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On The Representation of 'Worst Case Scenarios' in Kafka's Short Stories "Metamorphosis" And "A Hunger artist"

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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Franz Kafka's death, this document presents some reasons why this author is still one of the most fascinating writers in the German-speaking world. The document examines the general principles of Franz Kafka's literary work together with some fundamental questions such as the relationship between literary representation and reality in two of his most-read stories, "Metamorphosis" and "A Hunger Artist". Some important aspects of literary reception are considered and the theoretical approach is complemented by a more historical and descriptive section, in which Kafka's biography and his works (literary history) are presented. The focus is on the evaluation and interpretative approaches to the two works selected for our analysis, in particular on the progressive description of catastrophes (literary criticism). The sequence of negative events for the protagonists described in Kafka's stories are systematically recorded and processed to provide additional arguments that characterize Kafka today, one hundred years after his death, as an important modern author.

KEYWORDS: Franz Kafka's short stories, 100th anniversary of Kafka's death, worst case scenarios in Kafka's works.

INTRODUCTION

In my short essay, I would like to examine why Franz Kafka, the German-language Czech writer, is still one of the most fascinating writers and certainly one of the most famous of modern German literature. Kafka's works enjoy incredible popularity worldwide. It is rare for an author's name to be associated with the coining of words that then become a permanent part of a language's vocabulary. In his case, however, the terms "Kafkaesque" or "Kafkism" have been adopted into the lexicon of other languages, not only about his writings, but also to describe absurd, frightening, hallucinatory and inexplicable situations or circumstances "having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality" (Merriam-Webster). The critical literature on his works is very extensive and constantly searching for the "key" to his metaphors and the interpretation of his "message". In this document, we will first look at the most important aspects of literary reception, then present a brief biography of the author, and finally analyze his widely read novels, "Metamorphosis" and "A Hunger Artist," one of his last stories. In conclusion, we will make some remarks about what Kafka still represents today, one hundred years after his death.

1. LITERARY RECEPTION AND HYPOTHESES

Franz Kafka, author of the three unfinished novels "The Trial" (1925), "The Castle" (1926) and "America" (1927), as well as numerous short stories, was posthumously published by his loyal friend Max Brod, together with most of his works (Anz, 2009: 23-24). The stories he invented take place in an absurd world where the protagonists are unable to free themselves from a cruel and inevitable fate. There are very many different interpretations or rather attempts to interpret his works. Entire books have been written about him that could fill several libraries and Kafka is an almost extreme case of an author who wrote less than was later written about him and his works.

But why write books and essays *about* literature? Writing about literature means, first and foremost, the attempt to make literature readable by showing what is hidden in the text, and also because it is a bit like not having read a text if you read it without having understood it. The reasons for interpreting literature are therefore very complex. The first is certainly the desire to explain the content of a work to the audience, to translate an author's text into a language that is accessible to the readers.

To do this, we generally have to decipher and solve all the puzzles, translate situations into situations that we know and are familiar with, and finally extract the hidden meanings of the text by determining its content, describing its form, and interpreting its message. If we want to translate the message of a complicated text into a simpler, more understandable language, this translation act is not as easy as it might seem. For example, to understand Kafka's work, I need some basic reference points regarding the circumstances of his life. If I don't have this information, I presumably won't be able to understand the themes he addresses. To decode the message and symbols of his texts, I also have to take into account their language, the content and style of his works, and, of course, the historical and social references of the time in which Kafka lived. The theme, plot, and choice of language also generally depend on the author's history, context, personality, intentions, and ideas. To understand the text and fully grasp the author's message, the work itself often provides little useful information. Knowing some of the author's thoughts and the assessments of the conditions of his life is possible thanks to his diaries and letters. Accounts of his education, travels and friendships can help guide our understanding of the text and the author (Kafka, 1976: 158). The psychological approach is certainly an equally important criterion. The central aspect is the analysis of the author's background. We follow the development of the author's artistic process and see it as the result of numerous processes and conflicts in his consciousness because the work certainly reflects the author's life, his



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concerns, problems, joys, desires, and fears, as well as his ideas. Moreover, reception itself is subject to social changes and modifications, as circumstances change over the centuries. The readership and interest in an author's work change, but so does the understanding of what he has written.

2. THE AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

In a multi-part documentary film, the life of Franz Kafka was retold on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of his death on German and Swiss television (2024), based on the latest research and findings. The main character (played by actor Joel Basman) speaks almost exclusively in sentences from Kafka's works, without sounding artificial and always organically integrated into the dialogues. In the course of the biographical documentation, some very interesting information about the author is revealed: for example, that Kafka was *not* the reclusive genius who was posthumously mystified. Let us now look at some aspects that decisively shaped both his personal life and his life as an author.

