



The Gyrating Hierarchy in Franz Kafka's *The Judgment*, *The Metamorphosis* and *In the Penal Colony*

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Abstract

Franz Kafka (1883-1924), could never finish his major works; most of them were edited and published posthumously by his friend Max Brod. We know that Kafka's long sleepless nights were relieved by the aggressive Tuberculosis, perhaps a bit too soon in 1924. However, death could not take the manuscripts away and though unfinished, his works provided a wide arena for the vast multitude of critics who would later attempt to decipher the texts, through their very warp and weft.

Bureaucracy, claustrophobia and an abrupt beginning without any explanation, these are the accepted prerequisites of Kafkaesque. A reader prepares himself/herself according to these attributes while going through a work of Kafka. Coley Taylor asserts that the problems faced by Kafka's characters are identical to the hazards encountered by any ordinary person at the hands of bureaucracy. However, the specified positions of the bureaucratic hierarchy do not always remain the same. It is difficult to imagine a structure with its rapidly shifting constituents. In this paper, I have attempted to focus on the dynamic characteristics of the hierarchy presented in the three works of Franz Kafka, namely, *The Judgment*, *The Metamorphosis* and *In the Penal Colony*. My goal has not been to discover any hidden message of Kafka. I have attempted to provide a detailed picture of the shifting system of hierarchy presented in the three aforementioned works of Kafka to facilitate the imagination of the concerned readers.

Keywords: Hierarchy, Bureaucracy, Abrupt Beginning, Dynamic, Kafkaesque

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Introduction

Franz Kafka's works are often marked as ciphers. However, the twentieth century interpretations of Kafka's texts refuse a totalitarian approach as none of the interpretations (symbolic, allegorical, psychoanalytic, religious etc.) can bind all the works of Kafka in a unified manner. A complex bureaucratic system appears as a dominant symbol in the works of Kafka. In his diaries and letters he is always on the run from an authoritarian father. However, all the roads seem to take him to the point from where he started. Suffering intensifies the more he struggles and interestingly, when he drafts a letter to his father for being abusive, he pens it for both the sides. The letter, however, was never delivered and the torture according to Kafka, never stopped.

Transfiguration is considered as one of the most important events of the “Bible”. The word transfiguration biblically connotes the episode of transfiguration of Jesus in the New Testament. This doctrine depicts that on the mount of transfiguration Jesus is transfigured through illumination with bright rays of light and this moment of transfiguration is hallmarked by the celestial Father’s voice to his chosen Son. However, in this paper I would not aim to interpret transfiguration in the Biblical light, rather would endeavour to explore the simultaneous shifting of roles as portrayed in the father and son, authority and subject, the protector and the ward relationship in the three stories of Franz Kafka namely: *The Judgment*, *The Metamorphosis* and *In the Penal Colony* respectively. A major query might surface as why these three stories has been selected, the logic to support this selection is, to discover the proximity in Kafka’s line of thought while writing these stories as one may notice that the publication dates of these three consecutive stories may justify the presumed proximity of the composition line-up.

1. The Judgment:

The Judgment unfurls the story of Georg who after a long time decides to write a letter to his friend in Russia to notify his recent engagement. This occasion prompts Georg to have an intimate visit with his father. Obliquely Kafka makes the readers aware of the fact that among the many changes that had happened to Georg in the past three years, it was the death of his mother that enabled him to set up home together with his father.

