judge of crimes, any sort of defense is forestalling the inevitable because he believes that *anyone* accused of a crime is consequently guilty.

The longer the officer explains the workings of the apparatus, the more the explorer is uncomfortable with the system of justice and the cruel form of execution, which becomes more absurd with the increasing level of detail in the apparatus. The explorer begins to feel guilty for even witnessing the execution, but he calms himself by suggesting he has no right to interfere with the cultural norms on the island.

While loading the prisoner onto the apparatus, the officer tells the explorer that he needs help to maintain this authoritarian system of justice and continue to use the apparatus. Evidently, the new Commandant does not approve of this judicial system, and instead prefers to holds conferences that are open to the public. The officer hopes the explorer will make a case for the old Commandant's system of justice and the new Commandant will see the error of his ways.

The explorer responds that he cannot support the officer—even if he will do nothing to stop the present execution—and he cannot tell the new Commandant that the apparatus is the proper way to administer justice. Upon hearing this, the officer quietly releases the prisoner, tells him that he can go free, writes his own sentence, feeds it into the apparatus, and then disrobes and places himself on the apparatus. The explorer looks on and concedes that the officer's actions demonstrate his appropriate conviction to his beliefs. The officer judges himself to be guilty of the crime of failing to uphold justice because he cannot maintain the old order.

As the officer dies, the apparatus falls apart in front of the explorer, soldier, and prisoner, who do reluctantly try to save the officer from the malfunctioning apparatus, which is now brutally murdering (instead of methodically torturing) its victim. After the officer's death, the explorer goes to the teahouse to view the grave of the old Commandant, whose headstone suggests he will someday return to the penal colony. The explorer distributes some money to a group of dockworkers before leaving the teahouse and walking to a boat to take him to his ship. The soldier and prisoner follow, but the explorer does not allow them to board the boat with him and instead leaves them on the island.

CHARACTERS

The Explorer – A protagonist with an ambiguous moral compass, the explorer is a distinguished visitor to the penal colony implied to have a European background. As the explorer witnesses the officer's dying way of life, he comes to represents a Western, liberal mindset. Invited to attend the execution by the new Commandant,the explorer is initially bored with the officer's explanation of the **apparatus** and its specific method of execution. However, his indifference soon shifts to horror as he learns the exact nature of the punitive system in the penal colony and the inhumane methods used to dispense the officer's idea of justice. Nevertheless, throughout the story the explorer downplays his authority and does not intervene in the execution of the prisoner despite his private misgivings. The explorer couches his lack of action as deference to cultural difference in order to absolve himself of culpability. When the officer pushes the explorer to speak up about preserving the use of the apparatus, however, the explorer tells him he will not support the officer, pointing out that because the new Commandant does not support the officer, his way of life is likely over anyway. When the officer then straps himself to the apparatus, the explorer seems to believe that the officer is doing the right thing—dying for his convictions. Ultimately, the explorer's conscience *does* get the best of him as he tries in vain to save the officer before his death. As he leaves the island, the explorer notably prevents the soldier and prisoner from coming with him—thereby further distancing himself from any connection with life on the penal colony. Though he condemns the officer's version of justice, the explorer's cowardly, self-serving actions also suggest that the West is not immune to inhumanity and cruelty.

The Officer – The story's antagonist, the officer acts as judge, jury, and executioner in the penal colony and is the last person who adheres to the rule of law created by the old Commandant. The officer is obsessed with the **apparatus**, a machine created by the old Commandant to torture and kill prisoners. The officer also took part in the early development of the apparatus and demonstrates this fondness for the device through his loving attention to every detail of the machine, which literally etches a sentence onto the body of the condemned and as it slowly kills them over the course of twelve hours. In an effort to continue the way of life he's known (and fiercely believes in), the officer gives a detailed explanation of the apparatus to the explorer, who he believes can convince the new Commandant to reinvest in apparatus and all it represents. The officer reflects an older, authoritarian society in which the few elite rule over the masses and use their authority to maintain power while cruelly inflicting punishment on anyone who breaks their rules. He does not give prisoners any chances to defend themselves, believing that anyone accused of a crime is guilty and that entertaining any counterarguments is a

tedious and unnecessary part of a system of justice. At the end of the story, the officer maintains his allegiance to the old Commandant by sacrificially offering himself on the apparatus and sentencing himself to the crime of being unjust. This suggests a biblical parallel with Christ's crucifixion, underscoring the fanaticism of the officer's beliefs. In its final execution, however, the apparatus begins to break down, ultimately killing the officer by driving a spike through his head. The parallel fates of the officer and the machine demonstrate the finality of his system of justice.

The Soldier – A man in charge of watching the prisoner and assisting with the execution. The soldier is unable to understand the explorer and the officer as they converse in French and is generally uninterested in the execution itself, although he dutifully follows the officer's commands and helps to strap the prisoner to the **apparatus**. After the prisoner is freed, the soldier helps him gather his clothes and is reluctant to save the officer after he straps himself to the apparatus—suggesting he has more in common with the prisoner than the higher ranking official. Throughout the story, the solider is primarily a mute presence who finally speaks near the end when he gives the explorer a brief explanation about the old Commandant's grave and tries to escape the penal colony with the prisoner, only to be thwarted by the explorer. The soldier's attempt to flee suggest that even though the apparatus and the officer are gone, life is still undesirable in the penal colony.

The Prisoner – A man sentenced to death for failing to wake up and salute his captain's door, an arbitrary and absurd conviction. The prisoner is described as a stupid and naïve individual, representative of the average person in the penal colony who lacks power. The prisoner is guarded by the soldier and sentenced to die by the officer. Before being put on **the apparatus**, the prisoner takes a keen interest in the officer's explanation of the machine despite the fact that he does not understand the officer's French. The prisoner delights in his freedom when the officer eventually sets him loose and chooses to sacrifice himself to the apparatus instead. As he sees the officer beginning to be tortured, the prisoner senses that change is coming to the penal colony and attributes this shift to the explorer. The prisoner also tries to escape from the penal colony with the soldier by running after the explorer, who nevertheless leaves the pair standing on the dock. The prisoner recognizes that the change he feels coming to the penal colony is not enough to want to make him stay, but he is unable to escape despite his newfound freedom. This suggests a certain insurmountable class or cultural hierarchy between the prisoner and explorer, who can come and go as he chooses.

The Old Commandant – An authoritarian leader and inventor of **the apparatus**, the old Commandant is dead at the outset of the story but at one point had the power to command the respect of the entire penal colony. The old Commandant was very close to the officer, making him his right-hand man and enlisting the officer's help in constructing the apparatus. The old Commandant also conferred the power of judge, jury, and executioner to the officer, who remains worshipful of the old Commandant even after his death. The old Commandant represents systems of justice that are dehumanizing and have no regard for the rights of individuals. This is in contrast to the new Commandant, who does not approve of the old Commandant's ways and is slowly decommissioning the use of the apparatus and the officer's power. The old Commandant's gravestone, which claims he will rise again and tells his followers to have faith, has a messianic quality that strengthens the story's suggestion that religion has a part to play in authoritarian systems of power.

