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# *I Dreamt I Was Kafka: Freudian Interpretation and Kafka's The Metamorphosis*

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## **Abstract**

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* has been examined through the lens of Freudian theory for decades. This article argues that Franz Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis* with Freudian theory in mind, particularly regarding The Oedipal Complex, a theory Sigmund Freud developed to describe the psychosexual development that occurs during the Phallic stage. According to Freud, during this stage, children experience an unconscious feeling of desire for their opposite-sex parent and jealousy and envy toward their same-sex parent. This article examines how Franz Kafka seems to reverse the Oedipal pattern in *The Metamorphosis* as the main character Gregor seems to not long for the love of his mother but rather that of his sister, Grete. This article also examines how Kafka seems to have written *The Metamorphosis*, as well as most of his work, through an autobiographical lens.

"Metaphors are one of the many things that make me despair of writing," noted Kafka in December 1921, commenting on the last sentence in his letter to a friend, which says only: "I warm myself by it this sad winter." In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka presents the ultimate metaphor, one that mirrors his own life. Kafka wrote to his fiancée Felice Bauer in July of 1913:

"Felice beware of thinking of life as commonplace if by commonplace you mean monotonous, simple, petty. Life is merely terrible; I feel it as few others do. Often—and in my inmost self perhaps all the time—I doubt whether I am a human being." (Kafka, LTF 287)

Franz Kafka was born on July 3, 1883, to a middle-class Jewish family in Prague, the capital of Bohemia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was the first of six children: the two brothers who followed, Georg and Heinrich, died in infancy; then, three sisters, Elli, Valli, and Ottilia, arrived. Except for

a short period in 1912, Franz remained very close to Ottilia, his youngest sister, throughout his life. However, Kafka was an expert on feeling foreign or extraneous. This feeling was very much a product of the variegated Austro-Hungarian empire in which he grew up: to the Czechs, he was a privileged German speaker; to the Catholic and Protestant majority, he was a Jew, and to many Jews, he wasn't Jewish enough. Kafka studied law at Prague German University, then worked for an insurance company and wrote in his spare time. He was dismayed that he had to spend too much time on his occupation and often lamented that he did not have enough time for writing. In a diary entry dated July 31, 1914, he wrote, "I have no time. But I will write in spite of everything, absolutely; it is my struggle for self-preservation" (Kafka, Diaries 300). He soon got a job at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute, where he handled compensation claims from lone workers against powerful companies. In this environment, Kafka would have witnessed

the legal and bureaucratic forces that limited an individual's freedoms—themes that would influence his later works, such as *The Trial*. Here, he was rapidly promoted and worked shorter hours, thus providing him with sufficient writing time.

Kafka's personal life was troubled. Handsome but deeply insecure, Kafka suffered from depression and anxiety, which contributed to a series of unsuccessful relationships with women. Kafka's father, Hermann, owned a business selling woman's clothes and fancy goods, and his mother worked alongside him. Hermann Kafka was a strong character; loud, assured, and domineering. Franz often found it hard to get along with him. It was clear from Kafka's correspondence and diaries that he considered himself to be a martyr to his work. In a letter to his fiancée Felice Bauer he declared, "I am made of literature; I am nothing else and cannot be anything else." This was a constant theme of his mature years and one that he expanded on in a highly significant diary entry from August 1916: "My penchant for portraying my dreamlike inner life has rendered everything else inconsequential; my life has atrophied terribly and does not stop atrophying" (Kafka, Diaries 369). This feeling was no doubt intensified by his imprisonment in his ailing body. Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1917, and from then onward, he spent frequent periods in sanatoriums. In 1923, Kafka went to Berlin to devote himself to writing, but worsening health meant a return to his family in Prague, where he finally succumbed to tuberculosis in 1924.

Kafka was a very self-analytic writer. While his diaries and letters contain many reflections on his own life and how it went wrong, his fictional writing was a less direct way of shaping and making sense of his experiences (Robertson 5). Suffering from depression, Kafka constantly feared everyone around him would abandon him if they ever saw through his façade. Thus, *The Metamorphosis* can be read as Kafka working this depressed state into a conclusion

a depressed individual would have - that everyone would be better off without him.

