Establishing Self-Identity

The beast wrests the whip from its master and whips himself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master’s whip-lash.

Franz Kafka

As an Artist

The fact that there is nothing other than a spiritual world deprives us of our hope and gives us our certainty.

Franz Kafka

The Failure to Escape his Father


Whoever in this world loves his neighbour does no greater and no lesser wrong than whoever in this world loves himself. There remains only the question of whether the former is possible.

Franz Kakfa

Within Society

Man cannot live without a permanent trust in something indestructible within himself, though both the indestructible element and also the trust may remain permanently concealed from him. One of the ways in which this lasting concealment can express itself is faith in a personal god.

Franz Kakfa

In Relation to God
In July of 1883, an average middle-class Jewish family in an average suburb of Prague (then in Austria) ushered into the average world a new creature: Franz Kafka. He would never forgive them for this unnatural act of torture...¹

In order to achieve self-realization, we must define ourselves in relation to society. As humans we must each participate in the search for an independent self-identity while remaining interdependent with “others”. Conflict, however, is inherent in this pursuit, as tension exists between the individual’s freedoms or rights and their responsibilities to society. The author Franz Kafka focused his life and writing on this conflict. More precisely, his life was focused on it by the immense strain that Kafka’s father placed on his particularly sensitive son. In the process of attempting to define himself, the troubled artist described, through remarkable metaphors, the torture of being stuck in a life defined entirely by others. Paradoxically, Jung would have characterized Kafka as an extraverted type: “like Epimetheus, his inner life is subordinated to external necessity.”² A fascinating subject for Jungian analysis, Kafka asked many of the same questions as the famous psychoanalyst. Unlike Jung, however, Kafka left the answers incomplete. His metaphorical and literary grappling with those of Jung’s questions that penetrate to the collective foundations of human nature is worthy of a paper ten times the length of this essay. The following pages will nevertheless offer a glimpse into Kafka’s telling and agonizing inability to build a Self-identity, as an artist, within society, distinct from his father, and in relation to God.

Kafka’s psychological and social conflicts as well as his search for truth and spirituality can be tied to his original failure to individuate himself from his father’s

overwhelming willpower. This difficulty is most directly expressed in the author’s “Letter to his Father” but is also evident in much of his fiction as well. Gregor Samson, the protagonist of Kafka’s most well known short story *The Metamorphosis*, is transformed into a parasite - literalizing Kafka’s father’s descriptions of his son. His father dominated his life to such an extent that “at one point Kafka considered issuing his collected works under the title *The Attempt to Escape my Father*. His writing was the only means he had to escape the stifling and unreasoning domination of [his] father.” 3 Kafka’s only close friend, Max Brod, published the writer’s works and through a masterful biography has left us with the only complete picture we have of Kafka’s life. Kafka’s ever-present father is as dominant in Brod’s image as any other. 4 The mosaic produced by the combination of Kafka’s fiction with his Letter and Brod’s writing is a remarkably detailed, complex and troubled picture of Kafka’s failed relationship with his father.

Before exploring the professional, social, artistic, and spiritual expressions of Kafka’s torment, we must examine further their root cause. The psychological conflict that resulted from the author’s inability to establish a positive distance between himself and his father seeped into the rest of his life. Kafka’s failure to individuate from his paternal figure “radiated out into the environment” infecting and affecting his profession, his relationships with women and even his artistic expression. 5 Kafka’s occupation bored and exhausted him, his family cramped and confined him, loneliness plagued him, marriage frightened him and his art – his only escape – left him unsatisfied. The significance of

4 Unfortunately, in the words of the esteemed author Charles Osborne, “there may even be the danger of our seeing Kafka completely through the eyes of his biographer and friend…Reading the biography one sometimes has the impression that Kafka was a character created by Max Brod.” Thus the Kafka we know might be a product as much of Brod’s imagination as Kafka’s father’s torment. Ibid 5.
5 Ibid vol. 7 78-79.
Kafka’s father, particularly in reference to his son’s psychological state, cannot be overstated and was a permanent obstacle on his tragic journey of self-discovery.