The New Commandant – The current leader of the penal colony who replaced the old Commandant. The new Commandant does not appear in the story in person, though he is clearly loathed by the officer. The new Commandant invites the explorer to view an execution during his visit to the penal colony, a move that the officer assumes is made to further devalue the old Commandant's system of justice and **the apparatus**. Despite the officer's criticisms, the new Commandant has made seemingly positive changes to the penal colony, such as holding conferences that the public can view as a way of participating in political life. The new Commandant represents a societal shift in the penal colony toward a more liberal, Western mentality further reinforced when the explorer tells the officer that he will not try to convince the new Commandant to keep using the apparatus. Even with the new Commandant's changes, it is suggested by the prisoner and the soldier's attempted escape at the end of the story that life on the penal colony remains unpleasant.

The Dockworkers – A group of poor, humble men who spend time at a teahouse in the penal colony. The dockworkers show the explorer the grave of the old Commandant and collect a few coins for their trouble. These men reinforce the state of the average person in the penal colony—listless and powerless.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TRADITION VS. PROGRESS

"In the Penal Colony" is a story of the planned demonstration of an execution using a machine called **the apparatus** by the military officer of a penal colony on a foreign island. The officer, well acquainted

with the apparatus, sets up the machine and explains its use to a foreign guest, the explorer, all the while detailing how the machine has fallen out of favor with the new Commandant and the residents of the island. In a bid to continue the old way of life, the officer tries to convince the explorer to make a case for using the apparatus to the new Commandant. Kafka's tale shows a shift in society from highly concentrated hierarchal authority represented by the officer to a more liberal, modern society represented by the explorer. In condemning the officer's stubborn devotion to decaying machinery and the backwards "justice" it represents, Kafka's story suggests the futility of clinging to outdated tradition in the face of forward progress.

The irrelevancy of the apparatus is reflected in its physically dilapidated state. The officer repeatedly points out how the device used to be a marvel of engineering elegance and ingenuity. Now, however, it is loud and often breaks. The officer further lacks the necessary spare parts to repair the apparatus, as the new Commandant—"always looking for an excuse to attack [the] old way of doing things"—withholds the necessary funds and sends along only "shoddy material." New laws also prohibit the officer from using acid to increase prisoners' pain, leading him to lament that the apparatus can "no longer wring from anyone a sigh louder than the felt gag can stifle." And where large crowds once gathered to gawk at the proceedings, now "the execution has no support from the public, a shabby ceremony-carried out with a machine already somewhat old and worn." Together these details present a physical manifestation of the fact that the apparatus—and the entire system of "justice" it represents—is in a state of continual decay and no longer has a place in society.

The officer is aware that his way of administering justice is changing. Nevertheless, he upholds slavish devotion to the apparatus, wistfully dreaming of returning it to its former glory—a desire that is clearly futile in the face of the progress suggested by the explorer. The explorer quickly notes that the officer's uniform is "far too heavy for the tropics," and that the latter is also "amply befrogged and weighed down by epaulettes." The uniform is a direct link to the officer's home country and the tradition therein, and the fact that it is wholly out of place in the colony reflects the officer's failure to adapt to his changing circumstances; he is literally "weighed down" by tradition. The officer further worries that the explorer will liken his methods to torture in the Middle Ages yet fails to internalize the antiquated nature of the justice he upholds. Indeed, the explorer muses that the new Commandant is going to bring in "a new kind of procedure which the officer's narrow mind was incapable of understanding." By bringing in a new way of dealing with offences, the new Commandant shifts away from the painful and absurd punishment of the old Commandant, creator of the apparatus, and his sole remaining devotee: the officer. The officer also says the new Commandant holds his conferences in public with a gallery that is "packed with spectators." This contrasts with the public who, during the time of the old Commandant, would gather to watch the apparatus work. This comparison suggests that the public is participating in the way the society is run rather than being entertained and kept in line by grotesque displays of execution. The entire world around the officer is progressing, then, and he clings to the past at his peril.

The officer's death and the destruction of the apparatus make it clear that the ways of the new Commandant and the explorer are significant social changes that cannot be reversed. The officer abandons the sentencing of the prisoner telling him that he is free to go, all the while looking like an "old man." Comparing the officer to an old man underscores the age of his opinions and procedures and that by letting the prisoner go, the officer is allowing the traditional structure he supported collapse. After observing the officer strip naked, the prisoner senses that "some great change was impending." This clearly demonstrates that the officer, naked and deprived of any weapon, lacks his former authority in this new, modern society. As the apparatus breaks down, it changes from a machine that is delicate and has an exquisite way of administering torture to a machine that only murders. The true purpose of the machine is laid bare as its wheels start to fly out and its structures collapse: to maim and murder, rather than to truly assist in the process of justice. The officer does not experience the redemption he suggests other men found before they died but continues to look "calm and convinced." The apparatus gave insight and redemption to past prisoners, according to the officer, but his argument turns out to be a lie. This is an argument in the story for the failing of such hierarchical forms of authority even if the adherents, like the officer himself, cannot admit to its failings.

The officer dies at the hands of the machine he knows better than anyone, and the social order in the penal colony is forever changed. No more adherents to the old way of dealing out justice remain, and the new Commandant is a leader who does not appeal to such absurd and brutal methods. Even still, the flight of the prisoner and the soldier show that no penal colony is appealing; however, the explorer's approval of the change suggest that the shift at work is a movement toward a liberal, democratic society.

POWER AND JUSTICE

"In the Penal Colony" explores what constitutes due and fair process in society. Kafka centers the plot on the planned execution of a prisoner who, instead of receiving a trial, has been sentenced to death by a high-ranking officer who automatically assumes that every man who is charged with a crime is guilty. The crime of the prisoner is one of disrespecting authority, further centering the importance of power structures in this world. What's more, the

prisoner doesn't even know what he's been accused of, underscoring the fact that the penal colony's justice system is unconcerned with protecting or rehabilitating individuals. Kafka's story ultimately argues that "justice" used only to maintain power and punish transgressors isn't really justice at all.

