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# Reading Reality into the Fantasy of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

Since its first publication in 1915, Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*) has undergone a colorful wave of adaptations and transformations led by a vast number of writers, and one can only imagine the degree to which each varying cultural context has restructured and reimagined the original work. Hartmut Binder first published research on the reception of Kafka's work, first focusing on Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy, and Japan in 1979, moving on to more research on how Kafka's work was adopted and transformed across nations in Eastern Europe and Latin America in 1983, providing a glimpse into the wide range found in the adoption and transformation of Kafka's work (Binder, *Kafka* 624–786; “Metamorphosen” 247–305). Moreover, in the following years, these efforts have continued not only in Europe but also outside of Europe where Kafka's work has been transformed beyond its literary form to encompass performance arts such as theatre. This is a common cultural trend of today that can be found across literary texts, but what is most notable is that Kafka's work, particularly *Metamorphosis*, which is the primary text of this study has been widely discussed in terms of the wide range of possibilities that lie in its interpretation. It has even been said that this text “is interpretable only as the Not-interpretable” (Emrich 127), or even more ambiguously, *Metamorphosis* has been referred to as “fundamentally silent” (Blanchot 73). These views not only make evident the unique quality of Kafka's narrative strategy, but also hints to the various implications that can be reached from age-old literary traditions from its mythological motif,

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1. The English translation of this text is by Jooyong Choi at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) Center for Interpreting & Translation, to whom I express all of my gratitude.

to today's discussion on the human and non-human. Without having to mention previous literary research on this issue, individual readers would easily testify that each act of reading results in a new experience. Then, how can one approach and explain this phenomenon? Is the ventriloquist nature of the text which enables "the multitude of meanings" or "palimpsest upon palimpsest of meaning" (Weninger 281) sufficient in understanding not only the narrative characteristics of Kafka's work, but also the interconnectedness of fantasy and reality?

Looking beyond Kafka's narrative strategies, this paper explores yet another factor that contributes to the wide-ranging interpretations of *Metamorphosis*, which lies in the very moment meaning is created through the act of reading. By examining both the narrative characteristics of the text and what occurs at the moment of reading, I also look into the way communication and interaction takes place between the text and the act of reading to bring light to the elements of realism within fantasy. This is the only approach that allows reflection on the context behind the supernatural event of a human turning into "ungeheure[s] Ungeziefer" (KV 57)<sup>2</sup> and its implications. The interpretive lens for this task will be i) the phenomenon of "narrative Modalität," which is most notable in Kafka's work, and ii) the interaction between the context of Kafka's work and the context of the reader's experienced reality. This approach is necessary due to Kafka's narrative characteristic that denies the clear progression of a supernatural event and continuously encourages the reader to ask questions such as, "Did Gregor Samsa truly become a verminous insect?" and "Why did he become an insect, out of all living things?" That is not the only reason why the interaction between the text and context should be scrutinized. Kafka's work often merges fantasy and reality as one, and the logical and the absurd seem connected upon the same plane, which according to Park Hwan-deok,

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2. The primary text used here is *Die Verwandlung*, which is part of *Erzählungen* of Kafka's complete works. When referenced within the text, it will be marked as KV alongside the specific page number that is being referenced. The translation of "Ungeziefer" also needs to be addressed. Generally, when translated to Korean, the words "beollae" (bug) and "gabchoong" (beetle) were used. Here, it is translated to "haechoong" (a harmful insect) in order to highlight the negativity and unpleasantness associated with "Ungeziefer." When translated to English, Richard Lawson had argued that the word "insect" fails to capture the unpleasant connotation of "Ungeziefer." Cf. H. Lawson, Richard. "Ungeheueres Ungeziefer in Kafka's 'Die Verwandlung'." *The German Quarterly* 33.3 (1960): 216–19, especially 216.

may have to do with the unique cultural layout of Prague where Germanic and Slavic cultures meet (41). Reiner Stach also noted the overlapping of fantasy and reality and their absorption into literature, which is one of the driving forces of Kafka's work (220). As such, the relationship between text and context becomes all the more significant as Kafka's fantasy and reality are closely connected. In what follows, I explore the elements of reality within Kafkaesque fantasy by reading into the historical context, more specifically the Jewish cultural history of Europe, and by doing so, demonstrate how the element of reality itself holds the possibility for a variety of interpretations that shift with changes in historical and geographical context.

## II. Kafka's Decontextualized Narrative and Varying Interpretations: The "Vermin" Motif as the "Metaphor of Insult"

The main event in *Metamorphosis* is the "transformation" of Gregor Samsa. This transformation does not involve a change in his human features. Instead, he wakes up one day to find himself an animal, and even worse, a "monstrous vermin." This fantastical event is what made *Metamorphosis* a fantasy tale well known throughout the world. The very fact that people can read this simply as fantastic literature is entirely a result of Kafka's narrative strategies. In the words of Adorno, the most striking feature of Kafka's narrative strategy is that the key to unlock his metaphors "has been lost." Adorno explained the characteristics of Kafka's prose as follows:

Sie [Kafkas Prosa—kys] drückt sich nicht aus durch den Ausdruck sondern durch dessen Verweigerung, durch ein Abbrechen. Es ist eine Parabolik, zu der der Schlüssel entwendet ward. (251)

Adorno characterized Kafka's prose as expressing itself "not through expression, but by evading and interrupting expression." Along the same lines as Adorno's lost key, Walter Benjamin also described the metaphorical nature of Kafka's prose as "a flower bud that blossoms on its own" (420). In short, as a literary text, each metaphor lacks a key to interpretation, and the flower is never shown in full bloom. Metaphors are only mentioned to the point, which allows various different interpretations, but the interpretation of these

metaphors only becomes possible when the text comes together with a real reader. The key to the metaphors lie in the context of these readers, and the act of reading is what triggers the flower to truly blossom. In this sense, it becomes clear that the interaction between Kafka's text and the context of the readers plays a significant role in the production of meaning. When this aspect of *Metamorphosis* is considered, it also becomes possible to prove that it cannot simply be read only as fantasy literature, as will be explained in the following.

Adorno's description applies not only to *Metamorphosis*. The evasive elements Adorno writes about have already been identified in other prose such as "Jackals and Arabs" (Schakale und Araber) and "At the Building of the Great Wall of China" (Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer).<sup>3</sup> Clear representations of China—smoking pipes, braided pigtails, and embroidered silk garments—were erased from the final version of "At the Building of the Great Wall of China," allowing European readers to read the story as one tackling the issue of the Austrian Empire instead of China. There were also cases where his work would be read as Jewish documentaries without a single mention of Jews.<sup>4</sup> This enigmatic nature of Kafka's texts can only be deciphered when one observes the interaction of meaning between the text itself and the context of the readers.

