

Form, Function, Fiction: A Rereading of Franz Kafka's "Vor dem Gesetz"

Owen Ayers

In a Tortoiseshell: *In his junior paper, Owen Ayers examines the genre of Franz Kafka's short story "Vor dem Gesetz" ("Before the Law"). Is it a parable, a riddle, or a joke? These genres, as defined by scholars, become Owen's **key terms** as well as the basis of his **structure**. He explains how the story fits somewhat into all three of these genres, thus complicating their scholarly definitions.*

Excerpt

If this is the set-up, though, the final exchange between man and gatekeeper must be the punch line, the unexpected and – literally – punchy turn of phrase that unlocks for the reader the meaning, or at least indicates the path toward it. Though he does not mention it by name in his essay, Wallace very well may have had "Vor dem Gesetz" in mind when writing his conclusion:

[I]magine [Kafka's] stories as all about a kind of door. To envision us approaching and pounding on this door, increasingly hard, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it; we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter [...] finally, the door opens...and it opens *outward* – we've been inside what we wanted all along.¹

The reader of "Vor dem Gesetz" has been played, just like the man at the gate in the story. Having bought into the story, reading faster and faster to reach the ending where, surely, the key to understanding it will be found – the reader is thwarted. Wallace's idea of the door opening outward, revealing to us that we've been seeking something that has surrounded us the entire time, is the ultimate prank reveal. The story is indeed funny, but the reader isn't necessarily the person laughing. Tellingly, the only laughter to be found in the story is the gatekeeper's when the man tries to look past him into the law. "Wenn es dich so lockt, versuche es doch, trotz meines Verbotes hineinzugehen"² he says – "If it tempts you so, try to go in, despite my forbiddance" [translation mine]. The gatekeeper may be laughing because he knows that both foolhardy entry and eternal waiting are futile decisions. We find in retrospect an early clue that what we desire is outside the door, the story that claims to hold the answer, contrary to what a parable advertises.

¹ Wallace, 65.

² Kafka, 144.

Jolles's canonical explanation of the *Witz* (Joke) bears this out. He posits: "Without exception, every joke both undoes an inadequate structure and dissolves a tension."³ In the case of "Vor dem Gesetz," the inadequate structure is the premise of the story itself; the man is looking for the only thing he desires – if we are to believe Wallace – in completely the wrong location. Without this framework, though, the story would fall apart, so the bit of black humor at the end indeed ridicules and undoes the supposition on which it is based. To Jolles's second point, the same critical exchange that ends the story diffuses the tension of the paragraphs before it, albeit unsatisfyingly or confusingly. The reader may even laugh at him- or herself for having put so much stock in the story's power to educate when Kafka's suggestion, like the gatekeeper's, is that they should have been looking elsewhere in the first place. The gatekeeper, "um sein vergehendes Gehör noch zu erreichen, brüllt er ihn an"⁴ ("to reach his [the man's] diminishing sense of hearing, yells at him" [translation mine]). Kafka could not be more obvious: this man can no longer see or hear; he is literally senseless, and in this state endures a complete undoing of his efforts.

³ André Jolles, "Joke," in *Simple Forms*, translated by Peter J. Schwartz (New York: Verso, 2017), 209.

⁴ Kafka, 146.

Author Commentary

Owen Ayers

The Department of Comparative Literature's first piece of junior independent work is a 4000-word close reading rather than a longer comparative project, so I knew that I wanted to thoroughly examine a very short piece of fiction. I ended up selecting a well-known piece by Franz Kafka, "Vor dem Gesetz" ("Before the Law"). While it's interesting in its own right, I admit to having chosen it in part because it reminded me of Hemingway's shorter works, and it left me with the same question that "Indian Camp" and "Cat in the Rain" did: How does he create so much interest with so few words?

My paper's original motive—the relationship between form and function—remains in the title, but my approach to that question was modulated by the writing process itself. My argument about genre ultimately stemmed from the banal issue of whether I should refer to the piece as a short story. The label "short story" indicates a work of fiction shorter than a novel or novella, yet its use is descriptive and generic. Parables, fables, and anecdotes are just a few examples of works that are short and have a narrative element, yet all of those names produce different expectations for the reader. André Jolles's work on subtypes of short fiction provided a scholarly lens with which I could study "Vor dem Gesetz" as a joke, riddle, and parable.