Franz Kafka was born on July 3, 1883, the eldest son of the German-speaking Jewish merchant Hermann Kafka (1852-1931) and his wife Julie Löwy (1856-1934) in Prague, in the house "Zum Turm" (lit. 'The Tower'). Franz was an only son, as his two brothers Georg (1885-87) and Heinrich (1887/88) had died young, and he was the brother of three sisters: Elli (1889), Valli (1890) and Ottla (1892), all three of whom died in Auschwitz. His father came from a Jewish butcher's family and his mother from a German-speaking, bourgeois Jewish family. The family moved frequently.

According to Kafka's diary entries, Kafka's father was an angry tyrant and when Franz introduced him to a Jewish friend, he was furious: "You bring vermin into my house". Yet the Kafka family itself was Jewish. The father also disapproved of his son's literary work. In return, he bought Franz an asbestos factory against his will.

Franz lived in his parent's house until he was 32 years old when he decided to rent his first room of his own on *Long Lane*. In 1916, he moved into a room in a small house that Ottla had prepared for him on Prague's *Alchemist Lane*. It was here that, between then and April 1917, he wrote a series of parabolic stories that would become the volume *A Country Doctor* (including *Up in the Gallery*, *The Next Village*, *An Imperial Message*).

2.1 GERMAN LANGUAGE AND JEWISH CULTURE

From the age of six until 1893, Kafka attended the German Boys' School on Fleischmarkt, followed by the *German Grammar School in Kinsky Palace* in the Old Town of Prague from 1893 to 1901. From 1901 to 1906 he was enrolled at the German University in Prague. He studied chemistry for the first two semesters, then German studies. Eventually, he changed his plans and decided to study law because he feared that his German studies would influence his projects as a writer too much. His education in the German language was crucial for the writer Kafka, who wrote in German and whose works were translated later from German into Czech.

Over the years, his interest in Jewish history and Zionism grew. In 1917 Kafka began to learn Hebrew. Between the *winter of 1922 and the spring of 1923*, Kafka, who was often bedridden due to illness, began an intensive study of the Hebrew language. He even planned several times to go to Palestine. Between August and September 1922, he moved with his sister Ottla to Schelesen and began attending the "Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums" (College for the Science of Judaism) and devoting himself to the study of the Hebrew language.

2.2 FRIENDS AND TRAVEL

His great friend and mentor was Max Brod, the man who published Franz Kafka's works after his death. He probably invented the story that Kafka ordered him in a letter to destroy all his writings after his death, especially those not yet published, and not to reprint those already known. Perhaps this was a "marketing strategy" and Brod wanted readers not to forget Kafka. The two had met in 1902 at one of Brod's lectures on Schopenhauer. Kafka, who was sitting in the audience, asked to talk to Brod. The two of them ended up walking around Prague all night, passionately discussing philosophy and social issues. Kafka frequently attended the theater performances of a group of Jewish actors from the East who were based in Prague until 1912, and his friendship with the actor Jizchak Löwy is also documented. His literary friends were Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Werfel (also born in Prague), and Robert Musil, who visited Kafka on April 14, 1916, in Prague.

In September 1909, he went on a trip to Riva del Garda and Brescia with Max and Otto Brod. In 1911, he undertook several business trips to northern Bohemia and pleasure trips with Max Brod to Switzerland, Italy, and France. In 1912, he traveled with Max Brod to Weimar, followed by a three-week stay at the "Jungborn" nursing home in the Harz region. He also visited Paris and Berlin with Max Brod.

2.3 HIS WORKING LIFE

He wrote mainly late in the evening and at night, and required a quiet environment to do so, something he did not have in his parental home. In 1906, Kafka worked in the law office of his uncle, Dr. Richard Löwy, and passed his state exam: on June 18, 1906, he completed his law degree. Until September 1907, he worked as a trainee lawyer at the court in Prague. From October 1907



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to July 1908 he had a temporary job at the insurance company (“Allgemeine Versicherungsgesellschaft”). He also attended a course at the Commercial Academy in Prague.

At the end of July 1908, he joined the Workers' Compensation Board of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague as a temporary official, where he held the following positions: 1910 draftsman, 1913 deputy secretary, 1920 secretary, 1922 senior secretary. His work was highly valued. Thanks to his keen mind, Kafka always found the right arguments to solve tricky legal cases. If nothing else worked, his colleagues in the company would often say, “Let Kafka solve the problem”.

2.4 KAFKA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH WOMEN

Kafka's first relationship was with the lawyer Felice Bauer, whom he met on August 13, 1912, at Max Brod's house and with whom he was engaged – with interruptions – for five years. The lively correspondence between the two lovers is very famous; it has been published in a book of over 1,000 pages. But Kafka's hesitation to marry Felice is also famous. He became engaged to Felice several times and canceled his planned marriage just as often until she gave him an ultimatum. Since Kafka still hesitated, Felice made a clean break at Christmas 1917: when the two met in Prague, they decided to break off their engagement for good and never to see each other again.

