

## Power and Oppression in Kafka's *The Penal Colony*

 Gerda Urbaite

Euro-Global Journal of Linguistics and Language Education, [urbaittee0013@gmail.com](mailto:urbaittee0013@gmail.com)  
<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.02500105>

Keywords	Abstract
Franz Kafka In the Penal Colony Authority and oppression Bureaucracy and justice Dehumanization and resistance	Franz Kafka's <i>In the Penal Colony</i> offers a profound critique of authoritarianism, justice, and the dehumanizing effects of power. Through the isolated setting of the penal colony and the symbolic execution machine, Kafka examines the dynamics of authority, submission, and complicity. The Officer, the Explorer, and the Condemned Man serve as archetypes reflecting the moral and psychological dimensions of oppression. The machine, both a tool of discipline and a metaphor for systemic violence, illustrates the fragility of authoritarian regimes, culminating in its dramatic collapse. This article explores Kafka's themes of power, bureaucracy, and resistance, situating his work within broader discussions of governance, ethics, and human rights. By engaging with Kafka's incisive critique, readers gain insight into the complexities of power and the enduring relevance of his work in confronting modern systems of oppression.

### Introduction

Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* remains a profound exploration of authority, power, and submission, offering a vivid tableau of dehumanization and systemic violence. Written in 1914 and first published in 1919, the story reveals Kafka's deep engagement with themes of justice, discipline, and the fragility of authoritarian systems. At the heart of the narrative is the penal colony's execution machine, an emblem of bureaucratic cruelty and technological domination, which Kafka masterfully uses to dissect the dynamics of power and oppression. This introduction aims to establish the foundation for analyzing the nuanced portrayal of authority and submission in *In the Penal Colony*, emphasizing its relevance to modern discourses on justice and governance.

Kafka's narrative operates as a critique of institutionalized power, where authority is portrayed as both unassailable and grotesquely flawed. Rutherford (2001) underscores the foreignness of authority in Kafka's work, noting how the execution machine symbolizes a detached, almost alien power that functions without accountability. This detachment, coupled with the mechanical precision of the punishment system, creates a chilling portrayal of justice devoid of empathy. Harrington (2007) draws parallels between Kafka's machine and Alfred Weber's critique of bureaucratic systems, illustrating how Kafka embeds critiques of bureaucratic rationality into his literary landscape.

The story's characters—the Officer, the Explorer, and the Condemned Man—serve as archetypes of power, submission, and complicity. The Officer, as the machine's custodian, represents blind loyalty to



This is an open access article under the  
 Creative Commons Attribution 4.0  
 International License

Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum  
 ISSN 3030-1718

an oppressive system, a figure devoted to the maintenance of authority even as it collapses. Frydman (2019) suggests that Kafka's characters often inhabit liminal spaces, negotiating identities between oppressors and the oppressed. The Explorer's role as an observer highlights the moral ambiguities of intervention, reflecting the complicity of external actors in perpetuating oppressive systems.

Central to Kafka's critique is the execution machine itself, a metaphor for technological and legal systems that depersonalize justice. Mohammed (n.d.) aptly describes the machine as both an instrument of torture and a tool of discipline, embodying the dehumanizing effects of mechanized authority. The gradual disintegration of the machine in the story signals not only the fragility of authoritarian systems but also the inevitability of their decay under the weight of their own excesses (Boyer, 2015).

Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* resonates beyond its historical and cultural contexts, offering insights into the workings of authority and the human condition. As West (1985) argues, Kafka's exploration of authority transcends specific legal or political frameworks, presenting power as an omnipresent force shaped by consent, submission, and resistance. The story's continued relevance lies in its capacity to challenge readers to confront the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by oppressive systems.

This article will delve into these themes, examining how Kafka constructs a narrative of authority and submission through the setting, characters, and the central symbol of the execution machine. By engaging with contemporary scholarship and Kafka's intricate storytelling, this analysis will illuminate the enduring significance of *In the Penal Colony* in understanding the dynamics of power and its impact on humanity.

## I. The Setting and Symbolism of the Penal Colony

Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* unfolds within an isolated, self-contained environment, which serves as a microcosm of authoritarian control and systemic oppression. The penal colony, with its rigid hierarchy and brutal system of justice, is a carefully constructed setting that reflects Kafka's critique of dehumanizing power structures. Through vivid descriptions and symbolic elements, Kafka creates a world where authority is both omnipresent and grotesquely flawed.