Subsequently, as the story goes on Georg approaches his father in his ‘unbearably dark’ (Kafka, 2007, p.42) room. The intimate conversation between the father and the son which is presumed to take place, unfortunately takes a turbulent turn as the father suddenly discloses all his grievances to his son which was buried under the silence of the lost years. He questions the existence of Georg’s friend in Russia, accuses him of keeping him (the father) in the dark about the matters of family business. He calls Georg selfish and declares that the death of mother didn’t affect him as it should have. However, Georg in order to take hold of the situation soon relinquishes the battle and considering the old age and retrograde health condition of his father, attempts to take him to the bedroom. However, the apparent stability inside the room is torn asunder and everything begins to tumble down when Georg goes on to cover up his father with a blanket and tries to pull it up over his shoulder. With such a clamorous thunder his father rises up, that almost causes the blanket to float in mid-air almost for a while. He goes on to verbally bash Georg all the way, directing all his remaining vitality and invectives against him sometimes on the grounds of disgracing his mother’s memory, sometimes for betraying his friend and ultimately for attempting to incarcerate him in bed. He rattles Georg completely defenceless, calls him ‘a veritable fiend’ (Kafka, 2007, p.49) and the belligerent onslaught comes to a stop with a verdict from his father that sentences the son to death by drowning. An exhausted and expelled Georg flings himself outside the room, crosses the road, sprints to the river and like a marvellous gymnast performs a magnificent dive that would almost ‘cover the sound of his fall’ (Kafka, 2007, p. 50). The dominant picture of a son carrying his ailing father to bed which seemed to prevail in the story, soon vanishes as the immersion of Georg and the emergence of his father to vitality, transfigure the prevalent structure of the existing roles in the story. We notice Georg, in his attempt to help his ailing father, tries to assume the role of the father/ the authority himself and thereby ignores his role in the system of hierarchy. His endeavour triggers a violent reaction in the system that culminates into the act of suicide. The decision of ending his life may be interpreted as the denial of a son who refuses to recede into the sleeve of his preordained role. Finally, Georg tries to reduce the sound of his fall to the minimum; his final dive becomes

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almost perfect which closely follows the father's commandment. However, the terminal act of compliance ends up into a quiet denial, the splash remains muffled while the system reconfigures itself.

2. The Metamorphosis:

...he bit fast on to the key with all the strength he possessed, to the point when he was ready to black out. The more the key moved in the door, the more he danced around the lock...The light click of the snapping lock brought Gregor round, as from a spell of unconsciousness. Sighing with relief, he said to himself: 'well, I didn't need the locksmith after all' and he rested his head on the door handle to open the door fully. (Kafka, 2007, p.99-100)

The unlocking of the door of Gregor's room in *The Metamorphosis* lets a spine tingling wind into the next room and at once consumes his family members as well as the chief clerk from his office, who came to investigate the reason of Gregor's absence from work. A staggering Gregor, still grappling to come to terms with the events around him darts to stop the chief clerk as his job would be under threat if the man reports what he has already witnessed. However, Gregor's efforts are nullified soon as he beholds his father, with a cane in one hand and a rolled newspaper in another, stamping towards him while 'emitting hissing sounds like a savage' (Kafka, 2007, p.104). He leaves almost no chance for Gregor to slowly manoeuvre himself to retreat to his room and with extreme haste, kicks him inside and shuts the door.

As the story progresses, Gregor finds his mother and sister toiling themselves dreadfully to shift the furniture away from his room to give him more space for movement. He determines to stay out of sight to avoid further turbulence but this futile attempt soon ends in a catastrophe when his mother makes the frightening discovery and with a hoarse, screaming voice collapses on the sofa. Gregor's sister comes to the rescue, in an attempt to extend help, Gregor too barges in only to put everything in disarray, he injures himself in the face, almost chokes up with 'the fumes of some harshly corrosive medicine' (Kafka, 2007, p.123), sets the whole room in a circular motion and with a whirling dizziness drops on the middle of the table. In the serene silence of the following concussion he lets himself drown for sometime which ultimately shatters with the ring of the door-bell. A figure approaches when the door is unlocked and to his horror Gregor discovers that the figure has a semblance with his father:

But really, really was that still his father? The same man who had lain feebly buried in bed, when Gregor had set out fortunately on a business trip; who had welcomed him back at night, in his nightshirt and rocking chair; not even properly able to get to his feet any more, but merely raising both arms in token of his pleasure;...And now here he was fairly erect; wearing a smart blue uniform with gold buttons, like the doorman of a bank; over the stiff collar of his coat, the bulge of a powerful double-chin; under the bushy eyebrows an alert and vigorous expression in his black eyes; his habitually unkempt white hair now briskly parted and combed into a shining tidy arrangement. (Kafka, 2007, p.124)

Seeing Gregor on the loose and the subsequent condition of the room and the mother, the father's rage comes down on Gregor. In his attempt to drive Gregor away to his room, his father takes some little apples and starts shooting them as projectiles:

...something whizzed past him, something had been hurled at him, something now rolling around on the floor in front of him. It was an apple; straightaway it was followed by another, Gregor in terror was rooted to the spot; there was no sense in keeping moving, not if his father had decided to have recourse to artillery. (Kafka, 2007, p.125)

One apple hits Gregor at the back and gets stuck there as a constant reminder of his guilt and disobedience. Later the wound festers into an infection and limits his movement. In other words, the apple, hurled by his father, becomes the primary cause of Gregor's fall.