The descriptions of the prisoner, the most powerless character in the story, illustrate the disparity of power in the penal colony. He is described as "stupid-looking" and compared to a "submissive dog" that would not try to escape his punishment even if he weren't tied up. Such a description suggests the dehumanization of the powerless in this society, who are so robbed of dignity and autonomy that they passively accept the orders of their superiors. To the "horror" of the explorer, the prisoner joins their tour of **the apparatus** examining the machine with "uncertain eyes" without being able to understand the object of conversation. Later, after being released, he begins to play with the soldier and their end of wrestling "in jest." These depictions reinforce a view of the prisoner as childlike—at least in the eyes of his superiors—and create the picture of a naïve individual who has no capacity for directing his own behavior and needs to be ruled by those in power. The prisoner's crime is also notably one of disrespecting authority. As a servant for a captain in the colony, the prisoner had been ordered to sleep outside the captain's door and wake to salute that door every hour to prove his alertness. The prisoner, rather understandably, slept through the 2:00 A.M. salute. The order had been an absurd show of power in the first place, and the prisoner's sentence—to have "HONOR THY SUPERIORS!" etched into his skin by the apparatus until he dies—is an equally absurd and cruel punishment. A society built on deference to authority above all else, Kafka suggests, is inherently at odds with the nuance and reason required of genuine justice.

The officer is wholly unconcerned with the idea that the prisoner should learn of his punishment beforehand or have any hope of defending himself, which reflects a single concentration of power that intends on keeping individuals in line rather than allowing them a chance to learn and mend their ways. The officer explains the prisoner does not even know of his offense, saying, "There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body." The officer's opinion that divulging the sentence would be pointless shows the punishment is not about rehabilitation. Instead, the man is used as an example to maintain the social order. The officer explains that his one principle is that "Guilt is never to be doubted," and shares with the explorer that any differing opinions are merely interferences with justice. The prisoner's guilt is a predetermined condition based on the charges of a superior officer. The foregone conclusion of guilt shows that the only truth in a brutal hierarchy is the truth that is decided by those in authority. When explaining the justice system, the officer says the prisoner would "have told lies" were he given a chance to defend himself and that a trial would have been a "confused tangle." Even explaining *this* point is a waste of time for the officer, who is more intent on impressing the explorer with the intricacies of the apparatus itself than the intricacies of *why* the apparatus is being used in the first place. If justice is a means to deter future crime, then Kafka's story would suggest that there *can be no* justice without an understanding of that crime in the first place. As such, justice cannot exist in a society in which the punishment is meant solely as a display of power and is more important than the crime or, indeed, than an individual's life at all.

The officer's sentence and death, in turn, solidifies this idea that any system of justice within the matrix of such strict hierarchical power is faulty. The officer shows the explorer that his own sentence, which will be written on his body, is to "BE JUST!" This shows that the officer, by letting the prisoner go, believes that he is violating his code of justice. Ironically, however, it is only through this final act of letting the prisoner, likely an innocent man, go—a direct inversion of power structures—that the officer does something that approaches justice. The explorer, for his part, cannot "decipher" the officer's sentence for the prisoner and for the officer himself, try as he might. This shows that the officer's idea of justice is only relevant to the elite who hold power and does not have broader meaning to those who do not participate in that type of society. Right before his death, the officer doesn't receive the "promised redemption" that others had found after the brutal inscription of their sentence. This suggests that in fact the officer did *not* commit a crime by letting the prisoner go free and that ultimately his view of justice is faulty.

Even as the prisoner is freed from death by the apparatus, he notably is still stuck in the penal colony—that is, a place where criminals are sent to be separated from "just" society. Both the prisoner and the soldier who'd been charged with guarding him follow the explorer as the latter leaves the colony via boat, with the implication that they, too, would like to escape from what is essentially a giant prison. Given that absurd display of crime and punishment within the story, the question arises as to whether *any* of the prisoners in the penal colony deserve to be there in the first place, or if they, too, were victims of a system designed to maintain power at whatever cost; perhaps their own transgressions back home were just as arbitrary as the prisoner's "crime" of falling asleep on the job. Kafka thus broadens his critique to condemn purely punitive justice at large and encourage consideration of the purpose of any justice system itself.

RELIGION

Religious fervor is an explicit undercurrent throughout "In the Penal Colony." The old Commandant, who used to run the penal colony

and is rumored to someday return, is reminiscent of an authoritarian god, while the officer acts as his lone remaining disciple. So devoted is the officer to the way of life embodied by the old Commandant that he follows his savior into death, sacrificing himself to his beloved **apparatus** in a sort of perversion of Jesus Christ's Crucifixion. The foreign explorer views the officer's dated and brutal beliefs with repulsion befitting his status as a more modern and worldly citizen. At the same time, however, the explorer—and, really, all those who have turned towards a society based on reason rather than blind faith—equivocates in his condemnation, lacking the officer's conviction when it comes to his own vision of morality. As such, Kafka's story grapples with how the modern turn away from religion is in many ways a step towards progress, yet also leaves human beings without the clear, guiding conviction they once enjoyed.

The officer's description of the old Commandant and the rules of the penal colony allude to the symbolic and allegorical connection to religious belief. The officer tells the explorer about the old Commandant and his "perfect" design of the penal colony. Further, the officer explains that the rules that must be followed are "doctrines" and the sentences inscribed on prisoners are similar to the biblical language of the Ten Commandants. These details suggest that the system of authority that the officer follows has a deep religious emphasis. The officer says that the "prophecy" that the new Commandant cannot alter any of the old designs has come true. This points to his unquestioning belief in the ways of the old Commandant that is guided by a prophecy, which is an explicit connection to ways that religions operate. The officer's fervor for his way of life is clearly demonstrated when he strips off all his clothes before getting onto the apparatus himself. The explorer observes that this is due to the deterioration of the "judicial procedure" that the officer believes in so strongly and believes that he would do the same under similar circumstances, thus justifying the action in the officer's context. These details reinforce the allusion to the officer's devotion as religious belief to the system of order created in the penal colony by his "god," the old Commandant.

The explorer and other residents of the penal colony lack the same disciplined zeal that the officer possesses, further reinforcing religion's ability to imbue life with order and motivation—for better or for worse. The officer explains that the adherents to the old Commandant's ways have "skulked out of sight" because the colony's new leader does not have an "atom" of the old Commandant's power. This shows that the people were principally motivated by the force of the old Commandant rather than meaningful consideration of the system of justice he created and enforced; without a leader who inspires such blind devotion, they are no longer motivated. The new Commandant notably has not outlawed the use of the apparatus despite his discomfort with it. Rather, he gives "shoddy material" to the officer to use the apparatus and takes control of the money for the machine. These are slow changes that do not reflect the sweeping use of power by the old Commandant. The explorer is also hesitant to openly express his disdain for the apparatus, his aversion to conflict proving stronger than his belief that such a tool and the justice it represents is morally wrong. All these details suggest that the new order, the new Commandant, the explorer, and the residents of the penal colony that no longer attend the executions are not motivated by any guiding frameworks that make them act with force or conviction.