Kafka's narrative sensibilities are not built on the assumption that there is a shared frame of thought that enables the symbolism within the text, or a shared belief that this symbolism can be understood by all. For Kafka, the only shared element is language (Anders 40–41). Kafka's decontextualized narrative evades and interrupts expression not by operating at a semantic level that presumes a shared image in the shape of metaphors and symbols, but by making use of "a shared language" of the signifier and the signified. This enables the communication of meaning, but due to the interaction between the literary text and the realism of the context it lies in, it also opens the possibility for multifarious meaning structures to be constructed and deconstructed at the

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3. Cf. Kim, Yeon-Soo. "Die Problematik der Diaspora in Kafkas Erzählung Schakale und Araber." *Bertolt Brecht und das moderne Theater* 21 (2009): 181–205, especially 183–86; and "Kafkas literarisches Spiel mit dem europäischen Orientalismus—Analyse zu China Bildern in der Erzählung Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer." *Dogilmunhak* 107 (2008): 103–30, especially 113–25.

4. Cf. Kim, Yeon-Soo. "Das Treffen von Europäern 'in der Strafkolonie' Kafkas." *Kafka-Forschung* 16 (2006): 31–50, especially 34–35.

semantic level. Languages generally change over time and the interpretation of literary works can vary dramatically as the differences in time and space increase between the context of production and the context of consumption. For example, the political satire and connotations that were relevant during the time of Jonathan Swift may no longer ring true to today's younger readers who may simply enjoy *Gulliver's Travels* as an adventure story. It is almost expected of Kafka's texts that are rife with word plays "express meaning through the interruption of expression" to result in an abundance of varying interpretations. Therefore, the characteristics in language and narrative that are identified in the interactive procedure of the transmission and reception of literary texts become crucial sources of understanding.

Then, what is it that is being expressed by *Metamorphosis* through the evasion and interruption of expression? If we were to reverse this question, we would have to begin with the matter of particular types of expressions that were denied and cancelled out in order to effectively express the fantastical nature of the metamorphosis. The image of the insect, or the verminous bug, can be found repeatedly in other works written by Kafka, and were explained by Karlheinz Fingerhut as "the metaphor of insults" (Schimpf-Metapher), which rises from Kafka's relationship with his father, Hermann Kafka (*Die Funktion* 212–15).<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of the vermin is derived from the verbal abuse that came from his own father. In *Brief an den Vater* (*Letter to His Father*), it is described how Kafka's father had objected to his son associating with Yitzchak Löwy who was an actor working for a theatre troupe. He would compare Löwy to vermin, and went as far as to adopt the old saying, "Whoever lies down with dogs, gets up with fleas" to express his disdain for Kafka's friendship with him. In his diary from the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, 1911, Kafka writes "well deliberated insults roll now and then, and within, the stronger tempers fly" (Literarisch überlegte Schimpfworte rollen hin und wieder, im Umkreis der stärkeren Temperamente fliegen sie) (*Tagebücher* 153). Kafka knew by then that one profane and abusive saying, if packaged in the right way, can bring great social and political repercussions. Unsurprisingly, his vermin motif is by far the best example for the "well deliberated insults" Kafka wrote about in his

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5. Cf. Choi Yun Young also addresses the issue of man and animal found in *Die Verwandlung* and *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* within the context of Europe's Jewish discourse and its cultural history in *Kafka, the Jew, the Body*. The insult metaphor is also explored in detailed manner. Refer to pages after 164.

diary.

The same motif is used in other works such as *Wedding Preparations in the Country* (1912).<sup>6</sup> This incomplete story was planned and written before Kafka started *Metamorphosis*. The metaphor of the vermin is slightly modified to a beetle, and this motif is used when the main character Raban daydreams on his way from his tough life in the city to the countryside where he is to be wed. Raban imagines becoming a beetle to escape from his own wedding and the excruciating pressures of everyday life. This is not so different from Gregor who also lives the exhausting life of a salesman. However, Raban's fantasies have not yet reached the level of vermin. What is different about Gregor is that he becomes a type of insect hazardous to mankind, vermin.

If we look further into the personal context of the author's life, we would find that Kafka's father was not inspired by an image he himself created. The image was drawn from an old saying, a socially shared image of disgust. His son's friendship taunted Hermann Kafka on at least two fronts. According to his worldview and value system, Löwy was an Eastern European Jew, considered the lowest class of all Europeans. Moreover, he was an actor, which meant he brought no practical good in life. Even if Kafka had strongly opposed his father's opinions, there is no doubt that the idea that one should do something practical would have been deeply rooted in his mind. His biographer Stach also noted that everything that could be imagined through the image of vermin was in fact "already operating as an important aspect of Kafka's inner world" (215). Therefore, his father's insults found in the context of the author's personal life can be "interpreted" to have been realized through the fictional world of text. However, in the text-based world of fiction, it is never once said that Gregor became a monstrous insect because he did not go to work early in the morning, just as his father had warned through his insults. The "facts" that can be verified through the author's biographical information is never mentioned within the text itself. This is Kafka's narrative characteristic that functions like a metaphor that has lost its key, and expresses itself by avoiding

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6. For more on Gregor Samsa's motif of the verminous insect in *Die Verwandlung* and the beetle motif in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, see: Emrich, Wilhelm. *Peurancheu Kapeuka: Geuui Munhagui Guseong Beopchik, Heomujuiiwa Jeontongeul Neomeoseon Seongsukan Ingan* [Franz Kafka. *Das Baugesetz seiner Dichtung. Der mündige Mensch jenseits von Nihilismus und Tradition, 프란츠 카프카: 그의 문학의 구성 법칙, 허무주의와 전통을 넘어선 성숙한 인간*]. 1975. Trans. Pyeon Youngsu [편영수], Seoul: ZMANZ [지식을 만드는 지식], 2011.

or interrupting expression. Only when the text itself and the various contexts come together can one reach an interpretation.

It is, of course, possible to read into the transformation as a very unusual supernatural event, without ever taking into consideration the different contexts that may be involved. Nevertheless, Kafka's narrative techniques have a certain magical quality that encourages the reader to actively connect the text with different contextual levels. The text may appear to have a hidden layer disguised under darker shades, much like the work of Maurits Cornelis Escher who tried to capture the third dimension on a flat two dimensional surface and to make the image turn back upon itself in ways that appear reasonable at the local level, but that reveal impossibility at the level of the entire image. The content itself may also be altered depending on the individual act of reading, just as with holograms, where the shape of an object can change depending on the movement of the screen. The same effects of Escher's sketches and holograms within Kafka's text can be found in the narrative. The supernatural event of a human transforming into an insect that occurs in this fictional world does not progress through a clear and definite storyline. Instead, the narrative constantly prompts the reader to ask, "Did Gregor Samsa really become a monstrous bug?"

In order to specifically locate this characteristic and analyze it, we must look into the narrative modality. Briefly put, narrative modality refers to "a part of the speaker's individual contribution [...] to the speech event" (Fowler 78). Modality relates to the real presence of a narrator or the credibility within what is being said. It can also demonstrate a particular point of view on a certain topic, demonstrate a connection with the decisions made by the narrator, and present judgements of various kinds (78). In *Metamorphosis*, the most extraordinary event takes place, where a human turns into an insect, yet the readers are also exposed to a particular "voice" that adds the mystery to the story and expands the scope of interpretations. In the following, such hybrid narrative tendencies within different modalities will be examined in order to discover how Kafka's fantasies lie open to such a wide range of interpretations and how these fantasies also entails elements of realism.