In his “Letter to his Father”, after outlining his father’s accomplishments as well as his expectations and criticisms of Kafka, the writer attempted to disentangle his father’s accusations:

If you sum up your judgment of me...you do charge me with coldness, estrangements and ingratitude. And, what is more, you charge me with it in such a way as to make it seem my fault, as though I might have been able, with something like a touch on the steering wheel, to make everything quite different, while you aren’t in the slightest to blame, unless it be for having been too good to me.⁶

Kafka contrasts his father’s views with his own, explaining that his father played a substantial role in fomenting his psychological weaknesses:

I’m not going to say, of course, that I have become what I am only as a result of your influence. I should probably have still become a weakly, timid, hesitant, restless person... Only as a father you have been too strong for me, particularly since...I alone had to bear the brunt of it—and for that I was much too weak.⁷

The unstated result of Kafka’s weaknesses in the face of such a powerful father was a life spent fulfilling paternal expectations and suppressing personal dreams.

Unable to individuate form his father he never developed his anima. Kafka’s feminine side - his artistic and spiritual impulses - remained unsatisfied as he forever sought to fit the rigid mold of his proud masculine father. Jung describes the positive and necessary anima as essential to mankind:

The perilous image of Woman; she stands for the loyalty which in the interests of life [man] must sometimes forego; she is the much needed compensation for the risks, struggles, sacrifices that all end in disappointment; she is the solace for all the bitterness of life.⁸

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⁷ Ibid 11.
⁸ Jung vol. 9ii par. 24.
Kafka’s failure to recognize and incorporate his anima prevented him from breaking free from his father and moving past his failures and disappointments. The repression of his anima also lead directly to Kafka’s inability to associate with the outside world in general and women in particular as well as his timid and weak persona. It is possible, perhaps even likely that Kafka’s father was similarly out touch with his anima. A Jungian explanation of the problems inherent in the ignorance or subjugation of one’s anima describes Kafka’s emotions and his father’s mannerisms accurately:

The tyrant tormented by bad dreams, gloomy forebodings, and inner fears [as] typical figure. Outwardly ruthless, harsh, and unapproachable, he jumps inwardly at every shadow, is at the mercy of every mood, as though he were the feeblest and most impressionable of men.9

Kafka’s overbearing and entirely masculine father contributed to the suppression of his son’s anima and thereby hampered his future successful relations with women, art and the divine.

The influence of his father extended even to Kafka’s spirituality and many have described his suffering in religious terms. For instance, the fantastic writer and master of the extended metaphor Jorge Luis Borges relates Kafka’s guilt and suffering to that of the Israelites: “We know of course that Kafka never ceased to feel a mysterious guilt in the presence of his father, as Israel did in the presence of God; Kafka’s Judaism, which set him apart from the rest of humanity, was clearly a torment to him.”10 This spiritual torment, like his uncomfortable affinity for being alone as well as his artistic angst, was very similar to the torture of attempting to please his father.

9 Jung vol. 6 par. 804.
Due to their interconnected nature, Kafka’s failure to achieve individuation hindered his ability to differentiate the various functions of his psyche. His emotions interfered with his work just as his work and wives interfered with his art. In the words of the Jungian analyst Daryl Sharp, “most of [Kafka’s] life was lived ‘ provisionally, ’ due to a conflict between the demands of his inner world and his aspirations in outer reality.” More specifically, the author could not combine his art and his work. The most important element of Kafka’s life, his writing – the only area which offered an outlet for his emotions and his spirituality uninhibited by society’s and more specifically his father’s norms – was always smothered under a blanket of familial and professional obligation.