Nevertheless, the fate of the officer and the old Commandant suggests that the way of life they enforce is doomed. The officer places himself on the apparatus instead of the prisoner, making himself a martyr to his system of justice. The officer's dies by the sentence "'BE JUST!'" and hopes to find the same sense of enlightened redemption he believes he witnessed in other prisoners' eyes in his last hours. However, he is not redeemed and is instead finally killed by a piercing blow from a "great iron spike." The death parallels that of Jesus Christ, who offered himself up for humankind and was ultimately killed with a spear—further supporting the connection between the officer and old Commandant's system of justice and religion, and perhaps suggesting that both have no place in modern society. The old Commandant's gravestone suggests that he will "rise again" in order to lead his adherents. This messianic promise shows that the old Commandant and his system fall squarely within the same structures that dictate religious belief, one that is—rather ironically—rejected by the priests in the penal colony who will not let the old Commandant be buried in the local cemetery.

In the absence of an authoritarian god, all the characters, particularly the people of the penal colony, lack the motivation to take specific action. They attend forums that the new Commandant holds rather than executions, and there is indeed more nuance to this existence. Yet there is clearly little industry or motivation to live or work within the society; these men may have comparative freedom, but it is unclear if they have any purpose. The benefit of this existence is complicated by the end of the story as the soldier and prisoner try to flee the colony with the explorer: the absence of a strict god may lead to freedom, but with that comes the burden of finding meaning for oneself.

CULTURE AND OTHERNESS

Though it is unclear where the central officer in "In the Penal Colony" is from, the explorer is clearly distinguished as a Westerner who is conditioned with European ways of thought. The explorer is the onlooker of a planned execution of a prisoner that he quickly learns is unaware of his crimes and did not receive a trial that included any sort of defense. The explorer is highly regarded by the

residents of the penal colony, especially the new Commandant, and ultimately disapproves of the procedure. The actions and position of the explorer is one of a power imbalance between Western culture and a different culture. However, Kafka complicates this relationship throughout "In the Penal Colony" by showing that neither the explorer nor the residents of the culture of the island are totally willing to embrace universal values such as inhumanity or cruelty.

The explorer holds esteem in the other culture of the penal colony because he is explicitly denoted as Westerner. The officer notes that the explorer is described as a "famous explorer" who has been influenced by "European ways of thought" and as such will have influence over the new Commandant. That the explorer has more social capital than the officer suggests the superiority of the explorer's position. As the prisoner reflects on the fate of the officer he believes that the "foreign explorer had given the order for it." The prisoner is happy and satisfied at this result, and by ascribing the new change to the explorer he is also amplifying the explorer's power from the position of the culture of the penal colony. Before the explorer leaves the teahouse, he passes out "a few coins" to the dockworkers who are described as "poor, humble creatures." This again positions the explorer as an agent of higher status who confers value on the laborers and can afford to distribute wealth. All these details reinforce the status of the explorer and the position of Western culture as superior to the other culture of the penal colony.

The explorer balks at **the apparatus**, yet his sense of (decidedly Western) propriety—and his cowardice—stops him from interfering. Throughout the officer's explanation of the apparatus, the explorer is uninterested and ultimately concludes that "The injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable." The explorer also believes that the officer will be incapable of understanding anything different than what he knows. These judgements show a strong sense of superiority that the explorer maintains over the officer and how this sense somewhat ironically prohibits him from even attempting to "better" the officer. As the explorer considers the apparatus disapprovingly, "with a frown," he immediately justifies its use by explaining to himself that the penal colony use "extraordinary measures" that it is basically a necessary part of military discipline. By allowing himself to accept the procedure as necessary the explorer diminishes the cruelty of the practice for his own comfort. When the prisoner joins the officer and the explorer to get a closer view of the apparatus, the explorer's impulse is to "drive him away" because the man's close presence induces guilt that he is "probably culpable" in the execution. By showing his squeamishness in the face of guilt, the explorer is further demonstrating he cares more about himself and being polite than anything else. By the explorer's reaction to the officer's tour of the apparatus and his passive stance to the groundwork of the execution, it is clear that his main priority is to be comfortable and to be polite. Kafka thus subtly undermines assumptions of Western superiority and authority.

The explorer's hesitancy to intervene in the use of the apparatus and the life of the culture of the penal colony is an indication that Western culture does not value human life universally. Even as the officer is disrobing, and it is clear to the explorer what is about to happen, he continues to believe that he has "no right to obstruct" what is happening and even goes so far as to explicitly state that the officer is doing "the right thing." This is extreme apathy and complacency on the part of the explorer, whose own commitment to humanity is suspect based on his unwillingness to get involved. When explaining his position to the officer, the explorer says, "I fear the end of your tradition is at hand, even without any humble assistance from me." This shows that the explorer is unwilling to participate in the change of the procedure on the island (one that he knows is undeniably unjust and inhumane) and that he shirks from using the power that is granted to him by this foreign culture. The story ends with the soldier and prisoner wanting to leave the island with the explorer. However, the explorer threatens them with "a heavy knotted rope" that keeps them from leaping into the boat. This is the only action taken by the explorer—to deny the soldier and the prisoner freedom. The explorer is unable to allow himself to help anyone except the dockworkers to whom he passes out a few coins. These points show that though Western culture may be deemed to be superior and more humane, in actual practice it lacks the conviction to affirm the value of human life and dignity.

The actions of the explorer and the high position of esteem that he carries in the penal colony point to privilege and enlightenment that is deservedly undermined by Kafka in the story. The explorer is incapable of saving the officer or helping the soldier and prisoner find a new life outside of the penal colony. Though the explorer has Western values that can identify inhumanity, cruelty, and injustice, this worldview does not assist the man in actually acting in service of these values. Kafka thus shows that the superiority of Western culture in the face of Otherness is an illusion; despite the cherished values that a person with power might espouse, if they do not use their power to act, they are complicit in perpetuating barbaric acts of violence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE APPARATUS

In the story, the apparatus is a machine used to represent the cruel and exacting torture of a

system of justice that is more concerned with upholding power than it is with the dignity of human life. The apparatus, which the old Commandant invented, is a grueling piece of machinery. It takes twelve hours to finish an execution by repeatedly etching the prisoner's sentence into his flesh. Giving a detailed explanation of his beloved machine (which he helped create), the officer explains that the apparatus keeps prisoners alive by feeding them and staunching their blood therefore painfully prolonging their death. Eventually the prisoner learns the nature of his crime, usually after the sixth hour of being tortured. The apparatus has three main components—the Bed, the Designer, and the Harrow—and it is clear from the officer's long, technical descriptions of the machine's inner-workings that he is more interested in the mechanism's performance than he is with the prisoners' quality of life. The methods the apparatus employs reinforce the extreme nature and absurdity of capital punishment in a system that does not even tell the accused of their sentence or regard their life as having any value. Ultimately unable to maintain the old Commandant's legacy in the face of the new Commandant, the officer disrobes and sacrifices himself to the machine. However, the apparatus instantly falls apart, suggesting that the system of justice that the officer and the apparatus represent is broken and defunct.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Schocken Books edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 1995.

