**“Hope, but not for Us”: Perspectives on Suffering in a Kafkaesque World**

by

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**Abstract**

Franz Kafka's works have been studied by literary scholars and students since the posthumous publication of his literature. Often noted for their absurd and fantastical elements, Kafka's short stories and novels present protagonists who undergo extreme experiences of suffering and death. Through a Marxist reading of his works, suffering is revealed as a product of a capitalist society and its alienation of individuals. In addition, through analyzing Kafka's religious symbolism and motifs, his protagonists act as foils to Jesus Christ, whose passion and death is perhaps the most widely recognized and celebrated story of suffering. Finally, Kafka's characters often exhibit the ideals of existentialism, the rejection of organized systems such as government and religion in favor of an introspective existence and an acceptance of suffering and death. Through these perspectives, Kafka explores the different meanings that can be derived from suffering.

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## Introduction

On June 3, 1924, Franz Kafka died after a long struggle with tuberculosis. One can only imagine the amount of pain and suffering he endured for years leading up to his death. And yet, his struggle with his ailing health was not the only struggle that caused Kafka great suffering. Kafka faced social anxiety and clinical depression throughout his life, and many biographers attribute his mental-emotional state to his hardened, dominant father and almost abusive relationship with him. Others include his laborious work as an insurance clerk in contributing to his anxieties, reminiscent of Joseph K.'s and Gregor Samsa's day-to-day lives as a banker and travelling salesman respectively (Robertson). Naturally, Kafka's life so full of struggles and suffering finds its way into the themes and motifs of his literature.

In addition, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were dominated by some significant ideologies that influenced the modern era and ultimately Kafka's works. Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) criticized the increasingly industrial, capitalist infrastructures that were emerging throughout Europe and America. Marx's communism and his belief in the collapse of capitalism as a result of a proletarian revolution were instrumental in shaping the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, the developing philosophy of existentialism emerged with Soren Kierkegaard, whom many have called the "father of existentialism," in the early nineteenth century. Kierkegaard and later existentialists, such as twentieth-century existentialist Albert Camus, sought to undermine organized religion and organized society in general, emphasizing the importance of the individual against "the crowd." Kafka's literature grew out of this period of struggles—class struggle, social struggle, and religious and philosophical struggle.

Through these perspectives, Kafka presents suffering through socio-economic themes, Christian and anti-messianic symbolism, and existentialist nuances. Suffering, through a Marxist perspective, is rooted in the socio-economic infrastructures that are prevalent in capitalist societies. In *The Trial*, Kafka explores suffering in the macrocosm of the capitalist society controlled by the Court; on the other hand, in “The Metamorphosis,” Kafka explores suffering under the pressures of capitalism in the microcosm of the family. Whereas capitalism provides the secular world with an environment for suffering to flourish, Christianity seems to provide hope in Jesus Christ; however, Kafka’s protagonists can be seen as foils to Jesus Christ, as their suffering ultimately go unnoticed and are unable to gain the fervor and following like that of Christ. Kafka’s stories—“A Hunger Artist”, “In the Penal Colony”, and “The Metamorphosis” especially—use religious symbolism to subvert the image of Christ through Kafka’s protagonists. Finally, through a comparison of Kafka’s protagonists—Joseph K., the hunger artist, Gregor Samsa, and the officer—as existentialist heroes, one can see that suffering is a necessary part of human existence, and that those willing to embrace and accept it can ultimately find their true meaning and significance.

## Chapter One: Kafka's World of Suffering and its Socio-economic Innerworkings

The editors of *The Oxford Library of the World's Great Books* edition of Kafka's *The Trial* claim that "Prague held Franz Kafka in thrall as London had once held Charles Dickens." In Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, readers are immersed in the socio-political tensions and chaos of the French Revolution in both Paris and London, as the French Revolution was largely influenced by the socio-economic class struggles. Similarly, Kafka's vivid descriptions and illustrious details immerse the reader not only in the world of each character, but also in the inner psychologies affected by and through the setting. The setting, just as in *A Tale of Two Cities*, is influenced by the social and economic climate established by Kafka, and in it, the characters find themselves in a system of suffering unbeknownst to them before. Often these characters are too naive and ignorant of the suffering of others around them that once they do suffer themselves, in their absurd circumstances, it is entirely a shocking experience. In this way, our discovery of the world of suffering through Kafka's narration coincides with each protagonist's revelatory discovery of the "other's world"—that of suffering. Kafka's world of suffering is marked by an industrial, capitalist society divided into socio-economic extremes. In addition, as Bluma Goldstein states in "Bachelors and Work", "The interrelatedness of man and society in the very style and form of the works [by Kafka] establishes and constantly affirms the idea of an environment created by people" (Goldstein 148). This "interrelatedness" often incites conflict and struggle, as Karl Marx presents in *The Communist Manifesto*, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (in Palmer, 275-276). By reading Kafka through this Marxist lens, it can be said that the cause of suffering is rooted in the socio-economic and political infrastructure apparent in a capitalist society. While Kafka's *The Trial* illustrates how

Joseph K. suffers under the macrocosm and infrastructure of the Court, “The Metamorphosis” illustrates how suffering manifests itself in the microcosm of a family under the pressures of a capitalist society.

In *The Trial*, Joseph K. lives a comfortable yet naïve life as the Chief Clerk of a prestigious bank. For a man in such an esteemed occupational and financial position, K.’s daily routine is characterized by superficial walks with his coworkers to bars and pubs, where “he normally sat with some mostly older men at their regular table until eleven,” with occasional drives to and dinners at his manager’s villa and casual visits to a promiscuous waitress named Elsa (Kafka 17). His life is comfortable but is nothing extraordinary, and K. is completely satisfied with this unextraordinary life. His coworkers are not necessarily his friends, as Kafka merely refers to them as “colleagues,” nor is K. in any intimate relationship, as Elsa, a waitress by night, “received her visitors in bed” during the day, insinuating that K. is less of a lover and more of a client.

Furthermore, K. seems to be estranged from his own family. Uncle Karl, who has been living in the country for some twenty years, only comes to the city to address K. about his trial; K.’s Uncle had heard of his troubles from Erna, his cousin whom he has not paid much attention to (64-65). Already, we see the divide between K. and his family simply through their respective locations, K. in the city and his family in the country. In addition, it is only through one of Kafka’s short, unfinished chapters that we learn of Joseph K.’s parents—in the fragment *Journey to His Mother*, we learn of Kafka’s intention to include K.’s estranged relationship with his aging mother. K. is supposed to visit his mother, as it has been “the third year since he had last seen her,” after breaking his promise to spend each of his birthdays with her (184). K.’s loneliness and

isolation are a result of his life as a banking clerk in the city; this is the life he chooses, a more mundane, routine life lacking human connectivity and intimacy. He has left the country where his family resides in pursuit of his professional career in the city. This physical break from his familial bonds is represented through Kafka's simple naming of "Joseph K.", an initialed last name losing its familial meaning and significance. Bluma Goldstein further iterates that K's "sense of his own identity and importance [is] derived from his professional prowess" (Goldstein 160). His identity, no longer shaped by his family, is now dictated by his reputation as the Chief Clerk at the bank.

This intentional separation from others and the world contributes to K.'s ignorance and naivety toward suffering, that of the people beyond his circle of "friends" from work. As Goldstein states,

> Although his daily routine clearly testifies to his fellow relationships, the vacuity of his social life, and alienation from his own human potential and value, Joseph K. himself showed no discontent; in fact, there was not the faintest sign…that Joseph K., before his arrest, was conscious of something being wrong or awry with the way he lived. (160)

But everything changes in Kafka's opening line introducing us to his world of the absurd, "Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested" (Kafka 5). Up until this unexpected arrest, Joseph K.'s life consisted of working at the bank, occasional socializing at bars, and visiting a prostitute. He lives alone, with casual and friendly relationships with his landlady Frau Grubach and neighbor Fraulein Burstner. K. does not even take the time to visit his own family. He lives his life "by the numbers," never taking into consideration others besides himself. It is when K.'s life as the Chief

Clerk is interrupted by his arrest and trial that he begins to suffer, as not only is the trial interfering with his career but also with his identity and confidence. The trial impedes his work and therefore impedes the only satisfaction K. can receive. The sudden realization of the omnipotent Court and the people associated with the Court—the urban working classes, children, and women—interrupts the normality of K.'s life.