### III. Gregor Samsa's Fantasy as Signifier and Reality as Signified: *Wenn-Phantasie*

#### 1. Characteristics of the Narrative Modality: Between Man and Animal

To examine what prevents readers from taking as literal this extraordinary event in which the main character transforms into a verminous insect, we must first look into two aspects of the narrative characteristic of *Metamorphosis*, or its narrative modality. Here, what is most notable is Kafka's choice of words and word order that creates the effect of *erlebte Rede* (i.e., free indirect discourse) and renders the events unfamiliar and distant. The narration and the inner thoughts of the characters arrive at various points of disagreement or conflict, which repeatedly prompts the reader to question the narrator's claim that Gregor has indeed become a verminous insect. This is what adds the riddle-like feature to the story and highlights characteristics shared with the work of Escher and the changing shapes of a hologram.

##### 1) *Erlebte Rede*: The Hybridization of Two Voices

*Erlebte Rede* refers to the narrative technique used when the narrator directly delivers the experiences, inner feelings, and thoughts of the characters. This narrative voice is already a hybrid of two different voices, one of the characters and one of the narrator itself. The narrative technique in *Metamorphosis* is closer to *erlebte Rede* than to stream of consciousness as Kim Tae Hwan notes, and Kafka's use of *erlebte Rede* also differs from the more traditional forms of *erlebte Rede* and its more modern usage, which can be found in Thomas Mann's writing (17–18). This is in fact very much the case. Kafka's use of *erlebte Rede* will be explored further in the following sections, but it is worth mentioning that the two combined voices in this narrative technique often experience fissures and conflicts that could result in an effect that distances the reader. In the case of *Metamorphosis*, the conflict between the narrative voice and the inner thoughts of the characters shakes the very foundation of the most central event and weakens its factual basis. In short, this is the paradox that is so often hailed as characteristic of Kafka's work (Politzer 273).

Kafka, or the narrator of the story, begins with the first sentence, "As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin" (KV 57). In the paragraph

that immediately follows the physical description of the transformation, it is stated with clarity that “it was not a dream” (57) and the transformation was real. This extraordinary event which is clearly a stated reality in this fictional world is then ridiculed as “alle Narrheiten” (all these idiocies) in the very next paragraph as Gregor thinks, “What if I went on sleeping for a while and forgot all these idiocies” (57). The transformation had been a confirmed fact and reality just one paragraph earlier, and with this menacing sentence this reality comes under question. This suspicion becomes even more evident in the following paragraph:

Zunächst wollte er ruhig und ungestört aufstehen, sich anziehen und vor allem frühstücken, und dann erst das Weitere überlegen, denn, das merkte er wohl, im Bett würde er mit dem Nachdenken zu keinem vernünftigen Ende kommen. Er erinnerte sich, schon öfters im Bett irgendeinen vielleicht durch ungeschicktes Liegen erzeugten, leichten Schmerz empfunden zu haben, der sich dann beim Aufstehen als reine Einbildung herausstellte, und er war gespannt, wie sich seine heutigen Vorstellungen allmählich auflösen würden. Daß die Veränderung der Stimme nichts anders war als der Vorbote einer tüchtigen Verkühlung, einer Berufskrankheit der Reisenden, daran zweifelte er nicht im geringsten. (60)

The contexts surrounding this particular passage reinforce the suspicion that Gregor's transformation itself may be but a fragment of his imagination, which reveals the foregrounding premise of story. As he woke from uneasy dreams, he found his body to have changed into an insect, and he struggled to get to work on time and missed the train, yet fortunately managed to hide his transformation from his family, thanks to a habit he picked up as a travelling salesman of sleeping with the door locked. His family stands outside calling out to him. It is in this situation that the quoted passage above is written. What is also striking is the three-page-long description of his room, the “kleines Menschenzimmer,” where his cherished magazine cut-out—the fruit of his only hobby—hangs from a frame, the difficulties of moving due to the changes to his body, the hellish work that goes into being a salesman, and the fact that he cannot leave his job because of his parents.

While Gregor lies wriggling in his bed, the narrator lays out information about the main character's past and present. In other words, the narrative

arrangement for the event at hand comes from the narrative act of a third person. The order in which the event itself progresses as well as the content that is being narrated do not fall under the same neat order. The narrator also marks the act of narrating in each paragraph with words such as “dachte er” (is what he thought) or “Gregor aber dachte” (but Gregor thought). The readers cannot avoid the mounting suspicion regarding his transformation and the thought that this may all be imagined by Gregor, even as they are reading through Gregor’s inner thoughts that are being delivered to them through the narrative voice. When the narrator reveals the musings of Gregor and that he was curious to see how his present impressions would gradually fade away, a discrepancy is exposed between the fact of the matter, which is the transformation of the main character, and that all of this is not a dream.

Within the fictional world of the text, the protagonist has clearly become a verminous insect, yet his mental capacities in no way resemble that of an insect. He worries about getting to work, when to take the train, and how to deal with the situation at hand. Even as he struggles to figure out a way to maneuver his own body, his thoughts are focused on what could potentially be done about the situation. His body may have become an insect as the narrator specified, and this body truly struggles to make sense of itself. On the other hand, the inner thoughts, emotions, and mental processes suggest the abilities of a man who is still lying in “a human being’s room.” Thus, Gregor is depicted as a hybrid between man and animal (Kwon 53). He may be a vermin in the objective sense, but subjectively, he is a human (Sokol 18).

These human mental processes are mediated through *indirect speech*, and often times his thoughts are expressed in *the subjunctive*. The use of the subjunctive is Gregor’s attempt to assess *possible* or *impossible* ways to remedy the situation. For example, Gregor is said to have thought, “What if I went on sleeping for a while and forgot all these idiocies” (Wie wäre es, wenn ich noch ein wenig weiter schlief und alle Narrheiten vergäße, dachte er) (KV 57). In other musings, it is asked, “But what was he to do now? The next train went at seven; to catch that, he would have to hurry at a frantic speed” (Was aber sollte er jetzt tun? Der nächste Zug ging um sieben Uhr; um den einzuholen, hätte er sich unsinnig beeilen müssen) (59) or “What if Gregor were to tell them he was sick? But that would be extremely embarrassing and suspicious” (Wie nun, wenn er sich krank meldete? Das wäre aber äußerst peinlich und verdächtig) (59). Other than the protagonist’s thoughts and musings on different possibilities, his wishes are also expressed in the subjunctive. At one point,

Gregor thinks how simple this would all be if his father and the maid came to help: “it occurred to him how simple it would all be if someone came to help him. Two strong people—he thought of his father and the maid—would have been entirely up to it” (fiel ihm ein, wie einfach alles wäre, wenn man ihm zu Hilfe käme. Zwei starke Leute—er dachte an seinen Vater und das Dienstmädchen—hätten vollständig genügt) (62). These thoughts directly clash with *the fact*, provided by the narrator in the very first sentence that the protagonist has become a verminous insect. The protagonist's thoughts that become known through the narration are not actualized as facts in the fictional world. They are mere possibilities conjured up by Gregor. However, this thought-play (Gedankenspiel) involving various possibilities can trigger the reader to reconsider the credibility of the narrator and create a level of unfamiliarity. The reader would distance him or herself from the narration and begin to question whether the protagonist has truly become an insect or not. Moreover, readers would become curious to know what the early morning “impressions” really were.

