Bodies beneath the sheets: the bed as an extension of the body in Kafka.

> "Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt."[1]

Here, in the opening lines of *Die Verwandlung* (1915), Kafka delays the alliterative couplet to the end of the sentence, drawing our attention immediately to the transformed body of the protagonist. Much of Kafka's general fascination with the body throughout his works may be related to the fin de siècle "cult of the body"[2], a trend in which Kafka actively and enthusiastically participated. Part of this corporeal preoccupation included an appreciation of Hellenic visions of the usually male physique, and so it is significant that the bodies that do not fulfil the ancient beauty standards, perhaps owing to sickness or deformity, often find themselves hidden away beneath the sheets. In the imagination, characters occupying beds may appear entirely consumed by it; close up, they merely appear to be floating heads, the duvet covering the worst of their bodily imperfections. Kafka works hard to pull the mental image away from the bed and focus attention back on the body, but this often leads to the bed being overlooked as a source of bodily empowerment. For instance, when Herr Bendemann rears up on his sickbed and sentences his son to death, our attention falls on the sudden power attained by the dying old man. And what is it about the Stoker's cabin bed that Karl Roßmann finds so attractive as to get into it with him? The common denominator underpinning these scenes is the bed.

Kafka's beds are versatile, hosting a variety of scenes, but what all of these scenes have in common is that the bodies beneath the sheets are in a state of vulnerability, be that illness, debility, or simply lacking clothing. Generally speaking, beds may symbolise a feeling of safety and protection from surrounding darkness, and yet in Kafka's works beds do not adhere to their typical associations with sleep and sexual activity:sleeping characters are seldom found in Kafka's beds, and sex acts take place anywhere but, including dirty floors, office cupboards, and corridors. It is worth considering, as Mark M. Anderson suggests, that Kafka found heterosexual intercourse somewhat repellent and shameful, which may elucidate some of the reasons why his depiction of heterosexual activity takes place in non-conventional settings.[3] Instead of being the site of bodily pleasure, Kafka's beds are the site of bodily peril— yet they are also the source of a certain power for those who inhabit them. In this sense, the bed may be considered an extension of the body in a state of weakness: the silent champion, a platform upon which the body may take centre stage and exert what often proves to be the last of its powers. Noting the close relationship between the bed and sick, debilitated bodies in a number of Kafka's works, such as *Die Verwandlung*, 'Das Urteil' (1913), and 'Ein Landarzt' (1918), I argue that the bed is an extension of the body that may be used to reverse power dynamics and exercise power over other characters, facilitating and sometimes even hosting conflict, and moving the plot forward.

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[1] Kafka, Franz. *Die Verwandlung*. 1915. Kurt Wolff Verlag, 2007, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/22367/pg22367-images.html. p. 5.

[2] Robertson, Ritchie. *Kafka: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 49.

[3] Robertson, Ritchie, and Edward Timms. *Gender and Politics in Austrian Fiction.* Edinburgh University Press, 1996. pp. 79-99.

The body and the bed in *Die Verwandlung* are undeniably connected, the bed being the site of the transformation itself. The opening chapter of the novella concerns itself with Gregor as he tries to get to grips with his new body, in order that he might get to work and perform his normal, everyday routine. There is a clear disconnect here between the corporal reality of the situation, and the desperate, human desire to restore order. The body serves as a physical obstacle to Gregor, preventing him from performing his function in the family as the economic provider, something that causes him and his family a great deal of stress. In fact, all three members of the family urge Gregor to get up and go to work, and it is only his sister who considers that perhaps he is "nicht wohl"[4], showing how his family use him for financial stability, without caring about his wellbeing, a fact that becomes increasingly obvious as the text goes on. The bed, then, appears to be the first hurdle that Gregor must overcome. Significantly, his first attempts to get up do not take into account his new shape and size: he tries to get out of bed bottom-end first, as a human would, again showing the disjuncture between physical and mental state, which is further elucidated by Gregor's inability to imagine how the rest of his body may look: "er [konnte] sich auch [davon] keine rechte Vorstellung machen."[5]