The world is opened up to Joseph K., a world of suffering in which K. feels uncomfortable, unable to relate to the suffering of others as he only seeks to return to his life of unextraordinary normality. In "The Exploration of the Modern City in *The Trial*," Rolf J. Goebel asserts that "[*The Trial*] stands clearly in the tradition of modernist city narratives, where urban space supplies the location for the disappearance of the alienated individual in the lonely crowd" (Goebel 42). In *The Trial*, the alienated individual is marked by his identity as a banking official amongst the working class. When Joseph K. is first summoned to his interrogation, he finds that the world of the Court is unlike the "petty-bourgeois conventionality of his lodging house," venturing into "the suburban periphery, where the strange and the foreign reside in the midst of social misery, poverty, and the filth of the slums" (45, 49). In a hurry to make it on time to his Sunday morning appointment, K. finds himself surrounded by "identical houses, tall, grey tenements where poor people lived," and where the men sit around smoking by their windows, people shout for no particular reason across the street, and women gossip while they shop around street vendors (Kafka 29). The neighborhood is marked by grime and filth, as K. examines "all these superficial details" of a man without his shoes reading a newspaper, a "frail young girl" pumping water into a bucket, and clothes hanging across a clothing line between two windows (29). K. is in awe of all this, as he has left the comfortability of his home and workplace for an

almost foreign territory where “he encounters a mixture of proletarian vitality and social deprivation” (Goebel 49). Bluma Goldstein shares similar sentiments with Goebel’s notion of K.’s “social awakening”: “One important aspect of the novel is the attempt to awaken the protagonist to an awareness of himself and his environment, to motivate him to tear himself out of his estranged life…” (Golstein 162).

The socio-economic distinction between K.’s world and the world of the Court becomes clear; while K. lives comfortably in his boarding house and his white-collar, banking career supports a lifestyle that includes leisurely walks to a bar and visits to a prostitute, the Court inhabits the world of the proletariat, the hard-working working class, who struggle for the life they live. Yet, both share an aspect of identity and character despite their different socio-economic realities; as discussed before, while K. has distanced himself from his familial identity, he has molded himself by “efficiently and effectively [working] at the bank and receiving appropriate recognition”—K. prides himself in his work (160). The Marxist notion of the proletariat is characterized by the working class, but K. is not one of them although he, too, values hard work and commitment. When he is arrested, K. is only concerned that he would miss work in the Bank, but “given his relatively senior position there,” he believed the transgression would be overlooked by his superiors (Kafka 10). He even thinks that his arrest is merely a joke being played on him by his coworkers. But the trial is all too real, interfering with K.’s work. Kafka describes K.’s inner aggravations and anxiety toward the end of the novel:

> Every hour he spent away from the office caused him concern. Although he could no longer make anything like as good use of his time in the office as formerly, sometimes

> spending hours making only a thin pretence of doing proper work, he was even more worried when he was not in the office. (142)

Here is a man who actually *wants* to work, in contrast to the people he encounters in the slums of the city who *have* to work. But whereas K.'s profession at the bank keeps him isolated at his desk, apart from occasional meetings with clients and disruptions from the Assistant Manager, the working class of the industrial age engage in communal, manual labor. There is a social aspect to the proletariat lifestyle, whereas K. is comfortable with his solitary work as the Chief Clerk and is satisfied with the "conventions of his own bourgeois existence" (Goebel 49). Bluma Goldstein further notes that "work may be understood as an essential form of a man's interaction with the environment, and it is this interaction—the activity and communication of a community of people—that creates society and culture" (Goldstein 162). Throughout the novel, K.'s trial and the Court's proceedings demand the active and social role of simply being and encountering people; K. seeks the help of a painter, a lawyer, and other people—especially women—who are associated with the Court. But to K., this is a "necessary suffering" that he must endure to stop any and all further intrusions by the Court, which, as eloquently explained by the painter towards middle of the novel, can never be achieved. There is a constant pull by the Court for K. to interact with the rest of the world, but K. incessantly refuses. He wants to go back to his life before that ill-fated morning of his arrest, to return to his solitary desk at work and his abysmal, lonely life: "a large part of The Trial consists of K.'s attempts to recuperate from the arrest, regain former self-esteem and command over his life, and restore the 'harmony' he has lost" (164). But of course, all his attempts are in vain. There is no escape from the world of suffering

now that it has been opened to K.; there is no escape from the Court; and there is no escape from this suffering.

Through this Marxist reading, we see that Joseph K. is alienated from the world around him as a result of his job as the Chief Clerk at the bank. Marx argues that work and labor are creatively necessary in living a happy, genuine human existence; as Palmer summarizes, "to a great extent we are what we make. We create our products, and our products re-create us" (271). But K., unlike the urban working class living in the poverish slums, does not make any products; instead, he deals with money. K. values work insofar as he values his position at the bank and less so actual manual labor. K. works not for himself, and not even for money. More specifically, K. works for *other* people's money and not his own. According to Marx, this "alienated labor" results from a disconnect between the individual and his work, when his work "is motivated by the necessity of fulfilling other needs, such as economic or avaricious ones" (Palmer 272).

But K. is not the only one disassociated from genuine, creative labor. K.'s uncle states that Huld, the lawyer, "has a considerable reputation as defence counsel and as a lawyer for the poor" (Kafka 69). Being a lawyer is a white collar job, just like K.'s position as Chief Clerk, and Huld similarly does not engage in manual labor. Instead, he spends his life in service to others. The painter, Titorelli, is also in service of others, specifically by painting portraits of the Court's great judges. His career as a painter can perhaps be interpreted as genuinely creative, but as he states to K., "Haven't you noticed that I speak almost like a lawyer? It's the influence of my constant dealings with the men from the court. Naturally I profit considerably from that, but at the cost of most of my artistic creativity" (108). Here we see the Court's true omnipotence, "extracting" the labor of Huld and Titorelli for their own uses. But even others who are not in

direct service to the Court are under their control, as Titorelli reveals that “The girls belong to the court too” (108). The Court has truly taken over the “superstructure” and the “foundation” of society, which Marx explains:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (in Palmer, 274)

The Court owns the poor working class, as they have made their slums and attics their own system of courts. As the washerwoman explains to K., “we live here rent-free, but we have to clear out the room on days when there’s a session” (Kafka 40). Thus, they own the “economic structure of society.” The Court’s hold over Huld the lawyer represents their hold over the “legal and political superstructure.” Finally, their power over Titorelli the painter revels that they have also taken over the “higher culture” of the arts. Because of the Court, the individuals within their systems live unfulfilled lives lacking genuine, creative labor. K. Huld, and Titorelli are alienated individuals who spend most of their time in one-room lodges, only brought out of their isolation in service to others. Through *The Trial*, Kafka illustrates how the macrocosm of society and the

powers that control its facets reveal the divisions in socio-economic classes, which then lead to the individual's struggle against that system and ultimate suffering under it.

Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," on the other hand, illustrates how the capitalist system negatively impacts the microcosm of the family. As Palmer further explains Marx's theory of "alienated labor," "Further alienation occurs if the product that a worker creates is for the profit of another person and if the product enters into an economic system meant to fulfill the desires of greed rather than true human needs" (Palmer 272). That is exactly the premise of Gregor Samsa's story: Gregor is a travelling salesman who works in order to pay off his father's debt and to provide for his family. The profits he makes selling fabrics door-to-door does not go directly to Gregor himself; rather, it goes toward upholding the family's bourgeois lifestyle, all the while his father has been keeping a certain amount for himself in secret. Just as Joseph K. and others are not entirely in control of their work in *The Trial* because of the overbearing force of the Court, because of his father's failures in the current economic system, Gregor Samsa takes on that labor in service of his father and family. In the macrocosm of society, Gregor submits himself as a travelling salesman of fabrics under the control of the director and the textile corporation; on a much smaller scale, Gregor opporesses himself under the authority and power of his father and, subsequently, his mother and sister Grete. There is still a class struggle in the larger world of "The Metamorphosis"; its focus, however, is on the familial struggle present within the Samsa family.

