

**Non-human identities. Discuss the portrayal of animals and/or other non-human agents in Kafka's writings.**

Franz Kafka's works are often characterised by an exploration of identity, alienation and the boundaries between human and non-human existence. Many of Kafka's animals belong to a hybrid species somewhere between human and animal or between species, which challenges the idea of identity as being shaped solely by physical form or heritage. These animal protagonists therefore challenge our image of animals and likewise our notion of human identity. This essay will first consider Gregor Samsa's transformation into an unidentifiable insect in *Die Verwandlung* (1915), and how this impacts his sense of self and human identity. Paradoxically, in becoming an animal, Gregor regains his sense of humanity. *Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917), a tale from Kafka's *Ein Landarzt* collection, presents the inverse transformation of an ape who adopts human qualities. In the context of this tale, I will examine how Kafka uses the animal perspective as a means of critiquing human behaviour, social structures and the illusion of civilisational superiority. Finally, I will discuss *Der Bau* (1931), a much later, rather more radical but unfinished text, which is narrated from a completely animal point of view yet resonates with instincts which overlap between humans and animals, such as self-preservation and distinctions between the self and other.

Kafka explores the concept of the self through animal transformation in *Die Verwandlung*, where Gregor Samsa metamorphoses overnight into an *ungeheures Ungeziefer*. Firstly, Kafka uses the animal protagonist to explore the destructive impact of an intense capitalist society on human identity. Gregor's demanding job as a travelling salesman deprives him of a fulfilling life and reduces his human relationships to cold, superficial interactions: 'Tag aus, Tag ein auf der Reise.'<sup>1</sup> It seems his transformation is not an abrupt rupture with his humanity, but the culmination of a gradual psychological decay long before his physical transformation. Drawing on Karl Marx's idea of human self-alienation, Walter H. Sokel describes how human labour should 'have an element of free choice' and 'at least partly, be its own reward and satisfaction'.<sup>2</sup> He contrasts this with animal labour, which is driven purely by survival. Sokel argues, 'Where it is imposed solely by economic necessity, the worker is not merely alienated from himself as an individual; he is estranged from his humanity.'<sup>3</sup> Thus, Gregor's monotonous corporate lifestyle leads to self-alienation, foreshadowing his eventual

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<sup>1</sup> Kafka, Franz, and Paul Raabe (eds), *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1970), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Walter H. Sokel, 'From Marx to Myth: The Structure and Function of Self-Alienation in Kafka's "Metamorphosis"', *The Literary Review*, (1983), pp. 485-96 (p. 486).

<sup>3</sup> Sokel, p. 486.

physical transformation where he loses his human form forever. The tale can therefore be read in part as a critique of modern capitalist society and the consequential isolation from one's own self.

However, while Gregor's exposure to capitalist society causes him to lose a part of his humanity, his confinement to his room paradoxically enables him to rediscover certain emotional qualities. For example, he develops a newfound appreciation for his sister Grete's violin playing: 'Und doch spielte die Schwester so schön. [...] War er ein Tier, da ihn Musik so ergriff?'<sup>4</sup> Gregor assumes that animals cannot appreciate the beauty of music, which leads him to question whether his transformation can be real. Here, Kafka highlights the universality of sensory experiences, suggesting that both human and non-human beings can share an aesthetic appreciation. Gregor's imprisonment thus allows him to re-engage with his senses and achieve a kind of spiritual freedom: freed from the demands of capitalist labour, he gains a deeper sensitivity, which one might in fact attribute to humanity. As Clinton R. Sanders highlights, 'the self is predominantly a *process* rather than a static object'.<sup>5</sup> The self can therefore be understood as an introspective process which occurs through interactions with external influences, such as Grete's violin playing. It seems sensory experiences and internal reflection are crucial for regaining one's sense of self. As Harel observes, as the tale progresses, 'the incompatibility between nonhuman body and human soul diminishes, becoming more congruous'.<sup>6</sup> In this way, Kafka questions the concept of 'otherness'; although Gregor transforms physically into something inhuman, he in fact embraces more sensitive, human qualities. The divisions between non-human and human therefore become blurred, revealing identity as a fluid construct.