## 2) Word Choice and Word Order: Distancing or the Dualization of Meaning

Other than Kafka's use of *erlebte Rede*, another narrative characteristic that prevents readers from taking Gregor's transformation literally is word choice and the order of words, which is essentially a result of a particular style of narrative delivery.<sup>7</sup> Depending on the choice of words and the context, identical content can be delivered with the implication of two to three different meanings, leading to a wide range of varying interpretations. These effects can be commonly found throughout *Metamorphosis*, and they will be explored with detailed examples.

The narrator lays out the transformation as a factual event in the very first sentence; however, when the protagonist “found himself,” the verb “fand er sich” already implies the subjective view of the protagonist (Fingerhut, “Die Verwandlung” 45). It was the protagonist himself, not anyone else who discovered his own transformation, and in this sense the narrative is based on his point of view. However, this particular sentence was not written in the subjunctive as is the case with other sentences that feature thought-play.

7. When it comes to Kafka's style or word choice, the influence of Prague German may have reinforced the effects of irony or paradox within the story. Cf. Politzer.

Instead, it is written in the imperative as a way to state a fact. Nevertheless, the words used in the sentence were carefully selected so that the aforementioned subjective viewpoint is not entirely erased. In fact, the word choice helps this subjective point of view come across. Another noteworthy element of the first sentence (fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt) is the German preposition “zu.” By writing “zu einem” instead of “in einem” it becomes clear that the protagonist is in the course of gradually becoming an insect rather than implying that the transformation is complete (45). Considering how the transformation begins to settle through Gregor’s interaction with his family, one can assume that this word choice was highly deliberate.

So far, it is not only evident that the author used expressions that involve additional connotations, there were also parts that were written specifically to create dual meaning. For instance, on the morning of his transformation, the sentence that depicts the discomfort that rises from the change suddenly shifts direction, and the narrative focuses on the past to discuss Gregor’s work conditions. When Kafka writes, “He slid back into his previous position” (Er glitt wieder in seine frühere Lage zurück) (KV 58), he not only expresses the uncomfortable movements of someone who has just turned into an insect; when this is read in conjunction with the following sentence, he could also be signifying the harsh work conditions of the travelling salesman, as well as Gregor’s predicament that forces him to continue work in order to support his family. The past and the present are closely interconnected in terms of the textual structure through these words or sentences that have more than one meaning. These sentences require attention and cannot be read through a cursory glance. Readers will often see these types of sentences that cause great discomfort. These are the sentences that can result in entirely different interpretations depending on how the additional connotations are understood.

There are also elements that reinforce the very question that readers have asked themselves from their early moments of reading—did Gregor actually become a monstrous insect? These are the elements that also trick us to think that there may be another painting hidden under the immediate surface as is the case with Escher’s work. Towards the end of the story, as Gregor prepares to take his “last breath” (sein letzter Atem) (KV 103) as a monstrous insect, there appear a number of words with double meaning that suggest the *possibility* of Gregor having left home and his family. It is worth noting that his death came almost immediately after his sister announced her

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final judgement. She declares she can no longer accept the disgusting vermin as part of her family and urges her parents to comply. "And now?" Gregor asks himself as the narrator lets the readers know that "[h]is own opinion that he should vanish was, if possible, even more determined than his sister's" (Seine Meinung darüber, daß er verschwinden müsse, war womöglich noch entschiedener als die seiner Schwester) (103). Here, Gregor feels he "should vanish" (verschwinden müsse), instead of feeling he "should die" (sterben müsse). Upon first glance, the verb "vanish" simply seems to mean "die and become dust," but this is another example of the dual meanings that appear with consistency. As her determination grows, Grete cries, "It has to go" (Weg muß es) (101) before she argues the following, "If it were Gregor, he would have realized that humans and animals would not be able to live together and would have left voluntarily" (Wenn es Gregor wäre, er hätte längst eingesehen, daß ein Zusammenleben von Menschen mit einem solchen Tier nicht möglich ist, und wäre freiwillig fortgegangen) (102).

Gregor's death is thus described with expressions such as "elimination," "disappearance," "leaving of his own free will," and the impossibility of living together. Grete's word choice when she persuades her parents that "[I]t has to go" clearly exhibits her determination to no longer see him as family. This also implies the act of "removal" or "handling," which suggests a more aggressive push than to wait for him to "vanish." Here, the connotation is also clear that his death would be the death of the vermin, not the death of Gregor. In addition, the possibility of such connotations is not just mentioned at the end of the story; they can also be found in the very beginning of the story in the way the morning of the transformation is described.

On the morning when Gregor missed work due to his transformation, he locked himself into his room and listened to the different reactions from his family. Each seemed to respond to his predicament differently depending on how close they are to Gregor. When the chief clerk came by and caused a scene, Grete began to weep out of concern that her brother might lose his job, and this weeping was heard from Gregor's room. Upon hearing Grete's weeping, this was the way the protagonist felt according to the narrator: "Surely for the time being these were unnecessary worries. Gregor was still here and didn't have the slightest thought of deserting his family" (Das war doch vorläufig wohl unnötige Sorgen. Noch war Gregor hier und dachte nicht im geringsten daran, seine Familie zu verlassen) (KV 64). Through the modal adverb, "wohl" (surely), the narrator here evidently did not have full confidence in the content

of the sentence, which hints at the possibility of Gregor leaving his family. At the same time, there is fair trust in that he would not leave them that very morning. Therefore, written between the lines is the suggestion that not going to work and losing his job would mean that he could no longer live with his family and would have to leave. Considering the entire context of the story alongside Grete's final announcement and the insect's death, it now becomes clear that the death of this verminous insect does not only signify Gregor's death, but also his "vanishment" and the outcome of him being "impossible to live with."