In 1918, Kafka began a correspondence with the Czech journalist Milena Jesenská. The writer visited her in Vienna and took the opportunity to tell her about a 100-page letter that was intended for his father but was never sent. A few years later, Milena moved to Prague, where Kafka gave her his “Diaries” from the years 1910 to 1920, which she translated into Czech. Jesenská addressed these words to the writer: “We all believe in your invention of the poor weakling - but you are not willing to compromise!” The last meeting between the two took place in June 1922.

In 1919, Kafka met Julie Wohryzeck, who came from a Czech Jewish family of craftsmen, in Schelesen and became engaged to her. However, this engagement was also dissolved the following year.

Between July and August 1923, Kafka took a trip to the Müritz on the Baltic Sea with his sister Elli and her children. It was here that he met Dora Diamant (or Diamant), at a center for Jewish culture. On September 24, 1923, she moved from Diamant to Berlin. Dora Diamant was a Polish nanny raised in the old Jewish traditions, with whom the writer had an affair during the last months of his life before she died at the age of 40 after a long illness. Diamant came into possession of numerous Kafka texts, which were confiscated years later by Hitler's Gestapo. And because the Gestapo never throws anything away, Kafka's last notebooks are probably in the Federal Archives in Berlin. It is not certain that they will ever be found, not least because the Gestapo's disorganized documentation runs to nine kilometers of paper.

2.5 SERIOUS ILLNESS

Kafka's health problems began in August 1916 with a severe hemorrhage that forced him to return to his parents' house. On September 4, 1916, he was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis. In 1918, Kafka moved to Zürau (North Bohemia) to live with his sister Ottla, who ran a small farm. Between April and May 1918, after his return from Zürau, Kafka resumed his office work. Business trips, gardening, and taking care of his health followed. Two years later, between October and November 1918, Kafka fell seriously ill and traveled to Schelesen (North Bohemia) for a cure. In 1919, shortly after he had returned to work, Kafka fell ill again and later stayed in Meran to recover. After returning to work in 1920, Kafka again left the office for health reasons. From December to August 1921, he took another health trip to the High Tatras. In 1921, Kafka returned to the office for two months but in November he was continuously on leave for health reasons. In January 1922 Kafka suffered a severe nervous breakdown and spent three weeks in Špindlerův Mlýn (Giant Mountains). At the end of February of the same year, when he began to work on his novel “The Castle”, he was interrupted by another nervous breakdown. On July 1, 1922, he withdrew definitely from professional life and spent some time in the spa town of Planá (West Bohemia), where his sister Ottla had a small summer residence.

In February 1924, his health deteriorated. On March 17, 1924, Kafka returned to Prague to live with Max Brod, where he wrote his last story “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People”. In March 1924, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis (laryngeal tuberculosis), and on April 19, he was transferred first to the Wiener Wald sanatorium in Lower Austria, then to the University Clinic in Vienna, and finally to the Dr. Hoffmann-Sanatorium in Kierling near Klosterneuburg, where he was cared for by Dora Diamant and her doctor friend Robert Klopstock, whom he had met in 1921. Franz Kafka died on June 3, 1924. His funeral took place on June 11 in the Jewish Cemetery in the Prague district of Straschnitz.

2.6 HIS WORKS (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)

Kafka's first literary work, the short story “Description of a Struggle”, was written between 1904 and 1905. It was during this period that he first began meeting regularly with his friends Oskar Baum, Max Brod, and Felix Weltsch. In 1907, he wrote “Wedding Preparations in the Country”, a novel fragment. In 1908, the first publication appeared in the magazine “Hyperion”. In 1909, he published “The Aeroplanes at Brescia” in the “Deutsche Zeitung Bohemia”. In 1910, he began writing his “Diaries”. In 1911 he wrote his “Travel Diaries”. He also begins writing his novel “Amerika (Der Verschollene; ‘The Missing’)” and devotes himself to the preparations for the first book publication “Contemplation” (including 18 prose pieces), published by Rowohlt in December. On September 20, 1912, Kafka began writing “Letters to Felice”; he then resumed works on “Amerika/The Missing” (2nd version, 1st chapter *The Stoker* and five further chapters were written by December 1912). Between November and December



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1912, he wrote the short story “(The)Metamorphosis”, which was published in 1915. *On December 4, 1912*, Kafka reads from “The Judgment” for the first time at a Prague writers' evening. *In August 1914*, he wrote the novel “The Trial” for the first time alone in his room, in Prague on Bilek-Gasse (in the house of his sister Valli), then in Nerudagasse (in the house of his sister Elli). *In October of the same year*, he writes the short story “In the Penal Colony”. *In mid-January 1915*, Kafka worked on several novels at the same time and interrupted “The Trial”. In Munich, *in November 1916*, Kafka publicly reads from his novel “In the Penal Colony”. *In 1916* he wrote “The Zürau Aphorisms”. *In 1918* he published “In the Penal Colony”. *In November of the same year*, he began writing “Letter to His Father”, which was followed in 1919 by the publication of “A Country Doctor”, a collection of short stories written between 1917 and 1919. *Between January and February 1920* the aphorism collection “He” was published. This is followed by a series of parabolic short stories such as “Homecoming” and “A Little Fable”. Already in 1918, Kafka began writing a new diary. The short stories “First Sorrow”, “A Hunger Artist” and “Investigations of a Dog” are written. Between 1923 and 1924, Kafka wrote the short stories “A Little Woman” and “Burrow”. Despite his strenuous and time-consuming profession and his serious illness, he has achieved an extraordinary feat by writing all these works. In the following sections, we will examine two of his perhaps most “popular” short stories: “Metamorphosis” (3.) and “A Hunger Artist” (4.) to focus on the catastrophically development of the plots including the fatal endings of both protagonists. Finally, possible interpretations of both stories are presented and the results are summarized in a conclusion.