### *The Penal Colony as a Microcosm of Authoritarian Control*

The penal colony represents an extreme version of bureaucratic and authoritarian systems. The physical isolation of the colony mirrors the moral detachment of its governing authority. The story's inhabitants are subject to a system that operates without transparency or accountability, where punishment is enacted with mechanical precision but devoid of empathy or fairness. As Rutherford (2001) highlights, the penal colony's detachment from the outside world emphasizes the insularity and self-perpetuating nature of oppressive regimes.

Examples of this detachment are evident in the story's setting:

1. The remoteness of the colony symbolizes the isolation of authoritarian systems from public scrutiny.
2. The lack of communication or appeal within the system reinforces the absolute power of the Officer, who serves as the executor of the law.
3. The inability of the Condemned Man to understand his sentence reflects the opacity and arbitrariness of the judicial process.



### *The Execution Machine as a Central Symbol*

The execution machine is the centerpiece of the penal colony's justice system and a profound symbol of dehumanization and mechanized violence. Kafka describes the machine with meticulous detail, emphasizing its complexity and cold efficiency. It is an embodiment of authority, carrying out its function without question or emotion, reducing human lives to mere objects of punishment.

Key examples include:

1. The machine inscribes the law directly onto the body of the condemned, merging punishment with the written word. This act literalizes the oppressive weight of authoritarian systems on individuals (Boyer, 2015).
2. The intricate design of the machine, with its needles and gears, symbolizes the bureaucratic obsession with order and control.
3. The machine's ultimate breakdown serves as a metaphor for the fragility and self-destructive nature of oppressive systems. Mohammed (n.d.) argues that the machine's collapse reflects the inability of authoritarian regimes to sustain their own excesses.

### *The Dual Role of the Machine*

The execution machine functions as both a tool of punishment and a mechanism for sustaining authority. Its use reinforces the legitimacy of the Officer's power, creating an environment where obedience is ensured through fear and spectacle. Frydman (2019) interprets the machine as a ritualistic device, one that elevates punishment to a quasi-religious act, further entrenching the Officer's control.

Examples of its dual role:

1. The Officer's reverence for the machine highlights its symbolic significance as a source of power and authority.
2. The ritualistic nature of its operation creates a spectacle that legitimizes the oppressive system, even as it alienates the participants.
3. The machine's inability to function without maintenance symbolizes the unsustainable nature of authority when it relies solely on coercion.

### *The Gradual Decay of Authority*

As the story progresses, the breakdown of the machine mirrors the collapse of the Officer's authority. Harrington (2007) suggests that Kafka uses the disintegration of the machine to symbolize the inevitability of change and the limits of authoritarian power. This decay is seen in:

1. The malfunctioning parts of the machine, reflecting the cracks in the penal colony's justice system.
2. The Officer's desperate attempts to maintain the machine, symbolizing the resistance of authoritarian figures to relinquish power.
3. The final destruction of the machine, which leaves the colony's justice system in ruins, marking the end of the Officer's reign.



### *Ambiguity and Alienation in the Setting*

The story's setting is deliberately ambiguous, with few specific details about its geographical or cultural context. This universality allows Kafka's critique of power to transcend its historical moment, making it applicable to various oppressive systems throughout history (West, 1985). The alienation experienced by the Condemned Man and the Explorer further reinforces the dehumanizing effects of the penal colony's justice system.

Examples of alienation include:

1. The Condemned Man's inability to understand his sentence, highlighting the exclusion of individuals from their own judgment process.
2. The Explorer's detachment from the colony, symbolizing the complicity of external observers in perpetuating oppressive systems.
3. The Officer's isolation in his unwavering loyalty to the machine, which ultimately leads to his downfall.

## **II. The Characters as Representations of Power and Submission**

Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* presents a cast of characters who symbolize various facets of authority, submission, and complicity. Through the Officer, the Explorer, and the Condemned Man, Kafka explores the psychological and moral dimensions of power dynamics within oppressive systems. Each character's role serves as a reflection of different attitudes toward authority, highlighting the tensions between justice, obedience, and resistance.