One challenge I encountered was how to engage with Jolles. A purely prescriptive approach would take Jolles's definitions for granted and simply assign Kafka's piece to one category or another, as if evaluating it with a rubric. Another option would be to problematize Jolles's categories, but this would take one far afield into literary theory at the risk of letting Kafka fall by the wayside. In the end, I found that the best approach was to use Jolles's conceptions as a framework for my own analysis with the conclusion that the ways in which "Vor dem Gesetz" violates canonical genre boundaries are what make it exciting to read.

Committing to this methodology largely determined the structure of my essay. Each discovery of an incompatibility between Jolles and Kafka would set up the next part of my argument about a different genre subtype. One such transition occurs just before the beginning of this excerpt, in which I am discussing David Foster Wallace's essay on humor in Kafka's work. Certain early plot points of "Vor dem Gesetz" may be analogized with a joke's "set-up." However, Kafka's subversion of the expectation for the joke's inevitable "punch line" thwarts the reader and gives the piece its memorable character. This passage integrates the canonical position of Jolles, the modern commentary of Wallace, and my own close reading using the concept of specific short fiction categories as analytic signposts.

Editor Commentary

Tess Solomon

In his junior paper, Owen investigates the genre of Kafka's "Vor dem Gesetz." This story, in which a man tries to gain entrance to "the law" through an open gate only to be denied entrance by the gatekeeper, defies easy characterization. Having considered it both as a parable and as a riddle, Owen now examines the short story as a joke.

In the paragraphs excerpted here, he seamlessly weaves in Wallace's opinion of Kafka, as well as Jolles's "canonical" definition of a joke, in order to explain how the text inverts the definition of a joke: "The story is indeed funny," he explains, "But the reader isn't necessarily the person laughing." Especially admirable is the way he puts Wallace and Jolles in conversation with each other. Jolles believes jokes must undo an "inadequate structure." Using Wallace's interpretation that the man is looking for what he desires in the wrong place, Owen finds Jolles' overturning of an "inadequate structure" manifest.

Throughout the paper but especially in this excerpt, Owen investigates the definitions of the genres he discusses, defining and complicating them in a masterful weaving together of primary text and critical lenses. The first writing seminar assignment, which asks students to use a lens to examine a source, becomes here a sophisticated combination of close reading and genre analysis. The author's structure arises naturally from his use of the key words "parable," "riddle," and "joke." Although Owen's key terms create a means with which to analyze the story, his argument eventually ends up like the story itself—raising more questions than it answers.

Owen also demonstrates a grasp of effective close reading, fitting in with this year's theme of "Up Close and Pedagogical." His selection of passages from Kafka's two-page story helps to illustrate his analysis of the whole work. He uses sentences we might have easily glossed over to teach a reader what we expect of genres, and what indicates genre to us in the first place. Ultimately, he shows that although it has a simple narration, Kafka's "Vor dem Gesetz" nods to a variety of genres even as it complicates them.

Professor Commentary

Daniel Heller-Roazen, Department of Comparative Literature

After a semester of concentrated work of reading and thinking, Owen wrote a very successful first junior paper. It was clearly conceived and lucidly argued, and it benefited at each step from Owen's sensitive reading of the primary text and secondary works, in German as well as English. Focusing on a major text of modern literature, Kafka's "Before the Law," Owen tackled the difficult yet important question of the sense and structure of Kafka's shorter prose compositions. The question of genre is crucial here: Before what kind of text, the paper asks, does the reader of "Before the Law" stand? Drawing above all on André Jolles' theory of "small forms," Owen considers some of the defining features of the parable and the riddle, before concluding that it is the joke that furnishes a key to an understanding Kafka's text.

Works Cited

Jolles, André. "Joke." In *Simple Forms*, 201-212. Translated by Peter J. Schwartz. New York: Verso, 2017.

Kafka, Franz. "Vor dem Gesetz." In *Erzählungen und und kleine Prosa*, 144-146. Berlin: Schocken, 1935.

Wallace, David Foster. "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed." In *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, 60-65. Little, Brown, 2005.

Bios

Owen Ayers '19 is a pre-med senior from Richmond, Virginia, who is pursuing a concentration in Comparative Literature (French, German, and Italian) and a certificate in Cognitive Science. His humanities research interests pertain to the influence of genre on the consumption of written information, usually within the context of history and philosophy of science. He wrote this essay as a junior.

Tess Solomon '21 is a prospective English major from New York City pursuing a certificate in German studies. She is a Writing Center Fellow, a managing editor at the *Nassau Weekly*, a prose reader for the *Nassau Literary Review*, as well as an engagement intern for the Center for Jewish Life. She wrote this as a sophomore.