3. METAMORPHOSIS

Kafka's perhaps the most famous short story is called ‘*Metamorphosis*’, and was written *between November and December 1912*. It was published in 1915 and Carl Sternheim who received the *Fontane Prize* passed the award money on to Kafka.

3.1 STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The 62-page story is divided into three parts of roughly equal length and describes from the first page the life of the young traveling salesman Gregor, who one morning upon waking transforms into a large insect. Kafka divided the story into three parts of approximately equal length, similar to the stories “Description of a Struggle” with three unequal parts and “Wedding Preparations in the Country” with two approximately equal parts; this division is also graphically marked with Roman numerals. The middle part is a few pages longer. And what he originally called a “little story” became “Metamorphosis”, Kafka's most extensive novella.

The novella is the story of a young man, Gregor, a traveling salesman who, for no apparent reason, turns into a giant insect. This transformation radically changes his life, but also the lives of his parents and his sister Grete, with whom he lives in a large, middle-class apartment. Apart from the last scene, the story takes place in the Samsa family's apartment.

Until his transformation into an insect, the protagonist is the only member of the family who works and thus supports them. He is also the head of the household, but he is also the one who takes care of his sister and makes plans for the family and himself, while after his transformation he increasingly becomes an unwelcome guest in his own home, so much so that the family would prefer to get rid of him. Alongside this development, the father becomes the dominant figure, influencing the fate of the family and ultimately winning the unconditional affection and sympathy of his wife and daughter (Politzer, after a few months of living as an insect, Gregor dies.

Part One

The first part of the story is set in the small room of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who hears the alarm clock one morning and finds himself “transformed in his bed into a monstrous parasite”. At first, he thinks it is a perceptual error and is not worried about the transformation, but rather about missing his train and not being able to go to work. As he tries to get out of bed and reassure his parents and sister Grete through the locked door, the lawyer from the company where he works comes to his house. Together with him, the family members try to persuade Gregor to open the door. Gregor, who still hasn't gotten used to his new body, finally manages to get up with great difficulty and open the door to his room. The public prosecutor is shocked at the sight of him and flees the apartment, while his family panics. The father tries to push Gregor into his room with a stick, injuring him in the process. Gregor wakes up in the first sentence and finds himself transformed into a giant insect. He immediately thinks that he is still asleep or under the stressful influence of his job, which forces him to get up at four o'clock every morning to catch the train at the station. He therefore decides to sleep a little longer, but he can't. He sees from his alarm clock, which is on the dresser in front of his bed, that he is already behind his normal schedule. Gregor is obsessed by the passage of time, which he feels is controlling him. “It was already half past six and the hands were moving quietly, actually it was even later, it was just before a quarter to eight.” Even later when he reflects: “I must have got out of bed before a quarter to seven.”

Part Two

As the story unfolds, Gregor slowly gets used to his new body. His mind, or rather his spirit, has not changed and he is plagued by pangs of conscience towards his family. Until now, he was the only one supporting the family with his sole salary. The family manages to overcome the difficulties that arise from this new situation. Gregor, who has been supporting the family with pure self-denial since the collapse of his father's company five years earlier, now has to be fed like an animal by his sister in her room while their father looks for a job as a clerk in a bank. Father and daughters find work, and even the mother manages to earn some money as a seamstress by working at home. As the family becomes increasingly independent of Gregor, he is pushed further



and further into isolation by his family. Although he has previously provided for the family and acted as the head of the household, he is now seen as an enormous burden. His relationship with his sister Grete deteriorates in particular. When Gregor begins to crawl on the walls and ceiling, his sister decides one day two months have already passed to clear out his room and calls on his mother for help. But Gregor, who remembers his human past, tries to save at least one picture on the wall. The mother still hasn't gotten used to the way her son looks, so she faints at some point, and while he tries to help her, the father re-enters the apartment. When he sees his wife faint, he blames Gregor and hits him, throwing apples at him. One of the apples hits him in the back, where it remains, and causes a serious wound as the story unfolds. From this moment on, the situation escalates.

