The Village Schoolmaster

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANZ KAFKA

The son of a prosperous Jewish retail merchant, Franz Kafka received the classical education typical of a middle-class child in Prague, complete with training in Latin and Greek. He studied law at university before working in local insurance firms—a profession which was stable but not at all to his taste. His real calling, he felt, was literature, an ambition which placed considerable strain on his relationship with his domineering father. He spent a great deal of his time writing, and he published his first book of short stories, *Contemplation*, in 1912 at age 30. This was soon followed by *The Trial* in 1914—the surreal drama of a legal system gone wrong—and *The Metamorphosis* in 1915—likely his best-known work, in which a man spontaneously transforms into an insect. By 1917, Kafka was suffering from the tuberculosis that would eventually claim his life. He spent his remaining seven years in and out of sanitariums. Much of his work—including *The Castle* (1926) and many short stories—appeared only posthumously, and in varying states of completion. His fixation on nightmarish scenarios and human powerlessness, his insight into the mind, and his combination of surreal elements with dry realism created some of the most memorable psychological portraits of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kafka drafted "The Village Schoolmaster" in December of 1914, right at the onset of World War I. At the time, Kafka's hometown of Prague belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire; by the time hostilities broke out between the Empire and its Allied aggressors, the city certainly felt effects of the awakening unrest (via censorship of newspapers and mail, for instance) even if no hostilities took place on its soil. Though Hitler's rise to power would be a long time in the future, German-speaking Jews, like Kafka's family, also lived as alienated minorities in the dominantly Christian and Czech-speaking Prague. Another important historical consideration for Kafka's work is industrialization. Though the so-called "Industrial Revolution" really boomed near the close of the 19th century, Kafka wrote "The Village Schoolmaster" at a time when the aftereffects of such industrialization were being felt particularly strongly. Writers during the Modernist period (roughly 1910-1950) responded to the alienating social effects of modern technological life—manifest, for instance, in the increased use of the telegraph and telephone, the expanding railway system, and rapidly changing transport—as well as the increasing commercialization of society; Kafka's work, though sometimes vague in its social attitudes, was no exception.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kafka is known to have admired the psychological realism of earlier authors such as the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Crime and Punishment*, 1866) and the French writer Gustav Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*, 1856). Among writers of his own day, the intensely cerebral prose of "The Village Schoolmaster" bears an affinity with that of Robert Walser, the Swiss novelist who produced snappy psychological meditations in his short stories and his novella *Jakob von Gunten* (1909). Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and *Steppenwolf* (1927) can be grouped with Kafka's short stories as well, not just as contemporaneous works of German literature but also as explorations into the differences between the "real" world and the psychological reality of the mind. Kafka's own novels and stories, such as *The Castle* (1926), *The Trial* (1914), and his best-known work, *The Metamorphosis* (1915), all share with "The Village Schoolmaster" an obsession with social alienation and confusion. This obsession, so essential to Kafka's work, has led in part to his classification with the major international writers of what's called the Modernist era (roughly 1910-1950). These writers include T. S. Eliot, whose poem *The Waste Land* (1922) laments the loss of social connections in modern society, and Samuel Beckett, whose play *Waiting for Godot* (1948) would memorably encapsulate the desperation, futility, and sense of thwarted hope that had so gripped Kafka.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Village Schoolmaster
- **When Written:** 1914-1915
- **Where Written:** Prague, Czech Republic
- **When Published:** 1931 (translated into English in 1933)
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** An anonymous provincial village
- **Climax:** After years of failed collaboration, the narrator and the schoolmaster have an argument on Christmas Day and part ways.
- **Antagonist:** Though there is no traditional antagonist in the story, both the narrator and schoolmaster struggle with their obsessions and, ultimately, with each other.
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Incompletion. "The Village Schoolmaster" is an incomplete

work. As far as people know, Kafka wrote the current draft in one night, on December 16, 1914, and abandoned it the following January.

Last wishes. Kafka published several books and stories in his lifetime, but by the time of his death much of the work for which he is now best known, including "The Village Schoolmaster," existed only as unpublished manuscripts. His last wish was that these papers be burned; after Kafka's death, however, his literary executor infamously disobeyed this order and began publishing it all.

PLOT SUMMARY

Several years before the beginning of this story, the narrator says, a giant **mole** appeared in a remote provincial village. The mole briefly attracted the attention of some locals at the time, and even some visitors from the surrounding area, but most people soon lost interest. The one man who did not was the elderly schoolmaster of the village, who took it upon himself to prove the mole's existence to the wider scientific community. He published **pamphlets** and met with a scholar to drum up awareness of the mole, but his efforts were routinely ignored or derided.

Meanwhile, the narrator, living in a nearby city, has heard of the schoolmaster's struggle and takes pity on him. He finds the schoolmaster's rejection by the scholarly community to be unfair and makes it his mission to help the schoolmaster's cause. The first step, the narrator decides, is to publish a pamphlet of his own that will defend the schoolmaster's credibility. But the only attention the narrator seems to arouse is that of the schoolmaster, who becomes distracted by the appearance of an intervener in the mole episode and starts to grow suspicious of the narrator's intentions—believing that the narrator wants to take credit for the mole's discovery.

The schoolmaster's jealousy deepens over the years, even as the men end up meeting each other on several occasions and trying to collaborate. Instead of collaborating, however, the schoolmaster spends his time complaining about the lack of public interest in the mole and blaming the narrator for his failed efforts to help. Simultaneously, the narrator describes the slow shift in his own interests: from a philanthropic urge to support the helpless teacher, toward an interest in the actual mole itself. He starts investigating the original appearance of the mole—interviewing witnesses and gathering so-called "evidence." This shift in the narrator's interest is viewed by the schoolmaster as a transgression on his territory. The schoolmaster's jealousy deepens and his accusations grow more personal.

As an undisclosed number of years and pamphlets go by, the public still proves uninterested in the mole. The narrator reaches his breaking point when a jeer at the men's efforts appears in the obscure back pages of an agricultural journal. The narrator decides to wash his hands of the affair and tries to recall all the copies of his pamphlet he had sent to various scholars. Just as the copies start to arrive, the schoolmaster comes to visit him in town over Christmas. Immediately, the schoolmaster launches into a diatribe on the agricultural journal's notice, and an argument erupts between the two men.

In this argument, the men reveal the motives that have pushed them all along. The schoolmaster describes, in minute detail, the great fame and fortune that he hoped to achieve from his scientific discovery. The narrator, incredulous at the schoolmaster's delusion, tries to talk some sense into him by positing a more realistic hypothetical outcome: the schoolmaster might have been recognized locally, but his discovery would have been absorbed into the broader scientific community and would cease to belong to him. In describing this possible outcome, the narrator reveals that his own motives for becoming involved with the mole episode—while once thought to be philanthropic in nature—have actually been unclear to him all along. The men conclude at a standoff; though the narrator plans to turn out the schoolmaster then and there, he cannot bring himself to do so.