In the Penal Colony Quotes

"For I was the former Commandant's assistant in all-penal matters and know more about the apparatus than anyone. My guiding principle is this: Guilt is never to be doubted. Other courts cannot follow that principle, for they consist of several opinions and have higher courts to scrutinize them."

Related Characters: The Officer (speaker), The Prisoner, The Old Commandant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Diverting from his tour of the apparatus, the officer takes a moment to explain the prisoner's crime and the system of justice that he follows to the explorer. This is a system he learned from the old Commandant, one that enforces punishment for the sake of maintaining the social order rather than rehabilitation.

In this aside, the officer reveals that the foundation of the traditional judicial system in the penal colony rests on the fact that guilt is assumed. Therefore, those accused of crimes—ostensibly always low status prisoners subject to the whims of other officers—are automatically guilty and have no chance to defend themselves. The officer's word thus becomes truth, further cementing his power in this authoritarian world. By situating himself as the old Commandant's assistant in all penal matters the officer is also underscoring how closely his views adhere to the old Commandant's. In the officer's opinion, courts that do not rely on the judgement of one authority figure are flawed because they are less efficient and have to resolve multiple opinions.

"Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds."

Related Characters: The Officer (speaker), The Explorer , The Prisoner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

As the officer continues to explain the workings of the apparatus to the explorer, he points out a crucial part of the machine—the way it reveals "justice" to the prisoner. Instead of simply being *told* their sentence, the guilty learn the reason they are strapped to the apparatus through its excruciating work, which carves the sentence into their body with needles over and over again. What's significant about this form of punishment is that its aim is not to offer any chance of rehabilitation or repentance to the person who committed an offense; their fate is clearly death. The reason for the punishment is solely to uphold the current system of power and the authorities that want to maintain that power. Justice becomes whatever the people in power say that it is, and the people accused of crimes within this system are simply sacrifices to demonstrate the power of

those in charge. The way that justice is "written" in the officer's system is overly complicated in order to prolong the torture of the apparatus. The fact that the explorer literally cannot understand the text that bears the prisoner's sentence suggests the officer is part of a system of justice that is literally incomprehensible to modern, liberal sensibilities.

> You are a foreigner, mind your own business. He could make no answer to that, unless he were to add that he was amazed at himself in this connection, for he traveled only as an observer, with no intention at all of altering other people's methods of administering justice. Yet here he found himself strongly tempted. The injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable.

Related Characters: The Prisoner, The Officer, The Explorer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

The explorer, watching the officer and soldier begin to strap the prisoner to the apparatus, continues to have conflicted thoughts about his role in the proceedings. He wants to avoid conflict and assure himself he is simply a casual observer, yet he also understands that by not intervening he is complicit in an undeniable demonstration of cruelty. The explorer is struggling with his role in the penal colony as he is only guest, yet his Western sensibilities balk at the system of justice the officer has explained to him. The "inhumanity" of the procedure is a keen judgment against the systems of power that the officer upholds and suggest a modern, liberal view on the part of the foreign explorer. The explorer, though, tells himself he must mind his own business specifically *because* he is foreign; this deference to cultural sensitivity allows the explorer to judge the penal colony while keeping his distance. Despite identifying the failings of the officer's system, then, the hesitancy of the explorer demonstrates the failings of a mindset that judges horrendous acts but does nothing to stop them. It's questionable whether the Western viewpoint of the explorer is really more civilized or advanced than that of the officer if the explorer is not willing to actually follow through on the principles his own culture purports to strongly uphold.

> "He has calculated it carefully: this is your second day on the island, you did not know the old Commandant and his ways, you are conditioned by European ways of thought, perhaps you object on principle to capital punishment in general and to such mechanical instruments of death in particular..."

Related Characters: The Officer (speaker), The Old Commandant, The New Commandant, The Explorer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

The officer explains his theory about the schemes of the new Commandant to oust the use of the apparatus, and subsequently the officer's entire system of justice, from the penal colony. Using the opinion of a famous guest like the explorer would enhance the new Commandant's viewpoint and finally put the officer's way of administering justice to an end. The officer cites the explorer's "European ways of thought" as the reason for his potential objection to the apparatus. This reinforces the idea that the explorer, and the new Commandant, represent a liberal mindset that is oriented toward progress and way from tradition; Europeans on the forefront of democracy would be aghast at the treatment of prisoner in the penal colony. Mentioning the explorer's ties to Europe also highlights the cultural differences at work and acknowledges that Westerners are often granted unique power because they are assumed to represent the apex of civilization (a viewpoint that the story takes care to complicate through the explorer's ambiguous morality).

> "Of course the Commandant is the kind of man to have turned these conferences into public spectacles. He has had a gallery built that is always packed with spectators. I am compelled to take part in the conferences, but they make me sick with disgust."

Related Characters: The Officer (speaker), The New Commandant, The Explorer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

The officer continues to rant about the new Commandant to the explorer and explains how the new leader has made changes to the way that society operates in the penal colony. In the past, residents of the penal colony would only participate in public life at the executions, crowding around the apparatus to watch prisoners be tortured. In contrast, the new Commandant invites the public to conferences where there is accountability and participation in civic life that doesn't inherently involve death. This develops the notion that the new Commandant is aiming toward progress in a democratic manner that tries to promote public good. The officer is disgusted because this is clearly an abdication of power. The fact that he whole affair is actually popular with the residents, however, further shows how everyone has turned away from the officer and the antiquated system he believes in.

> Now the officer began to spell it, letter by letter, and then read out the words. "'BE JUST!' is what is written there," he said, "surely you can read it now."

Related Characters: The Officer (speaker), The Explorer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Having resolved to become the final victim of the apparatus, the officer spells out his own sentence for the explorer, who is still pained to make out what is written on the slips of paper that direct the Harrow's writing. By revealing the text, the officer is stating that his crime is injustice. From his perspective, the officer could not maintain the structures that would properly ensure justice. The fact that the explorer still cannot read the script, however, again suggests that understanding that this system is unintelligible to a progressive outsider. The officer is also imploring the explorer to, at the very least, understand that there is some sense to the way that he lived his life and the way that he plans to end it.

> The explorer bit his lips and said nothing. He knew very well what was going to happen, but he had no right to obstruct the officer in anything. If the judicial procedure which the officer cherished were really so near its end—possibly as a result of his own intervention, as to which he felt himself pledged—then the officer was doing the right thing; in his place the explorer would not have acted otherwise.

Related Characters: The Officer, The Explorer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

The explorer understands that the officer, having placed his sentence in the apparatus and stripped naked, is going to sacrifice himself and die for the system of justice he believes in so much. Despite his disgust for the apparatus, the explorer respects the conviction that binds the officer to his way of life. This conviction notably contrasts with the explorer's own hesitancy to speak up throughout the story, suggesting that his own morals, however progressive, are more loosely held than those of the officer. The explorer's thinking here again helps him rationalize his lack of action: he cannot disturb the course of events because he respects the officer too much. Again, he conveniently does not have to put his own culture's ideals regarding respect for human life into action.