Transformation comes to Gregor in three steps in *The Metamorphosis*. Firstly we notice his loss of voice; next is the change in his physiological reflexes and at the third stage Gregor loses his taste for the regular food. The second and the third stage occur simultaneously in the novella. However, since his transformation, we see, Gregor is pondering over a singular thought that the effects of transformation may be reversed if he somehow manages to sleep again. The transfiguration of the father seems to be the answer of his prayers as he makes the discovery of the transfigured father to his horror only after the second occasion of sleep in the novella. It terrifies Gregor to see the father marching towards him sometimes with a handful of apples, sometimes with a cane, sometimes stamping the ground and emitting hissing sounds like a savage, only to drive him back to his room.

The intimidating stride of his father catches him off guard and rattles him completely as Gregor steps back to save himself from the incoming projectiles hurled by his father. The transfiguration of the father completes the circle of shifting roles of the authority and subject which has its inception in the metamorphosis of Gregor at the beginning:

When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed. He lay on his tough, armoured back...His numerous legs, pathetically frail by contrast to the rest of him, waved feebly before his eyes (Kafka, 2007, p.87).

3. In the Penal Colony:

We notice at the beginning of the short story *In the Penal Colony*, the officer of the penal colony demonstrates 'a strange piece of equipment' (Kafka, 2007, p. 149) to the travelling researcher. The magnificent machine consists of three parts- the lowest part is 'the Bed', the top part is 'the Engraver' and the suspended part in the middle is 'the Harrow'. He proudly presents himself as an envoy of the machine, speaking about its seamless perfection from the inception to the days of its completion. While demonstrating the machine to the traveller, he also supervises an ongoing execution of a condemned man. The execution-machine, according to officer, contains 'the Bed' to hold the body of the condemned person while 'the Harrow' inscribes the sentence on the body incessantly for twelve hours. 'The Bed' which is made of cotton-wool holds the body, revolves and vibrates automatically throughout the process of inscription. The inscription which is written on the body of the condemned needs be installed in 'the Engraver' prior to the execution. Here the inscription for the condemned man is: 'Respect your commanding officer' (Kafka, 2007, p.154) as this person is condemned for disrespecting his superior. Then, he moves on to the role of 'the Harrow' which is made of glass with innumerable long and short needles mounted on it. The long needles inscribe the sentence while the short ones sprinkle water to wash off the blood.

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As the execution is going on the officer urges the traveller not to refute the process of the execution as a primeval practice because for him it is a process of enlightenment which starts only at the sixth hour of the entire process when the convict begins to perceive the retribution through his whole body as the collective mass of spectators beholds it in the eyes of the convict. The new commandant's ascension into power has posed a threat of extinction to both the officer and the machine and he fears only a negative remark from the traveller would be his doom. The officer attempts to persuade the traveller to gain his favourable remark which would be the only way of survival for both him and the machine. However, his aspiration is utterly diminished when the last remnants of his hope fail to gather any affirmation from the traveller and this development leads him to embrace the fate determined for both the man and the machine. He stops the execution, lets the convict go, takes off his uniform, installs a new inscription ('Be Just') in 'the Engraver' and replaces himself in the place of the condemned. While everyone is befuddled, the machine initiates the process but the cog wheels suddenly keep on tumbling down and instead of inscribing it starts jabbing all over the officer. The promised enlightenment which is supposed to come at the sixth hour, switches place with the message of a premature murder as the machine liberates the officer from the prolonged hours of torture. With the promised enlightenment, they both tumble down, mutually transfigured, to the grave.