CHARACTERS

The Schoolmaster – The elderly headmaster of the small, unnamed village school, and one of the story's two protagonists. The story revolves around his interest in an abnormally large **mole** that once appeared in his village, and whose appearance he takes as an opportunity to earn notoriety and wealth. He tries to cash in by publishing a small **pamphlet** about the mole's existence, by selling the pamphlet to tourists, and by trying to catch the interest of the scientific community. When everyone ignores him, however, he grows bitter and inordinately obsessed with the mole, claiming that only he understands its true significance and spending years trying to make the subject relevant. The bulk of the plot has to do with his misunderstanding and resentment of the narrator's attempts to help him bring the mole to wider public attention. By the end of the story, when he reveals the absurd level of fame he had hoped to achieve by writing about the mole, it seems that his years of obsession have made him delusional. Kafka withholds the schoolmaster's name and almost all biographical information, apart from the fact that he is poor and struggles to support his wife and children. The schoolmaster comes across opportunistic and stubborn, but also not without dignity and a sense of dedication that the narrator finds admirable.

The Narrator – The anonymous narrator, whose probing reflections, psychological analysis, and hindsight characterize Kafka's story. The story offers few biographical details about

the narrator, beyond the fact that he is a businessman who lives in an unnamed city not too far from to the schoolmaster's village. After hearing of the schoolmaster's ill treatment by a scholar, the narrator decides to help the man in his quest to raise awareness among the scientific community of the existence of a freakishly large **mole**. The narrator is precise and thorough both in his assessment of the schoolmaster's psychology and of his own efforts to help. But these qualities ironically sabotage those very efforts: the narrator's thoroughness leads him to over-investigate the mole's appearance, leading to the schoolmaster's fierce jealousy. What's more, in his wish to remain unbiased by initially refraining from contacting the schoolmaster or reading his **pamphlet**, the narrator only breeds confusion and misunderstanding between himself and the older man. Alongside his brief account of the falling-out between them, the narrator conjectures about and describes in detail their varying motives for getting involved with the mole case. The narrator also recounts a strange mixture of his growing obsession with the case and his deepening disillusionment with the schoolmaster himself. By the end of the story, after an undisclosed amount of time, the narrator gives up on his efforts; he requests that all copies of his own pamphlet be returned, and has completely lost sight of his original motives.

The Scholar – With difficulty, the schoolmaster secures a meeting with the unnamed scholar in hopes of raising awareness about the existence of the **mole**. The scholar dismisses the schoolmaster's fixation on the mole, however, jokingly explaining away its supposed size as the result of good soil. The scholar's insulting treatment of the schoolmaster later prompts the intervention of the narrator in the mole affair, after the schoolmaster writes of the affront. The scholar only appears briefly in the story, but is nevertheless a significant character; he symbolizes academia and the scientific community at large, a community whose attention the schoolmaster desperately wishes to catch. His curt dismissal of the schoolmaster, therefore, represents the schoolmaster's broader failure to attract the respect and attention he craves.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

OBSESSION AND DESIRE

Although Franz Kafka's short story "The Village Schoolmaster" is often subtitled "The Giant Mole," the titular oversized **mole**, whose appearance briefly catches the attention of a small village, never actually appears in the story. Instead Kafka focuses on a provincial schoolmaster's mission to prove the existence of the abnormal creature—and the narrator's deepening obsession with proving the schoolmaster's credibility. As both men spiral into obsession over the mole episode—an episode that the villagers have already forgotten—Kafka gradually indicates that neither man cares much about the mole at all; the teacher obsesses over his own hopes and dreams, while the narrator's object of obsession is left ambiguous. In artfully swapping the mole for messy psychological motives, Kafka suggests that the desires fueling obsession are never as straightforward as they seem.

While the story, at first, seems to revolve around the mole, Kafka indicates that the animal itself is less important than the psychological drama it inspires. One indication that the mole itself isn't very important is the speed with which everyone else in the small village forgets the whole episode. This suggests that the mole might be justifiably forgettable, and it makes the schoolmaster seem odd and eccentric for clinging to the story. Furthermore, as the story progresses, Kafka reduces the mole's importance by suggesting that the schoolmaster's obsession isn't actually about the mole. The story ends in an argument between teacher and narrator, in which the schoolmaster reveals his elaborate vision of becoming wealthy and famous for his discovery of the mole. The mole itself hardly comes up—it's clear that the mole was never as important to the schoolmaster as his vision of what writing about the mole might bring. It's especially clear that the mole is somewhat irrelevant when Kafka reveals that the schoolmaster has never seen the creature firsthand. The mole—ostensibly the object of the schoolmaster's obsession—might not even exist, which suggests that the mole was always just a vehicle for his unrelated obsessions.

Just as the schoolmaster's obsession isn't actually with the mole, Kafka shows that the narrator's obsession with the schoolmaster is not what it seems. Near the beginning of the story, the narrator describes a scholar cruelly dismissing the schoolmaster's claim about the giant mole. This episode, the narrator says, inspired him to research the giant mole in order to write a defense of the schoolmaster's credibility. However, the narrator's obsession with vindicating the schoolmaster is, from the beginning, strange. After all, the narrator seems to find the whole episode unimportant. He calls the schoolmaster "honest but uninfluential," and he describes the mole episode with belittling language: "trivial," "small," "transient," and even "tiny little." This suggests that even the narrator himself finds the incident unworthy of attention, which makes his own obsession with it mysterious. Furthermore, while the narrator claims that his goal is to vouch for the schoolmaster's credibility, he doesn't bother to read the schoolmaster's **pamphlets**—the very claims that need defending—before writing a defense. One would think that reading the pamphlets

in question would be the first order of business in defending the schoolmaster's credibility, so it casts serious doubt on the narrator's motives that he didn't read the claims he was ostensibly defending.

Finally, Kafka gives ample evidence that the narrator himself doesn't understand his mysterious motives, since the narrator is inconsistent in describing what fuels him. At first, the narrator claims that his motive is to defend the "honesty" of the schoolmaster, but then he clarifies that he's proving the schoolmaster's "good intentions" (which, of course, is not the same thing as honesty). Next, the narrator writes in his pamphlet that his intention is to give "the schoolmaster's pamphlet the wide publicity it deserves," but then he admits that he "was trying to belittle the discovery" of the mole—two statements that are clearly in conflict. Near the end of the story, the narrator he claims to the teacher that "I wanted to help you," but the teacher rejects this notion and the narrator agrees that it's "probably" untrue. When the narrator finally admits near the end of the story that he himself does not know why he tried to defend the schoolmaster's honesty, it seems to be the first time he's said something believable about his motives. This calls into question the entirety of his involvement as the reader is invited to go back through the story, searching for any scrap of sincerity in the narrator's motives.

MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISCOMMUNICATION

In "The Village Schoolmaster," the schoolmaster and the narrator are allegedly allies in a common cause: the schoolmaster sets out to prove to the world that a freakishly enormous **mole** exists, while the narrator vows to prove the schoolmaster's honesty. But at nearly every stage, this partnership goes awry. From the beginning, the two men have inadequate information—indeed, almost no information—to carry out their missions: neither has even seen this mole, the narrator tries to back up the schoolmaster without reading his **pamphlets**, and the men never communicate with one another. Throughout the story, the schoolmaster—confused about the narrator's motives—is convinced that the narrator is out to steal his fame and is therefore hostile toward his attempts to help. Meanwhile, the narrator (who never asks the schoolmaster how he might be useful) undermines and offends the schoolmaster instead of helping. In plaguing his characters with miscommunication and factual ignorance, Kafka draws attention to the power of misunderstanding to isolate people from one another and to impede even the simplest relationships.

The schoolmaster and narrator separately take up their causes with almost no concern for facts. This is the first warning sign that they're living in separate realities and will therefore find collaboration impossible. The schoolmaster's eyewitness account of the mole is questionable from the beginning. Early on, Kafka reveals that the schoolmaster has never even seen the mole whose existence he devotes his life to proving. His estimation of the mole's length (two yards) is an exaggeration, which casts doubt on all his other assertions. Because of this clear credibility issue, the narrator's task of proving the schoolmaster's honesty seems immediately doomed. Even worse, just as the schoolmaster tries to prove the existence of a mole he's never seen, the narrator tries to prove the schoolmaster's credibility without ever investigating whether the schoolmaster actually *is* credible. In fact, the narrator writes his pamphlet defending the schoolmaster without having read the schoolmaster's pamphlet. And when the narrator finally does read the teacher's pamphlet, he finds that "we actually did not agree on certain important points," despite the men's persistent belief that "we had proved our main point, namely, the existence of the mole." His failure to communicate with the schoolmaster from the start has undermined whatever philanthropic benefit he might have offered.

In addition to both men being unconcerned with clearly establishing fact, they are unfocused and unqualified for the tasks they've chosen, which further undermines their credibility. The narrator conducts interviews and claims to have "correlated the evidence," but readers are never told of the nature of this evidence. Whatever this mystery evidence is, the narrator admits to having collected it "unsystematically." The narrator—a businessman—repeatedly admits that he has no credentials to qualify his investigations into the schoolmaster's veracity. He says that his lack of credentials is probably why his inquiries were doomed from the start. Even the men's published conclusions are unreliable. The teacher is said to spend more time fretting over the narrator's attempts to help him than composing effective arguments for his own pamphlets. In a review of the narrator's pamphlet, an academic journal calls its arguments unintelligible, which gives the reader a sense that the wider scientific community considers the men's pursuits to be amateur and half-baked. And the narrator himself admits that his and the schoolmaster's writings, even if they were true, would be impossible for average readers to follow—unintelligibility which only added to the public's confusion surrounding the mole episode.

To these failures of personal knowledge, Kafka adds a rift in the men's understanding of each other. The two men communicate exceptionally poorly. Although he claims to want to help the schoolmaster, the narrator refuses to contact him at first. The schoolmaster discovers the narrator's involvement in the mole case only through "intermediaries," which causes him to become suspicious of the narrator's intentions. The schoolmaster admits that he initially had had high hopes for the narrator's success. He had dreamed that, with the support of a businessman from the city, he could have won fame, fortune, and respect. Yet all the while he has deliberately placed "obstacles" (the narrator does not specify what kind) in the

narrator's path. He does so, the reader is told, because he believes the narrator wants to rob him of credit for the mole discovery. In the final passage, the men claim drastically different visions for the fruits of their mole inquiries: the schoolmaster desired fame, riches, and a ceremonial relocation to the big city, while the narrator claims to have wanted to improve the teacher's sense of self worth by earning him a bit of recognition. The disparity in these vision shows just how different their quests have been all along. It is this distance that causes the narrator to abandon the project altogether and to call it a mistake. The teacher wanted riches and recognition, while the narrator professes a humanitarian desire merely to help the teacher. When the teacher presses him, however, the narrator admits a total ignorance of his real motives. This scene depicts not only isolation between men but fundamental self-ignorance.

THE FUTILITY OF PRIDE AND AMBITION

"The Village Schoolmaster" is the story of two men wasting their energy on quests they fail to complete. The schoolmaster wants to win fame and fortune by proving to the world that an enormous **mole** exists, while the narrator wants to prove that the schoolmaster is credible. Both tasks are impossible, both men make fools of themselves, and throughout their labors, they both seem to have an inkling that what they're doing is futile. By telling a story of obsessive quests that have no hope of success, Kafka explores the psychology of chasing futile ambitions. Kafka's exploration centers on the men's growing attention to each other: because no one else cares about their efforts, the men increasingly treat each other as outlets for their vanity and ambition. Through this, the story shows the sheer depth and durability of human pride. Kafka focuses his psychological portrait on the men's thwarted efforts in order to suggest that ambition, in the absence of a meaningful goal or an audience that is invested in one's achievements, is ultimately futile.

Both the schoolmaster and the narrator begin by trying to prove a point to the outside world, but Kafka suggests that their audience is small, or possibly nonexistent. This sets the stage for the men's turn toward each other. The nature of the men's plea for attention is public: they publish **pamphlets** for people to read, they seek audiences with the wider scientific community, and they have wild hopes about the social impact of their efforts. But Kafka thwarts these public efforts at every turn. The few people who seem to read the pamphlet are explicitly unmoved by its ideas: a yawning scholar dismisses the schoolmaster and the agricultural journal dismisses the narrator's pamphlet in an obscure back-page notice. Only one reader keeps the narrator's pamphlet—as an oddity—when the narrator recalls all copies. This gives readers the sense that the mole affair could only possibly matter to the two protagonists. Without an audience for their obsessions, their quests seem quite clearly to be motivated by proving themselves right. Additionally, to emphasize that their quests have no significant impact, Kafka depicts the outside world in the story as essentially nonexistent. The village in which the story takes place is never named, is not accessible by train, and is never described socially or geographically. No character in the story is named either, and Kafka details almost nothing of the protagonists' private lives or backstories. The schoolmaster is known to have a family but mention of them—when he leaves them shivering in the snow while he debates the mole with a dismissive scholar—is brief enough to suggest that obsession with proving the existence of the rodent is more important to him than his wife and children are. Any potential influence the schoolmaster and the narrator might have in the wider world is therefore portrayed as nonexistent, and it's clear that the men's efforts are futile and ultimately detrimental to themselves and their love ones.

