

Franz Kafka's *Amerika*: The Amerikan Dream

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Forty million people, a number that today would account for roughly fifteen percent of the United States population, immigrated to America in this past century alone. While many people came to America to seek sanctuary from religious, political, or ethnic persecution, the great majority of those forty million decided to leave their homes either to escape poverty or to achieve economic success. Inspired by the often exaggerated rags-to-riches stories, immigrants would cross the Pacific and Atlantic waters to pursue the American dream. Most foreigners believed that opportunities abounded in this land of freedom and that anyone who maintained a solid work ethic would encounter financial glory. Franz Kafka's conception of America differed, however, and this German-speaking Czech Jewish author reflected this opinion in his book *Amerika*.

Although Kafka never visited America, he crossed over to the land of red, white, and blue through a portal of secondary sources. "Kafka read American travel books, attended lectures, collected printed materials, and spoke with returning emigrants," E. L. Doctorow explains in the Foreword of *Amerika*, "all for the purpose of writing a realistic novel authenticated with 'up-to-date' American detail" (Doctorow ix). Kafka's first novel, though unfinished, traces the struggles of sixteen-year-old immigrant Karl Rossmann as he journeys through unknown territory in order to follow his American dream. Rather than mirroring the popularly glorified versions of America in his novel, Kafka criticizes America's flaws. In fact, Kafka originally named his work "The Man Who Disappeared" ("Der Verschollene"), but after his death, Max Brod, who assembled and published the manuscript, changed the title to *Amerika*. His original title leans more toward a criticism of America rather than a glorious achievement of the American dream as it suggests a pessimistic fate for his young hero. In *Amerika*, Franz Kafka indeed satirizes American ideals by absurdly portraying this land of opportunity and by tracing Karl Rossmann's ironic fate as he struggles to attain the American dream.

Through his portrayal of America, Kafka shatters the idealistic conception of this land of freedom and instead conceives an image of America as a frightful land filled with myriad social ills. Kafka's first paragraph sets the stage for his impending criticism:

As Karl Rossmann, a poor boy of sixteen who had been packed off to America by his parents because a servant girl had seduced him and got herself a child by him, stood on the liner slowly entering the harbour of New York, a sudden burst of sunshine seemed to illumine the Statue of Liberty, so that he saw it in a new light, although he had sighted it long before. The arm with the sword rose up as if newly stretched aloft, and round the figure blew the free winds of heaven (Kafka 3).

Kafka's description of a Statue of Liberty that holds a sword rather than a torch leaps out as the most striking part of the opening paragraph. Controversy arises as to whether the factual error serves an intentional, symbolic purpose or whether it exists merely because of an unintentional misinterpretation of "contemporary photographs taken from a considerable distance and blurring all details" (Spann 76). Regardless of the intentionality of the mistake, however, the fact remains that Kafka consciously chooses to place a sword rather than anything else in Lady Liberty's hand. On one level, the absurdity of Kafka's portrayal of the statue complements the absurdity of Karl Rossmann's initial situation—being banished to America because his sexual promiscuity had shamed his family's honor. This connection reveals an inauspicious beginning for Kafka's young hero in an imperfect America. Meno Spann even writes, "The very first sentence, long, rhythmically beautiful, saying and implying much, makes it clear that this America will not be the land of red and white" (Spann 76-77). Thus, through his ridiculous depiction of the statue, Kafka clarifies for his reader at the very beginning the distinction between his conception of America and any other glamorized version that may have reached European ears. On another level, the choice of the sword signifies that Kafka believes liberty to be more akin to a double-edged weapon that can cause both good and harm, that can be both capitalized upon and abused, rather than the guiding light of a torch. This symbolism prepares *Amerika's* atmosphere and introduces a land of liberty in which freedom will certainly do as much, if not more, damage than

good to Karl. Kafka's opening paragraph furthermore provides a gloomy criticism of America that construes liberty as a false apparition. Since the true Statue of Liberty does not exist in Kafka's *Amerika*, perhaps he believes that true liberty does not exist in the actual America—a land glorified and advertised to be free.

Kafka continues his satire of America through his depiction of New York, the location upon which Karl Rossman first embarks from his ship. Several factual inconsistencies arise in Kafka's portrayal of New York, beginning with the notion that no ship berths exist in the port; after Karl debarks from the ship, sailors must row him in a boat to shore. His uncle holds the title of "Senator" but has no role in government; instead the title seems to signify a rank such as Count or Baron. Police towers look down upon the highways of New York, and the homes that Karl visits are like labyrinthine castles. As the translator of Kafka's novel, Edwin Muir, writes, "*Amerika...* shifts uneasily between the metaphysical and the actual, and... while its scene is a fantastic version of the United States, it occasionally crosses to a province which is not of the actual world at all" (Muir 237). All of these factual inconsistencies mock the reality of America in a comedic fashion and also suggest a possible presumptuous arrogance on the part of Kafka. Most likely unintentional, these mistakes imply that Kafka did not think America to be important enough for him to thoroughly research the validity of his assumptions, reflecting a condescending attitude toward America and the ideals for which it stands.