Even before Gregor's metamorphosis, the Samsa family is already divided, particularly in their alienation of Gregor. As in Joseph K.'s case, and through Marxist theory, this alienation results from the dissociation between Gregor and his work. Gregor "thinks nothing but his

work...he never goes out in the evening; he's been there the last eight days, and every single evening he's stayed home. He just sits there at the table...quietly reading the newspapers or looking over train schedules" (306). His family speaks of him as if he is a stranger in their own home. Indeed, they depend on him for his work and the profits he brings to the family, but apart from his role as breadwinner, he is never treated as a son nor as a human being. Gregor's transformation into an insect is merely the physical manifestation of his family's treatment of him as less than human. Walter H. Sokel in "From Marx to Myth," explains,

> Gregor's sole reason for enduring the hated position, the need to pay his parents' "debt" to his boss, drastically highlights the doubly extrinsic purpose of Gregor's work. For not only is his labor alien to his true desires, but its sole purpose, its fruit—the salary or commission that it affords him—does not even belong to him. Gregor's toil does not serve his own existence. (Sokel 487)

Sokel further connects Gregor's alienation with his work and family to being "estranged from his humanity" (486). Marx argued that in order for the individual to live the best life, he must find work that genuinely fuels his own needs and desires; when one works at the expense of his own freedom and autonomy, such as a travelling salesman forced to work off his father's debt, then he suffers a lack of fulfillment. Gregor was never fully human to begin with, or at least he never set out to live a fully human existence. "What an exhausting job I've chosen" he laments, but he had never truly chosen that job in the first place; and because of this, he himself suffers and suffers alone. He meets "casual acquaintances...in passing, never to see again, never to become intimate friends. To hell with it all!" (302). Gregor's frustrations and anxieties are only amplified in his metamorphosis, but they have always been there as a result of his job. Outside of his work,

however, Gregor does make an attempt to have genuine, creative labor: "The only enjoyment he gets is when he's working away with his fretsaw...he spent two or three evenings cutting out a little picture frame" (Kafka 306). However, he pursues this craft alone, without the appreciation nor even the recognition of his own family. Indeed, he loves his work for its own sake, but like a frame without its picture, this lack of recognition seems to be a lack of actualization. Gregor is not entirely a person in the eyes of his family; thus, "Gregor's metamorphosis literally enacts this 'loss of self.' It makes drastically visible the self-estrangement that existed even before his metamorphosis" (Sokel 487).

In addition to the alienation as a result of the economic system and circumstances in the world of "The Metamorphosis," Kafka also uses family dynamics as a cautionary tale of the dangers of competitive capitalism. As Palmer writes of Marxism,

> the possession of a society's material wealth by a specific group of people automatically creates a class system—basically, the owning class (the "haves") and the class controlled by the owning class (the "have nots"). Because the interests of these two classes are always in opposition, these classes must be in perpetual conflict. (Palmer 275)

In *The Trial*, we saw that the Court and its system of judges ultimately rule over the socio-economic world of Joseph K., while everyone else is in their control. In *The Metamorphosis*, the class system is condensed into the Samsa family household. Gregor's father is ultimately the antagonist to Gregor's protagonist; his father keeps him away from his true desires by binding him to a state of servitude. Yet, Gregor hopes that "as soon as I've saved enough money to pay back what my parents owe [the boss]...Then, I'll cut myself completely free" (Kafka 303). This "absurd sort of hope" is, of course, false. His father would have never let

Gregor "off his leash," as he and his wife thoroughly enjoy their own freedom and comfortability without having to work on their own (305). This is proven in the end, when Gregor is, in a sense, freed through death; neither his father nor his mother takes on a job and, instead, they depend on their daughter Grete to provide for them. As Sokel continues, "Gregor's relationship to his father thus represents an exact paradigm of the worker's exploitation by his capitalist employer, as described by Marx" (487). Competitive capitalism incites conflict. In this system of the "haves" and the "have nots," there will always be a master and a servant, the oppressor and the oppressed. Here Kafka reveals the kind of dehumanization that is a result of that divide, and when minimized to a social group such as a family, can tear that family apart. When a family runs into "financial troubles," that is almost a sure sign of conflict within, perhaps leading to divorce or even the neglect of a child.

In the case of the Samsa family, they become vulnerable to the outside forces of the boarders. The boarders have made themselves comfortable in the Samsa household—taking that comfortability away from Gregor's father and mother. Kafka writes of the boarders, "They sat down at the head of the table, where Gregor, his mother, and his father had sat in the old days" (325). Whereas before, the father had the power and authority over Gregor, the boarders now have the power and authority over the whole household. As Sokel continues, "The lodgers' invasion of the household and their assumption of absolute control over it thus, in Marx's words, only 'brings to a head' what had been inherent in the family's enslavement to the capitalist world through the father's original guilt" (Sokel 492). In forcing Gregor to take on the fallout of "the collapse of his [father's] business [which] plunged them all into a state of total despair," the Samsas alienated him; this, in turn, began to separate the family and left them vulnerable (Kafka

314). This collapse of the family can therefore foreshadow Marx's vision for the "optimum" society: "This relinquishing of control by the dictatorship...will usher in a classless society, which will end the dialectic of conflict and therefore end history as we know it" (Palmer 277). And yet, by the end of "The Metamorphosis," Herr Samsa and his wife do not "relinquish" control. When they are finally alleviated of the burden of Gregor, they merely turn to Grete for financial extortion and manipulation. The conflict continues, just as the socio-economic structures of the world persist. Kafka subverts expectations in that rather than ending "The Metamorphosis" on a resolute solution to the Samsas' financial problems, he continues the cycle of capitalist "enslavement" with Grete.

In the world of both *The Trial* and "The Metamorphosis," the center of society revolves around money and finance rather than the people that make up society. Therein lies the root of all suffering as presented through Kafka's protagonists. While Joseph K. finds himself trapped, among others, in the macrocosm of the Court and its power over all of society, Gregor finds himself trapped under the financial burden of his father and family, resulting in his physical transformation into an insect. In both cases, Kafka, reminiscent of Marx, presents the problem inherent in a Western, capitalist society: competition presupposes conflict, and in that conflict, an individual and even an entire social class experiences suffering.

## Chapter Two: Kafka's Suffering Servants, or the Foils to Jesus Christ

While capitalism creates the secular environment for suffering and conflict to flourish, religion seemingly provides some kind of hope. "Life is suffering," says the Buddha in his Four Noble Truths, and one can find this apparent theme in Franz Kafka's many works. In "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa is transformed into a beetle-like insect, suffering from negligence, violent abuse, and malnourishment. But his suffering does not begin with his metamorphosis; he already works exhausting hours in lonesome places as a traveling salesman. He lacks sleep and finds his only enjoyment in carving wood and creating picture frames. He genuinely loves his family, yet they fail to recognize his hard work; Gregor suffers on their behalf. In "A Hunger Artist," the starving protagonist performs the art of starvation, seemingly for the simple sake of his own craft. He sacrifices food for entertainment, only to lose the attention of his audience and is ultimately forgotten by them. In "In a Penal Colony," the officer takes on the mission of the Old Commandant in supporting a barbaric method of justice and execution. In sacrificing himself for that belief, the rest of the penal colony can finally put behind the Commandant's execution machine and move on to a more civilized and modern method of justice. Life, for all these protagonists, is full of suffering; at the same time, their lives are also full of a religious fervor for that suffering. Rather than taking inspiration from Buddhism, Kafka alludes to perhaps the most well-known narrative of suffering—Jesus Christ. In doing so, Kafka sets up his protagonists as saviors and martyrs, yet ultimately foils to Christ in that their suffering are all in vain.

Gregor Samsa's job as a traveling salesman symbolizes the mission and purpose of Jesus Christ. Christ's mission involved moving from town to town, convincing people of God's

kingdom, "selling" the idea of a graceful and merciful God in heaven. Gregor's occupation is similar, demanding constant movement and relocation while selling customers products. "What an exhausting job I've chosen," Gregor exclaims to himself, although he does not really have a choice in occupation (Kafka 302). Like Christ whose mission was thrust upon him by his Father from conception, Gregor's job is thrust upon him by his own father after obtaining a debt to the director. As Walter H. Sokel notes in "Marx to Myth," "[Gregor's] incarnation of guilt corresponds to Christ's incarnation of God in man"; both figures play a retributive role in a story of salvation—for Gregor, his family's salvation and for Christ, humanity's salvation (491). In addition, Christ was a revolutionary prophet persecuted by the Pharisees, who accused Christ of heresy and undermining Jewish beliefs and traditions. Although Gregor does not assert himself as a prophet, part of his downfall is the "gossip and bad luck and groundless accusations" of his coworkers and director, who suggest that his absence from work is because he made off with the "sums of cash that were recently entrusted to [him]" (Kafka 307, 309). His absence from work, and ultimately his job termination under his manager, symbolizes the end of Gregor's mission and purpose in life—to work on behalf of his family's debt. Up to this point, Gregor is the only source of income for his family, but now he can no longer fulfill his role as breadwinner. Just as the Pharisees' accusations led to Christ's suffering and death, this is the beginning of Gregor's own journey toward death. The end of his mission is essentially the end of his life.