While both men are ostensibly obsessed with proving something to the world, they both seem to understand that they'll never be able to do so. Nearly everyone in the schoolmaster's village has forgotten about the large mole's appearance. That even the people who saw the mole have forgotten it indicates that the quest to make the mole relevant is useless. The schoolmaster is the first to understand the futility of trying to sway public attention back toward the mole. He sees that his "fragmentary labors" are "basically without value." The reader is told that he is accustomed to strangers' lack of interest. He calls the mole affair a "thankless business." When the narrator enters the picture, he immediately taps into the same sense of powerlessness that has gripped the schoolmaster. The narrator calls the schoolmaster "uninfluential," yet describes his own abilities as "far from sufficient to effect a change" on public opinion. He describes his "useless labors on this wearisome question," using words like "obscurity" and "desuetude" to describe the reception of their efforts. He recognizes that "enough time had elapsed to exhaust the trivial interest that had originally existed." That the schoolmaster and narrator are aware of how fruitless their endeavors are serves to highlight just how powerful—and perhaps delusional—of an effect pride and ambition can have on individuals.

Despite knowing that their labors are futile, the narrator and the schoolmaster's vanity pushes them to carry on in response to each other. After the narrator enters the picture, the schoolmaster becomes jealous, an emotion that develops into a central motive for him. The schoolmaster grows protective of the mole and is said to show a "keener penetration" into the narrator's interventions than into his own arguments regarding the mole. This obsessiveness shows that the schoolmaster regards intrusion on the subject as a personal affront—which, in turn, underscores that he's driven as much by pride as by scientific curiosity. Going forward, the schoolmaster concerns

himself less with public opinion and more with the narrator. He responds to the narrator's pamphlets with personal attacks and spirited complaints. Similarly, the narrator's original intention was to improve the schoolmaster's reputation in the public sphere, but the only audience he mentions reaching is the schoolmaster himself. Throughout the story, the narrator describes conversations and accusations between himself and the schoolmaster, suggesting that their real forum is one-on-one debate—not at all a dialogue with the broader scientific community, as they once alleged. In confining the schoolmaster and narrator to a bizarre competition with each other, Kafka adds a nuanced psychological evolution to the men's original assertion of hoping to change public opinion. In the absence of a real readership for their pamphlets, the men end up treating each other as their audience instead. Rather than portraying this as some sort of admirable display of perseverance and dedication, though, the story ultimately portrays both men's efforts as borne from pride and ultimately futile.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE MOLE

Kafka's work notoriously rejects easy summary, and his use of symbols in "The Village Schoolmaster" is no exception. Although the story's central symbol, the mole, cannot be said to *mean* anything explicitly, it is tied in various ways to the two protagonists' psychologies. Among the ways in which it connects to the men's internal lives is by its elusiveness: the mole is the purported years-long object of the men's efforts, yet neither of the men have actually *seen* it. In fact, most people in the village have forgotten all about it, leading readers of Kafka's story to doubt whether it existed at all! This elusiveness, in turn, reflects the weakness of the grasp the protagonists have on their own motives: the schoolmaster's alleged hopes to contribute to science in fact turn out to conceal a delusional lust for fame and wealth, while the narrator, at first professing a philanthropic desire to help the schoolmaster, in the end has no idea why he got involved in the first place. In this way, Kafka uses the mole itself as a symbolic commentary on the elusive, shifty, and slippery nature of people's true motives.

THE PAMPHLETS

The sole fruit of the protagonists' labors is the publication of their two separate pamphlets about the **mole**. These pamphlets are the means through which the narrator and schoolmaster attempt to communicate with the public, to prove the existence of the mole and garner support for their endeavors. And as the men grow increasingly attached to the case of the mole, Kafka uses their pamphlets to represent something of each man's personal identity and desires. Yet these publications go largely unread, ignored or derided by their intended audiences. The pamphlets, then, could also be seen as representing the failure of either man to communicate—with the world at large, and with each other.

When he first gets involved in the mole case, the narrator professes what he insists is an unbiased and impersonal desire to help defend the schoolmaster from afar; to be sure of this, he even refuses to read the schoolmaster's pamphlet. This avoidance of the schoolmaster's pamphlet symbolizes a personal distance between the men that will play out with more dramatic consequences later on, when compounded misunderstandings prevent their ability to communicate or work together effectively. In a way, the narrator fails to help the schoolmaster because he doesn't listen to him, just as the rest of the world seemingly has no interest in listening to either man.

Further, after the narrator has invested years and unspoken amounts of effort, an agricultural journal confuses his pamphlet for the schoolmaster's; the narrator calls the journal's error "an unpardonable confusion of identity." This confusion wounds the narrator so deeply that he recalls all copies of his pamphlet "for purely personal and therefore very urgent grounds," a revocation that symbolizes his personal withdrawal from the mole affair. By the final scene, in which the narrator can no longer pin down his motives for getting involved and wants to cut ties with the schoolmaster, he has piled up these remaining copies of the pamphlet on his table: an image that suggests the sum total of his personal involvement. The pamphlets, then, can ultimately be seen as a testament not only to the difficulty of meaningful communication, but also to thwarted ambition, dreams, and desires.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Schocken edition of *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories* published in 1995.

The Village Schoolmaster Quotes

His little pamphlet was printed, and a good many copies were sold to visitors to the village about that time; it also received some public recognition, but the teacher was wise enough to perceive that his fragmentary labors, in which no one supported him, were basically without value.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator is describing the schoolmaster's initial obsession with the mole. This passage is significant for being the first clear expression of the futility of the schoolmaster's whole endeavor to prove the mole's existence. It's noteworthy that, despite understanding that his work is essentially meaningless, the schoolmaster struggles on with it. This shows that the schoolmaster isn't exactly naïve—he is not so delusional as to think that he's doing something that is important to anyone but himself—but he's also perhaps not behaving rationally. After all, it's irrational to spend years of one's life on a task one believes to be meaningless. Later on, the schoolmaster's choice to commit himself to the mole episode is cast in a different light: he was all along apparently seeking fame and fortune through his writing on the mole, which does seem delusional, but certainly gives a rationale for actions that previously seemed irrational. Regardless, the schoolmaster's acknowledgement of the futility of his labors makes clear how murky human motives are in Kafka's world.