Kafka's animal theme further allows him to engage with Charles Darwin's theories from his work *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859. Darwin argued that man had developed from animals through the process of evolution, therefore the two are inexorably linked. Gregor's situation reflects a struggle for survival, mirroring the principles of natural selection. Initially, he is respected as the sole breadwinner of his family, as the family's survival is dependent on him. However, once he transforms and can no longer provide for them, he becomes a burden, and his family's attachment to him dwindles. Their concern is not for Gregor as an individual but for their own survival, reducing human relationships to the same instincts that govern the animal world. Grete no longer recognises Gregor as her brother: 'Ich will vor diesem Untier nicht den Namen meines Bruders aussprechen, und sage daher bloß: wir müssen versuchen, es loszuwerden.'<sup>7</sup> The noun 'Untier' here suggests that

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<sup>4</sup> Sämtliche Erzählungen, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Clinton R. Sanders, 'The Animal "Other": Self Definition, Social Identity, and Companion Animals', *Advances in Consumer Research*, 17.1 (1990), pp. 662-668 (p. 662).

<sup>6</sup> Naama Harel, *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human/Animal Barrier* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Sämtliche Erzählungen, p. 94.

for Grete, Gregor's form defies even animal classification, while the use of 'es' rather than 'er' further dehumanises him, reflecting how Gregor has lost all sense of recognisable identity. For Grete, identity is rigidly tied to name and appearance, so she refuses to associate Gregor's name with the 'Untier' she sees before her. This ruthless depiction of Gregor's family suggests an inclination on Kafka's part for a more fluid definition of identity, which is not restricted to appearance or name, but is grounded in emotion depth and self-perception. However, Gregor's family rejects this perspective, instead adhering to a survivalist mindset dictated by Darwinist principles. His eventual starvation emphasises the brutal consequences of this logic. Following Gregor's death, Grete's parents immediately begin planning her marriage, symbolising the final aim of the Darwinian struggle: reproduction. Although in the natural world humans position themselves as the pinnacle of civilisation, Kafka suggests that their ruthless self-interest renders them no more civilised than animals.

While *Die Verwandlung* explores a physical dehumanising transformation, *Bericht für eine Akademie* presents the inverse process: an ape, Rotpeter, who assimilates into human society after having been captured from the Gold Coast of Africa as part of a colonialist expedition. He sees his only chance at survival as adopting human behaviours through mimicry. Rotpeter's transformation begins at sea, where the sailors force him to drink alcohol and stub out their cigarettes on his fur. For Rotpeter, learning to be human means spitting, smoking, and drinking alcohol, all behaviours which contrast with traditional notions of human civilisation. He explains, 'Es war so leicht, die Leute nachzuahmen. Spucken konnte ich schon in den ersten Tagen.'<sup>8</sup> While humans consider themselves civilised compared to animals, Rotpeter perceives human identity as defined by vulgar behaviour. As Harel observes, 'Humanity is identifiable in the story by images connected with vice and trickery.'<sup>9</sup> Yet Rotpeter views himself as more civilised than his human companions: 'Wir spuckten einander dann gegenseitig ins Gesicht; der Unterschied war nur, daß ich mein Gesicht nachher reinleckte, sie ihres nicht.'<sup>10</sup> What to a human might seem like an uncivilized act—licking one's own face—is for Rotpeter a form of hygiene, highlighting the subjectivity of civilization itself. In this way, Kafka's animal narrator presents human society from an external, critical perspective. Rotpeter's actions are not natural imitations, but parodic performances which exaggerate human 'civilised' behaviours. Kafka contributes to this parody by reversing the evolutionary hierarchy, where Rotpeter prepares to lecture a learned society: 'Hohe Herren von der Akademie! Sie erweisen mir die Ehre, mich

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<sup>8</sup> Sämtliche Erzählungen, p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> Naama Harel, 'De-allegorizing Kafka's Ape: Two Animalistic Contexts', in *Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings*, ed. by Marc Lucht and Donna Yarri (Lexington Books, 2010), pp. 53-66 (p. 61).

