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THE CONCEPT OF GUILT AND THE PHENOMENON OF MEMORY IN FRANZ KAFKA'S NOVEL THE TRIAL

Banias Volodymyr

Candidate of Philological Sciences,

Associate Professor at the Department of Philology

Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6880-8805

Banias Nataliia

Candidate of Philological Sciences,

Associate Professor at the Department of Philology

Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6974-0790

This article examines Franz Kafka's novel The Trial through the lens of the intertwined concepts of guilt and memory. The primary focus is placed on the theme of forgetting as a catalyst for the protagonist's dehumanization. The aim of the study is to interpret the metaphysical and religious aspects of guilt, positioning Joseph K. not merely as a subject of judicial persecution but as a symbolic representation of inner moral crisis. The methodology combines hermeneutic literary analysis, cultural studies, and intermedial references to cinema. Particular attention is paid to Biblical notions of sin, the Judaic understanding of guilt as a conscious act of memory, and the intertextual parallels with William Shakespeare's Hamlet, where memory functions as an ethical imperative. The article also explores a comparative reading of Kafka's novel alongside Steven Soderbergh's film Bubbles (2005), where the protagonist's loss of memory leads to moral collapse and emotional detachment. The analysis reveals that in The Trial, guilt does not require justification or evidence – its very existence stems from internal amnesia and self-alienation. The article argues that memory in Kafka's narrative performs not only a cognitive but also an ethical function by maintaining the individual's link to past responsibility and moral awareness. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Kafka's prose by highlighting how the dynamics of guilt and memory construct the existential framework of the text and determine the fate of the character.

Key words: Franz Kafka, The Trial, guilt, memory, dehumanization, Judaism, existentialism.

Баняс Володимир

кандидат філологічних наук, доцент кафедри філології

Закарпатський угорський інститут імені Ф. Ракоці

Баняс Наталія

кандидат філологічних наук, доцент кафедри філології

Закарпатський угорський інститут імені Ф. Ракоці

КОНЦЕПТ ПРОВИНИ ТА ФЕНОМЕН ПАМ'ЯТІ В РОМАНІ «ПРОЦЕС» ФРАНЦА КАФКИ

У статті проаналізовано роман Франца Кафки «Процес» крізь призму категорій провини та пам'яті. Дослідження сфокусовано на проблемі втрати пам'яті як одній із ключових при-

чин дегуманізації особистості. Основною метою статті є інтерпретація метафізичного та релігійного виміру вини в тексті, де головний герой Йозеф К. постає не лише як об'єкт судового переслідування, а й як символ внутрішнього морального конфлікту. Методологічну основу дослідження становлять герменевтичний аналіз, елементи культурологічного підходу та інтермедіальні зв'язки з кінематографом. Особливу увагу приділено паралелям з біблійною концепцією гріха, юдейським розумінням провини як акту пам'яті, а також із трагедією «Гамлет» Вільяма Шекспіра, де пам'ять відіграє роль морального імперативу. Залучено порівняльний аналіз роману Кафки та фільму «Бульбашки» (2005) режисера Стівена Содерберга, в якому також показано, як втрата пам'яті веде до втрати людяності. У результаті дослідження з'ясовано, що в романі «Процес» провини не потребує чіткого обґрунтування, оскільки її джерелом є забута або витіснена провини самого героя. Висновки доводять, що пам'ять виконує не лише когнітивну, а й етичну функцію – вона зберігає зв'язок людини з моральним минулим. Стаття робить внесок у сучасну інтерпретацію прози Кафки, показуючи, як поняття пам'яті й вини формують екзистенційний горизонт тексту та визначають долю персонажа.

Ключові слова: Франц Кафка, Процес, провини, пам'ять, дегуманізація, юдаїзм, екзистенціалізм.

Introduction. Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial* [2] remains one of the most discussed literary texts of the 20th century. Written in 1914–1915 and published posthumously in 1925, the novel portrays the sudden arrest of Joseph K. without disclosure of the crime, turning the plot into a parable about justice, guilt, and existence.

This paper focuses on two essential categories – guilt and memory – interpreting them as mutually interdependent components of the protagonist's downfall. The central thesis is that Joseph K.'s inability to recall or acknowledge his guilt symbolizes the broader existential crisis of modern man and culminates in his dehumanization.

Methods and theoretical framework. The study uses literary analysis supported by philosophical and cultural contextualization. The interpretations of Reiner Stach, Theodor Adorno, and Rolf Goebel are examined, alongside Jewish theological concepts of guilt and Biblical memory. A comparative approach incorporates the cinematic narrative of *Bubbles* (2005) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as frames for interpreting guilt and memory in broader cultural discourse.