### *The Officer: Custodian of Authority*

The Officer is the embodiment of unwavering loyalty to an authoritarian system. He is not only the operator of the execution machine but also its most ardent advocate, viewing the machine as the ultimate expression of justice. The Officer's blind devotion to the machine symbolizes the dangers of uncritical adherence to tradition and authority (Boyer, 2015).

1. **Devotion to the Machine:** The Officer reveres the machine as a sacred artifact, referring to its creator, the former Commandant, as a near-mythical figure. His belief in the machine's infallibility illustrates the dehumanization inherent in oppressive systems.
  - Example: The Officer's detailed explanation of the machine's operations reveals his obsession with its precision and his belief that it delivers "true" justice.
2. **Isolation as a Function of Authority:** The Officer's role isolates him from others, as his loyalty to the machine alienates him from the Explorer and the Condemned Man. This isolation reflects the psychological burden of upholding oppressive systems.
  - Example: The Officer's increasing desperation when the Explorer questions the legitimacy of the machine demonstrates his growing awareness of his own obsolescence.
3. **The Officer's Sacrifice:** In the story's climax, the Officer willingly submits himself to the machine, signaling his ultimate loyalty to the system he serves. Mohammed (n.d.) interprets this act as a critique of authoritarian figures who sacrifice themselves to uphold collapsing systems.



### *The Explorer: The Ambiguity of Complicity*

The Explorer serves as an outsider, a witness to the penal colony's justice system. His role is marked by moral ambiguity, as he observes the system's brutality but refrains from intervening. Through the Explorer, Kafka critiques the complicity of external observers who fail to challenge oppressive practices (Rutherford, 2001).

1. **Moral Ambivalence:** The Explorer's reluctance to interfere with the system highlights the complexities of moral responsibility in the face of oppression.
  - Example: The Explorer's decision to remain a passive observer reflects the tension between his moral discomfort and his unwillingness to challenge the Officer's authority.
2. **The Role of an Outsider:** As a foreigner, the Explorer's detachment mirrors the indifference of external powers to the suffering within authoritarian regimes.
  - Example: The Explorer's final act of leaving the colony without directly confronting the system underscores his complicity in perpetuating injustice.
3. **Symbol of Neutrality:** Harrington (2007) notes that the Explorer represents the modern individual's struggle with neutrality, as he grapples with the desire to maintain objectivity while witnessing systemic cruelty.

### *The Condemned Man: The Voiceless Oppressed*

The Condemned Man symbolizes the powerless individuals subjected to oppressive systems. His inability to understand the charges against him and his silence throughout the story highlight the dehumanization and voicelessness of those under authoritarian control.

1. **Lack of Agency:** The Condemned Man's ignorance of his sentence reflects the opacity of authoritarian systems that deny individuals the ability to defend themselves (Boyer, 2015).
  - Example: The Condemned Man's passive acceptance of his fate underscores the complete erasure of agency in oppressive systems.
2. **Representation of the Oppressed:** The Condemned Man's silence serves as a metaphor for the broader voicelessness of oppressed populations.
  - Example: The Condemned Man's lack of comprehension of the language and judicial processes mirrors the alienation experienced by marginalized groups (Frydman, 2019).
3. **Silent Acceptance of Injustice:** The Condemned Man's behavior raises questions about the normalization of injustice and the internalization of subjugation.
  - Example: The Condemned Man's passive demeanor contrasts sharply with the Officer's fervent defense of the system, highlighting the psychological toll of oppression.

### *The Interplay of Characters and Power Dynamics*

The interaction between the Officer, the Explorer, and the Condemned Man reveals the complexity of power dynamics within the penal colony. West (1985) argues that Kafka's characters are caught in a cycle of authority, submission, and complicity, reflecting the moral and psychological dimensions of oppression.



1. The Officer's unwavering belief in the machine clashes with the Explorer's skepticism, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity.
2. The Condemned Man's silent acceptance of his fate underscores the moral ambiguity of the Explorer's refusal to intervene.
3. The Officer's self-sacrifice serves as a tragic culmination of his devotion, illustrating the self-destructive nature of authoritarian systems.