<sup>10</sup> Sämtliche Erzählungen, p. 152.

aufzufordern, der Akademie einen Bericht über mein äffisches Vorleben einzureichen.’<sup>11</sup> The contrast between Rotpeter’s elaborate academic language and his condition as an ape is comical. The humour and absurdity of this moment emphasise Kafka’s critique of academic discourse and its arrogant sense of superiority. As Marian Scholtmeijer states, drawing on Darwinian theories, ‘human beings are not only not different in kind from other animals; they are also not sitting at the top of the evolutionary chain of being. There is no chain of being, and all living entities are in a state of equality within the indifferent workings of nature.’<sup>12</sup> Thus, by placing an ape in the role of lecturer, Kafka exposes the fragility of human pretensions to civilisation and the absurdity of the claim of human pre-eminence.

Kafka also employs the character of Rotpeter to explore themes of identity and isolation. Despite adapting to human society, Rotpeter’s chimpanzee girlfriend serves as a constant reminder of his ape origins. He cannot bear to look into her eyes during the day, as they reflect the madness of a trained but bewildered animal: ‘Bei Tag will ich sie nicht sehen; sie hat nämlich den Irrsinn des verwirrten dressierten Tieres im Blick; das erkenne nur ich und ich kann es nicht ertragen.’<sup>13</sup> She mirrors Rotpeter’s suppressed ape identity, which he desperately tries to escape. His rejection of her reveals this internal conflict: he is constantly defined by his heritage, despite his attempts to assimilate into human society. This idea of alienation from one’s own sense of self can be contextualised through an autobiographical reading of the text. In a diary entry from 8th January 1914, Kafka expresses his own sense of detachment from his Jewish heritage: ‘Was habe ich mit Juden gemeinsam? Ich habe kaum etwas mit mir gemeinsam und sollte mich ganz still, zufrieden damit, daß ich atmen kann, in einen Winkel stellen.’<sup>14</sup> Just as Rotpeter refuses to define himself as strictly human or ape, Kafka resists being confined to a singular identity. He suggests that self-definition is an internal process rather than something dictated by external labels. His reflection, that merely existing and breathing is enough, implies that true self-discovery does not come from rigid categorisation but from a personal, evolving understanding of identity. Kafka hints at this ‘ongoing process of self-definition’,<sup>15</sup> which Rotpeter also embodies, demonstrating the fluid nature of selfhood, and challenging the notion of identity as a fixed trait.

Unlike *Die Verwandlung* and *Bericht für eine Akademie*, which feature human-animal hybrids, *Der Bau* is narrated from the perspective of a purely animal creature, allowing Kafka to focus on the

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<sup>11</sup> Sämtliche Erzählungen, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> Marian Scholtmeijer, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice* (University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Sämtliche Erzählungen, p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Kafka, and Max Brod (eds), *Tagebücher 1910-1923* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1981), p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, p. 662.

animal perspective of the world around him. However, within this animal perspective there are also some human traits to be recognised. The animal protagonist's identity is deliberately ambiguous: as Naama Harel notes, it exhibits characteristics of both a mole and badger, both eating rats and stockpiling food, behaviours not specific to either species.<sup>16</sup> It seems identifying the animal's species is unimportant, but that Kafka wishes to present rather the sense of entrapment of a burrowing animal. Kafka's use of the animal protagonist allows him to explore the theme of isolation and confinement, as the animal attempts to create a haven, his burrow, to protect him from the unknown threats of the outside world. The animal's attachment to this space is evident as it addresses the burrow lovingly: 'Was kümmert mich die Gefahr jetzt, da ich bei euch bin. Ihr gehört zu mir, ich zu euch, verbunden sind wir, was kann uns geschehen.'<sup>17</sup> Matthew Powell notes that, 'In this intertwining of the physical and the psychological, the external and the internal, the ontological dimension of entrapment is revealed to be as much a product of "the other" as of the world in which "the other" lives.'<sup>18</sup> This suggests that the burrow and the burrower, as internal and external spaces, are not merely linked but are integral to each other's existence, blurring the boundary between self and environment.