Another component of Kafka's Christian allusions is betrayal. Jesus's infamous betrayer was his own disciple Judas, who led the Roman guards in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. Similarly, Gregor's father betrays his own son and family by keeping a "certain amount of capital" and some of the "money Gregor had been bringing home every month" a secret (315).

The family is indeed not poor, living comfortably in a large apartment with a cook and maid. Yet, although it is his own debt, the father allows Gregor to continue his tedious, lonesome work while keeping a sum, including part of the salary Gregor works so hard to earn, to himself. Like Judas, Gregor's father is influenced by money. His father's betrayal is further illustrated by the apple flung at and imbedded into Gregor. The apple itself is a symbol of perhaps the greatest biblical betrayal: Adam and Eve's eating of the Forbidden Fruit against God's command. "The apple," Kafka states, "remained imbedded in [Gregor's] flesh as a visible reminder" of, like the original sin passed down from Adam and Eve, Gregor's inheritance of his father's debt, burden, and suffering (321). As Sokel continues in "From Marx to Myth," "That Gregor's metamorphosis literally incarnates guilt becomes apparent...by the fact that his immediate reaction to his transformation is a guilty conscience" (Sokel 490). Gregor himself is retribution for his father's past failures as a businessman. Like Christ whose mission was to be sacrificed on behalf of the sins of humanity, Gregor's mission is to work off debt on behalf of his father. In addition, by the end of the story, Grete also betrays Gregor by giving up on him and convincing her mother and father to give up with her. Like Judas' fatal kiss to Jesus, it is Grete who yells "'at last'…as she turned the key in the lock," sealing Gregor in his small, dirty room that serves as his tomb (Kafka 329). Even his sister, who seemed so graceful and good spirited at first, betrays him. Gregor does not only face physical suffering, but also the suffering of watching his loved ones condemn him to death.

However, while Christ had his mother and disciples to mourn for him, Gregor's own family is relieved after his death, ignoring the hard work and sacrifices he made for them. Although his sister Grete initially cares for Gregor by bringing him food and cleaning his small

room, she “had gotten tired of taking care of Gregor” (324). “This animal persecutes us,” she says to her parents, pleading them finally to give up on Gregor and get rid of him (328). Ironically, it is his family that persecutes Gregor even before his metamorphosis, treating him with neither gratitude nor reward for being the breadwinner of the family; they already regard him as less than human and practically a slave laborer. When they find him dead, they see that “Gregor’s body was completely flat and dry,” conjuring similar imagery to Christ’s dehydrated and bony body hanging from the cross. “Thanks be to God,” Mr. Samsa says at the sight of his dead son’s insect body, showing more gratitude for his death rather than for his incessant work and labor (329). In addition, while Christ was resurrected and reunited with his mourning mother and disciples, Gregor remains dead while his family easily moves on to better lives:

> They found a new apartment…they watched their daughter become more and more vivacious…blossomed into a pretty and shapely girl…it was as if in confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions that at the end of their ride their daughter got up first and stretched her young body. (331)

There is no mention of Gregor at all after the cleaning woman, not even his own family, disposes his body. There is no resurrection, but only the manifestation of the next phase in the Samsa family’s lives, especially pertaining to their daughter’s coming of age. Though, through their experience with Gregor’s metamorphosis, the Samsas are liberated from economic ruin, Gregor is not hailed as their savior. Instead, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa now turn to Grete for economic stability, searching for a suitable and perhaps rich husband for their daughter. While Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection spawned a legacy and belief by generations after, Gregor’s story of suffering is merely forgotten and left unspoken.

Franz Kafka uses these Christian symbols and motifs to portray Gregor Samsa as an unnoticed savior to his family, as Gregor does not become the legend and hero Christ ultimately came to be. Sokel ties the mythical story of Jesus Christ to Marxism:

> Behind Marx's economic determinism one can glimpse the messianic martyr-savior's part played by the proletariat. In the world view of the young Marx especially, the proletariat suffers the fate and assumes the task of Christ. Today the proletariat is the scapegoat of humanity; tomorrow it will be its redeemer. So runs the Marxist myth. The proletariat will save the very society that has victimized it and committed the worst injustice against it. (492)

Gregor is ultimately this "proletariat hero" and Christ-like savior. In taking on his family's financial burden and eventually dying along with it, the Samsas are finally liberated from Herr Samsa's past business failures. But instead of learning from those failures that led to Gregor's demise, the Samsas ignore Gregor's story in favor of continuing to take advantage of their daughter Grete. Kafka makes Gregor's tale of suffering all the more tragic, as Gregor's love and efforts for his family come unrecognized and unappreciated. Gregor's transformation into a vermin insect is ultimately a symbol and manifestation of the way his family treats him—like a pest. If Gregor's family had obtained their own jobs to contribute in paying off their debt earlier, Gregor's suffering and death could have ultimately been avoided. Instead, they depend on him alone, pushing him to his emotional, physical, and mental limits. There is no resurrection for Gregor; there is only the complete opposite. In turning Grete into the next financial savior of the Samsas, it is as if Gregor never existed.

In Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," we also follow a protagonist who has devoted his entire life and existence to a mission, yet ultimately fails in creating a lasting legacy. The hunger artist's mission, of course, is professional fasting. Fasting in itself has its own religious connotation, apparent in faiths such as Buddhism and Hinduism. For Christianity, the roughly forty days of the season of Lent is of specific significance, as the days represent the same forty days that Jesus Christ spent in the desert without food or water. Kafka almost explicitly alludes to Christ's forty days in the desert as he writes, "The longest period of fasting was fixed by his impresario at forty days" (270). In the desert, Christ also faced the temptations of the devil to create his own food for nourishment. In "A Hunger Artist," the protagonist resists any temptation to feed his appetite as to protect the "honor of his profession" (269). Starvation has become his lifelong mission, so much so that the profession has defined him; he has no name, merely known as "the hunger artist."

And for a while, the hunger artist remained relevant for the people's entertainment: "at one time the whole town took a lively interest in the hunger artist...everybody wanted to see him" (278). In the various towns that starvation performances took place, the hunger artist would receive the attention of audiences, especially from children who saw them as "a special treat" (268). Nathan Cervo, in his analysis of Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," describes the hunger artist's performance in a cage as "a parody of both the Nativity and the Epiphany" (99). Nativity and Epiphany displays, depicting the birth of Christ in a manger alongside barn animals and visited by the three kings, are created out of crafted figures and displayed during the Christmas season. The hunger artist's cage is reminiscent of this manger scene, in which he sits "down among the straw on the ground" and is exhibited near a "menagerie" and "beasts of prey" (Kafka 268, 275).

In a sense, these starvation performances used to have a religious significance and fervor around them, but that fervor has since dissipated. “We live in a different world now,” writes Kafka (268).

Throughout the story, the hunger artist’s cage keeps getting pushed to the side as the animal shows become the forefront of the travelling circus, until the hunger artist loses all popularity and loses all relevance altogether. Kafka calls him a “suffering martyr,” one of the last of his kind to stand for professional fasting (272). His audiences, by turning their attention away from the hunger artist, persecute him as “the world was cheating him of his reward” (276). The religious following he used to have is now gone, leaving the only believer as the hunger artist himself, “Too fanatically devoted to fasting” (273). Some days the hunger artist would forget “the change in public opinion...in his zeal” (274). However, in the conclusion of Kafka’s story, it is revealed that the hunger artist’s zeal was perhaps a false pretense. The reason he starved himself, according to the hunger artist, is that he “couldn’t find the food [he] liked” (277). Could it be that after all this time, the hunger artist has been a false prophet, a feigning martyr? If indeed he was faking, perhaps this explains why he asks for forgiveness in the end, “Forgive me, everybody” (276). The hunger artist was never the true symbol for Jesus Christ; rather, he more fittingly represents the false faith and hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

The panther that replaces him, on the other hand, can be interpreted as the true savior of the story. Nathan Cervo writes, “the free and joyful presence of a panther is necessary to Kafka’s fulfilled meaning in ‘A Hunger Artist’” (99). The hunger artist is buried, but then is immediately forgotten. In his place is a panther, which “carr[ied] freedom...in his jaws...and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion” (Kafka 277). The panther is the complete opposite of the

hunger artist in that, rather than intended starvation, the panther is a complete animal and predator, a true carnivore. Whereas the hunger artist represented death in his emaciated body—“ribs sticking out so prominently” (268)—the panther is a symbol of “the joy of life.” In the same vein, Christ was never meant to be a symbol of death. Indeed, his passion and suffering were a harsh reality. But in his resurrection, he embodied life anew. The panther at the end of “A Hunger Artist” is full of life, which is more appealing to audiences than the hunger artist’s starvation. The audiences “braced themselves, crowded around the cage, and did not want ever to move away” (277). The panther gains this new, religious fervor as the hunger artist fades from the public consciousness.