To a certain degree, by creating his own conception of America, Kafka takes the role of master and creator, producing for himself a feeling of power and superiority over the supposed land of freedom. This sense of superiority enables Kafka to criticize the capitalist and industrialized America through his description of the streets of New York. He writes,

From morning to evening and far into the dreaming night that street was the channel for a constant stream of traffic which, seen from above, looked like an inextricable confusion, for ever newly improvised, of foreshortened human figures and the roofs of all kinds of vehicles, sending into the upper air another confusion, more riotous and complicated, of

noises, dust and smells, all of it enveloped and penetrated by a flood of light which the multitudinous objects in the street scattered, carried off and again busily brought back, with an effect as palpable to the dazzled eye as if a glass roof stretched over the street were being violently smashed into fragments at every moment (Kafka 39).

The “confusion” that Kafka explicitly mentions is further revealed implicitly through his heavy incorporation of sensual imagery, ranging from the cacophony of human and car noises to the visual scattering of sunlight to the clash of smells, all of which introduce a bustling and industrious atmosphere into Kafka’s world. The complex syntax of this lengthy sentence, with its prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses, engenders a sense of confusion in the reader’s mind that parallels the confusion that Karl experiences when staring down at the city from his uncle’s house. Austin Warren points out that “Kafka’s imagined America is not a land of broad cornfields shining in the sun but a chiefly metropolitan affair, already stratified, weary, and hopeless—a land of hotels and slums” (Warren 123). Any sense of individualism, of the individual achieving the American dream, becomes lost in the midst of this fast-paced America. Karl, as a “lost sheep” (Kafka 39) in the crowd, lacks any individual importance. Thus, Kafka criticizes America’s paradox: in this land of opportunity, in which popular rags-to-riches stories extol the individual for his work ethic and economic success, anyone else who does not achieve financial glory loses any sense of individualism and becomes merely another cog in the larger machine.

Kafka further extends his critique of American ideals to a burlesque of American politics. He describes a political campaign rally that arouses Karl’s excitement and incites him to watch from an apartment balcony:

Down below the main body of the procession had now come into sight behind the band. On the shoulders of a gigantic man sat a gentleman of whom nothing could be seen at this height save the faint gleam of a bald crown... [T]he whole breadth of the street... was filled with the gentleman’s supporters, who clapped their hands in rhythm and kept proclaiming in a chanting cadence what seemed to be the gentleman’s... short but incomprehensible name. Single supporters... were carrying motor-car lamps of enormous power, which they slowly shone up and down the houses on both sides of the street.... On

the balconies where supporters of the candidate were packed, the people joined in chanting his name, stretching their hands far over the railings and clapping with machine-like regularity. On the opposition balconies... a howl of retaliation arose.... All the enemies of the... candidate united in a general cat-calling.... Here and there unrecognisable objects were being flung by particularly heated partisans... into the street, where they provoked yells of rage (Kafka 248-251).

What begins as an orderly parade with the purpose of increasing popular support for a candidate hoping to be elected as district judge degenerates into a barbaric yawping match among political rivals. As the confusion exemplified by Kafka's description of New York's industrialized atmosphere transfers to this representation of a highly charged political rally, so too does his faultfinding commentary on America. Somewhat hyperbolic in nature, this passage in Kafka's satiric writing even infuses into the verbal nature of contemporary political mudslinging the physical aspect of throwing objects at the candidate and his supporters. In doing so, Kafka manifests America's political savagery and its lack of a civilized political system. "Kafka would seem to equate democracy with mob life, ... giv[ing] intimation of the madness if not the barbarism, of all culture," argues Doctorow. "[T]his is an American political rally seen, so to speak, from a European balcony" (Doctorow xvi). Moreover, Kafka amplifies his conception of the foolishness of Americans by later mentioning the "round of free drinks" (Kafka 253) that the candidate distributes to the already lively crowd as he delivers his speech. As one can imagine, a drunken electorate holding a mob mentality will be influenced more by the alcohol than the candidate's political platform. Kafka's portrayal of the political rally thus makes a bitter farce of American democracy; true democracy based on merits cannot exist in his *Amerika*.

The portrayal of certain aspects of America serves as only one of the two mechanisms that Kafka utilizes to disparage this nation of immigrants; the helplessness that Karl Rossman experiences on his road toward the American dream serves as the other. Each time that Karl endeavors to climb up the social ladder or to assist his fellow companions, society negates his will and perverts his intentions, thereby making his own circumstances even worse than before.