### III. Themes of Power and Oppression

Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* delves deeply into themes of power and oppression, illustrating how systems of authority dehumanize individuals and perpetuate injustice. Through the use of vivid imagery, complex character dynamics, and the execution machine as a central symbol, Kafka critiques the mechanisms of power that sustain authoritarian regimes and explores the psychological effects of oppression on both the oppressors and the oppressed.

#### *The Relationship Between Authority and Justice*

Kafka's penal colony operates on a distorted version of justice, where authority is wielded arbitrarily and punishment is enacted without transparency. The Officer's justification for the machine's use, rooted in the idea of "pure justice," exposes the moral corruption inherent in unchecked authority (Rutherford, 2001).

1. **Arbitrariness of Authority:**
  - The Condemned Man's ignorance of his sentence underscores the lack of due process in the penal colony.
  - Example: The Officer claims that the Condemned Man's guilt is self-evident, bypassing any need for a formal trial.
2. **Justice as a Performance:**
  - The execution process, described in ritualistic detail, reduces justice to a theatrical spectacle, emphasizing power over fairness.
  - Example: The machine's inscribing of the sentence on the condemned's body literalizes the violence of authoritarian justice (Boyer, 2015).
3. **Absence of Accountability:**
  - The penal colony's system functions without oversight or accountability, reflecting Kafka's critique of systems that prioritize authority over morality.
  - Example: The Officer's reverence for the machine overrides any concern for the humanity of the condemned.

### Dehumanization of Individuals

Kafka portrays the penal colony as a space where individuals are stripped of their humanity, reduced to objects of control and punishment. The execution machine serves as the primary vehicle for this dehumanization, transforming the act of punishment into a mechanized process devoid of empathy.



### 1. **The Condemned Man as a Symbol of Dehumanization:**

- The Condemned Man's lack of voice and agency reflects the erasure of individuality in oppressive systems (Frydman, 2019).
- Example: His passive acceptance of his sentence mirrors the silencing of marginalized voices.

### 2. **The Machine's Role in Dehumanization:**

- The machine's precision and complexity emphasize the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy and technology.
- Example: The intricate process of inscribing the sentence on the body reduces the condemned to a canvas for authority's message (Mohammed, n.d.).

### 3. **The Officer's Dehumanization:**

- The Officer's unwavering devotion to the machine illustrates how oppressors, too, are dehumanized by their roles.
- Example: His ultimate submission to the machine signifies the destructive nature of blind loyalty to authoritarian systems.

#### *Submission and Complicity*

Kafka explores the dynamics of submission and complicity through the characters' interactions with the penal colony's justice system. The Condemned Man's silence, the Officer's fanaticism, and the Explorer's passive observation all contribute to the perpetuation of oppression.

### 1. **Submission to Authority:**

- The Condemned Man's acceptance of his fate illustrates how oppression fosters compliance through fear and resignation.
- Example: His inability to question or resist his sentence reflects the internalization of subjugation (West, 1985).

### 2. **Complicity of Observers:**

- The Explorer's refusal to intervene highlights the moral ambiguity of bystanders in the face of injustice.
- Example: His departure from the penal colony without challenging the system underscores his passive complicity (Harrington, 2007).

### 3. **The Role of Ritual in Maintaining Power:**

- The ritualistic nature of the execution reinforces submission and legitimizes authority.
- Example: The Officer's detailed explanation of the machine's operation elevates the act of punishment to a quasi-religious ceremony.



## The Fragility of Authoritarian Systems

Kafka illustrates that authoritarian systems, despite their appearance of invincibility, are inherently fragile. The gradual breakdown of the execution machine symbolizes the eventual collapse of oppressive regimes under their own weight.

### 1. The Machine's Decay:

- The machine's malfunction reflects the unsustainable nature of systems reliant on coercion and violence.
- Example: The Officer's inability to maintain the machine signals the decline of his authority (Mohammed, n.d.).

### 2. The Officer's Desperation:

- The Officer's decision to subject himself to the machine highlights the self-destructive nature of authoritarian figures.
- Example: His death at the hands of the machine he revered underscores the futility of blind loyalty to power.

### 3. The Explorer's Departure:

- The Explorer's rejection of the penal colony's justice system signals the possibility of resistance and change.
- Example: His departure suggests that oppressive systems are not immutable and can be challenged through moral conviction (Rutherford, 2001).