Just as the starvation performances of the hunger artist used to carry some kind of religious following, the public executions carried out by the Old Commandant and the officer in “In the Penal Colony” used to garner a sacramental reverence and sacredness from its audiences. As the officer explains to the explorer, seeking to assess the relevance of the machine and the Old Commandant’s mission, “How different an execution was in the old days! A whole day before the ceremony the valley was packed with people; they all came only to look on; early in the morning the Commandant appeared with his ladies; fanfares roused the whole camp” (153). The executions were a public and communal affair, as “hundreds of spectators” watched “the condemned man...laid under the Harrow by the Commandant himself” (153). And among these spectators, “the children should have the preference” for the best view of the execution (154). Jesus is often depicted among a crowd of children, set as the example of the ideal Christian. In addition, Jesus Christ was indeed condemned and crucified in public. His sentence of blasphemy and of being a false Messiah was written in an inscription above his head, INRI or “Jesus of

Nazareth, King of the Jews"—an ironic title because the Jews had ultimately hailed Caesar as king and rejected Jesus. The inscriptions on the condemned men under the apparatus are phrases such as "HONOR THY SUPERIORS" or "BE JUST"—phrases reminiscent of the diction and syntax of the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament. The Commandant's condemned were meant to serve as examples of what not to be, contrasting Jesus' model of how one ought to be. Furthermore, the cruel and violent nature of the Commandant and his machine reflect the angry, jealous God of the Old Testament.

However, children and audiences have since abandoned the Old Commandant's practices, dismissing it as an old form of justice: "We haven't used torture since the Middle Ages" (156). The officer blames the "European ways of thought" for undermining the significance of the medieval machine, carrying out the Old Commandant's mission all on his own. He still performs the executions like sacraments, but without its communal aspects, as "These were tasks that might well have been left to a mechanic, but the officer performed them with great zeal" (140). If the Old Commandant represents the true Christ, then the officer is like a priest in the same way that a priest takes on the role of Christ during mass. The executions themselves are reminiscent of a mass, with sacramental parts in a sequential order, such as reading scripture—"the relevant drawings made by our former Commandant"—and washing of hands, to make sure that they were "clean enough" to hold the drawings and fulfill the execution, and kneeling down at the sixth hour to witness the condemned man's "Enlightenment" (144, 150). The machine itself, too, symbolizes the Christian notion of the Holy Trinity, as "It consists...of three parts...The lower one is called the 'Bed,' the upper one the 'Designer,' and this one here in the middle that moves up and down is called the 'Harrow'" (142). In addition to the three parts representing the Holy

Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—there is also the idea that the machine, just like God, is judge, jury, and executioner. Throughout the execution process, a "short needle sprays a jet of water to wash away the blood," mixing together the "blood and water" in the same way Christ shed blood and water during his crucifixion; in a sacramental sense, the mixing of wine and water for Communion during mass represents this passionate shedding of blood and water (147). Of course, the ceremonies of the mass were instructed by Jesus and the early Christian leaders, as Christ said "Do this in memory of me." But the only one carrying out the Old Commandant's instructions is the officer, who declares, "I am its sole advocate" (153). The purpose of the public execution is to provide an example for the community of what one should not do, yet the communal aspect of it has since disappeared. And without the role of the public, what is the purpose of all these ceremonial and sacramental procedures, if not merely as elaborate nonsense? The officer has already begun to realize this, as in trying to persuade the explorer, he admits that without the machine and its procedures, "I and the work of the Old Commandant will be done for" (156).

In this way, the officer acts as the sole member of the Commandant's cult. The Old Commandant's machine is now all that's left of that crazed religion, and the officer alone has come to find meaning in it. Although the officer attempts to relate to the explorer and tries to "convert" him, he fails; he is outmatched and outnumbered by the dissenting colony. So like a devout believer, he sees no other option but to die for what he believes in—to die with the Old Commandant's machine. He places himself in the machine, which then malfunctions; the officer dies with the same "calm and convinced" expression on his face (166). To the others, the officer is a crazed zealot of a forgotten religion; but to the officer, he is a martyr, much like the

"suffering martyr" in the hunger artist. Although he dies alone in his faith, he dies having found meaning in the Commandant's mission. He completely surrenders himself to the Old Commandant and the machine, just as Christ pronounces to his Father, "Thy will be done." Yet, the officer's martyrdom garners no inspirational following. Upon leaving the penal colony, the explorer finds the grave of the Old Commandant foretelling his resurrection. The townspeople, however, were "smiling, as if they too had read the inscription, had found it ridiculous, and were expecting him to agree with them" (167). Austen Warren finds a silver lining in the story's conclusion, however. Indeed, the officer fails in convincing the explorer of the Old Commandant's brutal method of justice, but "when [the explorer] sees the old officer is willing to testify to his faith by martyrdom...he respects him for loyalty to his code, and 'would not have acted differently'" (148). Warren refers to the explorer as "Pontius Pilate" as "he makes no report to the new commandant; and he takes the Prophecy of Return seriously...he refuses to judge; he finds no fault in the just manipulators of the machine" (148). The explorer does not buy into the officer's persuasions wholeheartedly, but he respects the officer's faith, never doubting it. Pilate, too, knew that Jesus was innocent, refusing to judge him and leaving Christ's judgement to the crowd of Jews who shouted "Crucify him!" And while the explorer might have gained some kind of newfound perspective, he ultimately leaves the penal colony to return to the rest of the modern world. There is no indication that he will try to take up the Old Commandant's legacy, as the officer, his blueprints, and the apparatus are all but gone. The legend of the Old Commandant would remain in the penal colony, where his mission has already lost relevance and will continue to fade from history.

Kafka alludes to Christianity in his use of symbolism and motifs. Through the protagonists of Gregor Samsa, the hunger artist, and the officer in the penal colony, Kafka presents foils to Jesus Christ. Their stories, just as Christ's, are stories of great suffering, pain, and death. And yet, in their sacrifices and devotion to their beliefs and missions, those around them find no similar calling. Gregor is a savior to his family, yet they have already forgotten him in their latching on to Grete as their next financial messiah. The hunger artist used to garner audiences who admired his craft of starvation, but they have since left him for the menageries. The officer is the sole believer in the Old Commandant's brutal apparatus of justice, and he fails to convince the explorer of its value. They are prophets, saviors, and martyrs, yet do not share in the same resurrection as Jesus did three days after his death. They do not share in the recognition, inspiration, and lasting legacy that Christ achieved. In these stories, suffering is not rewarded nor retributed; suffering is pain, loneliness, and death.

## Chapter Three: The Failure of Joseph K. as the Existentialist Hero and Comparing Kafka's Protagonists as Exemplars of Existentialism

Franz Kafka is often labeled an "existentialist" writer, crafting stories and characters that capture the existentialist zeitgeist that began in the nineteenth century through the modern era and, many argue, is still going on today. As Walter Kaufmann notes in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, existentialism "is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets" (11). From Kierkegaard to Camus, there are many discrepancies and differences between each existentialist-labeled writer. Kierkegaard was influenced by Christianity, while others like Nietzsche rejected religion entirely; some were philosophers by title, while others dabbled in fiction writing like Albert Camus. Many we label "existentialist" would not have considered themselves one, despite being grouped and studied among the others. Kaufmann attempts to condense their themes as "The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life…" (12). This "refusal" and "repudiation" of forces outside the individual is central to existential thought. Existentialism can be defined as a subjective ideology that emphasizes the individual's mastery and control of his own existence; significantly essential to his existence is the concept of suffering and death, in which he finds and creates his ultimate self.

But to what extent do Kafka's protagonists live out existentialism? Kierkegaard establishes the individual against the "crowd," Nietzsche turns suffering into empowerment, and Camus finds happiness in a world of absurdity. Each label their respective models of existentialism: Kierkegaard's knight of faith, Nietzsche's Uberman, and Camus' absurd hero.