> "It is the aim of this pamphlet [...] to help in giving the schoolmaster's book the wide publicity it deserves. If I succeed in that, then may my name, which I regard as only transiently and indirectly associated with this question, be blotted from it at once."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

This is a direct quote from the introduction to the narrator's pamphlet. Kafka quotes it for a reason, and so readers ought to pay close attention to his wording here. The pamphlet's stated objective—to gain the schoolmaster more publicity—is simple enough, but it is not at all the narrator's initial intention. The narrator wanted originally to help the schoolmaster by vindicating his honesty and credibility, whereas now the narrator claims to act as a publicity agent. The shift between these impulses suggests a questionable grasp of the narrator's own motives. It's also noteworthy that the narrator writes that the schoolmaster's pamphlet "deserves" an audience; earlier, the narrator admitted that he wrote his own pamphlet without reading the schoolmaster's pamphlet (and once he does read it, he realizes he disagrees with the schoolmaster over important issues). How can he justifiably recommend a work he hasn't read? This casts doubt on the narrator's reliability and his ability to comprehend and express his own motives.

> [...] I was often struck by the fact that he showed almost a keener penetration where I was concerned than he had done in his pamphlet.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

This line, spoken by the narrator during his speculations about the schoolmaster's psychology, signals a decisive shift in the schoolmaster's obsession. Where he was once obsessed with the mole—publishing about it and bothering an important scholar—he now seems fixated on the machinations of the narrator whom the schoolmaster perceives to have encroached on his exclusive right to study the mole. So far, the schoolmaster's mole efforts have been met with total apathy, and it might be that the schoolmaster's keen interest in the narrator has to do with his surprise at finally finding someone else who is interested in the mole. It's interesting that the narrator believes the schoolmaster to be more perceptive about the narrator's machinations than about the mole itself. This strengthens the case that the mole was never the schoolmaster's real interest, and it lends credence to the schoolmaster's later accusations that the narrator was acting in self-interest rather than trying to help.

> All that he was concerned with was the thing itself, and with that alone. But I was only of disservice to it, for I did not understand it, I did not prize it at its true value, I had no real feeling for it. It was infinitely above my intellectual capacity.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator describes the schoolmaster's jealousy by paraphrasing one of the schoolmaster's main complaints against the narrator: that he has misunderstood the mole's significance. On the one hand, this complaint is completely accurate. The narrator has never even pretended to be interested in the mole. His stated aim in his work has always been to vindicate the schoolmaster's honesty, not to understand the mole. On the other hand, that the schoolmaster is making this complaint illustrates the men's mutual misunderstanding. The schoolmaster is furious about the narrator not valuing the mole enough, seemingly not realizing that the mole was never the narrator's interest. Had they understood one another's goals and values, perhaps they could have collaborated.

> An unpardonable confusion of identity.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

This line comes from the narrator when he reads the agricultural journal's confusion of his pamphlet for the schoolmaster's. He is clearly wounded by this mix up, and he means this short line as a declaration of offense, but the line has an ironic turn to it: is it really that unreasonable for a back-page notice to confuse two pamphlets written about a long-forgotten zoological oddity, years apart? Given the narrator's liberal reminders of the world's apathy toward the mole, it is a wonder the journal has reviewed his pamphlet at all. So the egregious offense the narrator takes at their mix-up is somewhat comic, suggesting that he has invested far too much pride into the matter.

In addition, the line is one of the most important quotes with respect to the pamphlet symbol. The merging of the two men's pamphlets in the public eye suggests a similarity between the two men. As the narrator begins to retrace the schoolmaster's old investigations—collecting the same evidence, and so on—there is a real sense that he has lost his original philanthropic intentions and become absorbed by the mole, making his own work parallel the schoolmaster's. Furthermore, the narrator taking offense at the journal's confusion shows that the narrator's disposition is remarkably similar to the schoolmaster's, since the schoolmaster also has incredibly thin skin when it comes to being associated with the narrator's work on the mole.

> These were my words; they were not entirely sincere, but what was sincere in them was obvious enough.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

The schoolmaster, having visited over Christmas, has blamed the narrator for thwarting his of hopes and dreams. In turn the narrator, hurt by the man's attack, gives an impassioned defense of his philanthropic motives. But in an aside to the reader, he admits here that his speech was insincere. This is a telling admission, as it makes clear that the miscommunication that has plagued the men throughout their failed attempt to collaborate has been, in some part, the result of the narrator deliberately concealing certain truths that are never specified. In many cases, their communication has failed despite the best intentions, but here the narrator reveals a conscious lie. This line calls into question the sincerity of his motives throughout the entire story, and it suggests that truth in the story is unstable.

> But the final deceit that lies in their words consists in this, that at bottom they have always said what they are saying now.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

In this line, the narrator describes the schoolmaster's final attack on him. The "they" refers to elderly men, when animated by the sudden urge to speak their minds. This line is important because it directly addresses communication between the two men—a particularly fraught and frustrated element of their relationship—but Kafka gives the reader no easy interpretation of what the narrator says. On the one hand, that the elderly "have always said what they are saying now" suggests that they have a consistent, unwavering, and discernable identity. But, on the other hand, these qualities are the opposite of what Kafka's readers have seen in the old schoolmaster, whose motives appeared to be scientific but are revealed to be based in personal greed. Kafka's story embraces these kinds of duality because they draw attention to the unresolved inherent in the men's ideas of themselves and their relationship.

> What interests one interests all the rest immediately. They take their views from one another and promptly make those views their own.

Related Characters: The Schoolmaster (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This is another example of a glaring contradiction that Kafka leaves unresolved. Here, the schoolmaster offers a rationale for his wild fantasy about the crowd that will greet him with money and fame once his scientific discovery is recognized. That people "take their views from one another," is a reasonable view of how desire works. But the irony in Kafka's work lies in the fact that neither of the men have been able to convert the public to a shared interest in the mole over which they obsess. In other words, people in Kafka's story do *not* share interests easily; they are isolated from one another: colleague from colleague, citizen from public. So for the schoolmaster to rest his entire vision on this view of shared desire strikes a bitingly ironic note with the reader, who has seen the exact opposite unfold. In this way, the schoolmaster's line here further shows his delusion and alienation from public life.

> "I do not ask for the return of the pamphlet because I retract in any way the opinions defended there or wish them to be regarded as erroneous or even indemonstrable on any point. My request has purely personal and moreover very urgent grounds; but no conclusion whatever must be drawn from it as regards my attitude to the whole matter."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the circular issued by the narrator to retract all copies of his pamphlet. The narrator makes an important distinction here between his beliefs and his self. In retracting the pamphlet, he is not erasing the intellectual content of his published arguments—his defense of the schoolmaster's honesty, his retracing of the mole investigation, etc.—but instead he symbolically retracts *himself* from his years of work. His urging that this gesture is made on "purely personal" grounds helps illustrate the deeply private connotations that his publication carries. This passage helps round out Kafka's use of published pamphlets as a symbol for his characters' identities.