Kafka was fascinated by institutions, and among one of the first institutions anyone encounters is family (Robertson 83); to Kafka, family was the place where oppression started. The main protagonist of *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor, is truly an insect—disgusting to himself and others, despised, and in constant danger of being crushed by his oppressive family. "I have always looked on my parents as persecutors," Kafka wrote to Felice in 1912. He also hated family life:

I cannot live with people. I absolutely hate all my relatives, not because they are wicked, not because I don't think well of them ... but simply because they are the people with whom I live in close proximity. Seen in a detached way, I enjoy all people, but my enjoyment is not so great that, given the necessary physical requirements, I would not be incomparably happier living in the desert, in a forest, or on an island, rather than here in my room between my parents' bedroom and living room. (Kafka, LTF 287)

Kafka lived with his parents nearly all his life, even when he was financially independent, in very close quarters, where his hyper-sensitivity to noise was tested daily.

This is the domestic situation out of which came the claustrophobia and self-disgust of Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka transposed the apartment on Nikalasstrasse where he lived with his parents into Gregor Samsa's room. The doors, the desk, the wardrobe, the hospital outside the window, and the streetlights reflected the upper part of the room (Citati 61). The oppression Gregor suffers from his family is even embodied in the layout of his room, which has three doors that Gregor locks every night. The fact that he locks these doors every night within the house that he shares with his family doesn't seem to strike Gregor

as odd; he even congratulates himself on it. But seen through the persecuting eyes of the outside world, his door-locking gesture can be seen as an act of hostility. As the chief officer of Gregor's firm says after seeing what happened to him, "You are barricading yourself in your room." After waking up to find himself trapped in bed as a bug-like creature, each member of his family knocks at these doors, urging him to get up and go to work as the family depends on Gregor for sustenance. He works as a traveling salesman for a boss he hates, and he plans to quit soon,

"Well all hope is not yet lost; as soon as I've saved up enough to pay back what my parents owe him—another five or six years should be enough—I'll most definitely do just that. This will be the great parting of ways." (Kafka 4)

In some ways, Gregor's transformation is liberating. It frees him from the burden of a humiliating job and an ungrateful family. The family was feeding off of Gregor; now, they are the ones who have to feed him.

Kafka had a difficult relationship with both of his parents. His mother, Julie, was a devoted homemaker who lacked the intellectual depth to understand her son's dreams to become a writer. Franz's feelings towards her were lukewarm at times—he admitted an occasional coldness toward his mother. In conflicts between the father and children, particularly Franz and Ottilia, she did her best to mitigate the impact of her husband's outbursts (Karl 18). In the end, however, she generally bowed to the indomitable will of Franz's father, Hermann Kafka. Kafka's lifelong awe in the face of power began with his father.

"Have I already told you I admire my father? You know that he is my enemy, and I his, as is determined by our temperaments but apart from this my admiration for him as a man is perhaps as great as my fear of him." (Kafka, Diaries 310)

By all accounts, Franz Kafka's relationship with his real father was tempestuous at best. The division between father and son existed on so many levels it is difficult to identify them. Besides the personal differences were the cultural differences; Hermann Kafka was a former small-town Jewish peasant who emigrated to Prague with nothing, while his son was well-educated with a law degree and literary friends. Franz grew up with eccentric interests and indifferent professional success and never married. To Herr Kafka, his son was a failure and a major disappointment (Karl 39). The struggle between father and son takes on several aspects in *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor's father is horrified by his son's transformation and aims to avoid the sight of Gregor through every possible means. Once it becomes clear to the father that Gregor has become economically useless and a social embarrassment, only the interventions of his mother and sister prevent Herr Samsa from beating him to death.

"All Gregor's entreaties were in vain, nor were they even understood, for as submissively as he might swivel his head, his father only stamped his feet all the more ferociously." (Metamorphosis, Kafka 16)

Sigmund Freud was an Austrian neurologist who invented psychoanalysis, a practice in which an analyst uses a patient's free associations, dreams, and fantasies to deconstruct hidden tensions. Some of the most significant academic conceptions of the twentieth century were his thoughts on child sexuality, libido, and the ego (Breger 10). Freud suffered a traumatic, impoverished, and difficult childhood that left him with fear, insecurity, and unhappiness. Like many bright children in similar circumstances, he escaped into the world of his imagination.