If this scene is read within the context of other scenes, the word "worry" (Sorgen) and "unnecessary worries" (unnötige Sorgen) signify not only the relationship between the protagonist and his family, but also the psychological aspect of the relationship between the protagonist's economic activity and his death/vanishment. The person who finds Grete's weeping as "unnecessary worries" is none other than the protagonist Gregor himself. On that morning, he was more than motivated to go to work. Nonetheless, when the chief clerk pays a visit, his situation is expressed as an effort to protect himself from his own family, since Gregor is seen to be barricading himself from his own family in the eyes of the chief clerk.<sup>8</sup> To the chief clerk, all of this causes "unnecessary worries" to Gregor's parents (KV 65). To Gregor, when Grete cries because he did not go to work, her weeping is seen as "unnecessary worries," while his absence at work, in the eyes of the chief clerk, causes "unnecessary worries" to his parents that Gregor could easily remedy. He tells the chief clerk the reason why he is to return to work soon is his "concern for his family and sister" (die Sorge um meine Eltern und die Schwester) (69) and tries to make his way to work. The subject of this "worry" and "unnecessary worries" shifts from one end to the other once again when he dies as an insect. Gregor sometimes feels moments of liberation as he becomes accustomed to moving around as an insect (83); however, at the same time, he feels intense "shame and sorrow" (Scham; vor Beschämung und Trauer) (75, 80) at his situation that has led his younger sister to go out and earn money. This young and delicate sister then grows up to no longer feel the need of her older brother. She is no longer the little girl who cried over her brother's inability to go to work. She no longer relies on her brother and the money he earns, and she has even freed herself from the obligation of feeding a disgusting insect that does not even work. She

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8. The chief clerk said, "Sie verbarrikadieren sich da in Ihrem Zimmer" (KV 65).



had realized that this obligation was merely “unnecessary worries.” Gregor sees this change sweeping through his family, especially his sister “with affection and love” (mit Rührung und Liebe) (103), and this observation is what led him to think that “his own opinion that he should vanish was, if possible, even more determined than his sister’s” (Seine Meinung darüber, daß er verschwinden müsse, war womöglich noch entschiedener als die seiner Schwester) (103). Gregor then dies, or depending on the context, he leaves his family.

In this sense, Kafka’s word choice and word ordering were all part of a very deliberately planned structure and this is what allowed the production of “extra meanings” (Fowler 92–109), which then comes into contact with the readers to be realized through their active production of meaning. This narrative characteristic is most like what reminds the reader of an Escher or a hologram.

## **2. If-Fantasy: “If I Were a Verminous Insect”**

With a better understanding of the narrative characteristics, the basic structure of the story gains better definition. One morning the protagonist wakes up as a verminous insect, which causes quite a commotion, then dies a verminous insect. At the same time, its structure necessarily implies the possibility of his death being read as a departure or a disappearance. What exactly occurred between the transformation into an insect and the death of the vermin that is discussed in the ending? Within the fictional world inside of the text, how is this supernatural phenomenon of a human becoming a monstrous insect understood and how does the event unravel? How should this event be read and understood outside of the text? Kafka’s narrative force, which lies outside the text, eliminates the “verminous insect” as the “metaphor of the insult” which is rooted in his own biographical context. In the most decontextualized form, the story of a man’s transformation into a monstrous bug unravels, primarily at the textual level, as a fantastical tale. However, this is a fantastical story that progresses by “jumping from the tiny diving board of reality outside of the text and leaps into the vast yet complex and interwoven horizon” (Anders 49). In other words, Kafka had erased the insignificant insult that was part of this tiny diving board of reality outside the text. However, from this diving board, the story would jump right into the fantastical event and become a tale of “if-fantasy.” Why did Kafka or the protagonist take a leap into this horizon of “if-fantasy”? What is it that he is trying to observe through



his thought-play or thought-experiment?

In earlier analysis of the clash between the narrator's voice and the inner thoughts of the protagonist, which are mediated by this same voice, the point has already been made that in the fictional world "within the text," the metamorphosis is reality and not a dream, but this can be within the imagination of the protagonist, as explained by the narrator. Here, the narrator informs the reader of the protagonist's thoughts, as Gregor is said to be "curious to see how his present impressions would gradually fade away," but does not go into details about the content of these impressions or his imagination. Before Gregor thinks these things, what is mainly explained is how far the story has progressed. In many ways, this can be understood as the protagonist asking the same question he asked himself earlier, as if the protagonist is watching his family through a one-way glass window, asking them silently "if I became a monstrous vermin, how would you treat me?" The "if-fantasy" supposition carries a story within a story, where the reader becomes aware of "ein Blick von außen" (a view from the outside) (Stach 214), the view of the animal gazing at the human, or the view from the outside the family. While the "if-fantasy" that follows the supposition "if I became a monstrous vermin" will be analyzed in the following, it should also be noted that this idea also gives way to a connotation of a slightly different nature: "if I did not go to work." It is not clear whether there lies a causal relationship in the situation, or whether he became a monstrous bug because he could not go to work although he had to or whether he could not go to work because he had become a monstrous bug. What becomes clear, however, is that the two different ideas, one being the transformation and the other being Gregor's absence from work, almost entirely overlap within the fictional world and are treated as having layers of meaning. The spatial set up can also suggest that the boundary between Gregor and his family was more strictly defined than ever. As the chief clerk put it, Gregor had "barricaded" himself in what could only be seen as a standoff with his family. It is then possible to suggest that the "impressions" that crossed Gregor's mind earlier mean Gregor thought of himself in the shape of a verminous bug, watching his family from a one-way window. These double meanings need to be further explored on two different levels. The first is the triad consisting of "absence from work—transformation—father (warning)," and the second is "absence from work—transformation—sister (his concern and love for her)." Kafka's Escher-like narrative structure and the qualities of a hologram will become more evident by looking into these

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different levels of meaning.

### 1) Absence from Work–Transformation–Father

The father, mother, and sister standing outside Gregor's room each responds differently to the "fact" that Gregor has still not left his room and has not left for work. They are not yet aware of Gregor's transformation into a verminous insect. The relationship between Gregor and each member of his family becomes apparent through Gregor's reaction and the way the narrator depicts the situation. When his mother knocks at the door, Gregor reacts with an emotionally charged "[t]hat gentle voice!" (Die sanfte Stimme!) (KV 59), while the narrator describes his father's reaction with "he warned again in a deep voice" (mahnte er noch mals mit tiefer Stimme) (60). By contrast, as if she is afraid of their father, his sister "begs him in a whispering tone" asks him to "open the door, I swear" (60) in an attempt to promise him she will keep any secret if necessary, and "his sister began to sob" (began die Schwester zu schluchzen) (64). From his sister's reaction, it is clear that she is ready to do anything for her brother in situations that go against their father's wishes. From this morning fiasco, it is already clear that the three different elements—"absence from work," "transformation into a verminous insect," and "father's warning"—are already closely interconnected. First of all, the implication is that Gregor, who has kept his job despite harsh work conditions solely for the sake of his parents, will be warned by his father if he ceases to work. In short, readers can easily surmise that if Gregor did not work for the sake of his parents or his family, he would have received the same warning "in a deep voice" on any day other than this particular morning.