Doctorow points out, “No matter where Karl’s adventures take him a certain social order prevails that... subjects him to the demands and desires of others... [T]he hero’s mind... is not limited by intelligence; it is limited by the circumstances in which it finds itself” (Doctorow xii-xiii). In this way, Karl’s downhill efforts to secure the American dream supplement Kafka’s descriptive satire of this land of mythical freedom.

Kafka makes a mockery of the American judicial system in the first troubling incident that Karl faces in his adventures, one that occurs at the arrival of his ship to New York. While searching for his forgotten umbrella, he encounters the ship’s stoker who, after inviting Karl into his room, complains to him about Schubal, his Romanian superior, who mistreats and “bullies him” (Kafka 14) simply because of his German ethnicity. Convinced of the stoker’s innocence, Karl brings the stoker’s case to the officers of the ship. The officers’ room symbolically represents an American judicial court in which Karl plays the role of a lawyer defending his client, the nameless stoker, from Schubal’s anti-German discrimination. This metaphor combined with the stoker’s lack of a name creates a universal scenario that broadens Kafka’s target of criticism from the single marine trial to the entire American justice system. Like K. in *The Trial*, Karl does not receive solid evidence that would either prove or disprove the stoker’s innocence; instead, the officers’ merely throw accusations at the stoker, calling him “a notorious gambler” full of “impudence in demanding things to which... [he has] no right” and who “spends more time in the pay-room than in the engine-room” (Kafka 15). Despite Karl’s “worldly experience” and “exemplary composure” (Kafka 15) during his arguments, the situation quickly devolves into a perversion of justice, one that metaphorically extends to the rest of America’s judicial system as part of Kafka’s satire of American ideals. This situation would not be complete without its kafkaesque quality, however, for one of the gentleman in the room introduces himself as Karl’s uncle, Senator Jacob. At this point, Karl—enticed by the possible

opportunities that he could receive with this newly found connection— leaves with Uncle Jacob, and any previous notion of securing justice for the stoker and of protecting the stoker's rights become immaterial and neglected. Erich Heller points out, "If [the stoker] is not guilty, it is more likely, to judge by the surrounding circumstances and the removal from the scene of his enthusiastic advocate, young Karl Rossmann, that 'justice' will not be done" (Heller 17). And so, American justice perishes to a desire for personal gain.

Karl's subsequent dealings with Uncle Jacob manifest Kafka's intention to debunk the meritocratic facade of American society. His fortuitous encounter with his uncle seemingly secures for Karl "a brilliant career... against all... previous expectations" (Kafka 24) such that he would never have "to learn by hard experience, which so much embitters one's first acquaintance with foreign countries" (Kafka 38). Karl lavishes the luxuries that his rich uncle provides, a balcony view, a mechanical writing desk, a piano, a room-sized bathtub, personal English lessons, and horseback riding lessons. Kafka's blatant exaggeration of Karl's rags-to-riches story points out the non-existent meritocratic foundation of American capitalism. Never does Karl show a reason why he would deserve his fortune, whereas even successful figures like Andrew Carnegie had to climb their way up the social ladder before obtaining wealth and fame. Ironically, Karl meets a twisted fate when his socio-economic condition plummets as quickly as it has improved. Karl makes the mistake of visiting the home of one of his uncle's business associates against his uncle's will, and in doing so, misses an English and a riding lesson. This seemingly insignificant offense turns out to be his uncle's ground for dismissing Karl from his life. Without even saying a personal goodbye, Uncle Jacob sends Karl a note: "Against my wishes you decided this evening to leave me; stick then to that decision all your life" (Kafka 94-95). Because of two missed lessons, Karl loses everything except his original trunk of clothing. Karl's socio-economic downfall represents Kafka's disbelief at the American rags-to-riches

stories. It further adds another level of criticism to the notion of American justice, for Karl receives an excessive punishment for such a small transgression against his uncle's desires.

Left alone to wander in the American wilderness, Karl joins the company of two individuals, Delamarche and Robinson, and he could not have made a worse decision. These two rascals exemplify the opportunist Americans who exploit the ignorant and the foreigners. When they help Karl to sell his suit, they keep "a disgustingly big profit" (Kafka 107) for themselves and give Karl a mere half dollar. After a meal, when the waitress asks the three who would pay the bill, "never did hands shoot out more quickly than those of Delamarche and Robinson as they pointed at Karl" (Kafka 115). When Karl asks his two friends to watch his trunk while he gets food, he comes back to find his box "standing wide open and half its contents scattered about on the grass" (Kafka 125). Karl's chances of achieving his American dream become unviable in light of Delamarche and Robinson's exploitation of his loyalty and friendship at every opportunity. Karl can procure a better quality of life if he leaves their company, and he does so, at least temporarily. Just when Karl seems to have secured a sound livelihood as an elevator boy, Robinson appears at his workplace, drunk and "awfully sick" (Kafka 164). Karl, who has an otherwise exemplary work ethic, misses a shift in order to take Robinson home to Delamarche and ironically, as can be expected in Kafka's novels, gets fired for helping a person he still calls his friend. His two companions epitomize the meaning of bad luck and, more importantly, they serve an important function in Kafka's criticism of American ideals. In a capitalist American society dominated by the theory of social Darwinism, only the fittest exploiters and opportunists can survive and attain the American dream; thus, Kafka makes the American dream an elitist concept. Unwitting and innocent individuals like Karl Rossman, always hoping to please the desires of their so-called friends, neglect their own well-being for the welfare of their friends and become "totally engaged, moment by moment, in analyzing and evaluating [their] choices in the