The most poignant and emotionally laden passage of Kafka’s “Letter to his Father” emphasizes the affect of Kafka’s father’s treatment of his infant son. The father had briefly abandoned his child outside at night in order to stop him from whimpering:

Even years afterwards I suffered from the tormenting fancy that the huge man, my father, the ultimate authority, would come almost for no reason at all and take me out of bed in the night and carry me out on to the pavlatch, and that therefore I was such a mere nothing for him.  

This feeling of nothingness would permeate Kafka’s existence and infect his writing with an existential void indistinguishable from that which has racked the modern Western mind for decades if not centuries.

For instance, in a key passage from The Metamorphosis, Gregor Samson describes his father’s transformation from the, “old man who…would hobble between Gregor and his mother…and yet, despite their slowness would be obliged to stop, whenever he wished to say anything, and call his escort back to him” to the impressive, proud man

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12 Letter to his Father 17.
who now “walked toward Gregor with a menacing air.”  
Before his transformation, Gregor had earned his family’s bread and butter and had sacrificed everything for them. Now, the roles were reversed and Gregor was the parasite that his father had been. His father resumed his original role as master of the household and “Gregor, astonished at the enormous size of the soles of his boots, took care to maintain still, for he knew that, from the first day of his metamorphosis, his father had held the view that the greatest severity was the only attitude to take up toward Gregor.” Throughout Kafka’s life he was the insect. Unable to free himself from his father’s authority over every element of his literal life, he attempted to escape through writing and spirituality. His success, like his life, was always painfully limited.

This feeling of constraint is expressed by all those who describe Kafka’s artistic desire to write as well as its overbearing opposite, his need to satisfy his role in society as prescribed by his father. Kafka is the oppressed artist epitomized. Osborne explains that “he wrote because he wanted answers to the problems that tormented him. Life was chaos, and he had to write some semblance of order into it.” Success, however, was fleeting. Kafka couldn’t reconcile his need to write with society or his father’s definition of a proper occupation and so he spent his time working at jobs which he detested because they kept him from his art. Max Brod quoted Kafka’s defeatist explanations:

There was no real freedom of choice of profession for me, I knew: compared with the main point everything will be as indifferent to me as the subjects I took in my secondary school, and so the only thing is to find a profession which will give the widest scope for this indifference, without hurting my vanity too much.

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14 Ibid.
15 Osborne 7.
Writing was always far closer to Kafka’s heart but he could not escape the need to maintain a reputable occupation. He needed an outlet to answer all the questions that constantly plagued his curious and artistic persona and writing seemed the obvious solution. Osborne explains:

His approach to literature was through philosophy, was, in fact, through having problems of his own. His entire childhood had posed various problems for him, problems to which the family life and traditional religion had not provided satisfactory answers. It was for help in the business of living that, as one naturally does in adolescence, the young Kafka first turned to literature.\(^{17}\)

Yet he could never imagine writing as an occupation because of the imposition of his father’s narrow view of the world on his own inquisitive personality:

A literary career was out of the question. Even if he had considered it possible to live by his writing, he would not have done so. The idea of turning his gift to practical advantage would have been abhorrent to him.\(^{18}\)

In writing as in life Kafka was conflicted, torn between art and money, satisfaction and reputation. Fitting Jung’s Extroverted type, he always succumbed to the society, giving in to the overpowering will of his father and materialism. Sharp paraphrases the psychoanalyst’s explanation: “C.J. Jung has suggested that the struggle to express an inner vision of a reality greater than the individual self, a reality that transcends the mundane, is what lies at the root of the genuine artistic impulse.”\(^{19}\) Kafka, unfortunately, never satisfied this impulse and never transcended his mundane existence.