Kierkegaard's knight of faith accepts absurdity and all its suffering, all in the name of faith in God. For Nietzsche, the individual who accepts life as it is, in which suffering is essential and necessary, represents the greatness of humanity and the ideal: the *Ubermensch*, the overman, the superman (Palmer). Camus calls Sisyphus, his absurd hero, the "wisest" and "most prudent" individual in his embracing of the gods' punishment against him, that even in his rolling his rock up the hill for eternity, Sisyphus is still "happy" (Camus 375-378). Their protagonists embrace their individuality, contrary to social norms and institutions, all while facing the harsh torments of death and suffering. In fact, John Updike seems to allude to these existentialist themes and ideals in his foreword to *The Complete Stories*:

> Kafka epitomizes one aspect of this modern mind-set: a sensation of anxiety and shame whose center cannot be located and therefore cannot be placated; a sense of an infinite difficulty within things, impeding every step; a sensitivity acute beyond usefulness, as if the nervous system, flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain. (ix)

This "anxiety and shame" is very much in line with Kierkegaard's concept of the "dizziness of freedom," while the "sense of an infinite difficulty within things" may allude to Camus' concept of the absurd—in the same way Sisyphus rolls his rock and faces difficulty "impeding every step" up the hill. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Camus have similarly emphasized a "flay[ing] of social usage and religious belief" in their rebelliousness against socio-political, judicial, and religious institutions. And in all of this, there is, of course, "pain" and suffering. If Kafka truly "epitomizes" existentialism, as Updike suggests, then these themes presented by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Camus will be the criteria by which we will measure his protagonists. In doing

so, Kafka's works reveal that *The Trial*'s Joseph K. fails as the existentialist hero in comparison to Kafka's other protagonists—"The Metamorphosis"'s Gregor Samsa, the hunger artist in his titular story, and "In The Penal Colony"'s the officer.

Most of Kafka's works follow a story formula that introduces his protagonist into an absurd circumstance, then illustrates how the protagonist attempts to make sense of the absurdity, until he is eventually consumed by the absurdity's torments and inevitably dies. This is true for Kafka's "existential" novel *The Trial*. "Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K.," the story begins, "for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested" (5). The absurdity lies in K.'s arrest, as he is innocent and has not committed "anything wrong;" he therefore assumes that there must be something wrong with anything but himself. For K., there must be a misunderstanding with the strangers who have arrested him. As Jean Wahl writes in "Kierkegaard and Kafka," "the work of both Kierkegaard and Kafka is based on the idea of misunderstanding" (284). Kafka was indeed familiar with the works of Kierkegaard and even identified himself with Kierkegaard; it is no surprise that his works can be connected to Kierkegaardian concepts (Wahl 282). An essential part of Kierkegaard's existentialism is the individual's conflict with assimilating to the "crowd":

> A crowd—not this crowd or that, the crowd now living or the crowd long deceased, a crowd of humble people or of superior people, of rich or of poor, etc.—a crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction. (in Kaufmann 95)

For Kierkegaard, the misunderstanding lies in one's conception of self, that for most people, instead of looking inward, one would rather look towards the crowd, the very manifestation of "untruth." Although K. believes that there must be some kind of misunderstanding with the Court, he refuses to examine himself and refutes that he has done nothing wrong. It is appropriate that his arrest comes on his thirtieth birthday, a literal call to wake up and examine his own life. Has he been embracing his individuality, as Kierkegaard would like him to do, or has he been too caught up in assimilating with the crowd?

The truth is that K. has let his life be dictated by others. Up until that morning, K. was satisfied with the life he had made for himself as a banker in a senior position. He would spend long days at the office through the evening, and occasionally socialize with "mostly old men" and his manager, "who valued his diligence and trustworthiness very highly." He would spend some time with a woman, Elsa, who "received visitors from her bed" during the day (19). For K., this life, albeit mundane, is worthwhile, or at least better than the "tall, grey tenements where poor people lived" (29). But Joseph K. seems to be merely living a passive life rather than a proactive one. Indeed, he prides himself by how his manager and coworkers perceive his success. He is even satisfied by his landlady's—Fraulein Grubach's—opinion of him, as "he knew very well that he was her best and dearest lodger" (18). Here lies Joseph K.'s arrogance and ignorance; in basing his identity in the view of others, he refuses to determine his own identity through self-reflection. This is why when he is first arrested, he could "regard the whole thing as a joke, a crude joke his colleagues at the bank were playing on him for some unknown reason, perhaps because it was his thirtieth birthday" (7). It is because of his arrogance that he also claims a conspiracy against him when he is summoned to his first hearing, that "There is no

doubt that there is a large organization at work behind this court's every operation, in my case the arrest and today's examination" (37). He does not take his trial seriously, and he doubts the Court's legitimacy. For K., the problem does not lie within himself, but in everyone else. "I am senior accountant with a large bank," he defends himself against the magistrate, which is the same explanation he uses to dismiss his arrest on the morning of his thirtieth birthday (33). His high ranking position at the bank, according to K., is enough to excuse the misunderstandings of the Court. Yet, he does not realize that it is he who is misunderstanding the absurdity of his situation.

Joseph K. further entrenches himself in the crowd when he enlists the help of others in his case against the Court, primarily through the help of the lawyer Huld and the painter Titorelli. Both Huld and Titorelli are tied to the Court system in someway; Huld has "a considerable reputation as defense counsel and as a lawyer for the poor" (69), while Titorelli is the Court's personal painter and "knows lots of judges, and even if it turns out that he doesn't have much influence himself, he can surely give [K.] advice on how to approach various influential people" (97). It is important to note that both Huld and Titorelli, much like Joseph K., are known by others by their title and occupation—K.'s Uncle Karl recommends Huld because of his reputation as a lawyer, and a factory owner, one of K.'s clients at the bank, recommends the painter Titorelli. Just as K. defines himself through his status and position at the bank, Huld and Titorelli are defined by their ties to the Court. This creates somewhat of a paradox for K.'s circumstances: in his efforts to escape the Court through Huld and Titorelli, he is only further incorporating himself into the Court's reaches. Even the women whom Joseph K. meets are also part of the Court. The washerwoman whom K. meets after his first hearing is the wife of a Court

usher, and as she explains to K., they too are engulfed by the Court: “Yes, we live here rent-free, but we have to clear out the room on days when there’s a session. My husband’s job does have some disadvantages” (40). And one of those disadvantages is that a student of the Court can take advantage of her, despite her husband’s wishes. Leni, too, Huld’s nurse, is connected to the Court’s plots, as she manipulates other clients like K. and Block through seduction. As the painter explains to K. about the poor girls who harass him, “The girls belong to the court too…But everything belongs to the court” (107). It seems as if every character in *The Trial* is part of the Court, whether he/she realizes it or not; the Court is inescapable. In seeking the help of others in his trial, K. further imbeds himself in his unfortunate and unwarranted circumstances. He realizes that he is but one of many who suffer under the Court’s mysterious and supernatural holdings. Yet, he refuses to take control of his own circumstance and existence, still allowing others to dictate his fate.

Joseph K.’s ultimate failure, however, is that he is unwilling to face his own death and ultimate fate. Annoyed by his abrupt arrest in the morning, K. ponders killing himself “ten times over” in his own bedroom where the strangers have confined him (Kafka 10). Nietzsche refers to this wanting to repeat suffering as an “eternal recurrence”; it is in suffering that the “greatness in a human being” can be revealed. Nietzsche calls this *amor fati* (love of fate), “that one wants nothing to be different…Not merely bear what is necessary…but *love* it” (Kain 54). One must recognize and accept suffering, and he must be willing to relive it over and over. But Joseph K. reverses his initial statement, as he dismisses his thoughts of suicide: “It would have been so pointless to kill himself that, even had he intended to do so, the pointlessness of the act would have made it impossible for him to carry it out” (Kafka 10). He finds death “pointless” because

he is clinging to the things that have given himself value and purpose—his work, money, and limited relationships with other people. He is a man of riches, pleasure, and satisfaction; he is a man far from death. The "poor people" living in the city slums, on the other hand, are closer to death than K. is, barely making a living for themselves. In the dreary slums, men smoking cigarettes are "holding children on the window-ledges," literally holding infants new to life at the edge of death (29). In another corner of the slums, "a line was being fixed between two windows. The washing which was being hung out to dry was already on it" (29); the clothes, a symbol of their livelihoods, are "hung out," as if their lives themselves hang in the balance. His experiences in the slums—running into children whom he ponders of either giving candy or beating with a stick (30), and the girls who "belong to the Court" chasing after him on his way to the painter Titorelli (107)—remind K. of his own mortality and proximity to death. This, of course, makes him uncomfortable and explains his hurry to leave the slums and Court offices. The Court's labyrinth, however, is inescapable, much like death itself. The Trial interrupts and threatens K.'s own livelihood; it threatens the life he has worked so hard to achieve; it ultimately threatens his existence.