Part Three

Gregor suffers from the wound and eats almost nothing for over a month. Nevertheless, he manages to participate a little in family life, because the living room door is open in the evenings. However, the conflict breaks out when Gregor shows himself to the three tenants who live in the family's apartment to help with the rent. One evening they ask Grete, who wanted to send Gregor to the conservatory, to play the violin with them. Attracted by the music, the brother tries to approach his sister through the open door and is discovered by one of the tenants. The three men leave the house in disgust and vacate their room, while the annoyed family struggles for silence and the sister wants nothing more than to get rid of the "monster" that is disturbing the family so much and causing her nothing but trouble. Gregor, plagued by his usual pangs of conscience, flees, drags himself to his room in pain, and decides to die.

The new and determined servant who has taken the place of the previous two, collects the body the next morning and informs the family. In the final scene of the third and final part of the story, the parents and sister leave the apartment together ("after months of not doing so") and take the tram out of town to the countryside to discuss their prospects, which now look better and better than before.

3.2 LITERARY RECEPTION

The structure of the story is as striking and unusual as its content. It consists of three parts, like a drama, but the catastrophe is already evident in the first sentence of the story and thus anticipated: "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin." (Kafka, 2017: 28).

As for the story, literary critics are divided into different interpretations stating that the plot seems like the dream or rather nightmare of a person in a feverish state (Abraham, 1998: 42;). Others claim it seems to be a fantasy, in which the author is turned into an insect to escape his professional obligations (Anz, 2009:78). Is no doubt that Kafka followed the tradition of the grotesque fairy tale of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Gogol, or Dostoyevsky, but the reader never understands what or whom exactly this monster represents or symbolizes (Beicken, 1998: 152ff.). Using the insights of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, some have even tried to give Kafka's works, and of course, the short story "Metamorphosis", a psychological and autobiographical meaning and in particular reveals a father-son conflict (111-113). Other critics see a religious meaning or a socio-political motif with a critical note toward the social system of the time (154ff.). Kafka was a Jew who was very interested in Jewish culture and language and sympathized with socialist ideology, especially in his later years.

4. A HUNGER ARTIST

The motif of hunger is a recurring theme in literature, as in Kafka's 1922 story "A Hunger Artist" (Rees 2016). Published just a few years after the end of the First World War, this story is centered around this motif. To provide a better understanding of the story, the terms "hunger" and "hunger art" will first be briefly explained. The story is then presented, with a focus on the depiction of hunger and on the role of the characters in the story, especially that of the protagonist (the hunger artist) and his self-perception.

4.1 HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND MEDICAL CONTEXT

In the affluent parts of the world, hunger exists only on the fringes of society. Most of us have never experienced real hunger. What is hunger? It is the feeling of needing to eat and it is associated with an empty stomach, but triggered by a lack of nutrients in the tissues or a low blood sugar level. It can be alleviated or eliminated by introducing nutrients (food) directly into the bloodstream. The control centers in the hypothalamus that respond to blood sugar levels play an essential role in regulating food intake. When the stomach is full of food, it expands and transmits satiety to the brain. On the other hand, however, the sight of appetizing food promotes food intake, which can even exceed the physiologically necessary amount.

The phenomenon of voluntary food deprivation has existed since ancient times. However, the reasons for this practice have changed. In the Middle Ages, people starved for lack of food or religious reasons. This habit of religiously motivated food deprivation was mainly postponed to a certain time of the year and is still observed today. The German term for this practice is "Fasten", which means "fasting" in English. All world religions recognize fasting as a means of inner reflection. For Christians, the most well-known period of fasting is the 40 days before Easter Sunday. This period is derived from the biography of Jesus Christ and his experiences in the desert. The calculation is based on the full moon and is not fixed in the calendar.

The context of fasting has changed throughout history. Some public artists abstained from food for an exceptionally long period (up to 83 days). These hunger artists were already known in the Middle Ages. Later, they became very common in Europe



and America in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, as they went without food for long periods to entertain paying spectators. This phenomenon reached its peak in the 1880s, and the heyday of fasting art lasted about 20 years, from 1880 to 1900. In a commercial context, a real job title developed (Diezemann 2006). However, since the word “art” is derived from “skill” and this “profession” would therefore require a certain amount of talent, it is questionable whether “starving” or fasting can be defined as art. The connection between starvation and art becomes more understandable when, as in the expressions “artist of living” or “art of living”, the artist is interpreted as “a person who skillfully masters life or, in this case, fasting or starvation”². Thus, a hunger artist would be someone who “controls hunger and even overcomes it to a certain extent”.