Kafka’s story about an artist whose art is to starve himself is clearly autobiographical. It embodies the writer’s sense of desperation, alienation and his paradoxical need to express himself. The hunger artist is perpetually disappointed because no one person can watch him all the time. As a result the artist is his only

\(^{17}\) Osborne 4.
\(^{18}\) Ibid 4-5.
satisfied spectator. Furthermore, no one truly appreciates the intellectual significance of
his art. At the same time, the hunger artist is ashamed at how easy it is for him to starve
and is plagued by the possibility that his art is simply the result of dissatisfaction with
himself. In the end, in a manner strikingly parallel to Kafka’s unhappy end, the hunger
artist starves himself out of existence. Just as Gregor is a physical manifestation of
Kafka’s father’s opinion of his son, so the hunger artist is a literal representation of Kafka
as an oppressed artist, wasting away as his art remains unappreciated by the world. This
is further evidence of Kafka fitting Jung’s Extroverted archetype:

the tendency of this type is so outer-directed that even the most obvious of all
subjective facts, the condition of his own body, receives scant attention. The body
is not sufficiently objective or ‘outside,’ so that the satisfaction of elementary needs
which are indispensably to physical well-being is no longer given its due. The
body accordingly suffers, to say nothing of psyche.

It is a truly sad indicator of the priorities of Kafka’s society that an artist of his magnitude
could be driven to death or something close to it by the suppression of his only form of
expression. Kafka needed his art as an escape from his miserable existence. Instead of
liberating the artist, however, his writing was a further reminder of his prison-like
psychological and social circumstances.

The author’s relationship with society, again reflecting his father’s contradictory
influence, is another manifestation of Kafka’s failed individuation. The son describes how
his father left him bewildered instead of corrected and belittled instead of enlightened:

You put special trust in bringing children up by means of irony, and this was most
in keeping with your superiority over me...each such question would be
accompanied by malicious laughter and a malicious face. One was so to speak
already punished before one even knew that one had done something bad.

245.
21 Osborne 13.
22 Jung vol. 6 335.
23 Letter to his Father 37.
Confused and demoralised, Kafka grew up an isolated hermit. He was colloquially speaking introverted, focused on his own plight and uninterested in those pursuits not related to his writing; “indifference” characterized his interactions with society. Even his relationships with women were cold and awkward (Brod 13). In a well-known list of reasons for why he should or should not marry his only fiancé, Kafka characterized his relationship with society as one of unhappy and unproductive necessity. Only the first entry of the list of seven was for marriage:

1. Inability to bear living alone, not any inability to live, quite the contrary; it is even unlikely that I understand how to live together with someone; but to bear the onslaught of my own life, the onslaught of time and old age, the vague pressure of the itch to write, my sleeplessness, the near approach of madness – to bear all this alone I am unable.

3. I must be alone a great deal. All that I have accomplished is the result of being alone.

5. Fear of being tied to anyone, of overflowing into another personality. Then I shall never be alone any more.

6. Single, I might perhaps one day really give up my job. Married, it would never be possible.24

The complex and paradoxical nature of Kafka’s relationship to society is apparent in these few informal lines.

While the characterization of Kafka as an introvert may appear to contradict earlier Jungian of descriptions of the author as fitting the Extroverted type, in reality these two labels are consistent and in fact interrelated. Jung explained how the Extrovert is so completely overwhelmed by the “other” that he or she is unable to establish their own identity.

“People [and] things seize and rivet his attention. Accordingly, they also determine his actions, which are fully explicable on those grounds. The actions of the extravert are recognizably related to external conditions…This is the extravert’s danger: he gets sucked into objects and completely loses himself in

24 Brod 112.
them. The resultant functional disorders, nervous or physical, have a compensatory value, as they force him into an involuntary self-restraint.\textsuperscript{25}

Kafka’s actions and neurosis were the direct result of his relationship with his father. He was lost in his father’s morality, his father’s occupation, his father’s priorities. As a result he disregarded his own needs and desires. The result was tragic. Isolated and alone, Kafka was unhappy with his relationships and yet unable to correct them. He wanted companionship but feared marriage, wanted to be productive but not alone.