face of the expectations or demands of others” (Doctorow xiii). Hence, Karl becomes utilized as a means to others’ ends. His own naiveté may be to blame, but in Kafka’s broader perspective, Karl exemplifies the victims of the systemic injustices of capitalism that deeply pervade American society.

His livelihood lost, his social niche unfound, and his individuality skeptical, Karl lacks an auspicious future. In his disillusioned state, he reads a billboard that offers the promise of a brighter tomorrow, that finally seems to open the path for his American dream:

The Oklahoma Theatre will engage members for its company today at Clayton race-course from six o’clock in the morning until midnight. The great Theatre of Oklahoma calls you! If you miss your chance now you miss it for ever! If you think of your future you are one us! Everyone is welcome!... Our Theatre can find employment for everyone, a place for everyone (Kafka 272)!

The words “[e]veryone is welcome” provides the primary incentive for Karl to capitalize on this opportunity. After facing rejection by his immediate family in Europe, by his Uncle Jacob, by Delamarche and Robinson, and by various other minor characters, Karl feels an affinity toward the Theatre of Oklahoma’s invitation to join its surrogate family, a family that does not judge who he was or who he is. Karl arrives at Clayton by train, and at the racetrack entrance gather hundreds of women, standing on pedestals, “dressed as angels in white robes with great wings on their shoulders... blowing on long trumpets that glittered like gold” (Kafka 274) to greet him.

Of course, a utopia would be too grand a finale for the young hero of Kafka’s satiric work. Karl falls prey to another flaw of America: false advertising and fairy tale promises. Karl undergoes several interviews, but the interviewers at each booth keep relegating him to the next window because of his lack of a college education and other qualifications, until he finally arrives at the window for European school students, which accepts him unquestioningly. The fact that the European booth accepts the rejects from all the other American booths represents Kafka’s portrayal of the Americans’ haughty belief that European schools are the lowest of the

low. Before this unfinished chapter ends and before Karl leaves for Oklahoma, however, the clerk asks Karl for his name, and Karl answers “Negro.” The book thus ends on a kafkaesque note of ambiguity. Perhaps, Kafka wanted to use the name “Negro” to symbolize Karl’s previous slave-like conditions and to contrast those conditions with the future freedom he would find in the Oklahoma Theatre. Or perhaps, more likely, Kafka intended to foreshadow the conditions of Karl’s employment at the Oklahoma Theatre as akin to slavery and even worse than his past situations; perhaps, in the unfinished segments left to be developed in Kafka’s mind, Karl would become “The Man Who Disappeared” and become a cog in another machine, lacking all sense of individuality in this land where people supposedly attain the American dream and where people supposedly achieve a sense of their own identity. Doctorow captures this notion of ambiguity, writing, “This is the moment when our confident American exceptionalism may be shaken, the moment when we find that dark glittering-eyed, sad-smiling face of Franz Kafka reading with us, right over our shoulder, his story after all, telling of a kind of slavery” (Doctorow xvii). Unfortunately, we will never know Kafka’s true plans for Karl’s final fate. Regardless of the interpretation, however, the fact that Kafka comments on slavery because of his use of the word “Negro” cannot be denied.

In his novel, Kafka certainly questions why forty million people, in their right mind, would choose to immigrate to America. The price of being mistreated by American justice, of losing one’s identity, and of falling prey to American opportunists would appear to outweigh any potential benefits of the American dream, of searching for the elusive economic success that everyone desire. After all, Karl has gained nothing since his entry into New York harbor except for the exhilaration of his adventures and having lost his trunk, possesses merely the clothing on his back at the end of the book. Doctorow even points out that “while [Karl] has learned English well enough, in pursuing his intention to make something of himself, he knows no more at the

end, on his way to Oklahoma, than he did at the beginning, getting off his boat” (Doctorow xiii).

Clearly, Kafka satires all that is American in his book *Amerika*. In a world where most people decided to leave Europe for the glories of America, Kafka decided to be different.

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