However, the narrator begging the public not to interpret his retraction of the pamphlet as a retraction of his ideas implicitly acknowledges that the public is likely to do just that. This shows how the narrator's actions might truly be hurting the schoolmaster's credibility, just as the schoolmaster alleges. Here, the narrator wants to believe he is doing something selfless by effacing himself from the schoolmaster's work, but he actually might be doing real harm to the schoolmaster's credibility, even though his initial goal was supposedly to prove to the public that the

schoolmaster was honest. This casts further doubt on the narrator's motives and his ability to understand himself and his actions.

> I didn't consider what I was doing carefully enough at the time to be able to answer that clearly now. I wanted to help you, but that was a failure, and the worst failure I have ever had.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Schoolmaster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's final admission here is one of the most important lines of the story. Taking place at the climax of the story, near the end, he finally tries to weigh in on what his actual motives might have been. This indeterminate "answer" comes when the embittered schoolmaster refuses to believe that the narrator's motives were as charitable as he initially claimed. The narrator admits here that he may not originally have wanted to help the schoolmaster as urgently as he has let on all these years. From this line, the reader must reconsider every prior statement the narrator has made about his motives; if he himself can't say what his motives were at the outset—or currently are in this moment—then how can Kafka's readers trust his narration at all? This line is the story's testament to the murkiness of the psychological self, to the fallibility of memory and recorded testimony, and to the total breakdown of simple human communication.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE VILLAGE SCHOOLMASTER

The story's narrator reports that, several years back, in an undisclosed village inaccessible by train from the nearest town, a giant **mole** inexplicably appeared one day. It is big enough to become a noted local curiosity, and its appearance briefly garners the village some degree of fame; it even attracts some interest from out-of-town visitors. In time, this fame passes, however, as most people aren't curious about the mole and forget about it without ever bothering to try to explain its size or presence.

It is important to note that Kafka introduces the mole—the story's central symbol—many years after its appearance and in the voice of a narrator who has never seen the creature. Kafka never shows his reader the mole and never describes it directly. In hiding the mole in this way, and in beginning his story long after the mole's appearance, Kafka immediately shrouds the mole in mystery. He therefore invites the reader to doubt any subsequent account of the mole—an instinct that will only grow for the reader as the story's two protagonists obsess over the mole's existence.

The schoolmaster of the village, however, fixates on the mole. Since there are no written accounts of its appearance, he takes it upon himself to write a **pamphlet** about the episode, which he sells to tourists. Some years pass without the pamphlet attracting much attention, particularly from the scholarly community. Although the schoolmaster sees that his efforts are "basically without value," he grows upset at the general lack of interest in his work, accuses the public of ignorance, and redoubles his efforts.

Kafka simultaneously describes the villagers' waning interest in the mole and the schoolmaster's insatiable obsession with it. That nobody cares about the schoolmaster's quest to bring the creature back into relevance leaves him isolated. Notably, this sense of isolation and his awareness that his work isn't valuable cause the schoolmaster not to abandon his futile work, but to put even more energy into it. This begins to show the absurd, illogical characteristics of obsession.

One day, the schoolmaster secures a long-awaited appointment with a scholar and leaves his family waiting outside in the snow while the two meet. Pleading that the existence of the **mole** be taken seriously, the schoolmaster exaggerates the mole's length to two yards. Still uninterested, the scholar brushes off this plea by attributing the mole's prodigious size to the richness of the village's soil.

The schoolmaster's meeting with the scholar is short and sparsely described, but the scene contains crucial plot points. First, the rare mention of the schoolmaster's family gives the reader a glimpse of the man's private life—an aspect of him that remains largely hidden from the story. That they wait shivering in the snow here speaks volumes to the man's character and the power of his obsession, which causes him to neglect his family. Second, the scholar's dismissive behavior embodies the reaction to the schoolmaster from the greater scientific community, which is totally uninterested in this provincial curiosity. Finally, Kafka makes a point of noting that the schoolmaster exaggerates the mole's length to two yards, a blatant lie that undermines the schoolmaster's credibility, even as he desperately wants to be believed. It's worth noting, too, that the scholar absurdly attributes the mole's size to the soil—a hypothesis so unlikely as to be unscientific. Nobody in this story seems credible, which adds to the mystery of the mole.

After hearing of the scholar's coldness to the schoolmaster, the narrator, a businessman in an undisclosed city, becomes angry with the scholar. He sees the rural schoolmaster as an honest man, up against unfair odds in his attempt to gain scientific recognition. So he vows to defend the schoolmaster's honesty and good intentions. He admits that his efforts also would be "far from sufficient to effect a change," but, despite this, he starts making "inquiries" in preparation for a **pamphlet** of his own.

The narrator becoming involved in the mole episode is the story's crucial juncture: from this point, the plot has less to do with one man's obsession with a mole and increasingly more to do with the way the two men treat each other as they try—and fail—to collaborate. Significantly, the narrator admits at the outset that he was probably powerless to help the man but that he carried on anyway—the first of many such admissions of futility. This moment echoes the schoolmaster's reaction to realizing his work is futile: just as the narrator carries on after acknowledging futility, the schoolmaster redoubled his efforts instead of stopping. This moment also signals an important shift in narration; where the reader has so far largely been following a plot about one man and a strange obsession, now the narrator begins to focus on the men's psychological motives. This tone is a hallmark of Kafka's narrators and is the defining feature of "The Village Schoolmaster."

The narrator decides that he will not read the schoolmaster's pamphlet before writing his own. He insists that to do so would unduly complicate his sole interest: the honesty of the schoolmaster, rather than existence of the **mole** itself. In fact, he will not contact the schoolmaster at all, fearing that to do so would convey a personal bias. He prefers to view his motives as pure and philanthropic.

The credibility of the narrator's project is immediately undermined here. He claims to want to vindicate the schoolmaster's honesty, but he does not take the most basic steps to do so: assessing the credibility of the schoolmaster's pamphlet and then speaking with the schoolmaster himself. That the narrator does neither suggests that his motives might not be as straightforward as he imagines—maybe his interest isn't simply in the schoolmaster's honesty—although it's not suggested what his actual motives might be. This echoes the schoolmaster himself, who (it is later revealed) became obsessed with the mole without actually seeing it. Both men seem to be on quests whose ostensible targets (proving the mole's size and the schoolmaster's honesty) are beside the point.

It does not take long before the schoolmaster hears "through intermediaries" that someone else has become involved in his **mole** affair. His initial reaction is jealousy, and so he puts "obstacles" in the path of the narrator. The narrator ruminates about why his attempts to help are met with such a hostile response. First, the narrator blames his own "scrupulosity," thinking that his thoroughness might have threatened to outdo that of the schoolmaster. The narrator has, it turns out, begun to conduct his own investigations into the mole's original appearance, which the schoolmaster supposedly has already done. Second, after publishing his own **pamphlet**, the narrator finally reads the schoolmaster's, and the narrator decides that they disagree about certain "important points." Third, although he claims in his pamphlet not to want any credit for the discovery of the mole, the narrator admits that his pamphlet's focus on the mole, rather than solely on the schoolmaster, might hot have seemed as selfless as he had intended.