The result of the irreconcilable conflict between Kafka’s extroversion and his personal psychological needs was a psychosomatic illness that eventually led to his death.\textsuperscript{26} Brod described Kafka’s coughing up of blood as if it was in response to the inevitable and terrifying prospect of marriage: “Steps taken in the matter of Kafka’s illness. He insists it is psychic, just like something to save him from marriage.”\textsuperscript{27} The resultant tuberculosis ended the author’s life.

While brief, literal and narrative based, Kafka’s stories are far from simple. To illustrate the profoundness and intricacy of Kafka’s works, Sharp offers an anecdote about Thomas Mann’s gift of a book by Kafka to Albert Einstein, who returned it commenting: “I couldn’t read it, the human mind isn’t complicated enough.”\textsuperscript{28} The \textit{Metamorphosis} is the perfect example of such complexity. Merely one hundred brief paragraphs, it has become the subject of intensive literary, psychological, historical and even sociological study and is a tribute to Kafka’s ability to summarise the human condition in ostensibly simple language.

\textsuperscript{25} Jung vol. 6 334-6.
\textsuperscript{26} Osborne 14.
\textsuperscript{27} Brod 127.
\textsuperscript{28} Sharp 7.
The depths of Kafka’s personality, like his language, can illuminate truths in our own lives that only the most complicated self-analysis would otherwise unveil. Irony characterized his father’s criticisms just as Kafka punished himself in life ironically. Like one of his own characters, Kafka’s physical illnesses were the result of psychological failures. He found employment that was as boring as possible so as to augment his indifference and focus further his mind on the more important task of writing. Yet writing was not an occupation worthy of his father and so it too was suppressed, as is evident in Kafka’s dying request to Max Brod to burn his life’s works (interestingly, Virgil made a similar request.)

Kafka’s psychological and experiential paradoxes, evident in the author’s distressing yet self-imposed ostracism from society, were due to his failure to individuate successfully from his father. As a child, Kafka developed something like an Extroverted neurosis; constantly attempting to conform to his father’s contradictory wishes, he established a defeatist outlook. This outlook left him alone, an intellectual orphan. Attempting establish right from wrong without the moral grounding normally imbued in a child, he became an introvert. Kafka’s lack of a moral foundation and exclusion from society, however, allowed him to explore reality with a clarity foreign to the majority of humanity who naturally and easily received a grounding in right and wrong, good and bad. This isolated genius element of Kafka’s psyche was very different from Jung’s descriptions of the Extrovert for whom “the moral laws governing his actions coincide with the demands of society.” Kafka’s moral laws were confused and his personality in chaos, the result of an endless onslaught from a father who, “was unrelentingly

29 Franz Kafka: Stories 1904-1924 s.
30 Jung vol. 6 334.
disapproving, finding Franz, everything he did, and everyone he knew just a little too odd.” Before he was killed by a disease linked to his fear of a social institution accepted by most of humankind, Kafka explored the depths of spirituality in an attempt to escape his father’s overwhelmingly negative influence.

Many have likened Kafka’s philosophically curious fiction to religious exploration and have compared his relationship with his father to that of Jesus or Job with a wrathful God. Jorge Luis Borges, in an introduction to a collection of Kafka’s short stories, again clarifies that “his work could be defined as a parable or a series of parables on the theme of the moral relationship of the individual with his God and with his God’s incomprehensible universe...his stories are less close to what is conventionally called modern literature as they are to the Book of Job.” Job was embroiled in a verbal battle against his unjust and contradictory treatment by God in a manner very similar to Kafka’s psychological conflict with his father. Job won his battle and was returned his life of luxury. Borges’ use of the term ‘parable’ is fitting because Kafka never explicitly speaks of God or his own father in his fictional writing.