The trajectory that is set in motion when Georg carries his ailing father into the bedroom provides a substantial picture of the father-son relationship but in his attempt to comfort his father with a blanket, somehow he disrupts the composure and discovers his transfigured father, emerging to life with a death sentence for the son. Gregor Samsa attempts to adapt himself to the bizarre reality; however, his endeavour sets everything around him in chaos with the eventual discovery of his transfigured father approaching from the doorway with striking changes both in his apparel and appearance. These changes formulate the father's role as the authority towards Gregor (the subject) sometimes with a cane, sometimes stamping the ground and sometimes 'emitting hissing sounds like a savage' (Kafka, 2007, p. 104) only to drive him to his room. The first occasion of sleep traps Gregor into the shape of a vermin. Gregor finds it difficult to accept this imposed identity and in his struggle to adapt himself to the situation, he puts everything in disarray and disrupts the order. Now, if we imagine the system of hierarchy as a pyramid, we have to consider Gregor as a part of that pyramid. However, a transformed Gregor is unable to comprehend and accept his role in that system. Moreover, his continuous struggles threaten to dismantle the entire system. Hence a reconfiguration becomes paramount to ensure the stability of the structure. In the novella, it comes with the second occasion of sleep. The second occasion of sleep transfigures his father to his prime, where he emerges to vitality to restore the equilibrium. This transfiguration of roles sets the binary positions of the authority and subject in motion and this continuous configuration and reconfiguration interlinks the two stories and at the same time takes a curious reader to *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, where Kafka describes an imaginary fight between his two hands:

My two hands began a fight. They slammed the book I had been reading and thrust it aside so that it should not be in the way. Me they saluted, and appointed me referee. And an instant later they had locked fingers with each other and were already rushing away over the edge of the table, now to the right, now to the left, according to which of them was bringing most pressure to bear on the other. I never turned my gaze from them. If they are my hands, I must referee fairly, otherwise I shall bring down on myself the agonies of a wrong decision. But my function is not easy, in the darkness between the palms of the hands various holds are brought into play that I must not let

pass unnoticed, and so I press my chin on the table and now nothing escapes me. All my life long I have made a favourite of the right, without meaning the left any harm... How in the long run, left wrist, will you resist the pressure of this powerful right hand? How maintain your girlish finger's stand in the grip of the five others? This seems to me to be no longer a fight, but the natural end of the left hand. Even now it has been pushed to the extreme left of the table, and the right is pounding regularly up and down on it like the piston of an engine. If, confronted with this misery, I had not got the saving idea that these are my own hands and that with a slight jerk I can pull them away from each other and so put an end to the fight and misery- if I had not got this idea, the left hand would have been broken out of the wrist, would have been flung from the table, and then the right, in the wild recklessness of knowing itself the victor, might have leapt, like five-headed Cerberus, straight into my attentive face. Instead the two now lie one on top of the other, the right stroking the back of the left, and I, dishonest referee, nod in approval. (Kafka, 1991, p.11)

The roles do not accept their prefigured positions, they fight, move, configure and transfigure themselves which ultimately find a closure in *In the Penal Colony* when the officer employs all his resources to persuade the remark of the traveller for the survival of the execution system and the execution-machine, much like a father begging for the life of his son, almost in an identical tone of Kafka when he addresses his father in his letters:

If I could get you to acknowledge this, then what would be possible is- not, I think, a new life, we are both much too old for that- but still, a kind of peace; no cessation, but still, a diminution of your unceasing reproaches. (Kafka, 1966, p.2)

Conclusion

I started the paper with the reference of the transfiguration of Jesus with bright rays of light. The officer of *In the Penal Colony* fails to provide a spectacle of enlightenment to his audience and as the change in power threatens the existence of the machine, the executioner attempts to become the saviour. The road to 'cessation' of 'unceasing reproaches' assumes formation as the officer determines to become the event he failed to provide. All the apparent conflicts seem to disappear as he embarks the road towards enlightenment. The machine jabs the officer to death and dismantles itself during the process. The demolition of the man and the machine signifies the collective mutual transfiguration of the father and son, the subject and the authority and the protector and the ward as they embrace each other in the grave.

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Bio-note

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