Here, the narrator tries to understand the schoolmaster's behavior, and his hypotheses point to the growing complexity of this situation. The narrator's first guess (that his research was so thorough that it put the schoolmaster to shame) is a bit self-aggrandizing, showing the narrator's ego. The second hypothesis (that the schoolmaster is upset because the narrator disagrees with him about central aspects of the mole's appearance) shows the absurdity of the narrator's claim that he is trying to prove the schoolmaster's credibility. It appears that the narrator does not *actually find the schoolmaster to be credible on this issue, as they disagree about fundamental things. The first two guesses help make sense of the third: the narrator's ego, combined with the apparent reality that he's not truly trying to vindicate the schoolmaster, suggest that maybe the narrator has published his pamphlet to aggrandize himself. The narrator is clearly unreliable, since he previously stated that his motives were selfless, but now it's clear that this isn't true. This passage also illuminates the character of the schoolmaster. The fact that his immediate response to a well-wisher is to thwart him attests to his immense pride—pride that will prove a fundamental hurdle to collaborating with the narrator.*

In the midst of the narrator's conjectures about his misunderstanding with the schoolmaster, it becomes clear that the two men have met (though the reader is not told any specifics about when). While the schoolmaster is at first "modest and humble" toward the narrator, the narrator tells the reader several of the schoolmaster's eventual accusations against him, namely a misunderstanding of the **mole**'s scientific significance and a desire to steal the schoolmaster's credit (despite his **pamphlet**'s "melodramatic" tone and self-effacing desire to be "blotted" from the schoolmaster's discovery). The schoolmaster sees the pamphlet's self-effacement to be "double-faced" and shamelessly self-publicizing; because of this view, he decides that the narrator is even worse than his previous enemies, who had confined their disparagement to the spoken, rather than published, word.

Due to the narrator's piecemeal storytelling, the reader is not told exactly how the two men met. There is no decisive scene where one reaches out to another. All that's clear is that they have indeed met, and that the miscommunication initiated by the narrator's avoidance of the schoolmaster's pamphlet has quickly snowballed into misunderstanding between them. While the narrator tries to explain himself thoroughly, the fact that the schoolmaster so easily rejects the narrator's avowed selflessness, instead choosing to see in the narrator a greedy desire to steal credit, attests to the uselessness of stating one's motives and the inevitability of misunderstanding.

The schoolmaster's various accusations lead the narrator to ruminate further on the nature of his own motives for trying to help the man, motives which he admits have strayed from pure philanthropy. He concludes that his efforts to bring the **mole** back into public relevance have become mixed with a desire to "belittle" the whole episode and, thus, to belittle the schoolmaster's interest in it. The narrator's tone grows gradually more dismissive, even taking care to note the teacher's "old wrinkled face." He explores the schoolmaster's inordinate obsession with the mole, his "complete unsuccess," and the excessive "touchiness" that has developed in him as a result.

The narrator's deep introspection here is classic Kafka. The narrator documents the slow shift in his motives from charity to resentment. This is a clear warning sign to the reader on several fronts. First, it indicates that stated motives in the story (remember, the narrator originally said he wanted to help the schoolmaster) are not really what they seem. Second, this shift in motives suggests that the men's focus is increasingly less on bringing a credible account of the mole to wider public consciousness than about their mutual antagonism. Further complicating things, while the narrator claims to "belittle" the schoolmaster's obsession, he himself has become wrapped up in the business of proving the mole's existence. Clearly he has become personally interested in something he claims to denigrate; this unaddressed contradiction adds to the story's theme of self-ignorance and reflects the complexity of an obsessive mind.

At the height of these probing reflections, the narrator describes the resounding apathy with which his **pamphlet** has been received. The recent issue of an agricultural journal has ridiculed his pamphlet in a brief back-page notice. The narrator quotes this notice, which is so uninterested in his work as to confuse the narrator with the schoolmaster. He calls this "attack" an "unpardonable confusion of identity." The narrator is hurt by the notice but not coordinated enough with the schoolmaster to fight back concertedly.

An obscure notice in the back pages of an agricultural journal is hardly enough of an "attack" to become personally wounded, but the narrator's language reveals that this is exactly how he feels when the journal confuses his pamphlet with the schoolmaster's. This points to the narrator's personal investment in the pamphlet and his big ego about it, and his reaction also parallels the schoolmaster's own hurt pride over the world's indifference to his labors. A "confusion of identity" is how the narrator describes the editors' mix-up of his publication with the schoolmaster's, but—as is becoming increasingly clear—the two men have similar character and are on similar quests, so the confusion doesn't seem as "unpardonable" as the narrator thinks.

This journal notice effects a change in the narrator, and he begins to doubt whether he can continue. He soon receives word from the schoolmaster that he will visit him over the Christmas holidays. The letter in which the schoolmaster announces his visit is particularly cryptic and bitterly occupied with generalizations about the "malice" of the world. The narrator reluctantly agrees to the visit.

As with the narrator's interest in something he wishes to belittle, the schoolmaster's letter shows a deep personal conflict: on one hand, his malicious note seems to lump the narrator alongside the "malice" in the world. This is indeed an insult, and that the narrator quotes the letter for his readers indicates the significance he gives to it. But on the other hand, this insult comes embedded in a desire to spend Christmas with the narrator: a poignant detail that is easily lost in the anger of his missive. Who would leave their family on Christmas? As with the image of the schoolmaster's family shivering in the snow, this detail speaks volumes for the power of the man's obsession. Only, this time, it is not the curious mole with which he is obsessed; it is now the narrator. His request to spend Christmas with the narrator, rather than with his family, indicates the total shift in his psychological dependence from the mole to his alleged benefactor/tormentor. This small gesture helps complete Kafka's message on two fronts: first, that obsession is rarely about the assumed object of fixation, and, second, that an obsessive and prideful person will create his own audience, even when nobody seems interested.

When the schoolmaster arrives, wearing an "old-fashioned padded overcoat," he has not only seen the agricultural journal's dismissive review but is furious about it, exclaiming "Of course I won't take this lying down!" Fed up, the narrator announces that they must part ways. He tells the schoolmaster that his inordinate obsession with the **mole** has shut him from the outside world and has rendered useless any attempt to help him. This overly personal involvement, he says, combined with the journal's clear pronouncement that their cause is useless, have convinced him to cease his involvement with the schoolmaster. Claiming motives of "self-renunciation," and "beg[ging] your forgiveness," the narrator breaks things off. He suggests that they have both failed and that to part ways out of "respect" would be in the schoolmaster's best interest.

