



[In the Penal Colony](#), by Franz Kafka

In A Nutshell

Franz Kafka was an early 20th century author of German-Jewish descent, famous for writing nightmarish, grotesque, disturbing, and enigmatic short stories and novels. We say "enigmatic" because almost all of Kafka's works seem like they have really "deep" meanings that are difficult to pin down or identify. This *must* mean something, you say after reading a Kafka story, but *what?!*

In fact, Kafka's even got an adjective all to himself – the "Kafkaesque" – which you might hear thrown around by uppity college English majors. "Kafkaesque" refers to that unique combination of qualities Kafka's work can have, and the particular *feel* you get when you read his stories. It also refers to the particular set of broad themes his stories usually seem to revolve around (which also give them that distinctive "Kafka" feel): judgment and justice (or lack thereof), particularly divine judgment; the alienation or isolation of the individual; the "faceless modern bureaucracy"; the promise that there *is* meaning somewhere – in God, in life, in a justice system – and the frustrating failure to find it.

"In the Penal Colony," one of Kafka's most famous short stories (some would call it a novella), is certainly Kafkaesque. It's got the grotesque and disturbing elements down (more even than most Kafka stories), not to mention all that stuff about judgment and justice: it's the story of an elaborate torture/execution machine which kills "the guilty." As you'll quickly find out upon reading it, this story also has the whole "This must mean something, but *what!?*" thing going

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on, big time. But that's part of why we're here, isn't it?

So what's the scoop on the history of the story? Kafka churned it out in two weeks in 1914, in the midst of writing one of his three major (and incomplete) novels, *The Trial*. "In the Penal Colony" wasn't published until five years later, in 1919, though better late than never.

In fact, most of Kafka's work remained unpublished until he died in 1924. That was when a close friend of his, Max Brod, began collecting and publishing the many writings Kafka had kept private, including Kafka's three incomplete and very fragmentary novels. Until then, Kafka's scanty published work, which was written in German (though he lived in Prague), had only made ripples in a very dedicated but small segment of the German Modernist *avant-garde* – the experimental artist types who were always looking for the next new thing that rebelled against "the man." Once Brod had undertaken the publishing project, though, Kafka caught began to catch on big time with larger segments of the German-speaking public, though this was seriously hindered in the 1930s when the Nazis came to power, since they didn't like Jews or Modernists much.

Kafka's really big break came after World War II, and the recent events of the war and Holocaust made some of Kafka's darker visions of the modern world more compelling. After the first translations into English were made during the 1940s by a husband-wife team named the Muirs, his popularity spread like wildfire in the English-speaking world, as both critics and general readers discovered they just couldn't get enough of the Kafkaesque.

"In the Penal Colony," which was first translated into English 1948, quickly came to be recognized as one of his most important shorter works by almost everybody. It's even found a home among political activists or politically-minded critics who like to make use of it as a very lurid (a fancy word that means "vivid," usually in a bad way) depiction of the way a

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society can torture and control human bodies. (The politically engaged critic Edward Said, for example, used it this way, as have many fascinated by the theories of "power and the body" put forth by the philosopher Michel Foucault).

"In the Penal Colony" has also received much attention from the veritable industry of Kafka criticism that sprung up in the 1950s. Critics love Kafka for the same reason lots of students do: when everything in a story is so unclear but seems so meaningful, almost anything you say will seem really deep. And you can say a lot.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Should "In the Penal Colony" be read allegorically? (See more possible allegorical readings in "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory"). Why or why not? What in the text might lead you to think it should be?
- 2 What causes the apparatus to fall apart? Is it lack of maintenance? Is the officer's sentence impossible? Are there other reasons that come to mind?
- 3 Do you think the soldiers in the penal colony come from any particular society, or specific kind of society?

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