The close connection between Gregor's transformation into a verminous insect and his absence from work also has much to do with whether or not Gregor belongs to the "human realm" (menschliche[r] Kreis) (KV 67). In other words, if he ceases to work, he would no longer be part of the human realm within his relationship with his family, particularly his father. For example, on the morning of his transformation, as Gregor tries to move his newly transformed body, he considered a *possible* scenario where he receives help. He imagines the help of his father and the maid, coming to his aid as he struggles to move. Here, readers can notice the thought-play of the narrator, who is mediating Gregor's thoughts through free indirect speech in the form of the subjunctive:

[W]ie einfach alles wäre, wenn man ihm zu Hilfe käme. Zwei starke Leute—er dachte an seinen Vater und das Dienstmädchen—hätten vollständig genügt; sie hätten ihre Arme nur unter seinen gewölbten Rücken schieben, [...] Nun, ganz abgesehen davon, daß die Türen versperrt waren, hätte er wirklich um Hilfe rufen sollen? Trotz aller Not konnte er bei diesem Gedanken ein Lächeln nicht unterdrücken. (62)

As he thinks of a situation where his father and the maid arrive to help him, he cannot help but smile to himself, which is sufficient evidence to suggest that this is simply an “unrealistic” thought. Therefore, this possibility stops at the level of thought-play or thought-experiment and never becomes a fact within this fictional world. His transformation alone can be the reason for a warning from his father since he did not obey him and failed to go to work. Considering this, it is only natural that his father would not even entertain the thought of entering Gregor’s room to help him. Such an event simply does not occur in the fictional world of the text, because Gregor himself decided this would be impossible from the other side of the one-way window and simply erased the possibility.

From this textual structure, one can assume that the transformation into a verminous insect is a punishment from his father. There are also clear connotations that he has undergone a downgrade from human to animal. When the chief clerk visits, and noises are heard outside to call a doctor and a locksmith, Gregor feels as though he “once again was drawn back into the human world” (KV 67). Here, there is an underlying desire to be considered a family member and a colleague, even if he is an insect that does not work. This is why the thought that crossed Gregor’s mind in the morning was in fact a musing in the subjunctive: “[i]f I became a verminous insect as a result of father’s warning, how would my family treat me and would I still belong to the world of humans?” Within the structure comprised of Gregor’s “absence from work,” “transformation,” and “relationship with (his) father,” he may have tested his own family with the “if-fantasy.” Nevertheless, in this fictional world of his subjunctive musings, his transformation into a verminous insect is in the third-person, a *fact*.

## 2) Absence from Work–Transformation–Sister

Gregor simply refuses to acknowledge the physical mark that is suggestive

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of a punishment from his father, and the deeply humane quality of his mental processes stand in stark contrast to his transformed body. This quality also comes forward in parts there Gregor thinks of his sister. After the chaotic incident that occurred in the morning, Gregor seems to be at a crossroads between living the life of an insect who has been liberated from the hellish work conditions, and belonging to the world of humans, or at least “human” by his family’s standards. He shows signs of hesitation due to his affectionate feelings towards his sister. As mentioned earlier, that very morning, having heard his sister weep, he thinks that she is unnecessarily worried and demonstrates a sincere willingness to go out and work. He even tried to open the door to the chief clerk when he heard the man’s voice from the living room. Such was his desire to quietly accept his life as the key life-support for his family. Although Gregor had clearly told the chief clerk that he would soon be dressed and would do his work willingly, the chief clerk leaved. Gregor attempts to grab hold of him but fails and falls to the ground, where “he felt at ease with his body for the first time that morning” (fühlte er zum erstenmal an diesem Morgen ein körperliches Wohlbehagen) (KV 71). In this sense, giving up his job was perhaps the first step to becoming comfortable with his life as a verminous insect. This is not the only moment of hesitation Gregor experiences. His painful dilemma can also be found when his mother starts to turn her back on him and when his sister plays the violin.

As Gregor becomes increasingly familiar with his life as a verminous insect, having given up his job after failing to hold back the chief clerk from leaving, his own words begin to sound like “animal noises” (eine Tierstimme) (KV 66), or a “hissing” (Zischlaute) (72), rendering communication with others impossible. He begins to “enjoy hanging on the ceiling” and “breath[es] with ease,” and sometimes falls into “happy oblivion” (83). The key to his door is now placed in the part of the lock on the outside of his room instead of the inside. This signifies the isolation that resulted from his transformation. It is no coincidence that his name “Samsa” means a lonely person in Czech (Doppler 92). The “if-fantasy” of wanting to observe his family is gradually becoming a fact within the fictional world of text.

However, at times, the urge to be human grows strong. This is when he is struck with “shame” and “grief” (KV 75, 80), when his seventeen-year-old sister is forced to work. He begins to regret not being able to work. His father, by contrast, now throws apples at his son who has “barricaded” himself after having turned into a verminous insect. This violent act is described with the

verb “bomb” (bombadieren) (90), in order to signify the rising tension between father and son. Although his father wasted no time on giving up on his son, his mother grieves over the incident. Only when everyone in the family is “exhausted” (92) to the point that they are no longer able to take care of him does he tell his sister to close the door to his room. That causes a fresh wound and Gregor loses many nights of sleep because of this feeling of “renewed pain” akin to when he was hit by his father’s apple. Just as the door symbolizes the dynamic between Gregor and his family, his mother’s instructions to “[c]lose the door” inflicted a pain as sharp as the pain he felt when he was attacked with apples. During many sleepless nights, Gregor sometimes thought that “when the door was next opened he might take the family’s affairs fully in hand again” (Manchmal dachte er daran, beim nächsten Öffnen der Tür die Angelegenheiten der Familie ganz so wie früher wieder in die Hand zu nehmen) (93). These musings first of all show how Gregor had been able to listen in on conversations through the small crack of the door. However, far more significant are the thoughts that follow. He begins to think of the people he had worked with: his boss, the chief clerk, the apprentice, store clerks, and his other colleagues. He begins to think of the possibility of resuming work. However, this was yet another possibility that had become impossible. The narrator reports his thoughts as follows: “but instead of helping him and his family, they were completely unapproachable, and he was glad when they disappeared” (aber statt ihm und seiner Familie zu helfen, waren sie sämtlich unzugänglich, und er war froh, wenn sie verschwanden) (93). He is reminded of his working days when he thought about crossing the boundary of the door to once again engage with his family, only to realize that this was an option no longer accessible to him. However, faced with the impossible, he is in fact “glad,” much as he felt a sense of comfort when he fell trying to grab hold of the chief clerk.

The human characteristics of Gregor’s internal self stand in contrast to his vermin exterior. The most powerful example that demonstrates his human quality is when his sister plays the violin. He crosses the boundary of his door and shocks the tenants with his filthy appearance, and yet, “he felt as though the way to the unknown nourishment he longed for was being revealed” (Ihm war, als zeige sich ihm der Weg zu der ersehnten unbekanntem Nahrung) (KV 98). Even the narrator adds a comment on the human side that lies within Gregor in the form of a question: “Was he a beast, that music should move him like this?” (War er ein Tier, da ihn Musik so ergriff?) (98). Even as his

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existence as an insect becomes more and more clear, this comment effectively captures the undying human side of Gregor even as it contradicts the narrator's usual stylistic tone. Gregor's sister was the main reason for his feeling of shame, and even when he had worked, the key motivation other than supporting his family was to save up enough money to send her to music school. To Gregor, music is the "unknown nourishment" that signifies art.<sup>9</sup> After giving up the possibility of working again, Gregor still has the mind and will to think of asking his sister to play the violin for him, which suggests that he may have considered art as a new possibility to explore for a new chapter in his life. This is why music as a proxy to art is called the "unknown nourishment he longed for."