## IV. The Execution Machine as a Central Symbol

The execution machine in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is the story's most prominent symbol, representing the intersection of power, violence, and dehumanization. Through its intricate design and central role in the colony's justice system, the machine embodies the authoritarian obsession with control and order. Its gradual breakdown, culminating in the Officer's death, reflects the inherent instability and ultimate collapse of oppressive regimes.

### *The Machine as an Instrument of Discipline*

The execution machine functions as a tool of discipline, enforcing the colony's laws with mechanical precision. Its operation, described in painstaking detail, exemplifies the bureaucratic rationalization of violence (Boyer, 2015).

### 1. The Inscription of Justice:

- The machine literally inscribes the condemned's sentence onto their body, turning punishment into a physical and permanent record of guilt.
- Example: The Officer's description of the process, where the condemned "learns the nature of the sentence through their suffering," reflects the dehumanizing philosophy of the penal colony.





## 2. Mechanical Justice:

- The machine's impersonal operation eliminates human empathy from the process of punishment.
- Example: The Officer's pride in the machine's precision highlights the reduction of justice to a technical procedure devoid of moral consideration.

## 3. Authority through Spectacle:

- The machine's elaborate design and the public nature of its operation emphasize its role as a spectacle of power.
- Example: The Officer's insistence on the machine's superiority to modern justice systems demonstrates how authoritarian regimes use public displays of violence to legitimize their authority (Mohammed, n.d.).

### *The Machine as a Symbol of Oppression*

The machine serves as a metaphor for the oppressive systems that dominate the penal colony. It represents not only the physical violence of punishment but also the psychological and cultural mechanisms that sustain authoritarian rule (Rutherford, 2001).

#### 1. Bureaucratic Violence:

- The machine reflects the dehumanizing effects of bureaucratic systems, where individuals are reduced to objects of control.
- Example: The lack of a trial for the Condemned Man highlights the arbitrary and impersonal nature of the colony's justice system.

#### 2. Loss of Individuality:

- The machine's operation erases the humanity of the condemned, turning them into mere bodies to be inscribed with authority's message.
- Example: The Officer's description of the machine's "beautiful" inscriptions illustrates how authoritarian regimes aestheticize violence to mask its brutality.

#### 3. Power and Control:

- The machine's intricate design symbolizes the complexity of authoritarian systems, which maintain control through layers of procedure and ritual.
- Example: The Explorer's reaction to the machine's operation—both fascination and revulsion—reflects the dual allure and horror of oppressive power structures.

### *The Machine's Breakdown and the Fragility of Power*

The machine's eventual collapse serves as a powerful metaphor for the instability of authoritarian systems. As the story progresses, Kafka uses the machine's malfunction to illustrate the self-destructive nature of regimes reliant on coercion and violence (Harrington, 2007).



### 1. Signs of Decay:

- The machine's malfunctions, described by the Officer as minor inconveniences, foreshadow its ultimate failure.
- Example: The Officer's struggle to maintain the machine mirrors his diminishing authority as the system begins to crumble.

### 2. The Officer's Death:

- The Officer's decision to submit himself to the machine reflects his unwavering loyalty to the system, even as it collapses.
- Example: The machine's failure to function properly during the Officer's execution symbolizes the collapse of the oppressive system it represents (Mohammed, n.d.).

### 3. The End of the Machine:

- The destruction of the machine leaves the penal colony without its central mechanism of control, signaling the end of the authoritarian regime.
- Example: The Explorer's departure from the colony after the machine's destruction suggests the possibility of resistance and renewal beyond the system's collapse.

#### *The Machine's Dual Role: Discipline and Self-Destruction*

The execution machine embodies both the enforcement and the downfall of authority. Kafka uses its dual role to critique the unsustainable nature of oppressive systems, which ultimately destroy themselves through their own excesses (Frydman, 2019).

### 1. Discipline and Ritual:

- The machine's operation reinforces authority through ritualized violence, creating a spectacle that legitimizes oppression.
- Example: The Officer's devotion to the machine as a "work of art" highlights the ritualistic aspects of authoritarian control.