In facing this existential crisis, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Camus provide a simple answer: acceptance—that is, acceptance of death and suffering. But throughout *The Trial*, Joseph K. does not accept his fate; he does all he can to avoid it. By the final chapter of the novel, as K. is carried away by the two men from the Court, he is offered the choice to accept this fate—to finally come to a realization alluded to by the existentialists. Indeed, he agrees to come with the men without reservations. "So you're the ones who've come for me?" he asks the strangers at his door, expecting that his time has come (161). Again, just as his arrest on his thirtieth birthday, it

is fitting that K.'s journey comes to an end on his thirty-first birthday—to die on one's birthday is in itself absurd and almost ironically humorous. K. is taken to the outskirts of the city, outside his literal comfort zone. "Logic may be unshakeable," Kafka writes as the two men restrain Joseph K., "but it cannot hold out against a human being who wants to live" (164). But does K. truly want to live? He has barely been living even before the trial, exhibiting a passive life by cherishing his money, power, and status over a life of genuine significance. He succumbs to the hierarchy of the bank, and later, the hierarchy of the Court. He has never been in control of his own life, as he has let others dictate his own existence for him. When he exclaims "Like a dog!" upon his death, he recognizes that he has lived his life according to what others have intended for him. Like a dog, K. has always lived according to the orders of his masters. He is not like Sisyphus who takes ownership of his punishment; he is not Kierkegaard's ideal individual who rejects the crowd; and he does not portray Nietzsche's *amor fati* (love of fate), as he constantly tries to run away from it. This is why Joseph K. fails as the existentialist hero: he is not a master of his own fate. Just as the man in the parable of the doorkeeper realizes that it is too late, that "No one else could be granted entry here, because this entrance was intended for [him] alone [and the doorkeeper] shall now go and shut it," it is too late for K. to turn back and change his life. Death—perhaps the only thing more powerful than the Court—comes for him.

In addition to Joseph K.'s failures, the hunger artist also falls short of embodying a true, existentialist hero. Indeed, the existentialists emphasized the acceptance of suffering and finding meaning in it; the hunger artist seemingly embraces suffering, so much so that he practices self-inflicted starvation as a profession. He finds "honor [in] his profession," yet "it was the easiest thing in the world" (269-270). For a while, there is meaning in the hunger artist's

suffering. Although he is not the only hunger artist, as the narrator reveals multiple "great performances" that have since lost popularity (268), this particular hunger artist keeps himself isolated and alone in a cage. In this way, he embodies the individualism suggested by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Camus. As Leena Eilitta asserts in "Kierkegaardian Redefinition of Identity", "While starving, the hunger artist nearly dies away from the rest of the world, takes no notice of his surroundings, and sinks utterly into himself" (Eilitta). The same can be said of Gregor Samsa and the officer from the penal colony, but this gradual decay of the individual is most physically depicted in the hunger artist's starvation. And although he is watched by public audiences and guards, the hunger artist always considers himself separate, better and transcendent: "To fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of non-understanding, was impossible" (Kafka 273). The existential crisis is always a battle against the world, against society and its rigorous world order; recall John Updike's words in his foreword, "a sense of an infinite difficulty within things, impeding every step," as well as Camus' absurd hero in Sisyphus, pushing the boulder up the mountain. The hunger artist may be physically suffering out of starvation, but there is also a suffering out of frustration that no one else can understand the hunger artist except for himself, the individual. We see this in Joseph K.'s struggle in *The Trial*, in which it is practically public knowledge that he is on trial, yet only he alone can know his case fully; his mistake is in entrusting his case to others, such as Huld the lawyer and Titorelli the painter. "The hunger artist's devotion to his art," on the other hand, as Eilitta continues, "has...separated him totally from the rest of the world and made him alien to worldly life" (Eilitta). "This suffering martyr," as Kafka calls him, is only focused on himself and the art of starvation, like an isolated monastic monk (Kafka 271). The hunger artist, unlike

Joseph K. who has let others control his life while he exhibits passivity, is truly in control; he freely chooses to starve. The hunger artist finds himself in a "state of resignation," the Kierkegaardian term for someone who completely surrenders and resigns himself to God—in this case, he surrenders himself to the art of starvation.

And yet, while the hunger artist is so close to becoming Kierkegaard's "knight of faith," he ultimately undoes all he has worked for as a hunger artist in the story's conclusion. After being secluded among the animal cages as his popularity wanes, the circus overseer who had seemingly forgot about him finds the hunger artist in his cage. The hunger artist asks for forgiveness, then admits that all he ever wanted was for the audience to admire his fasting. He confesses that, after all this time, his fasting was not for any transcendent purpose, but "because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else" (277). He does not exhibit Nietzsche's *amor fati* and theory of eternal recurrence, because if he were to repeat his life over, he would not have chosen to suffer if he had found a favorite food. After these last words, the hunger artist dies and is buried, while his cage is replaced by a panther. Should the hunger artist be believed, or is this only an excuse to save face? Eilitta offers the interpretation that "the hunger artist, in spite of his proximity to salvation, is ultimately incapable of making the leap of faith" because "After being deprived of the chance to continue his art, he himself eventually loses touch with his art" (Eilitta). He devotes his entire life to the art of starvation, yet only at the point when he is most alone—when audiences have abandoned him for more entertaining shows—the hunger artist devalues his own value, the meaning he had created in his art. It is in fact appropriate that he is replaced with a panther, an animal, just as Joseph K. remarks upon his death, "Like a dog!"

Much like K., the hunger artist "suffers from a false self-image" (Eilitta). The hunger artist does better in embracing suffering and isolation compared to Joseph K., but shares the same inability to commit fully to self-exploration and self-evaluation. The hunger artist is still committed to starvation, as even in the end, he does not consume food. Whether or not the hunger artist creates an excuse for himself in confessing his lack of a food that he likes, he still falls short as a existentialist hero. The fact that he ultimately asks for forgiveness from other people reveals that he has given up his individuality for the sake of satisfying others. The hunger artist dies unsatisfied, both in appetite and in his existence.

Gregor Samsa, in "The Metamorphosis," comes closer to the existentialist ideal than the hunger artist. Indeed, he shares some characteristics with *The Trial's* Joseph K., in that Gregor Samsa works as a travelling salesman and he has come to define himself as such, in the same way K. has defined himself as a banker. Both K. and Gregor are insecure about their jobs once they find themselves in their absurd circumstances, as K. is arrested and Gregor wakes up as a "monstrous insect" (Kafka 302). Gregor, however, has more of a cause of anxiety about his job as his family's well-being depends on it. His parents owe the director, his boss, and Gregor is working off his parents' debt. And just as the hunger artist isolates himself in a cage, Gregor isolates himself in his flat: "The boy thinks of nothing but his work. It nearly drives me to distraction the way he never goes out in the evening; he's been there the last eight days, and every single evening he's stayed at home. He just sits here at the table with us quietly reading newspapers or looking over train schedules" (306). His devotion to his work, like the hunger artist's devotion to the art of starvation, leads to his own isolation. But his work—his identity—is complete dependent upon his parents' needs and the director's demands. Up until the

absurd morning when he finds himself turned into a bug, Gregor has never had control of his own life. Ironically, albeit difficult and immensely challenging, it is only when he is a bug that he finally gains freedom and autonomy: “He no longer paid attention to the burning pains in his abdomen, no matter how they hurt. Then, allowing himself to fall against the backrest of a nearby chair, he clung to the its edges with his little legs. Now he was once more in control of himself” (307). This struggle of control continues as Gregor becomes used to his new, insect body; yet, this is the first time Gregor has ever chosen to take control, as his life has been dictated to him by his parents and the director. It is a struggle, and it is suffering, but much like Sisyphus rolling his boulder up the mountain, Gregor takes control of all of it. This is why Pavlos Michaelidas, in “Modernity and the Existential Metaphysics of Life and Death in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*,” suggests that Gregor’s “horrendous metamorphosis of literally being vermin bears his awakening to the truth of his life, to the lie of his habitual self-understanding” (110). For the first time in his life, he is in control and  independent. In turning into a bug, Gregor ironically becomes much more human, choosing for and willing himself all on his own; when he was physically a human, he took orders from his parents and superiors “Like a dog!” as Joseph K. would say.