However, as the text goes on, it becomes apparent that the bed that Gregor has left was actually a source of power for him, and in leaving it in the first chapter, he unknowingly rejects this potential power for good. Although both bed and body serve as obstacles to Gregor's attempts to restore normality, in the moments that Gregor was lying there not going to work, he actually held a great deal of power over his family. He rejected his role of breadwinner, forcing his family, as they must later in the text, to admit that they have exploited him, which is evident in their actions of getting jobs and dipping into savings, both of which were possibilities when Gregor was still able to work. Visually, the image of Gregor on top of the bed is a powerful one, because this man-sized, disgusting insect swamps the domestic environment, clearly unbound by it, and is elevated above the floor as if to show superiority. By getting off the bed, Gregor loses all of this domination, and spends the rest of his life scuttling along walls and floors. There is a striking visual juxtaposition later in the text between Herr Samsa, driving his deformed son back into his room with a sweeping brush, and Gregor, struggling to manoeuvre himself on the ground, his legs "schmerzhaft zu Boden gedrückt".[6] The adverb "schmerzhaft" in particular evokes a sense of sympathy for this "ungeheueren Ungeziefer", putting the reader into a similar position to Gregor, trying to make sense of a body that does not align with the mind. This image also demonstrates the shift in power dynamic: Gregor no longer assumes the role as head of the family, and is figuratively cast out until his death. All of this may have been at least partly avoided by staying in the bed, whence Gregor may have been able to maintain a level of dignity and power, instead of resigning himself to expulsion from the family.

There is a parallel here between Gregor's efforts to get out of bed and Herr Bendemann's sudden fit of rage standing *upon* his bed in 'Das Urteil'. What ties these two scenes together are the nouns "Macht" and "Kraft". Nietzsche differentiated these terms, defining *Kraft* as strength, and *Macht* as the appropriation of *Kraft* for a particular purpose, analogous to the English noun "might". According to Ritchie Robertson,

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[4] *Die Verwandlung*. p. 9.

[5] *Die Verwandlung*. p. 10.

[6] *Die Verwandlung*. p. 27.

Kafka was an avid reader of Nietzsche[7], and so his word choice in these texts is particularly significant. On one hand, Gregor channels his *Kraft* to the extent that he expends all of his "might", indicating his desperation to leave the bed and rejection of its powers: "[er] schwang sich mit aller Macht aus dem Bett."[8] On the other hand, Herr Bendemann "warf die Decke zurück mit einer Kraft, daß sie einen Augenblick im Fluge sich ganz entfaltete, und stand aufrecht im Bett."[9] Here, *Kraft* is a sign of physical power, a revival of strength entirely unexpected of a man who, just moments ago, was *carried* into bed by his son. The fact that Herr Bendemann's sudden rage begins when he is back in bed implies that it affords the sick man a certain power: he is elevated from the ground, reminiscent of the towering Herr Samsa hissing over his transformed son.

'Das Urteil' is frequently cited by critics as an embodiment of the Oedipus complex, Kafka even writing in his diary that he had Freud in mind whilst feverishly writing one night in September. Whilst this is significant for the power dynamic in the scene, described by Elizabeth Boa as "a double iconoclasm"[10] — in other words, Herr Bendemann plays the role of an aged infant, lifting his nightclothes to reveal "the sacred phallus […] an undecidable amalgam between a dirty old man and a megalomaniac baby"[11] — I would argue that this interpretation takes the scene too far out of context. Herr Bendemann lifts his skirt in a theatrical flourish during an extended speech which accuses Georg of sleeping around, insinuating that his desire to marry is sexually driven:

> "er hob, um das darzustellen, sein Hemd so hoch, daß man auf seinem Oberschenkel die Narbe aus seinen Kriegsjahren sah, »weil sie die Röcke so und so und so gehoben hat, hast du dich an sie herangemacht, und damit du an ihr ohne Störung dich befriedigen kannst"

By confronting Georg with the phallus, Herr Bendemann makes him stare his alleged sin in the face, forcing him to acknowledge the bodily reality of the sexual organ, in whatever state it may be, as opposed it being shrouded in darkness, relegated to a shamed secrecy beneath the sheets. The body is the vehicle through which Kafka presents the theme of shame, particularly surrounding sexuality. Moreover, in dominating the bed, the sphere of sexuality and nakedness, Herr Bendemann occupies a moral and physical position to condemn his son. It is from this position, assuming power absorbed from the bed, that Herr Bendemann delivers the eponymous judgment: "Ich verurteile dich jetzt zum Tode des Ertrinkens!"[12] And of course, the victim of this Oedipal dynamic submits.

The naked body is also a focus in 'Ein Landarzt'. Kafka first draws our attention to the body at the beginning of the text, when the Doctor is forced to leave his maid, Rosa, in the predatory hands of the horse-

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[7] *Kafka: A Very Short Introduction.* pp. 104-125.

[8] *Die Verwandlung*. p. 13.

[9] Kafka, Franz. *Das Urteil.* 1913. Kurt Wolff Verlag, 2007, www.gutenberg.org/files/21593/21593-h/21593-h.html. p. 22.

[10] Boa, Elizabeth. *Kafka: Gender, Class, and Race in the Letters and Fictions.* Oxford University Press, 2002.

[11] Ibid.