Hunger artists earned their living by performing in markets and squares. They also attracted the interest of doctors, so their hunger experiments were often carried out under their strict supervision. This was an important advantage, as the public was very skeptical. There was also a certain competition. A good performance was therefore very important and medical supervision contributed to the credibility of a hunger artist. If a performance turned out to be a fraud, the artist risked prosecution or even conviction. Competition between hunger artists was also based on the duration of food deprivation: the longer the food deprivation lasted, the greater the artist's reputation. However, the physical restrictions often prevented the artists from achieving the highest reputation. To avoid the risk of death, they sometimes had to end their food deprivation or fasting experiments prematurely. During the demonstrations, a large cage was displayed on a stage, in which the hunger artist was located. Sometimes the hunger artists also performed in restaurants, where they were used to entertain the guests. This form of performance was particularly macabre, as the temptation to eat was much greater than in a market due to the smells and the food of the guests. Sometimes a blackboard was placed in front of the cages, on which the days of fasting were noted. This allowed the audience to see the success of the hunger artists.

In English-language literature, the motif of the hunger artist can be found in modern stories such as “Wu Yongfang, the Hunger Artist” by the Chinese author Hu Fang (2010). In his story, the hunger artist tries to draw attention to social injustices such as poverty and hunger through his actions, which are reminiscent of Kafka's character.

4.2 STRUCTURE AND ANALYSIS

The title of the story is a fusion of hunger and art. This fusion seems unusual in today's world, since, as mentioned in Section 4.1, hunger (or fasting) is no longer seen as something artistic, but as suffering. In the past, artists who fasted were an attraction. Yet also in the time in which the story takes place the “hunger artist saw himself abandoned by the crowd of pleasure seekers”, as the Kafka quote suggests (Kafka, 2017: 22). The art of fasting is categorized in the very first sentence, which states: “In the last decades interest in hunger artists has declined considerably” (p. 18). This first sentence of the story immediately questions the Hunger artist's right to exist, because the heyday of Hunger art is over and no one is interested in it anymore. In a sense, the tragic end of the Hunger artist and his art is announced from the outset.

The story is essentially divided into two parts. The first part covers about two-thirds of the text and describes the ‘past’ of Hunger art, while the second part exhibits the Hunger artist in a circus, where he eventually dies. The protagonist, whose name is not known to the reader, sits in a straw cage and wears only black tights, looking pale.

The only object that distinguishes the artist from the animal is a clock. It symbolizes and documents the art that he has been practicing for several weeks. It is the only reason why he has an audience. The clock also shows the transience of existence and symbolizes the success of the hunger artist. In the story, he ignores the clock and is content to keep his eyes fixed forward with his eyes closed.

The cage also has an ambivalent meaning for the hunger artist. On the one hand, it is his prison, but on the other hand, it protects him from the outside world and the public. Sometimes, when requested, he pushes one arm through the bars and allows visitors to touch his emaciated body by stretching out his thin arms. Thus, the visitors can verify whether the hunger artist is credible or not. Despite the parallels to the Brothers Grimm fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel”, the audience has no intention of eating the hunger artist at any time. Unlike Hansel, who gives the witch a finger instead of a bone, the hunger artist reacts differently. He does not deceive his audience but lets them feel his extremities. As for the cage, Neumann compared it to the familiar situation in Kafka's novel (1984).

The story then describes the guards who are supposed to ensure that the hungry artist does not eat. The cage is constantly guarded by guards chosen by the audience. They have no special qualifications, but according to Kafka, they are “vulgar butchers” who are supposed to make sure that the hungry artist does not eat. Kafka's grandfather was also a butcher, which prompted him to become a vegetarian. This profession was therefore negatively connoted by the author. The hunger artist is cared for with a certain lack of concern by various people, although he prefers to be closely observed, as he does not intend to deceive the audience to legitimize his art.

The impresario is an ambivalent but important figure in this fairy tale. He is a figure who gets the most out of the art of fasting for himself and the hunger artist. Only through successful presentation and good advertising can money be made from the art of fasting. Yet despite all efforts, public interest is waning. “The art of fasting has gone out of fashion,” Kafka writes.

² See DWDS under the reference word <Lebenskünstler>.



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The impresario is responsible for the presentation and legitimization of the art of fasting, and it was he who limited the fasting period of the hunger artist to 40 days. This period is not arbitrary. Historically, this specific number can be explained by the fact that public interest could only be maintained during this period. This explanation sounds plausible, but it is certainly not the only reason for choosing this number. It is certainly no coincidence that there is a connection to the 40-day fasts of Christ, Moses, and Elijah. Perhaps the impresario deliberately chose this period to provoke a comparison between the starving artist and the biblical figures. The 40 days would then serve as legitimization: just as Jesus fasted for 40 days, so will the hunger artist. However, the impresario could not allow him to fast longer, as the audience would not approve of anyone taking the place of Jesus.

In the story, the hunger artist extends the period of fasting without ever exceeding the fateful 40 days. However, it is not stated how long he has fasted because he can no longer remember. Furthermore, the number of days was not written on the blackboard next to his cage. So there is a discrepancy between the perceived time and the time he spent fasting. The audience has turned away from the hunger artist and his cage was placed in the circus on the way to the stables. The change in audience taste also took place in reality. In times of crisis and famine, no one wanted to see a hunger artist. The problem of famine was still too present.

