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Explication: An Imperial Message

The short story “An Imperial Message” by Franz Kafka is about the desire to know. The story begins by introducing a character of a humble subject that is referred as “you”. Then the speaker creates an image of an emperor on his deathbed trying to convey an extremely important message through a messenger. After receiving the message from the emperor, the messenger is tasked to spread the message. This marks the start of an endless journey. The messenger tries his hardest, but the numbers are against him. He has an infinite number of boundaries to cross from the inner palace to the outermost gate. Additionally, if he can do that he will only reach the imperial capital. Finally, the messenger will never be able to leave this place even if he has a message from the emperor. And while all this is happening the speaker suggest that the character “you” is waiting for this message while dreaming.

The story has a lot of subtle symbolism represented by imagery that adds to the general idea of the story. In the starting Kafka introduces a character by using the terms insignificant shadow remotest from the imperial sun (Kafka). This imagery signifies that the shadow casted by this specific character is inconsequential and creates an ambiguity that a reason for this could be the distance from the light source “Sun”. However, the term “imperial sun” could also suggest the center of the kingdom. As, comparing the location to the Sun, creates an assertion of a heliocentric idea where the power is at the center like our solar system and further comparing the size of the kingdom to our solar system. Meaning another reason for the insignificance could be distance from the capital of the kingdom. The speaker then introduces another character in the form of a messenger who is a powerful and an indefatigable man (Kafka). While further in the story the speaker gives a clear imagery of how many boundaries he must cross suggesting how repetitive and relentless the task of imparting knowledge to someone can be. This whole ordeal created by Kafka also shows how a person when tasked with something can keep on perform the same task even though the result of that task will not matter in the end. We see this depiction with the messenger and how he is tasked with an impossible task and never stops. This idea of being given a task and never questioning the ideas behind the task shows how Kafka represents a single functioning mind.

Another important component of this story is the presence of ambiguity and the artificial sense of ambiguity that Kafka creates. In the first line of the story the speaker suggests that this story is in a form of a parable using the phrase “so a parable runs”. This phase leads the reader to assume that the speaker is trying to impart a hidden meaning. Concurrently the presence of a character referred as “you” is a wonderfully used relation, as it gives a sense of ambiguity to who the actual “you” is and some readers might confuse this as a direct reference from Kafka to the readers. Kafka also leaves a lot ambiguity with what exactly was the message, which leads the readers to create their own assumptions on why a king would use a messenger to deliver this message and why would the king choose to impart the message to the insignificant character.

Kafka writes this story in a liner progression, where a dying emperor has sent a message to a character using his messenger and the “you” waits for this message. Kafka also clearly show that the origination of the message on a deathbed is a symbolic representation of ideas being passed down during death and how the important ideas are conveyed. This simple idea from Kafka shows how a message gains its importance from where it originates and that the messenger could be a symbol representation of a medium in which ideas are conveyed. While the character “you” is eagerly in wait of something that will never happen further showing a layer of idea that the longing to receive a message from the king can be a representation of our hunger of knowledge and how that character will wait to understand something even when the idea is unachievable. Ultimately, general theme that Kafka creates in this story is of ways to communicate which he represents through the messenger and relentlessness desire to know which he concurrently represents which the character “you”.