The tension between inside and outside further manifests itself in the form of an outside threat, a 'an sich kaum hörbares Zischen',<sup>19</sup> which the burrower desperately attempts to locate. As the sound grows louder, the animal descends into a state of panic, unable to distinguish between real and imagined threats. But there is also an internal threat: 'ich wäre schon zufrieden, wenn ich mir den inneren Widerstreit beruhigte.'<sup>20</sup> This suggests that the burrower's anxiety may be self-generated, an outward projection of its own inner turmoil. As Powell observes: 'Kafka manages to conflate the animal's speculation about the external threat with the animal's ceaseless conjecture concerning his own role in producing the threat.'<sup>21</sup> It seems that the creature's identity is inextricably tied to its perception of external reality, reinforcing the idea that selfhood is an ongoing process shaped by interactions with external forces. Both Powell and Harel draw attention to a letter from Kafka addressed to Max Brod in 1904, in which he likens himself to a burrowing animal: 'Wir durchwühlen uns wie ein Maulwurf und kommen ganz geschwärzt und sammethaarig aus unsern verschütteten

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<sup>16</sup> Naama Harel, *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human/Animal Barrier* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, p. 374.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Powell, 'Bestial Representations of Otherness: Kafka's Animal Stories', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32.1 (2008), pp. 129-142 (p. 132).

<sup>19</sup> *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, p. 374.

<sup>20</sup> *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, p. 382.

<sup>21</sup> Powell, p. 133.

Sandgewölben'.<sup>22</sup> Here, Kafka demonstrates a preoccupation with exploring the self, a process that requires persistence, like the act of burrowing. The description of emerging 'geschwärzt und sammethaarig' suggests a kind of inner transformation through the process of self-introspection, making it impossible to return unchanged. *Der Bau* therefore takes on an autobiographical quality: just like burrowing animals, we each create our own individual versions of reality that constitutes part of our identity. Kafka's concept of identity is not limited to superficial qualities but encompasses the psyche and the subjective ways in which individuals perceive and shape their worlds.

In conclusion, Kafka's exploration of animal identity in all three animal stories critiques fixed notions of selfhood, civilisation and human hierarchical superiority. Kafka challenges the binary differences between human and animal and self and other, emphasising identity as a flexible concept. In *Die Verwandlung*, Gregor's metamorphosis allows him to rediscover a certain level of emotional sensitivity which his family seems to lack. *Bericht für eine Akademie* presents the inverse transformation, where Rotpeter's imitation of human behaviour portrays civilisation as a façade, parodying humanity's claims to superiority. In fact, humans commit vicious acts which are perhaps more ruthless than those committed by animals, and we struggle for existence in a Darwinist manner, just like any other animal. Finally, *Der Bau* offers a purely animal perspective, yet one that parallels human anxieties surrounding isolation and security. Through these works, Kafka refutes the idea that identity is tied to strict classifications such as physical form or heritage. He considers selfhood as an ongoing process, shaped by interactions between external forces and internal perception. By portraying human and animal experiences as inherently linked, Kafka suggests that the boundaries between species are arbitrary, advocating for a more sympathetic attitude towards animals, rather than one of superiority.

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<sup>22</sup> Kafka, Franz, and Hans-Gerd Koch (eds), *Briefe, 1900-1912* (S. Fischer, 1999), p. 40.

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