[12] *Das Urteil*, p. 27.

handler. Thoughts of Rosa and her inevitable sexual assault plague the Doctor for the rest of the story, such that when he reaches his destination and is confronted with a horrific wound on the leg of a young boy, his language reflects his preoccupation with another horrific situation:

> "In seiner rechten Seite, in der Hüftengegend hat sich eine handtellergroße Wunde aufgetan. Rosa, in vielen Schattierungen, dunkel in der Tiefe, hellwerdend zu den Rändern, zartkörnig, mit ungleichmäßig sich aufsammelndem Blut, […] Würmer, an Stärke und Länge meinem kleinen Finger gleich, rosig aus eigenem und außerdem blutbespritzt, winden sich, im Innern der Wunde festgehalten…"[13]

As Andrew Kahn argues, "on the level of symbolic language [the boy's wound] is a second wounded rose"[14]: in other words, the Doctor's constant preoccupation with Rosa's fate manifests itself in his perception of the boy's wounded body. The first person narrative perspective of this story means that the appearance of the wound as described by the Doctor may not be entirely accurate, but rather an unconscious projection of his mental state. However, if we are to accept the Doctor's description, the wound also reminds of the female sexual organ, which brings about a tension once the Doctor is undressed and put into his patient's bed against his will. As this takes place, Kafka uses music, a song sung by the villagers while they act, to distract the senses away from the naked body, meaning that it may be hidden beneath the bedsheets before it attracts too much attention. Although the atmosphere of this scene is much calmer and more serene than the one between Rosa and the horse-handler, the parallel of non-consent may still be drawn here.

Once in the bed, and in the silent aftermath of the song, the Doctor takes care to locate himself in relation to the wound and therefore also in relation to the patients sexual organs: "Zur Mauer, an die Seite der Wunde legen sie mich."[15] This is significant because it exposes his preoccupation with the body, and a fear of the grotesque. There is however a second dimension to this fear, in that the duvet blockades sight, leaving the Doctor at the mercy of the sick boy, the inhabiter of the bed, in a reversal of the typical doctor-patient dynamic. The patient has used his position in the bed, specifically as a sign of sickness, to exercise power over the Doctor and the villagers, silently manipulating them to make the Doctor submit to him, which in itself has sexual connotations. The patient is the silent orchestrator, the bed seemingly engendering the power found in sickness. Once in the bed, the sick boy taunts the Doctor with their proximity, inevitably knowing the fear of unwanted contact hanging over his head in the darkness, whispering threats of violence into his ear: "Statt zu helfen, engst du mir mein Sterbebett ein. Am liebsten kratzte ich dir die Augen aus."[16] The use of the noun "Sterbebett" holds a deeper meaning for the Doctor, suggesting that he may die there too, at the hands of his patient, as if his inability to save the boy has signed his own death certificate. However, though their conversation remains along the lines of sickness and violence, the tone of the scene becomes oddly

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[13] Kafka, Franz. *Ein Landarzt: Kleine Erzählungen.* 1918. Kurt Wolff Verlag, 2007, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/21989/pg21989-images.html. pp. 23-24.

[14] Kahn, Andrew. *The Short Story: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021. p. 73.

[15] *Ein Landarzt*, p. 28.

[16] *Ein Landarzt*, p. 28.

intimate, the whispered reassurances reminiscent of pillow talk, like comforting an insecure partner after intercourse:

> "»Ist es wirklich so oder täuschest du mich im Fieber?«
> »Es ist wirklich so, nimm das Ehrenwort eines Amtsarztes mit hinüber.«"[17]

Finally, the paradox of intimacy laced with the threat of violence prove too much for the Doctor, and he escapes the bed, speeding off into the night on horseback, presumably still naked. In escaping the bed, he escapes his patient too, but spends the journey home in deep reflection on his profession. His practice, he believes, is over — and the cause may be traced back to the patient, who, in spite of his bodily debility, exercises power over not only the Doctor, but also the other inhabitants of his village, through the silent power of the bed.

In conclusion, Kafka's beds serve as a power source for his most debilitated characters, enabling them to exercise power over others, often with dire consequences, like Georg Bendemann's suicide and the Country Doctor's ruined practice. The bed in *Die Verwandlung* is a mark of a perverse debilitation that may, in reality, have saved Gregor from the injustices of the family-based society in which he formerly lived. It is the centre of freedom from his former unhappy life, but sadly, the body remains slave to a mind corrupted by the desire to restore order. The bodies that find themselves in beds are ostensibly debilitated and sick, but in reality, the bed plays an active role in their empowerment: characters find strength in their confinement, something their physical bodies can no longer afford them, and, bolstered by the power of the bed, they reveal the horrors hidden beneath the sheets.

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[17] *Ein Landarzt*, pp. 29-30.

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