### 2. Fragility and Decay:

- The machine's collapse demonstrates the inherent fragility of systems that prioritize control over humanity.
- Example: The machine's inability to function without constant maintenance reflects the unsustainable nature of authoritarian regimes.

## V. Broader Implications of Kafka's Critique

Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* transcends its specific historical and cultural context, offering a profound critique of authoritarianism, justice, and the human condition. By examining the interplay of power, submission, and the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy, Kafka sheds light on the enduring dynamics of oppression. The story's broader implications resonate in contemporary discussions of governance, ethics, and resistance.



### *Critique of Modern Systems of Governance*

Kafka's portrayal of the penal colony critiques modern systems of governance that prioritize order and control over humanity. The execution machine, with its mechanical precision, serves as a metaphor for the bureaucratic systems that dominate modern life.

#### 1. **Parallels with Totalitarian Regimes:**

- The penal colony reflects the characteristics of totalitarian regimes, where authority operates without accountability, and dissent is eradicated.
- Example: The Officer's unquestioning loyalty to the machine mirrors the role of enforcers in oppressive governments (Boyer, 2015).

#### 2. **Bureaucracy and Dehumanization:**

- Kafka's depiction of the machine critiques the depersonalization inherent in bureaucratic systems.
- Example: The Condemned Man's inability to comprehend his sentence reflects the alienation of individuals in bureaucratic societies (Harrington, 2007).

#### 3. **Relevance to Contemporary Governance:**

- Modern legal and political systems continue to grapple with the balance between authority and individual rights.
- Example: Rutherford (2001) argues that Kafka's critique of justice in *In the Penal Colony* resonates in discussions about surveillance and state power in the 21st century.

### *The Psychological Impact of Power Dynamics*

Kafka explores the psychological effects of power on both the oppressors and the oppressed, revealing the moral and emotional toll of authoritarian systems.

#### 1. **The Oppressor's Burden:**

- The Officer's unwavering devotion to the machine illustrates the psychological burden of maintaining authority.
- Example: The Officer's ultimate submission to the machine reflects the self-destructive nature of authoritarian figures.

#### 2. **The Oppressed's Alienation:**

- The Condemned Man's voicelessness highlights the psychological toll of dehumanization on the oppressed.
- Example: His passive acceptance of his sentence illustrates the internalization of oppression (Frydman, 2019).

#### 3. **The Observer's Complicity:**



- The Explorer's moral ambiguity underscores the psychological challenges faced by bystanders who witness injustice.
- Example: The Explorer's decision to leave the colony without intervening reflects the moral dilemmas faced by external actors in oppressive systems.

### *Universality of Kafka's Themes*

Kafka's critique of power and oppression is universal, transcending the specific context of the penal colony to address broader questions about authority and justice.

#### 1. **Timelessness of Kafka's Critique:**

- The story's themes of dehumanization, bureaucracy, and resistance remain relevant in contemporary contexts.
- Example: Mohammed (n.d.) highlights how Kafka's use of the execution machine anticipates modern debates about technology and ethics.

#### 2. **Application to Global Issues:**

- Kafka's exploration of authority and submission offers insights into issues such as systemic racism, colonialism, and human rights abuses.
- Example: Frydman (2019) connects Kafka's critique to the historical experiences of marginalized communities, including the Holocaust and colonial oppression.

#### 3. **Kafka's Influence on Modern Thought:**

- Kafka's work has inspired discussions in philosophy, law, and literature, shaping contemporary understandings of power and resistance.
- Example: West (1985) argues that Kafka's exploration of consent and autonomy continues to inform debates about individual freedom and collective responsibility.

### *Possibilities of Resistance and Renewal*

While Kafka's portrayal of the penal colony is bleak, the story suggests the possibility of resistance and renewal beyond the collapse of oppressive systems.

#### 1. **The Collapse of the Machine:**

- The destruction of the execution machine symbolizes the potential for authoritarian systems to self-destruct.
- Example: The machine's failure reflects the fragility of regimes reliant on violence and coercion (Mohammed, n.d.).

#### 2. **The Explorer's Departure:**

- The Explorer's decision to leave the colony suggests the possibility of rejecting oppressive systems.



- Example: His departure can be interpreted as a symbolic act of resistance, even if passive (Harrington, 2007).