Kafka in Ukrainian Literary Scholarship. Franz Kafka's reception in Ukrainian literary criticism, although relatively limited compared to Western academia, has gained momentum in recent decades. During the Soviet era, Kafka was often marginalized due to ideological constraints that deemed his themes of existential anxiety and bureaucratic absurdity incompatible with the tenets of socialist realism. His works were interpreted through a narrow political lens or omitted altogether from mainstream discourse. However, with Ukraine's independence in 1991, a significant re-evaluation of Kafka's oeuvre took place.

Ukrainian intellectuals, especially since the 1990s, have approached Kafka through a post-totalitarian lens, viewing his depictions of guilt, alienation, and institutional power as highly resonant with Ukrainian historical experiences. Scholars such as Tamara Hundorova, Mykola Riabchuk, and others have examined Kafka's relevance to the post-Soviet subject – a figure navigating disorientation, fractured identity, and opaque authority structures. Hundorova, for instance, reads Kafka as a precursor to the postmodern condition in Ukrainian literature, while Riabchuk draws attention to Kafka's critical potential in articulating cultural trauma.

Moreover, Ukrainian translations of Kafka have introduced stylistic and philosophical nuances that reflect local literary traditions. University courses in Ukraine increasingly feature Kafka in modern literature curricula, encouraging intertextual comparisons and philosophical inquiry.

The growing body of Ukrainian-language academic writing on Kafka signals a shift from marginal engagement to an active and contextually rich dialogue, positioning Kafka as a meaningful figure in Ukraine's evolving intellectual landscape.

Results and discussion. Let us consider the main interpretations of the work.

Interpretation I: Life as Judgment.

One interpretation presents the novel as a metaphor of human existence, beginning with Joseph K.'s metaphorical "birth" and ending with his death. His inner prison is built by recurring thoughts of guilt. Kafka implies that guilt, even if unspoken, defines our existential being.

Interpretation II: The Hidden Crime.

Another reading suggests Joseph K. may be guilty of some unnamed crime. Kafka questions the assumption of innocence and explores how any action can be criminalized, depending on the system of judgment. Christian allusions reinforce the theme of original sin.

Interpretation III: Socio-Political Allegory.

Written before World War I, the novel reflects anxiety amid political transformation. Joseph K. is passive and lacks historical agency – a small man crushed by systemic forces. This reading anticipates totalitarian control and bureaucratic absurdity.

Adorno vs. Stach.

Adorno [1, pp. 87–92] sees *The Trial* as the political prophecy of fascism; Stach [5, pp. 464–483] argues for autobiographical interpretation. Goebel [3, pp. 151–164] offers a synthesis: K. and the court are interdependent, mirroring internal vs. external conflict. Kafka's use of fantasy blurs reality with dream logic.

The Final Sentence.

K.'s death "like a dog" reflects ultimate shame. He fails to remember or confess his guilt – a failure of memory, which equates to loss of humanity. According to Judaic thought, guilt is tied to remembrance of sin. Forgetting becomes a curse, remembrance a virtue.

Cinematic Parallel: Bubbles.

Steven Soderbergh's *Bubbles* presents a modern variation: the protagonist commits a crime and forgets it. The absence of memory removes guilt and accountability. This reinforces the idea that morality depends on the capacity to remember.

Hamlet as Counterpart.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* [4] embodies memory as a moral force. The prince's vow to remember his father drives his actions. Claudius and Gertrude's forgetfulness marks their guilt. Kafka's Joseph K. is Hamlet in reverse – silent, passive, and forgetful.

Literature and Film in Kafka's *The Trial*. Kafka's *The Trial* has been a fertile source for cinematic adaptations, each reflecting distinct aesthetic and ideological interpretations. Among the most renowned is Orson Welles's 1962 adaptation, which emphasizes the surreal and nightmarish tone of the novel. Welles uses stark black-and-white cinematography, shadow play, and disorienting set design to create an oppressive world that visually mirrors the protagonist's psychological turmoil. His Joseph K. moves through bureaucratic labyrinths with increasing helplessness, and the film's visual language highlights the tension between the individual and an incomprehensible legal system.

Another notable adaptation is the mini-series directed by David Schalko, which portrays the life of Franz Kafka, focusing in particular on his relationships with his father, his lovers, and his friend Max Brod.

These adaptations, while different in visual style and historical context, reveal the intermedial power of Kafka's work. By translating the novel into cinematic language, both films reinterpret its core themes – guilt, fate, surveillance, and helplessness – for new audiences. The visual

medium accentuates aspects of the narrative that are only implicit in the text: spatial constriction, symbolic imagery, and psychological isolation. Moreover, the cinematic retellings underscore the universal relevance of *The Trial*, while also situating it within specific cultural and temporal frameworks. The dialogue between literature and film thus expands the interpretative possibilities of Kafka's work and demonstrates the adaptability of his vision across artistic forms.