Considering the dynamic between "absence from work," Gregor's "transformation," and "the love that he has for his sister," his transformation into a verminous insect not only involves shame, but also seems to take on a decisively human quality thanks to the "unknown nourishment" provided by the artistic expression of his sister. If Gregor were ever to return to the human world, or return to work, it would be solely for his Grete. Here, music is presented as a third option that he may resort to, even as he decides not to return to work and not to return to the human world.

### 3) Death as a Verminous Insect, Departure as a Human Being

Within the "if-fantasy" frame of thought, Gregor's identity both as a verminous insect and a human being appear in overlapping form. The earlier parts of the story do feature more of Gregor as a human, and towards the end the fantastical aspects of the transformation are increasingly described as a factual event. In a letter sent to the Georg Heinrich Meyer on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, 1915, Kafka writes that he cannot draw the vermin itself.<sup>10</sup> Just as

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9. Based on biographical information regarding his relationship with his sister Ottilia as well as letters and journals written by Kafka himself, some see *Metamorphosis* as a story that addresses the issues of being an artist. Cf. Politzer, Heinz. "II. Juvenilia—Der Jungeselle als Grundfigur." *Franz Kafka: Der Künstler*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978. 45–83.

10. In a letter to Georg Heinrich Meyer on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, 1915, Kafka writes: "Das Insekt selbst kann nicht gezeichnet werden. Es kann aber nicht einmal von der Ferne aus gezeigt werden. [...] Wenn ich für eine Illustration selbst Vorschläge machen dürfte, würde ich Szenen wählen, wie: die Eltern und der Prokurist vor der geschlossenen Tür oder noch besser die Eltern und die Schwester im beleuchteten Zimmer, während die

the detailed contours of the insect could not be presented by replacing them with subtle shades, Kafka's writing offers the possibility of understanding the transformation and death differently. This falls in line with Fingerhut's view that Gregor continuously traverses the physical realm and the spiritual, emotional, and reflective realms, blurring the boundary between the signified and the signifier ("Die Verwandlung" 69).

The vermin motif as a "motif of insult" functions as a very small diving board that allows the leap into the endless stretch of the "if-fantasy," and the connecting bridge between the exterior and interior of the text. In this sense, the protagonist's transformation into a verminous insect is an identity given by his father whose orders had been disobeyed due to Gregor's absence from work. In other words, it is an identity that is given from the outside, not the protagonist's inner self. His transformation into this verminous creature was hardly a life-shattering, extraordinary, impossible event. It was "a great misfortune" (ein großes Unglück) (KV 66). His family regards him as something they can no longer live with, a "monster" (Untier) (100). Gregor looks back on the relationship with his family and the possibility of remaining a son and a brother when he dies as a verminous insect. Moreover, it was his voluntary choice to die. After traversing the boundaries defined by his father, the boundaries between the animal and human worlds, he fails to return to the world of man and dies a verminous insect.

As mentioned earlier in an analysis of word choice with dual meaning, Gregor's death implies double, triple meanings of "elimination," "vanishment," and "leaving of his own free will." The word "animal" (Tier) would have sufficed to describe Gregor, yet "monster" (Untier) was the word of choice selected by Grete in her moment of great anguish. While "Untier" highlights the hate and disdain against Gregor, it also negates the "Tier" with the prefix "Un-" which suggests the opposite of Gregor being an animal (Choi 152). Under this light, Gregor's death can also be read as a form of farewell. Here lie the connotations of Gregor's will to leave, departure, disappearance, and death when faced with the resolute farewell voiced by Grete, who represents the family. The story thus ends as the possibilities of a wide-ranging interpretation extend far beyond Gregor's death as a verminous insect, his departure as a

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Tür zum ganz finsternen Nebenzimmer offen steht" (qtd. in Engel and Auerochs 166). Cf. Engel, Manfred, and Bernd Auerochs, eds. *Kafka Handbuch*. Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2010.

human, and the disintegration of the family unit.

### 3. Between the Fictional World of the Text and the Real World of the Context: The Possible and the Impossible, the Realistic and the Unrealistic

If the various possibilities that lie in the production of meaning are already implicated in the construction of a text, the more precise interpretation of these potential meanings are unveiled through the act of reading, a point noted earlier by Adorno or Benjamin as a characteristic of Kafka's narrative. The relationship and structure of the communication between the text and the reader play an even greater role in fantasy literature.<sup>11</sup> Whether a fantastic, unprecedented event will be read as an unreal, supernatural, and fanciful tale or as a symbolic system or an allegory of a realistic story lies entirely in the relationship of the context of the reader's acceptance. Kafka has already set down a narrative groundwork—the possibility of interaction between the fictional world of the text and the realistic world of the context—*inside the text* of this work:

Gregor suchte sich vorzustellen, ob nicht auch einmal dem Prokuristen etwas Ähnliches passieren könnte, wie heute ihm; die Möglichkeiten dessen mußte man doch eigentlich zugeben. (63)

The narrator conveys the thoughts of the protagonist that the story of Gregor morphing into a verminous insect is something that can happen to anyone. In other words, once the condition of turning into a verminous insect from *inside the text* is read as a *possibility* in the real world *outside the text*, this fantastic and *unrealistic* occurrence can be read as a realistic story. If the realistic insulting metaphor of a *verminous insect* was a *small diving board of*

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11. One can observe an attempt by Hong Jin-ho to review the theory of fantasy literature by Louis Vax, Roger Caillois, and Tzvetan Todorov based on the theory of fantasy and theoretically, persuasively approach the crash of the fantasy and reality in fantasy literature by distinguishing the experience-based reality of the reader, the reality of the fictional world and the supernatural event while contemplating the interactive relationship in his paper. For more details refer to the following paper: "Fantasy and Reality: The Crash between Reality and Supernatural events in Fantasy Literature." *Kafka-Forschung* 21 (2009): 325–50.



reality into the what “if-fantasy” from the perspective of *inside the text*, the protagonist’s metamorphosis into a verminous insect, which was based on an insult from reality, would create a social and political sensation with a single “refined literary insult” from the perspective of *outside the text*. This can be seen as “[t]he thoroughly subversive and marginal nature of the fantastic” (its Grenzcharakter) (Murphy 309).