> The condemned man especially seemed struck with the notion that some great change was impending. What had happened to him was now going to happen to the officer. Perhaps even to the very end. Apparently the foreign explorer had given the order for it. So this was revenge. Although he himself had not suffered to the end, he was to be revenged to the end. A broad, silent grin now appeared on his face and stayed there all the rest of the time.

Related Characters: The Explorer , The Officer, The Prisoner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

The prisoner, now freed from the apparatus, is slowly realizing that the officer is going to suffer the fate that was originally planned for himself. The dawning realization on

the part of this member of the penal colony points to the bigger shift at work with the officer's death—the social shift toward progress and away from the traditional authoritarian structures. The awakening of the prisoner also shows the extremity of the reversal of power at work as the officer dies. For the first time it appears that the prisoner is even *able* to formulate thoughts in response to things that were previous unthinkable, such as a superior officer getting punished instead of the prisoner. That this retribution is gleeful suggests that though the officer and his system of justice are fading away, there is still, unfortunately, capacity in men's hearts for delight in the destruction of others. This, in turn, reflects the story's ultimate ambiguity surrounding the way of life suggested by men like the explorer.

> […] no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found; the lips were firmly pressed together, the eyes were open with the same expression as in life, the look was calm and convinced, through the forehead went the point of the great iron spike.

Related Characters: The Officer, The Explorer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In the officer's final moments, the explorer sees that his face does not bear the mark of redemption that the officer had boasted comes with dying via the apparatus. Instead, the officer dies with conviction but no sense of being enlightened or redeemed. This is an ambiguous ending that could suggest redemption via apparatus is impossible and instead was a projection of the officer onto dying men. This system of justice is shown to be flawed and murderous instead of the pinnacle of human order that the officer believed in, and the officer dies without dignity. This implicitly undercuts his reverence for the apparatus and signals that his way of life is truly over. The way that the officer is killed is also reminiscent of Jesus's being pierced with a spear on the cross. This would suggest a critique of dogmatic religious belief, including that which officer felt toward the old Commandment's system of justice. The officer maintains his belief and conviction until the very end—yet that conviction, clearly, is for naught.

> Here rests the old Commandant. His adherents, who now must be nameless, have dug this grave and set up this stone. There is a prophecy that after a certain number of years the commandant will rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait!

Related Characters: The Old Commandant, The Explorer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

The soldier takes the explorer to a teahouse, where the explorer reads the headstone of the old Commandant. The message of the headstone clearly shows the religious significance of the old Commandant, who ruled the penal colony like an authoritarian god and commanded religious devotion from his adherents. The stone suggests that the old Commandant will, like a messiah, come back to help his followers. The role of the headstone near the end of the story lends more significance to the officer's sacrifice because it couches the death in the context of religious belief, which the story suggests is a strong, motivating force for action. For the officer, a true believer, the ways of the old Commandant were worth dying for. By clearly linking religious themes to the old Commandant, the story is condemning unquestioning belief and autocratic dogma.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

IN THE PENAL COLONY

An officer is proudly showing an explorer a machine called **the apparatus**, which will be used for an execution on a penal colony situated on a tropical island. The explorer has agreed to watch the execution "merely out of politeness." Behind the pair, a soldier guards a lethargic prisoner who will be executed for disobedient and insulting behavior to a military superior. Despite being heavily chained, the prisoner looks "like a submissive dog" who could be set free and then "whistled for when the execution was due to begin." The officer is, too, weighed down in the tropical heat by his uniform that the explorer notes is unfit for the tropical heat.

The story immediately makes plain the difference in power of the characters present. The prisoner is described like a dumb dog unaware of his fate, being executed by a superior officer for the purpose of reinforcing obedience to authority. The difference between the officer, soldier, and prisoner, and the explorer, who is a guest, establishes the cultural divide that persists throughout the story.

Proudly detailing the functions of **the apparatus**, the officer explains that he helped with the development of the delicate machine but credit for its invention goes to the old Commandant, a leader who structured the whole society on the penal colony. The officer is worshipful as he describes the old Commandant's work as "flawless" and clearly shows disdain for the new Commandant by suggesting that the new leader couldn't come up with any better ideas even if he had "a thousand new schemes." The explorer (who is disinterested and hardly listening) and officer hold their conversation in French, though this doesn't deter the prisoner from also taking an interest in the officer's explanations with "a kind of drowsy persistence."

The officer's slavish reverence of the old Commandant reveals his near-religious devotion to the leader and his ways. The apparatus is an essential part of the fabric of the old Commandant's system, and as such the officer's devotion to this order is wrapped up in the machine. Holding their conversation in French, meanwhile, illustrates the difference in education and therefore power between the officer and his subordinates, the soldier and the prisoner. French also suggests that the explorer is related to Europe and European ways of thinking.

As the officer animatedly explains the various parts of **the apparatus**, its three different components—the Bed, the Designer, and the Harrow—the explorer becomes more interested in the machine. The officer shows contempt toward the new Commandant, who didn't explain the procedure to the explorer in the way that the old Commandant always did for guests. Continuing to drone on, the officer explains the function of the apparatus is to write a prisoner's sentence directly onto their body. The officer cuts his rant short and says that regardless, he is "certainly the best person to explain the procedure," as he has the original drawings that the old Commandant made.

The difference between the old and new ways of the penal colony emerge with the officer's evident scorn for the new Commandant. The officer's attention to detail and enthusiasm for the apparatus also further develop his close relationship to its function in the penal colony. His easy delight in such a grisly sentence also underscores that the apparatus makes a cruel spectacle of punishment, and that the system of justice upheld by the officer is utterly unconcerned with humane treatment.

Learning of the prisoner's sentence troubles the explorer, who becomes curious about the exact system of justice in the penal colony. The officer explains that he is both judge and executioner, that the prisoner had no defense, and that in his proceedings the officer assumes that "Guilt is never to be doubted." However, this is a system that is beginning to be overturned by the new Commandant.

Describing the system of justice that the officer enforces begins to make clear that the ways of the old Commandant prioritize maintaining an established system of power over respect for the individual. Assuming guilt essentially makes the officer's word the only truth in this world, robbing the accused of any autonomy or hope. The new Commandant is beginning to change this situation, suggesting the social shift in the penal colony away from such antiquated notions of justice.

The officer continues to explain the exact nature of the prisoner's crime: failing to wake up every hour to salute a captain's door during the night. After discovering the prisoner's disobedience, the captain whipped him. Instead of begging for forgiveness, though, the captain claims that the prisoner had screamed wildly, "Throw that whip away or I'll eat you alive." The officer explains that this is evidence enough, but he adds that if there were any defense, it would have been totally constructed of the prisoner's lies. The officer switches the subject back to **the apparatus**, more eager to explain its function than the rule of law, as the explorer begins to be agitated by the proceedings.