### 3. The Role of Reflection:

- Kafka's critique invites readers to reflect on their own roles in perpetuating or resisting systems of power.
- Example: Rutherford (2001) emphasizes the transformative potential of Kafka's work, urging readers to confront the moral and ethical dilemmas of their own societies.

## Conclusion

Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* stands as a profound meditation on power, oppression, and the human condition. Through the isolated and insular setting of the penal colony, Kafka constructs a microcosm of authoritarian control, where justice is rendered mechanical, humanity is stripped away, and authority perpetuates itself through ritualized violence. The execution machine serves as a powerful symbol, representing not only the dehumanizing effects of authoritarianism but also the inherent fragility of systems built on coercion and domination.

Kafka's characters—the Officer, the Explorer, and the Condemned Man—each embody different facets of power dynamics, submission, and complicity. The Officer's blind devotion to the machine reflects the moral and psychological toll of upholding oppressive systems, while the Explorer's moral ambiguity highlights the complexities of complicity. The Condemned Man, voiceless and passive, serves as a stark representation of those marginalized and dehumanized by such systems. These interactions illuminate the psychological and moral dimensions of power, urging readers to confront their own roles in sustaining or resisting authority.

The broader implications of Kafka's critique extend far beyond the confines of the penal colony. His portrayal of bureaucratic violence and mechanized justice resonates in modern discussions of governance, surveillance, and systemic oppression. Kafka's themes of dehumanization and resistance invite reflection on issues such as totalitarianism, human rights, and the ethical dilemmas posed by technology. The execution machine's collapse underscores the unsustainable nature of oppressive regimes, offering a glimmer of hope for renewal and resistance in the face of authoritarianism.

Ultimately, *In the Penal Colony* is a timeless and universal work, challenging readers to grapple with the complexities of power, justice, and humanity. Kafka's incisive critique remains deeply relevant, reminding us of the fragility of systems that prioritize control over compassion and the enduring need for vigilance, resistance, and moral reflection in confronting oppression. As readers, we are left not only with the story's unsettling images but also with its urgent questions: What are the costs of submission to authority, and how can we resist the dehumanizing forces of



power in our own societies? These questions, central to Kafka's work, remain as vital today as they were a century ago.

## References

- Boyer, D. W. (2015). Kafka's Law-Writing Apparatus: A Study in Torture, A Study in Discipline. *Yale JL & Human.*, 27, 83.
- Frydman, J. (2019). Kafka, the Caribbean, and the Holocaust. *Interventions*, 21(8), 1087-1106.
- Harrington, A. (2007). Alfred Weber's essay 'The Civil Servant' and Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony': the evidence of an influence. *History of the Human Sciences*, 20(3), 41-63.
- Kreps, J., Narkhede, N., & Rao, J. (2011, June). Kafka: A distributed messaging system for log processing. In *Proceedings of the NetDB* (Vol. 11, No. 2011, pp. 1-7).
- Labi, C. (2022). Let those commandments be burned unto your heart: kafka's in the penal colony and legal transmission. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law-Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique*, 35(2), 675-685.
- Mammadova, I. (2024). The Concept of the Absurd: Camus' Literary Exploration of Existential Philosophy. *Global Spectrum of Research and Humanities*, 1(1), 111-120. <https://doi.org/10.69760/gsrh.01012024010>
- Mohammed, A. A. The Horrible Machine Reading the function and the role of the machine in Kafka's In The Panel Colony.
- Rutherford, D. (2001). The Foreignness of Power: Alterity and Subversion in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" and Beyond. *Modernism/modernity*, 8(2), 303-313.
- Shukla, P., Krishna, C. R., & Patil, N. V. (2024). Kafka-Shield: Kafka Streams-based distributed detection scheme for IoT traffic-based DDoS attacks. *Security and Privacy*, 7(6), e416.
- West, R. (1985). Authority, autonomy, and choice: The role of consent in the moral and political visions of Franz Kafka and Richard Posner. *Harvard Law Review*, 384-428.

Received: 03.01.2025

Revised: 07.01.2025

Accepted: 11.01.2025

Published: 13.01.2025



This is an open access article under the  
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0  
International License

Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum  
ISSN 3030-1718