The extent to which the story impacts the reader or the direction of interpretation may differ according to which group a reader is in — the group who can construe the word Kafka’s father used to insult his son Franz’s Eastern European Jewish friend, namely “verminous insect,” as an insult that carries an image of hatred towards the Jews, having lived in the same era as the author or the group from a very different space and time context and are therefore completely oblivious unless they conduct extra research. There are readers who can deduce the *realistic* meaning from of this fantastic event by capturing the connotation of the metaphorical insult “verminous insect,” and there are those who cannot do so. This is mainly due to the fact that the real world that the readers have experienced plays an important role in generating the meaning of the text in the communication structure between the (fantastical) text and the reader. As noted earlier, if the text of Kafka, which did not include a single word related to *Jews*, was read as a Jewish documentary by European readers because they shared the same space and time context with the author, then Kafka’s work may be read simply as an unrealistic fantasy novel by the youth of Korea today. Therefore, there exists a difference in understanding and interpretation between readers who speak the same language as the author, and readers who



Fig. 1.

do not. This, in turn, indicates a possibility that there may be contrasting interpretations among readers on whether they can evoke the image of the Jewish people from the signified point of view by looking at the signifier, the “verminous insect.” With these conditions in mind, there is a need to analyze how the supernatural event where the protagonist morphs into a verminous insect can be read once it enters into the context of reality of the readers.

For European readers who lived during the same era as Kafka and had either directly or indirectly experienced anti-Semitism, the

“verminous insect” referred to Jews—especially Eastern European Jews— and this expression can be read as an anti-Semitic insult. There is an abundance of cultural historical examples to support this connection. For example, although the documentary film directed by Fritz Hippler, *The Eternal Jew* (1940), was produced as an anti-Semitic propaganda in 1940 Nazi Germany, it vigorously employs the “images of hatred depicted in the relics of nineteenth century anti-Semitism” (Benz 48). The Jewish people living in the ghettos of Poland, Lodz, are shown to be equivalent to a hoard of cockroaches and the on-screen juxtaposition of images of cockroaches and rats with Jewish people fuels the hatred for Jews—explicitly showcasing the social prejudices of that particular era (Lorenz 207). Moreover, during the Nazi rule, where anti-Semitism was systematically encouraged and rampant on a social level (which was some years after the publication of Kafka’s work), a cartoon printed in *Die Brennessel*, a Nazi magazine of the Third Reich, depicted a drawing of heads of famous Jews attached to the bodies of verminous insects. The same can also be observed in the historical novel *Jahrestage— aus dem Leben Gesine Cresspahls (Anniversaries: From the Life of Gesine Cresspahls)*, where the history of a family is narrated during the settlement of the Third Reich in Germany. The protagonist, Gesine Cresspahl, writes of his family and the history of Germany in his diary entry on March 5, 1968 while he is living in New York with his ten-year-old daughter Marie. In the particular entry, a “huge vermin” (Ungeziefer), a cockroach, makes an appearance in his New York apartment, which is followed by a detailed, almost academic report of the annihilation of the cockroach with Zyklon B (Johnson 822–27). The same Zyklon B that was used in the gas rooms of the concentration camps (KZ) is utilized to evoke a certain image as well.<sup>12</sup> One can also surmise that the “image of the cockroach” is a popular metaphor of disdain for the Jews, as noted in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* by Adorno and Horkheimer (253). The wealth of material from cultural history confirms the direct connection between the vermin motif of Kafka and the anti-Semitism images of that era. From this perspective, European readers read this fantastic event of the protagonist morphing into a verminous insect as a *realistic* narrative, rather than an *unrealistic fantasy*.

12. Refer to Norbert Mecklenburg’s paper for more on the cultural history research related to the vermin motif and New York Jews in the chapter of Uwe Johnson’s novel: “Ungeziefer und selektiertes Volk: Zwei Aspekte von New York in Uwe Johnsons Jahrestagen.” *The Germanic Review* 76.3 (2001): 254–66.

However, there is a higher possibility that the vermin motif will be read as an *impossible* and *unrealistic* fantasy by those who do not speak the “shared language” and do not share the space and time context with the author as opposed to being read as a *realistic* story of the Jews. Nonetheless, readers who can tap into the “extra meanings” by understanding the narrative aspects found in the construction of the text or by layering double, or triple meanings will also be able to decipher the theme of the modern isolated peripheral individual inside the relationship dynamics of the family structure. We can easily encounter an interpretation of the work as a life of a *stranger* or a problem of the Other in the multicultural modern society in which we now live (Kwon 53; Ålund 318). These cases can be seen as the result of the reader actively conjuring up the image of the Other, or in this case, “European Jews” from the signifier of the vermin motif within the reader’s own context. When read in this context, the fantasy is an *unrealistic tale* but it can be accepted as a *possible story* that can actually occur. Thus only when the interaction between the fictional world of the text and the real world of the context is taken into consideration can Kafka’s fantastic quality can be fully understood.

#### IV. Conclusion

This study examines the way in which various interpretations of a text can already be potentially embedded in the composition of the text by analyzing the unique characteristics of Kafka’s writings in its narrative strategy and therefore, in this sense, studies the reality and possible generation of realism of the fantasy by examining the supernatural fantasy occurring in a fictional world *inside the text* and how it can be accepted *outside the text*, meaning the contextual aspect of the readers’ real world. Not only is one able to read with questioning the transformation of the main character itself through Kafka’s experiential phenomenon, a hybridism in the discordance of the narrator and the main character’s voice, but also acknowledge the different level of the narrator’s narrative act and the narrated through the narrative aspect. Furthermore, by analyzing the possibility in the creation of double and triple connotations entailed by the uniqueness in the choice and arrangement of vocabulary, Kafka’s text can be admitted to have a narrative effect much like the art of Escher or a moving hologram.

According to the communicative structure between the text and its

reader and in particular in the context of how Kafka's fantasy is accepted by the realistic reader, this type of narrative allows a story to be read rather realistically than in a mere simplistic way of perceiving a supernatural fantasy. The transformation of the main character into a verminous creature is the visualization of the insult from the outside, and the signified symbol of the "vermin" can be read in Kafka's historical and cultural context through the realistic reader's act of reading. This signification that the reader can accept transformation in the context of time and space can explain the foundation of how this book was exceptionally accepted in various different ways in a large number of different countries. This paper is significant in the sense that it is the basis of comparison of how Kafka's fantasy was either accepted equivalently or differently in various language and cultural regions. Further comparative research into Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and its acceptance in Korea will be on the way with the help of the implications gained from this study.

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Fig. 1. "Systemverrätern." *Die Brennessel* 9 Sep. 1933: n. pag. Print.

## Abstract

This study examines the potential for wide-ranging interpretation that was already latent within the textual makeup of *Metamorphosis*. This potential was read or understood through its interaction with the reader's real world context to reveal how an event as extraordinary as Gregor Samsa's transformation can entail an element of realism. The signified aspect of the verminous insect can be seen as an extension of hatred against Jews as Gregor's supernatural transformation was closely tied to the anti-Semitism that spread across Europe during the time *Metamorphosis* was written. However, when adopted in a different time and space, it is most likely to be accepted as a fantastical tale that defies all rules of nature, a story that is simply "unrealistic." At the same time, it could also be seen as unrealistic yet possible when the reader's real world context conflates Jews who were the Other of Kafka's time and other communities that are considered as the Other in the reader's contemporary perspective. The implications drawn here are expected to contribute to the study of comparative literature of Kafka's fantastic stories and the way they are being adopted in similar or varying forms.

**Keywords:** Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, vermin motif, if-fantasy, narrative modality, dualization of meaning

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