Learning of the exact nature of the crime makes the sentence even more absurd, and this revelation disturbs the explorer, which reinforces the difference between the officer and the explorer's ways of thinking. By enforcing obedience to arbitrary rules, the officer is making it clear that upholding the system of power is more important than the nature of the crime being committed.

Ready to be finished with the tour, the explorer exudes distaste for the officer and his system by rationalizes the methods of execution to himself as "extraordinary measures" that must be needed on a penal colony. However, he hopes that the new Commandant might intervene. Satisfied with his explanation of the judicial system, the officer enthusiastically returns to the "essentials" of **the apparatus**. The guilty sentence is written on a script that is in turn written onto the flesh by the Harrow that is made of needles that can be seen through glass. To the horror of the explorer (who begins to feel more "culpable" in his role as an observer), the prisoner gets even closer to the apparatus. Not wanting the life of the prisoner to absorb the interest of the explorer from the apparatus, the officer rouses the dozing soldier to pull the prisoner back onto his feet.

The explorer dislikes the officer's way of dispensing justice yet doesn't do anything to stop it; he refuses even to speak up at first, hiding cowardice behind a guise of cultural respect as he tries to justify the use of the apparatus to himself. Regardless of how inhumane he believes the apparatus to be, the explorer seems to value avoiding confrontation more than boldly defending human rights. Given that he is throughout the story treated as an emissary of QWestern civilization, this suggests a subtle jab at the supposed superiority of Western culture and social propriety in general.

Showing the explorer the "most important" part of the execution, the officer carefully reveals the guiding plans of **the apparatus**. So precious that only the officer himself can touch them, he lets the explorer look but the visitor cannot make out any words on the page. The officer explains that the sentence has to have lots of "embellishments" along with the script of the sentencing because the apparatus keeps a man alive for at least twelve hours, turning him over, staunching his blood, and feeding him to ensure he lives until the punishment is over.

The precious plans are another instance of the officer's complete devotion to the apparatus. The "embellishments" to the script, too, are a way of prolonging the work of the apparatus and show its cruel enforcement of justice.

Going into excruciating detail, the officer notes the tortured men are fed warm rice pap but lose the desire to eat in the sixth hour—the same time at which they achieve enlightenment. Breathlessly careening through his explanation, the officer continues explaining that ultimately a prisoner "deciphers" his sentence with his "wounds," which he admits to the still silent explorer, is very hard work.

Once again, the more that is revealed about the apparatus the clearer it becomes that the machine was built for exacting torture rather than ensuring justice. Not even mentioning a prisoner's sentence to them, and expecting they will learn as they die, also shows the system of the old Commandant does not even consider rehabilitation to be an option.

Beginning the work of the execution, the soldier haphazardly cuts off the clothing of the prisoner, leaving him surprised and naked as the soldier and the officer secure him to **the apparatus**. As a strap on the machine breaks, the officer complains about the lack of funds to keep the apparatus operating smoothly. Nostalgically pointing out that under the old Commandant there was "free access" to money when it came to maintaining the apparatus, the officer bitterly notes that the new Commandant is "attacking" the old ways of doing things by distributing inferior parts for the apparatus and always with great delays.

By withholding resources to the officer and allowing the apparatus to deteriorate, the new Commandant shows that he is a different leader than the old Commandant. The breaking of the apparatus also suggests the breaking of the officer's system of justice.

As the officer and the soldier busy themselves with preparing the prisoner for execution, the explorer struggles with his role in the situation. He notes that it's "ticklish to intervene in other people's affairs" and imagines that if he objects his opinion will be dismissed because he is a foreigner. Yet, the explorer is "strongly tempted" to act because of the "undeniable" cruelty and injustice of **the apparatus**.

It is clear to the explorer that the apparatus and the system it represents are inhumane, yet his sense of propriety and fear of being culturally insensitive prevent him from speaking up. In this way, the story again condemns the explorer for failing to enact the supposed virtues of the Western culture he represents. He is ultimately ineffective at protecting the dignity of human life, and his behavior contrasts with the fervent belief of the officer.

The prisoner vomits. this further infuriates the officer, who says that the new Commandant has a "mild doctrine" because he does not starve the prisoners before the execution. As the soldier futilely tries to clean the apparatus, the officer reveals that he is the "sole advocate" to the old Commandant's ways in the penal colony. Others that used to follow the old Commandant no longer continue to advocate for the apparatus because they have lost all interest, which makes them useless to the officer.

The officer's language and the way he describes the members of the penal colony he dismisses are strongly related to religion and show that the officer is the only one who truly has faith. Being on his own also means that the officer's system is dying out, further showing the change at work in the penal colony.

Whisking the explorer back to a better time, the officer describes the days of executions during the time of the old Commandant when there would be "hundreds of spectators" in attendance. The silent, glittering **apparatus** would do its work and the people would see that it was the work of "Justice." The all-important sixth hour brought the spectators so close that there had to be spots reserved, sometimes only for children, to look at the "transfiguration" on the face of the man being tortured. The officer's memory is so sweet and absorbing that he forgets who he's talking to.

Again, the language the officer uses to describe the fate of the prisoners in the sixth hour has religious significance as he describes a change that could also be used to describe a person's soul. The officer's total rapture in the story also develop his position as the most faithful follower of the old Commandant.

Embarrassed by the officer's passion, the explorer remains quiet. Realizing it *is* quite hard to believe, the officer nonetheless argues that the current state of affairs—namely the emptiness of the valley and the decrepit **apparatus**—is shameful. The officer suspects that the new Commandant will use the authority and opinion of the explorer, a famous guest "conditioned by European ways of thought," to finally put an end to executions using the apparatus.

Here the officer makes it clear that, even if he's not from *Europe, the explorer still represents a more liberal, Western way of approaching justice. This signals the transition to progress and continues to develop the cultural differences at work in the story.*

The officer continues to rant, pointing out that the explorer is probably thinking that in Europe they haven't used torture since "the Middle Ages." The officer cautions the explorer, saying the new Commandant will twist anything the explorer says into a pretext to discontinuing the apparatus. Gleeful, the explorer explains that he indeed *does* disapprove of the apparatus but downplays his authority, saying his opinion would be "private" and if the new Commandant wants to end the use of the apparatus he already has the power to do so.

Ironically, the officer is aware enough to recognize that methods of torture used in the Middle Ages were cruel but cannot make this connection with the apparatus. It's clear that the explorer, not wanting to risk action, is happy because he doesn't have to be the one to interfere with this other culture to uphold his values. The officer's suspicions about the new Commandant show that, once again, there are social changes at work in the penal colony.