Romantic novels and accounts of life in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome are where he found solace. His heroes became conquerors like Alexander the Great and Napoleon. He was also drawn to another figure,

one out of the dramas of ancient Greece: Oedipus, who bested his own father in combat, solved the riddle of the Sphinx, and became King of Thebes (Breger 2).

In creating a new heroic self, Freud relied on his impressive literary skills. He became a masterful stylist, capable of presenting his ideas in compelling prose, of shaping arguments with persuasive metaphors and rhetoric (Breger 3). Freud wrote several important essays on literature, which he used to explore the psyche of authors and characters, explain narrative mysteries, and develop new concepts in psychoanalysis. His essay *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva* and his readings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams* are great examples of how Freud used his literary and rhetorical skills to control and shape his personal legend, as well as the history of the psychoanalytic movement.

It is reasonably certain that Kafka first became acquainted with the theories of Freud during a series of lectures and discussions held in 1912 at the house of Frau Bertha Fanta (Wagenbach 199). The most controversial work published by Freud up to this period was *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which the Oedipus complex first appears. Published in 1899, Freud analyzed himself using his own dreams, many of which he recorded in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In his opinion, a dream resembled a neurotic symptom; both arose from an unconscious wish, derived from infancy, that had been repressed (Ferris 166). It was here he proposed the Oedipus complex, which he instantly promoted to a universal law: All boys lust after their mothers, which brings them into rivalrous combat with their fathers. The conflict, fear, and guilt of this situation became Freud's principal explanation for the symptoms and anxieties of adult neurosis, both his own and those of his patients (Breger 3). Freud created psychoanalysis in part from his observations of neurotic patients. However, an even more potent source for his theories was the self-analysis that he carried out in his late thirties and early forties, confided in letters to his friend, the Berlin physician

Willhelm Fleiss. As Freud stated in a letter to Fleiss,

I have found in my own case too, the fact of being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and now I consider it a universal event in early childhood...

If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of Oedipus Rex...the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality. (Ferris 150)

Kafka's earliest recorded reference to Freud can be found in a letter to Willy Haas dated July 19, 1912, in which he calls Freud's ideas "unprecedented" and professes "a great, but empty respect" for him (Winston 168), a suggestion that, at this point at least, he had not actually read any of Freud's texts. Kafka also never underwent psychotherapy and often expressed doubts about the validity of analyzing the mind. However, one important access point towards psychoanalysis was through his own writings. In September 1917, Kafka asked his friend Willy Haas to copy a passage from the 1917 study by the Freud pupil Wilhelm Stekel titled *Masturbation and Homosexuality*, in which *The Metamorphosis* is mentioned in passing (Winston 145).

Studies of Freud's influence on Kafka's work have been numerous. Kafka was first opened to Freudian interpretation by Walter Sokel in his 1964 essay, *The Myth of Power and the Self*. Sokel was compelled to use Freud to "unlock the secret doors" to Kafka's texts, as he explains in the introduction to his compilation of essays entitled *The Myth of Power and the Self* (2002):

As a native of the city of Freud, I found it natural to use the author of classic text of dream interpretation as the first guide in my quest to understand and

interpret Kafka's work that fascinated me on account of its dreamlike quality. Kafka himself, as I read in his diary, had found thinking of Freud quite "natural" when composing the work of his "breakthrough." Thus Freud offered himself as the first key in trying to unlock the "secret doors" to Kafka's texts. They seemed to me structured according to principles analogous to dreams as analyzed by Freud. I saw manifest text as a disguised expression or projection of the protagonist's feelings. (Sokol 14)

Interpreting Kafka's work in light of Freud seems to validate the importance of literature, as Freudian theory was built on a literary key for analyzing. Freud himself wrote:

The dream thoughts which we first come across as we proceed with our analysis often strike us by the unusual form in which they are expressed; they are not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts, but are on the contrary represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech. (26)