Before his death, the hunger artist asked for forgiveness and explained that he simply wanted to be admired by everyone. When the overseer assured him that everyone admired him, the starving man replied that this was not the case and confessed that he only fasted because he could not find any food in life that tasted good to him.

4.3 LITERARY RECEPTION

Kafka's short story has been interpreted in many different ways. It is quite possible that the hunger problems prevalent in his time led him to write this story. Since he suffered from anorexia, many agree that he described probably his own experiences with hunger.

Some others want to establish a connection between the "Hunger Artist" and Kafka himself or find parallels to his position as a writer who did not recognize his achievements and works or who found it very difficult to be recognized as an artist or writer (Rubinstein 1952). In his diary, Kafka wrote: "My main nourishment comes from other roots in other airs, [...] these roots are equally miserable but necessary for life" (Kafka 1976). Like his protagonist, Kafka also seeks nourishment outside the earthly world. However, the nourishment described here is probably spiritual and not physically existing nourishment.

Another possible interpretation is that the artist developed fasting as a process of self-discovery. According to Eschweiler, Kafka's goal in telling this story was to question art itself (Rubinstein, 1952: 13; Eschweiler, 1984: 201). Consequently, the message of art is a perspective on the fulfillment of life in death (pp. 209-211). Art is practically a tool to give people hope. Since the public has not seen the end of the fast and thus the redemption, the question remains as to how fasting or hunger can give people hope. Besides the fact that the hunger artist refuses to eat and starves, this situation also seems to represent a rejection of luxury. The starving artist voluntarily renounces all worldly goods. He even renounces his freedom, as he is kept in a cage and is considered a dangerous animal. The depiction of the protagonist in the cage frames the story, and in the end, the starving, weak, and old artist is replaced by a young, wild predator, a black panther. The story is certainly a kind of allegory of our culture as well as a pictorial representation of the abstract concept of hunger (Rolleston 1995). The attitude of the guards is also open to criticism because although they were supposed to protect the artist from hunger, they allowed him to eat. However, this attitude is also characterized by charity and the instinct not to let others go hungry (Rees, 2016: 46). At the time when Kafka wrote the story of the fasting artist, attitudes towards hunger were different, because at that time, shortly after the end of the First World War, hunger was a constant companion and had also become a mass phenomenon.

In today's world, the art of fasting no longer exists in the artistic sense of the time. Hunger, referred to as *Fasten* in German and as *Fasting* in English, has disappeared from public view and exists almost exclusively in closed or private spaces. Nevertheless, there are signs of a disturbed relationship with food in our society. Hunger still exists today: an estimated 750 million people in the world suffer from chronic malnutrition and acute food shortages and are therefore constantly hungry. Paradoxically, in the Western industrialized countries in particular, where hunger only appears in the news, there are two self-induced hunger syndromes: anorexia and bulimia. This means that in our society, hunger is only a symptom of psychological illnesses. In developed industrialized countries, there is also another phenomenon that is becoming increasingly evident: obesity. There is an enormous imbalance in the distribution of food in the world as evidenced by the symptoms of real eating disorders or eating diseases.

It is also clear that there is an imbalance in the distribution of food, similar to Kafka's story. On one side of the world, people live in abundance and can choose what they want to eat, while on the other side, people starve due to a lack of food, as in Kafka's story.

Kafka's fasting artist is a "profoundly contradictory and ambivalent figure, for he embodies both the rejection of the world and the thirst (or desire) for the world" (Kurz, 1980), because he could not find the food he likes. The young panther, who replaces the hungry man at the end of the story, has been the subject of much debate in literature and considered the "the epitome of the life the artist has rejected" (Rubinstein, 1952: 18). While some see his vitality as a sign of *joie de vivre*, others find him threatening and interpret him as a prophecy of the dark times to come (Rees, 2016 : 80).



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5. RESULTS

In “Metamorphoses” the dramatic conflict develops from the very beginning. A person who wakes up in the morning after restless dreams and turns into a monstrous parasite, lying on his back and barely able to move, who misses the start of work and tries to crawl away, and only gets more questions than answers, and “A Hunger Artist” is a story about a nameless person who is locked up in a small cage with a bit of straw and ends up dying completely neglected. It turns out that the parameters are always extremely pessimistic (“worst case”) and that, based on all the situations examined, no other development possibility (forecast corridor) is recognizable for the protagonists, apart from the final death. Likewise, the final part of a (classic) drama, the catastrophe is the decisive turning point of the plot, which (tragically) resolves the dramatic conflict.

At the end of his short story “A Hunger Artist”, when the protagonist who is caught in a cage is placed like cattle to the slaughter, the scene has elements of operetta: for this last act, two guardians in “blouses, pale and fat, with top hats, seemingly motionless” appear as “tenors”. But nowhere is indecency erased, tension reduced, and Kafka's story refuses to achieve that happy equilibrium in which the ridiculous is exposed, the rule of law is enforced, and common sense triumphs. On the contrary, Kafka pushes the plot to the point where the imbalance becomes permanent (Mitchell 1987).