The Absence of Narrative Closure in *The Trial*. One of the most striking features of *The Trial* is its deliberate absence of narrative resolution. Unlike traditional novels that provide catharsis through confession, punishment, or redemption, Kafka withholds all such closure. Joseph K. never learns the nature of his crime, is denied a fair trial, and meets his death without absolution or understanding. This narrative strategy reflects a modernist skepticism toward absolute truth and exposes the inadequacy of conventional legal and moral systems to account for existential complexity.

The lack of resolution also functions as a commentary on epistemological paralysis. The more Joseph K. attempts to understand the mechanisms of the court, the more entangled he becomes. Knowledge does not liberate him; rather, it intensifies his confusion. This inversion of the Enlightenment ideal – that truth leads to freedom – marks *The Trial* as a profoundly anti-modernist text, questioning whether human beings can ever fully grasp the forces that govern their fate.

In pedagogical settings, this unresolved structure challenges students to confront discomfort and ambiguity. Rather than leading to definitive answers, the novel encourages open-ended reflection – a process that mirrors the reader's own confrontation with guilt, memory, and responsibility. The very absence of clarity becomes a mirror for the modern condition: fragmented, uncertain, and morally unstable.

Teaching experience and student reception. *The Trial* was discussed during an English language seminar with first-year philology students. The teaching experience revealed several challenges in student reception of the work. First and foremost, the majority of the students had never read Kafka's novel before the class, which made the initial engagement with the text difficult. Secondly, due to their age and limited academic experience, the students found it hard to move beyond surface-level interpretations and approach the novel critically and independently, rather than relying on existing commentary. Additionally, the concept of intertextuality – especially in drawing parallels between literature and film – proved to be abstract and challenging for many. The comparative analysis involving Steven Soderbergh's *Bubbles* was met with confusion rather than insight, as students struggled to establish meaningful connections. Finally, it became evident that the concept of guilt, central to Kafka's novel, is still foreign to many students at this early stage of their intellectual development. Their limited life experience makes it difficult to reflect deeply on moral and existential themes. This seminar revealed not only the complexity of Kafka's writing but also the pedagogical difficulties in introducing philosophical literature to young learners.

Conclusions. Kafka's *The Trial* presents guilt and memory not merely as literary motifs but as fundamental elements of human identity. Joseph K.'s downfall is not the result of judicial punishment in the traditional sense, but rather the product of internal amnesia – a failure to recall, recognize, or even formulate the nature of his own guilt. In this narrative, memory becomes a moral compass; its erosion marks the unraveling of individual agency. The novel thus articulates a vision of the modern subject as existentially vulnerable – defined less by action than by disorientation, guilt without origin, and responsibility without clarity.

The hermeneutic approach applied in this study reveals that guilt in *The Trial* is metaphysical in nature. It does not require evidence or justification; it exists outside legal structures and within the realm of being. Kafka challenges rationalist models of morality by suggesting that the loss

of memory severs one's connection to an ethical framework. This notion resonates strongly with Judaic theology, where remembrance is inseparable from repentance. In forgetting, Joseph K. forfeits not just his innocence, but his humanity.

Comparative intertextual analysis further highlights this idea. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which memory becomes the motor of moral action, serves as a thematic foil to Kafka's protagonist. Likewise, cinematic parallels such as Soderbergh's *Bubbles* and the film adaptation by Welles expand the discussion into the realm of intermediality, offering visual embodiments of guilt and disorientation. These works reinforce the insight that literature and film, though formally distinct, can collaborate in expressing existential anxiety and ethical collapse.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian scholarly reception of Kafka introduces an important cultural dimension. Post-Soviet readings underscore the relevance of *The Trial* to societies shaped by authoritarian legacy and legal absurdity. This geographic and historical lens contributes to a more pluralistic understanding of Kafka's continued resonance across borders and traditions.

In light of these findings, several avenues for future research emerge. One promising direction involves further comparative studies between Kafka's fiction and Eastern European narratives of guilt and surveillance. Another lies in interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary analysis with psychology, theology, or legal theory. Kafka's oeuvre continues to demand new frameworks – not only for what it says about the human condition, but for how it destabilizes the very categories by which we attempt to interpret that condition.

Ultimately, *The Trial* resists closure. Its strength lies in ambiguity, in its refusal to confirm whether guilt is deserved or imposed, remembered or imagined. Yet this very refusal calls forth reflection. It asks not what Joseph K. has done, but what it means to be guilty, to forget, and to lose oneself in the machinery of modern life. In a world increasingly defined by impersonal systems and moral ambivalence, Kafka's vision remains urgently relevant.

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