In her study from *Kafka In Context*, Carolin Duttlinger explains, "The earliest, and most frequently cited psychoanalytic reading of Kafka's works, however, comes from the author himself." On September 23, 1912, having just finished his breakthrough story "The Judgement," Kafka notes in his diary: "thoughts about Freud, of course." Self-observation was a key method of experimental psychology. In his early diaries, Kafka frequently emulates this approach as a source of creative inspiration. In an entry dated October 4, 1911, he records his impressions while lying on his sofa at nightfall:

Why does one take a rather long time to recognize a color, but then, after the

understanding has reached a decisive turning-point, quickly become all the more convinced of the color. . . When the light in the ante-room is turned off and only the kitchen light remains, the pane nearer the kitchen becomes deep blue, the other whitish blue, so whitish that all the drawings on the frosted glass . . . dissolve. The lights and shadows are thrown on the wall and ceiling by the electric lights in the street and the bridge down below is distorted, partly spoiled, overlapping, and hard to follow. (Kafka, Diaries 216)

In their paper *A Study of Kafka's The Metamorphosis in Light of Freudian Theory*, Barfi et al. suggest that *The Metamorphosis* is a symbolic presentation of Gregor's unconscious world. According to Freud, our mind consists of two parts: conscious and unconscious. He believed we held our suppressed wills, feelings, horrors, drives, conflicts, and even memories in the unconscious part of our psyche (107). "The Judgement" and *The Metamorphosis* thematize the alienation between father and son. Catherine Hezser, in her study of *Freud's Oedipal Complex in the writings of Franz Kafka and Philip Roth*, wrote,

"this alienation develops in reaction to a gradual or sudden change if the son's lifestyle or character or appearance as well as a change of the father's behavior from initial weakness to vigor, strength, and authority" (260). However, none of these studies seem to address the obvious reversal of the Oedipal pattern in *The Metamorphosis*; Gregor seems to not long for the love of his mother but rather that of his sister, Grete.

There is no doubt, however, that Kafka saw elements of his guilt-laden relationship with his father in Freud's Oedipal Complex. These elements are exemplified in *The Metamorphosis* when Gregor seems to become jealous of Herr Samsa's newfound

authority. Now that Gregor is indisposed, Herr Samsa has taken a job, and he's so proud that he refuses to take off his uniform even when not at work.

“In a peculiar form of stubbornness, Gregor's father refused to take off his porter's uniform even at home; and while his nightshirt hung uselessly on its hook, he would slumber where he sat, fully clothed, as though he remained ready for service at all times.”  
(*Metamorphosis*, Kafka 33)

With this new authority, there also seems to be a sexual relationship building between mother and father. Just before Gregor loses consciousness from the pain caused by an apple his father just lodged into his back, he witnesses a primal scene:

He caught only a last glimpse of the door to his room flying open, his shrieking sister, and his mother running out of the room before her wearing only a chemise, for his sister had undressed the unconscious woman to let her breathe more freely, then he saw his mother rush to his father's side, her unfastened skirts slipping one by one from about her waist as she ran. Saw her stumble across these skirts as she threw herself at his father, and embracing him, in perfect union with him. (*Metamorphosis*, Kafka 32)

Gregor's sight goes dim to prevent him from seeing what he must not see, an act of parental union which, in sparing his life, re-enacts the one that gave him life. This points to the mother's confused attitude towards her son and to the unquestioned dependence upon and total union with the father, but Kafka never rebelled; instead, he turned his fear into self-abasement or psychosomatic illness. In every dispute with authority, he made himself the guilty party; moreover, he began to see himself through his father's eyes (Robertson 66).

Like *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's 1912 story, “The Judgement,” conjures Freud's Oedipal conflict. Here

the conflict between father and son once again ends with the death of the son, but the mother is not there. In fact, she has been dead for several years. There are, however, two contenders for her place in Kafka's take on the Oedipal triangle: the protagonist Georg Bendemann's fiancée and his nameless male friend in Russia. Georg's father contests his son's relationship with both of them as he attacks and eventually destroys Georg's role as the head of the family. Again, Freud's influence looms large in Kafka's writings, though less as an uncontested authority than as a template of life and writing to be wrestled with and rewritten. Kafka was perfectly cognizant of the father-son conflict as the focal theme dominating not only “The Judgement” but *The Metamorphosis*. In fact, he initially wanted to publish the two pieces along with “Letter To My Father” jointly in one volume under the title of *The Sons*. Franz Kafka had written earlier in his 1906 story *Wedding Preparations In The Country* of turning into an insect in order to let his body go on an unwanted journey while his mind stayed peacefully at home:

As I lie in bed I assume the shape of a big beetle, a stag beetle or cockchafer, I think. The form of a large beetle, yes. Then I would pretend it was a matter of hibernating, and I would press my little legs into my bulging belly. And I would whisper a few words, instructions to my sad body, which stands close beside me, bent. Soon I shall have done—it bows, goes swiftly, and it will manage everything efficiently while I rest. (*Stories* 56)

In “The Judgement,” his father passed a sentence of death onto him; whereas in *The Metamorphosis*, two themes were joined into one even more terrible: My father regards me as nothing better than an insect and kills me himself.

In Gregor's family, his sister, Grete, is the one Gregor admires and seems to be the only one sympathetic to his plight. Gregor and Grete are siblings but seem to share an unnaturally close

relationship. His feelings for his sister are both paternal and slightly incestuous, consistent with Kafka's take on such matters: "Love between brother and sister—the repeating of love between mother and father" (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 210). In time, Gregor was to reveal a secret plan to send Grete as a student at the conservatory as soon as the following Christmas.

"After this declaration, his sister would be moved to the point of tears, and Gregor would now raise himself to the height of her armpit and kiss her throat, which now that she went to the office everyday, she wore free of ribbon or collar." (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 39)

Kafka's youngest sister, Ottla, allowed him to move in with her temporarily when he was particularly ill. At one point, Kafka felt he should quit working afternoons and do more writing, but his parents disagreed. Unexpectedly, Ottla sided with her parents, a betrayal which Kafka never fully forgave (Karl 441). This is mirrored in *The Metamorphosis* when Grete decides Gregor's fate:

"Dear parents,' his sister said, striking the table by the way of preamble, 'things cannot go on like this. Even if you two perhaps do not realize it, I most certainly do. I am unwilling to utter my brother's name before this creature, and therefore will say only: we have to try and get rid of it.'" (Metamorphosis Kafka 41)

So, Gregor's fate is sealed and the alliance between Grete and Gregor is broken. Experiencing a revelation through surrender, Gregor makes his way to his room and the door is pushed shut indignantly by Grete and locked. In the darkness, "He thought back on his family with tenderness and love. His opinion that he must by all means disappear was possibly even more empathetic than that of his sister" (*Metamorphosis* Kafka 43). Even in his last moments, Gregor's thoughts are of his family and their well-being.

We can take Grete and Gregor's relationship

a step farther and consider them both as part of a whole, part of one individual, which is represented by the family. Therefore, Gregor represents a sudden illness, such as depression. He represents a critical situation that is becoming an obstacle; whereas Grete might represent the will, the future, or the butterfly-in-potential. By confronting the problem head-on, Grete learns how to become a caretaker and how to deal with the most unpleasant and real consequences of the issue. The very last line of *The Metamorphosis* conjures the image of a butterfly escaping its cocoon:

"And when they arrived at their destination, it seemed to them almost a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when their young daughter swiftly sprang to her feet and stretched her young body."  
(Metamorphosis Kafka 47)

She has undergone her own metamorphosis except hers is a successful one, unlike Gregor's.

In a letter dated January 27, 1904, Kafka wrote to his friend Oskar Pollak:

If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? ... We need books to affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us. (Kafka LFFE 16)

*The Metamorphosis* is not simply a story about a man that turns into a creature; it is catharsis, not only for the reader, but for Kafka himself. After all, in a diary entry on December 8, 1911, Kafka wrote,

"I have now, and have had since this afternoon, a great yearning to write all of my anxiety out of me, write it into the depths of the paper just as it comes out of the depths of me, or write it down in such a way that I could draw



what I had written into me completely.”  
(Kafka Diaries 134)

The proximity of literature and autobiography could hardly be closer than it is with Kafka; indeed, it almost amounts to identity. Harold Bloom, the famous literary critic, once stated,

“Freud, slyly following Shakespeare, gave us our map of our mind; Kafka intimated to us that we could not hope to use it to save ourselves, even from ourselves.” (Bloom 940)

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