In both stories, the author describes a world that has been transformed into a state of emergency in all its aspects and will be unpredictable. The darker the fate, it seems, the more grotesque the setting; in Kafka's work the one cannot be separated from the other, and very often the events seem to come from a dusty chest. In a way, both texts are barometers of the invisible. There is no reconciliation, no harmony, no happy endings. As if to suggest the opposite, Kafka piles up impossibilities in his writings, he piled up incommunicability, and he indulged in endless procrastination. Aspects of his life such as “marriage attempts”, “bachelor disasters” and family conflicts can be found there. When literature and biography merge as Kafka described: “My novel is me, my stories are me”), this is proof that it is impossible to live. Kafka's texts go in this direction because they embrace the paradoxical, tear contradictions from their moorings and drive them into infinity.

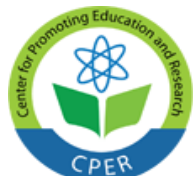
The author himself indeed placed a great deal of emphasis on stylistic precision, both in the way he narrated facts and in the language he used. Since he lived almost exclusively on a German island in Prague, he also used a neutral language that lacked regional influences or literary role models, as is common among authors who use the language of the country in which they live (Nekula 2003). Critics agree that Kafka fully achieved his goal of using a neutral and distant language, undoubtedly influenced by several autobiographical aspects such as his background, his family relationships, the isolated environment of the Jewish quarter of Prague where his family lived, and the particular atmosphere that prevailed in the city of Prague at the beginning of the 20th century, his German-speaking literary friends, his interest both in the theater and in Jewish language and culture, his working environment as a lawyer, his discussions with friends about the social conditions of the time and, on a personal level, his phobias, insecurities, and habits and of course, his serious illness.

Kafka himself spoke of a “petite littérature”, a literature that is not the mediation of culture, that is not the representation of the mind, that is not the symbol of higher education. Kafka drew inspiration from Yiddish literature and the writings of Eastern Jewish communities: the literature of a minority that asserts itself in seclusion and ghettos. With its “liveliness”, “unprincipledness” and “popularity”, the “petite littérature” thus intervenes in “literature”. It ignores the representative corpus of the work, the author, and tradition, and itself provides a reading guide for Kafka's texts. Kafka's texts are not to be commented on, but used; they can hardly be explained, but they can be quoted to explain the agonies of some individuals who are caught in hopeless situations with no way out, and thus trace the moments when individuals are completely helpless at the mercy of institutions (including their own family) or society and ultimately suffer a miserable fate. At least that is what Kafka's short stories suggest. They describe the human condition and the thoughts and environment of the powerless (Politzer, 1966: 41). They do not provide an overview, but a meticulous examination of details.

6. DISCUSSION

Understanding and misunderstanding often coincide, and no other author has attracted so many literary interpreters with this contradiction, this resistance to understanding, and even the impossibility of only “one” interpretation. The author is therefore also considered resistant to interpretation or simply not open to interpretation (Schmidt, 2007: 19; Henel, 1967: 251). There is certainly no single key to reading Kafka's work, which has become the epitome of what could be called the erratic and all-too-familiar literature of this century. In his works, Kafka violates the norms of high literature and deals it severe blows. What is literature? Where does it come from? What is its *raison d'être*? Kafka drags the great genres onto the sterile ground. The sad heroes of these stories are inconspicuous and insignificant silhouettes of normality. There is no development, there is no elaboration of these figures, there is no general motivation for the various actions, there is no step-by-step plan, and there is no added value in the sense of meaning.

From the ancient epic, only the Odyssey remains; from tragedy, an uncomfortable fate; from the bourgeois novel, a mediocre type; and the artist's narrative, an inconsolable artist (Reich-Ranicki, 2002:12). Where the novel has established meaningful biographies and exemplary characters, Kafka sticks to the banal, inferior narrative styles that are closer to the sub-romance, the



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adventure novel, and the detective story than to the *Bildungsroman*, with its everyday confusions, small cruelties, persecuted virtues and unalterable sequences of episodes that never end well and always end very badly.

7. CONCLUSION

In summary, Franz Kafka remains a particularly relevant example of the various attempts to interpret literary works. There is hardly another German-language author for whom such diverse and comprehensive interpretations have been undertaken. Aspects of great importance here include the different interpretative approaches and knowledge of the circumstances of his era and those of his environment.

Perhaps it is precisely his enigmatic nature that arouses the interest of the reader, who can never be sure of having found a complete interpretation of his works. In fact, according to our hypothesis, what fascinates readers most about him is the fact that he is one of the (first and one of the) few authors to allow pessimistic visions and hyper-negative developments to occur in his works. Just when you think it can't get any worse, these fearful premonitions are surpassed in Kafka's writing. It turns out that the parameters in his plots are always *extremely* pessimistic ("worst-case scenarios"), which is probably a crucial aspect of why this author continues to fascinate so many people today.

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