Whereas Joseph K. does not learn to embrace himself as an individual, and whereas the hunger artist completely subverts his progress toward an existential climax, Gregor Samsa learns to accept the truth of himself, and ultimately, the truth of life—death. It does take some time for him to come to this revelation, struggling to convince his family that he is still capable of living out a human life, journeying to work and providing for them. But even Grete, his beloved sister, recognizes that it is impossible: “We would’ve lost a brother, but we’d have been able to go on

living and honor his memory. But the way things are, this animal persecutes us" (328). She is the one who finally locks Gregor in his room, with every intention of forgetting him and leaving him behind. But as Kafka writes, Gregor

> felt relatively comfortable. It was true that his entire body ached, but the pain seemed to him to be growing fainter and fainter and soon would go away altogether...His own belief that he must disappear was, if anything, even firmer than his sister's. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful reflection until...involuntarily, his head sank all the way down, and from his nostrils came his last feeble breath. (Kafka 329)

Gregor is ready to die; in fact, he has always been ready to die. In his final moments, Gregor accepts his suffering and ultimate fate—he exhibits Nietzsche's *amor fati* in his eternal recurrence. The life he has been living has never been entirely his, and neither was it any enjoyable, as he had remarked in the beginning, "My God...what an exhausting job I've chosen!" (302). His death is peaceful, it is purposeful, and it is accepted. Indeed, Gregor Samsa is an existentialist hero in his embracing of his suffering, death, and authenticity. Michaelidas calls Gregor "an advancing Prometheus heroically doomed in advance, but only in order to show the way to future succeeding heroes...the dreamtime philosophical hero" (110-111). Here Michaelidas refers to Prometheus, but of course, Camus' Sisyphus shares the same eternally doomed punishment from the gods. Gregor Samsa ultimately frees himself from the "gods" that have controlled his life. As an insect, he embraces the struggle for autonomy and authenticity as an individual, which culminates in his revelatory death.

The officer from Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" presents perhaps the ultimate paradigm of the existentialist hero, without Joseph K.'s, the hunger artist's, or Gregor Samsa's pitfalls,

particularly exhibiting Kierkegaard's concept of infinite resignation. Contrary to Joseph K., who has come to define himself through external and trivial labels—a high ranking bank official, a wealthy bachelor, and Fraulein grubach's favorite tenant—the officer identifies himself with a larger calling, an identity completely separate from the society of the penal colony. Indeed, the fact that the colony itself is on a remote island reveals the officer's detachment from the entire world. The officer embraces individualism in a way unlike Joseph K., who makes multiple attempts at integrating into society, particularly through seducing women and holding on to his job at the bank. In "Fear and Trembling in the Penal Colony," Kyle McGee suggests the interpretation that "the old Commandant could represent the God of the Old Testament" (McGee). Relinquishing his relationship to his own community, the officer has come to identify himself with the Commandant's legacy through the apparatus, its blueprints, and the medieval system of justice; he has "resigned" himself to the God in the Commandant. As McGee points out, "The machine, without doubt, is the officer's responsibility, not to mention his pride and reason for living" (McGee). His unabashed faith in the Commandant is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham's relationship with the Old Testament God. He writes of Abraham, "Abraham was greater than all, great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness" (Palmer 265). Abraham, of course, is asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac on a mountain top. Abraham fully trusts and thrusts himself in his faith in God, so much so that he intends to do what God asks of him; he is completely "resigned." This "madness" characterized by Kierkegaard in Abraham can also come to characterize the protagonists of Kafka, such as the officer's obsession with the Commandant's legacy and

machine. The officer has surrendered himself to the Commandant, a long gone yet invisible force in the penal colony. The officer himself, alone in the face of unbelievers, carries out “God’s plan” of justice.

The officer’s resignation is ultimately tested when he places himself in the apparatus in a last ditch effort to convince the explorer. He gives himself the sentence “BE JUST,” and in a horrible accident, the apparatus malfunctions and, instead of a slow, painful execution, the officer goes through a harsh, haphazard experience of death: “The Harrow was not writing, it was only jabbing, and the Bed was not turning the body over but only bringing it up quivering against the needles...this was no exquisite torture such as the officer desired, this was plain murder” (Kafka 165). And yet, after all that suffering, there is still some ambiguity as to whether the officer comes to some sort of a revelation. Kafka writes of the officer’s corpse, “it was as it had been in life; no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others found in the machine the officer had not found” (166). But this lack of revelation seems to contradict Kafka’s later note, that his “eyes were open, with the same expression as in life, the look was calm and convinced” (166); convinced of what, exactly? As Kyle McGee explains,

> The officer's move of infinite resignation signifies his crossing of the threshold into the...Kierkegaardian leap of faith, an inexplicable movement of faith...The officer's extreme, crystallized suffering raises him above the universal as an individual. The officer becomes the knight of faith – that is, he acts as the single individual standing in an absolute relation with God and the absurd, and in a way, the old Commandant. (McGee)

Of course, the officer could have just simply died, with no great philosophical significance. And yet, his mere look of calm conviction at the end of his life points toward a more tantalizing

resolution. The existentialists emphasized the individual and his own journey of self-discovery. The officer has done just that; recalling John Updike's preface and use of the term "flayed," McGee writes that "The move of infinite resignation, concisely, is a shedding of all things held dearly and closely, coupled with a feeling of reconciliation with the suffering caused by that loss" (McGee). What is left is the void in which the individual faces God and the absurd. What the officer finds in death is only for the officer himself, which is why "what the others found in the machine the officer had not found"; he has found something else—his own truth. The important detail, however, in comparing the officer to the failed existentialist hero of Joseph K. is that the officer fully commits himself to death and suffering. Whereas Joseph K. spends most of *The Trial* clinging to his passive, unremarkable life, the officer embraces the end of his life by his own free choice, much like Gregor Samsa. The officer presents the prime example of the existentialist hero, one who embraces suffering and faces it head-on.

## Conclusion and Final Thoughts

In Kafka's literary worlds, suffering is a prominent theme that drives the protagonists' stories and gives them significance. Through this theme, Kafka explores the result of a modern, capitalist society in its alienation of the individual and its treatment of people as less than human. In *The Trial*, Joseph K.'s dependence on his socio-economic status and position as Chief Clerk at the Bank reveals how he is ultimately subjugated under the Court, whose powers infiltrate every and all aspects of society and life. In "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa's taking on of his father's and family's financial burdens illustrate the divisive and deteriorative aspects of competitive capitalism, leading to the collapse of the Samsa family. While Marxism points toward a cause of suffering, Christianity provides hope in a messiah. However, through Kafka's use of various religious symbols and motifs in his stories, Gregor Samsa, the hunger artist, and the officer all take up a perverse version of a savior. In their sacrifices, these anti-Messianic figures are not praised nor glorified; rather, they are mostly forgotten and unappreciated. Finally, through an existentialist reading of Kafka's works, the failures of Joseph K. to accept and embrace suffering result in his lack of a genuine and authentic existence. The hunger artist, to a degree, better exemplifies the existentialist hero who takes on suffering for its own sake, but he ultimately undermines his own existential revelation in the end. Gregor Samsa and the officer in the penal colony are perhaps the better examples of existentialist heroes, those who accept and embrace suffering, carrying out a truly genuine existence.

But is there any hope in the world of Kafka? In writing Kafka's biography, his friend Max Brod recalls a conversation in which Kafka states that there is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope" in the world, "but not for us" (in Benjamin 798). This hopelessness is evident in

his writings, as most of his protagonists' only hope in escaping suffering is through death. Kafka, as diagnosed with tuberculosis, was always aware of his own death. In leaving his job as an insurance clerk, he devoted his time and effort into his writings. He pursued the "creative labor" that Marx suggested, and he then found inspiration from the writings of Soren Kierkegaard. Even in his ailing times, Kafka found a way to cheat suffering in the sense that he never let it consume or overcome him. And contrary to his wishes, Max Brod refused to burn his stories and published them for Kafka posthumously.

Perhaps that is what Kafka meant when he said that there is, in fact, hope, just not for us. We as individuals will ultimately die. But for others, those who continue to live on, they can find hope in the memories and things we leave behind. Kafka certainly left a lot for us to mull over for generations. Kafka's stories of suffering remain relevant today, as suffering is a universal experience and an essential part of what makes us human. Every individual faces the absurd in everyday life. In recognizing our own suffering, naturally, we can recognize the suffering of others as well. While everyone has their own respective struggles, through empathy, we can displace some of that suffering equally as we carry some of each other's burdens. In a sense, that is the ideal of Marxism, and even that of Christianity. There is hope in our world, if only we bring it to those who need it the most. As individuals, we will die. But through others, we can leave behind a better world, a world that is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope."

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