Nevertheless, the author’s ability to illustrate spiritual and psychological turmoil through plot and circumstance paralleled Jesus moral teachings in the bible. Kafka’s religious references are at times crystal clear: Gregor Samson, in the form of a massive insect and, struck by an apple thrown by his father, “seemed to be nailed fast to the spot and stretched his body helplessly.” Crucified on the wall of his dining room, Gregor’s “last, hopeless glance” is of his mother begging his father for his life. Jung’s description of an image of Jesus on the cross parallel’s Kafka’s treatment of the crucifixion and

31 “Franz Kafka,” Art and Culture Network.
32 Borges 5.
33 The Metamorphosis 65-67.
simultaneously describes the author’s isolated torment: “the cross symbol always had the
connotation of suffering, so we are probably not wrong in assuming that the mood of this
picture is one of more or less painful suspension…over the dark abyss of inner
loneliness.” Like Jesus Kafka’s lessons outlived him. Unlike the Christ, his
accomplishments far surpassed those of his ‘father’ and unlike Job, Kafka’s life ended
early and unfortunately. While Jesus and Job were immortalized through writing or
transcendence, Kafka and Gregor suffered unproductively and died without achieving
salvation.

A cohesive picture of Kafka’s life and writing would be unfaithful to the author’s
chaotic existence. Curious till the end of his life, Kafka was never satisfied with his
writing. It had not answered his most problematic questions. The author’s primary
inquiry, how to fit into society and yet thrive as an individual artist, remains the subject of
intellectual debate to this day. Kafka’s mental collapse is tied to this conflict by what Jung
describes as the “threat of the collective image”:

Many fathomless transformations of personality, like sudden conversion and other
far-reaching changes of mind, originate in the attractive power of a collective
image, which...can cause such a high degree of inflation that the entire personality
is disintegrated.

The problem became of vital importance to Kafka, because of his father’s confining
education.

A Jungian analysis of Kafka’s relationship to his father reveals problems facing all
of humankind. This relationship is important because it shaped a literary artist that has
defined our century. It is the subject of extensive debate and intensive study. Franz
Kafka’s compelling portrayals of agony, deprivation, isolation have become embedded in

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34 Jung vol. 9i 327.
35 Jung vol. 7 144.
our Western psyche’s. The Metamorphosis has become a modern illustration of various collective archetypes including the conflict between a child and their parent, the conflict between the artist and society and the physical and mental destruction that is the result of the failure to deal with these conflicts. Kafka’s writing was an outlet for his intense unhappiness. Many if not all of his protagonists resemble their author in one way or another and can reveal as much about his personality and psychology as any of his diaries or the plethora of biographies which have been written since his untimely death.

Most telling of all, however, are the questions that Kafka asks through all of the above mediums. They plagued Kafka a hundred years ago and they trouble writers and psychologists to this day. The author’s first important query was how to please his father. As a child and an adult his life revolved around fitting a mould created by his omnipotent father. This question led to a hierarchy of inquiry that at its pinnacle revolved around the meaning of life. After questioning his relationship with his father, Kafka questioned his relationship with his family. If he could not define an appropriate connection with his family, how was he to do so for society in general? Yet society is only important to an individual satisfied with their Self. The Self is optimally in a state of balance: all of the psychological and external forces acting on it should be in equilibrium. Finally, and once again at the top of the hierarchy, Kafka had to form an appropriate relation to the divine.

The author’s personality refused its environment and resulted in his enhanced state of chaos and curiosity. The result of this confusion was a body of literature that focused his readers’ attention on the paradoxical nature of life. Kafka was the master of the labyrinth without an exit and the castle without an entrance. His writing, like his life offers a plethora of Jungian insights and eternal questions. Kafka died unsatisfied because the questions he asked are so tied to our collective identity as humans that the answers
would leave us with no reason to look further and no goals to attain. In short, Kafka was trying to find perfection in an imperfect world. Kafka’s father thought he had all the answers. His son teaches us that it is not the answers but the questions that are significant.

Previously I did not understand why I got no answer to my question, today I do not understand how I could believe I was capable of asking. But I didn’t really believe, I only asked.  

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Works Cited