The explorer's resistance causes the officer to become even more fervent about the importance of preserving **the apparatus**. He bluntly pleads for the explorer to help him. When the explorer rebuffs saying he cannot help or "hinder" the officer, the latter gets even more insistent, encouraging the explorer to believe in himself and his authority. The officer lays out his plan: the explorer will make an eloquent speech when the new Commandant holds one of his conferences that are "public spectacles" open to the anyone. At the end of this rousing defense of the apparatus, or even a mild, subdued, defense, the new Commandant will see the error of his ways and humble himself before the system of the old Commandant.

The new Commandant's public meetings suggest a more liberal, progressive environment that contrasts sharply with the public spectacle of executions under the old Commandant. The officer truly believes that the explorer has the power to shift the views on the penal colony and create a change, which suggests that the explorer does have authority as a visitor from the West and outsider to the culture.

Patronizing and steadfast in his convictions, the explorer says he is "touched" by the conviction of the officer but refuses to help him maintain **the apparatus** and the system it represents. The officer realizes that the explorer will not change his mind and that his "procedure" was not convincing. Dazed, he looks at the explorer like an "old man" looks at a young, foolish child. The officer releases the prisoner, telling him that he is free. Unsure of the reason for his change in fate, the prisoner is excited nonetheless and struggles on his own to break the straps of the apparatus.

By making it plainly clear that he will not help the officer, the explorer—who was the officer's last hope— effectively declares the end of the apparatus. The officer looking like an "old man" connects him to an antiquated tradition that has no place in the new social of the penal colony. The officer exercises his power one last time by letting the prisoner go, suggesting the arbitrary nature of the man's selection for punishment in the first place; he'd been chosen largely to put on a show for the explorer, rather than to pay for any real crime.

Admonishing the prisoner for being rough with **the apparatus**, the officer spells out his own sentence—"BE JUST!"—and shows it to the explorer. As with the previous script, the explorer cannot read the words, but the officer is at least "partly satisfied" with the explorer's efforts as he mounts the apparatus to input the new sentence.

The sentence is a declaration of what the individual who is guilty should do. Therefore, the officer is guilty of being unjust for being unable to continue to preserve the system he believes is the only way of achieving justice.

The officer quickly and stoically strips naked, breaks his sword, and climbs onto **the apparatus**. The explorer is uncomfortable with the officer's behavior but ultimately believes that the officer's decision to execute himself is "the right thing" because it demonstrates his unflinching dedication to his judicial system.

It's clear that the officer is going to sacrifice himself in the place of the prisoner in the name of his beliefs, which suggests a twisted parallel with Jesus Christ sacrificing himself on the cross. The unwavering, religious dedication to the judicial system impresses the explorer, who again chooses not to interfere.

After a brief bit of wrestling with the soldier, the prisoner, upon seeing the officer naked, realizes a change is at hand and "grins" at the revenge about to take place, attributing this change to the explorer's intervention. With grace and an adept hand, the officer turns on **the apparatus** and demonstrates his working understanding and intimacy with the machine. So dedicated is the officer that he doesn't need to be strapped down; the prisoner and soldier eagerly decide to do it anyway because it seems like the execution would be "incomplete" otherwise.

The prisoner is happy to see an inversion of the former order of power—so much so that he enlists the soldier to help ensure there is no way for the officer to escape from the apparatus. That he and the soldier team up so quickly suggests the arbitrary nature of the power hierarchy under the Old commandant. Further, the fact that the prisoner attributes this change to the explorer's doing further props up the power of the Western individual in this context.

Starting of its own accord, **the apparatus** does its work, at first silently to the explorer, who is completely entranced before noticing the curious and rapt attention of the soldier and the prisoner. Seeing the men delighting in the execution makes the explorer disgusted. Finally using his authority, the explorer orders the two men to go home, but the prisoner begs to stay. Before his annoyance turns to violence, the explorer is distracted by the apparatus, which is no longer silent but quite loudly falling to pieces.

Once again, the explorer has disdain for the members of the penal colony. Ironically, though, when he finally tries to use his authority it is meant as a show of respect *for apparatus and the officer—perhaps suggesting his own sense of social superiority to lower class men like the prisoner and soldier, despite his ostensibly more democratic Western beliefs. The state of the apparatus further shows that the system it represents is crumbling and mirrors the dying officer who is also the last proponent of that system.*

The explorer finally decides to act once he realizes the officer's death will be "plain murder" rather than "exquisite torture." Attempting in vain to free the officer from the bonds of **the apparatus,** the explorer receives help reluctantly from the soldier and prisoner. As they try to save the officer, the explorer gets a last glimpse of the officer's face, which is absent of the "promised redemption" the man had suggested that prisoners attained on the apparatus. Despite this, the officer continues to look "calm and convinced" as the apparatus drives a spike through his head. The officer dies, and the apparatus finally stops working.

In the climax of the story, the officer dies without receiving redemption. This might suggests that he was not actually guilty of the crime he committed—by letting the prisoner go and sacrificing himself, he was in fact being just for once. However, this moment could just as easily be read as evidence that the entire system of "justice" the officer represented was fundamentally flawed, and that no prisoners ever *actually achieved "enlightenment." The explorer acts too slowly to save the officer and his description of the apparatus shows the machine for its true purpose—murder. That the officer is ultimately killed by a spike is another connection to Jesus Christ, who was stabbed by a spear when he hung on the cross.*

The explorer, soldier, and prisoner return to the penal colony and visit a teahouse, which holds the grave of the old Commandant. Speaking for the first time, the soldier tells the explorer that the "priest wouldn't let him lie in the graveyard." The explorer reads the old Commandant's headstone, which is actually a prophecy that the leader will someday rise again and tells the adherents to "Have faith and wait!"

The old Commandant's grave is a clear indication of his religious significance, even as the priest's instructions suggest that the old Commandant was an aberration of the priest's God. The instructions to followers to "Have faith and wait!" is a messianic expectation that is common in both Christianity and Judaism.

Before leaving the teahouse, the explorer distributes some coins to the dockworkers, a quiet, homely group of men who are just hanging out without any real purpose. The explorer quickly exits the teahouse, showing he has no interest in talking with anyone. The soldier and the prisoner run after the explorer, attempting to "force him" to take them off the penal colony. The explorer has no interest in saving the men, however. Instead, he threatens them with a rope as the boat leaves the dock, and the two men, perhaps scared or intimidated, don't try to follow him any further.

The explorer's wealth is further evidence of his power as a foreigner. He would rather hand out money than talk to anyone at the teahouse in the same way he would rather think about his ideas of justice and the right of human dignity without actually enacting them in the penal colony. The soldier and prisoner's mad dash suggest that despite the disappearance of the apparatus, life in the penal colony is still undesirable. The explorer's reaction to the men shows that though Western minds may value justice, he is hesitant to actually help those in need and considers himself innately superior to men like the prisoner and soldier.

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