This scene, the first of their meetings that Kafka actually describes, illuminates ugliness in both characters. As for the schoolmaster, the fact that he has already seen such an obscure notice suggests the tenacity with which searches for information about himself—a detail that shows dedicated self-absorption. His desire for revenge on the editors is as ridiculous as the narrator's deep personal offense—a similarity that further unites the two men in their lonely pursuits, despite their imminent parting. As for the narrator, his allegedly selfless reasons for abandoning the project strike the reader as patronizing and insincere, especially when he fixates on denigrating personal details like the schoolmaster's clothing. (Kafka's physical descriptions are rare, so details like these are especially significant to the narrator's growing desire to "belittle" the man.) Lastly, the narrator's moralizing about the schoolmaster's unhealthy fixation sound especially hypocritical in light of his injury at the journal's notice and his own years of wasted obsession.

A heated argument ensues, in which the schoolmaster reveals the hopes he had harbored for fame, fortune, and comfort for his impoverished family. Speaking with arms outspread, "as if his tiny little wife were standing there and he were speaking to her," he says that when the narrator originally stepped in to help, this encouraged the schoolmaster and his family to envision unprecedented levels of success: that the narrator's support would catch on publically, townspeople would agree that the old village schoolmaster might hold an important scientific discovery, the schoolmaster would be "showered" with donations, and he and his family would finally be whisked away to the city in a horse-drawn carriage, where hordes of people would wait to honor him for his intelligence. For the thwarting of these hopes, the schoolmaster blames the narrator.

In the Christmas Day argument at the story's climax, there are two big reveals. The first of these is the schoolmaster's revelation of his true motive in studying the mole. The object of his obsession, it turns out, was either all along a constructed fantasy or has at least now turned into one—his aim is less the promotion of a zoological oddity than earning fame and fortune for himself. The animation with which he narrates this fantasy—even gesticulating to his imagined wife—gives readers the sense that his years of unrewarded effort have made him completely delusional. Kafka, however, is ambiguous as to how readers should take this delusional monologue. On one hand, it could be a cautionary tale about the power of a lonely and ambitious mind to construct its own reality; the schoolmaster, after all, seems convinced that these hopes were reasonable. But on the other hand, his motives, insane as they are, are at least discernable, and they seem to come, at least in part, from a desire to help his family. Readers are about to discover that this is more than can be said for the narrator, whose motives in the next phase of this argument seem not only confused but non-existent.

In the midst of this, the narrator pauses to inform the reader that, in the wake of the journal's dismissive notice, he quietly orchestrated the return of every copy of his **pamphlet**. He published a circular requesting the pamphlet's return, and he sent this circular to everyone to whom he had distributed the publication. Most copies were returned, several respondents had forgotten the pamphlet entirely (this pleases the narrator), and only one person requested to keep the pamphlet as a curiosity, with the promise to keep it hidden for twenty years.

The fact that many of the narrator's correspondents have forgotten his pamphlet illustrates a total lack of audience for the men's obsessions. Since Kafka equates the pamphlets with the men's sense of self, the narrator revoking every copy of the pamphlet signals the end of his personal involvement in the case. Kafka's decision to include a sole interested reader of the pamphlet is a curious and unresolved one; he might be read as Kafka's symbolic acknowledgement that no curiosity or obsession, however irrelevant, is wholly without its enthusiast—a small reminder of the mind's susceptibility to pet interests, the kind of susceptibility that started this business in the first place. Even in this view, Kafka quashes any suggestion of any meaningful engagement with the question of the mole, though, since the reader seems more amused than interested.

The narrator meets the schoolmaster's monologue about his thwarted fantasy with a speech of his own, in which he rebukes the schoolmaster for blaming him and for misunderstanding the reward of scientific discoveries. To humor the schoolmaster, the narrator offers a different hypothetical scenario, in which a scholar and his graduate student might investigate the schoolmaster's claims, the schoolmaster might be recognized publically with a university scholarship, his status in the village might be elevated a bit, he might earn some money and a medal, and a small museum might be built on the site of the **mole**'s appearance. Above all, the narrator scolds the schoolmaster's misunderstanding of fame and credit: he insists that, even if recognized briefly, the discovery of the mole would soon be absorbed into the wider scientific community, other scholars would add to and alter his findings, and, in the process, the mole would cease to be the schoolmaster's sole property.

The narrator's rebuke to the schoolmaster confirms what the reader has been coming to terms with all along: that the men have all along had immensely different goals for their involvement in the mole episode. The narrator's fiery response makes the reader aware of just how isolated the schoolmaster has become. To illustrate the schoolmaster's delusion, the narrator invents a parallel hypothetical scenario about the schoolmaster's success. That the narrator stoops to the same kind of psychological invention that the schoolmaster did suggests that the narrator, the alleged voice of reason, is also able to fabricate detailed psychological realities and that he uses much of the same deluded logic and ungrounded hypotheticals that characterize the schoolmaster's thinking. Once again, the two men do not seem so different from one another.

After the narrator's exasperated monologue, in which he stands by his original desire to help the schoolmaster, the schoolmaster questions this motive point-blank. He asks the narrator if he truly wanted to help when he decided to get involved, and if he still wants this now. After a pause, the narrator admits that he no longer knows if that was his motive—then or now. The argument subsides, and the narrator considers his desire to banish the schoolmaster from his home. He even gives him money (something he admits to having done before), hoping the schoolmaster will leave on his own accord. But as the schoolmaster sits smoking his pipe in silence, the narrator can't bring himself to ask him to leave.

The tone of the narrator's diatribe has been fairly moralizing, but the climax's twist—that the narrator's motives aren't clear and can't really be considered altruistic—makes this moralizing tone retrospectively ring hollow. Just as Kafka reveals to the reader the extent of the schoolmaster's delusion, Kafka suggests that the narrator himself has very little self-knowledge and was deluding himself about his own motivations this whole time. His ignorance of his own motives in this final scene undermines the whole idea of charity in the story: both of these men appeared initially to have good intentions (to spread scientific knowledge and help a mistreated schoolmaster), but in the end, neither had straightforward altruistic motives. Kafka leaves unresolved whether genuine altruism is possible—it may be impossible to know, since self-examination is shown to be almost impossible, too. In other words, it seems that nobody really knows their own motives, so it's unclear if anyone is ever being altruistic or whether all motives are essentially selfish. The story's final moment, in which the embittered narrator cannot dismiss the schoolmaster, suggests that the men have grown paradoxically dependent on one another. Despite their bitter differences, they are the only ones who understand each other's obsessions, and so they've found a kind of companionship that substitutes for the public audience they initially desired.

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