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THE UNCANNY HOMES AND HOMELESSNESS IN KAFKA'S "A COUNTRY DOCTOR"

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the topos "house" which acts as a metaphor for "being" in Kafka's short story "A Country Doctor." We handle the notion of the house both literally (spatially) and metaphorically (as one's being), demonstrating the ways in which the story constructs the house on the contentious relationship between individual privacy and public revelation. While the patient's house is a playground for societal pressures that demand public exposure, the doctor's house is controlled by sexual forces that demand secrecy, preventing him from taking full ownership of the house or his own being. Both houses are representations of the doctor's homelessness. There is indeed no house in Kafka's claustrophobic literary world where one can fully feel at home, i.e. in peace with his own private being and in comfort with others.

Keywords: Kafka, "A Country Doctor", Homelessness, Uncanny, Public, Private

KAFKA'NIN "BİR KÖY DOKTORU" HİKÂYESİNDE TEKİNSİZ EVLER VE EVSİZLİK

ÖZ

Bu makale, Kafka'nın "Bir Köy Doktoru" hikâyesinde metaforik olarak "varlık" anlamına da gelen "ev" teması üzerinde durmaktadır. Ev kavramını hem asıl itibarıyla (uzamsal olarak), hem de metaforik olarak (var olma hali) olarak ele alarak, hikâyenin bu kavramı kişisel gizlilik ve kamusal ifşa arasındaki çekişmeli ilişki üzerinden nasıl kurduğunu gösteriyoruz. Hastanın evi toplumsal baskıların arka bahçesi olarak temsil edilirken, doktorun evi kendi varlığına ve evine sahip olmayı engelleyen cinsel dürtüler tarafından yönetilmektedir. Bu her iki ev de

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doktorun “evsizliğinin” bir temsilidir. Dolayısıyla, Kafka’nın klostrufobik edebi dünyasında doktorun ya da herhangi başka birinin kendi şahsiyetinin mahreminde ya da başkalarıyla huzur içinde evinde hissedebileceği bir ev gerçekte bulunmamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kafka, “Bir Köy Doktoru”, Evsizlik, Tekinsizlik, Kamusalılık, Mahremiyet

INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka’s short story, “Ein Landarzt” (“A Country Doctor”) has long lured the attention of Kafka readers as well as Kafka scholars. There are diverse readings of this ambiguous and tempting text. Some critics such as Manson, Tobias, Goldstein, Brancato emphasized the relation between science and religion in their theological reading and sought religious symbolism in the text that indicates the protagonist’s impotency in a changing world where the doctor replaces the priest. Accordingly, R. Tobias and B. Goldstein argue that the doctor fails to act as a healer in both Christian and Hasidic traditions. While some critics such as E. G. Bregman and K. Stockholder interpret such understanding of failure from a psychoanalytic perspective and bring in the Freudian notions of castration and ambivalence, the futility to control reality and incapacity to act forms the basis of H. Guth’s existentialistic argument.

It would be impossible and in fact futile to make sense of every narrative turn in Kafka’s desultory dream narrative, and the reading that we offer hardly claims to hold the key to the story’s copious symbolisms. Therefore, instead of taking one aspect of the story into account, this essay is an attempt to blend various aspects of the Kafkaesque elements by weaving them around the “uncanny” house. We mainly propose to comment on the spatial and architectural elements, especially in relation to the story’s various houses of being, which display the contentious relationship between public openness and private secrecy. The focus on the house, both in literal and figurative senses, may provide a way into understanding the complex textures of paranoia and persecution that Kafka is well known for.

The house in question may be viewed as both a literal house as made most explicit in the first part of the story and a metaphorical one as the house of one’s being. The latter use of the house is evident in the second half of the narrative where the doctor pays a visit to the house of the patient that Kafka imagines as multiple houses of being, some of which more private or public than the others. It might be said that in the story’s second half, Kafka superimposes various houses of being onto the same house: the house of one’s body, the family household, the doctor’s practice, the commons and, in an ironic turn, the church. These houses imply the intimacy and proximity of others, where the boundaries of the self, subject, individual etc. have to be drawn, indeed negotiated collectively or inter-subjectively. In all the houses

that Kafka deploys as setting, there holds a tension between individual privacy and public revelation, between keeping secrets and making public. Each house involves the presence of others: in the first house, these others are the maid and the horse-boy, whereas in the other house, they are the young patient, his family, neighbours, and, through a curious widening of the social circle, the entire community. The rapport between these others and the doctor is represented in terms of different forms of appeal: the doctor finds himself in the midst of various summons, calls, orders, requests, petitions, pleas, threats or demands placed upon him by the others in both houses. The story might be interpreted as a display of the discomforts and insecurities of being in the presence, and one might say, in the eye of others while inhabiting different houses (or realms) of being.

The bipartite fantasy contains two episodes and two houses; in the first episode, the doctor is expelled from his own house by the horse-boy and in the second episode the doctor escapes from the sick boy's house to which he is summoned for an urgent visit. The first episode, which relate to the scenes in the doctor's house, roughly makes up for one fourth of the story's length. The doctor is speedily brought to the patient's house on horses, where the larger portion of the story takes place. Kafka dedicates a mere sentence to the entire trip from one house to the other: "the carriage is torn away, like a piece of wood in a current" (Kafka, 2009, p. 44). A sense of absurdity and incomprehension rules both episodes, in which the doctor appears to be thrown around from one strange incident to another. As different from the first episode, which merely involves three characters, i.e. the doctor, the maid and the young horse-boy, this second episode is more populated: apart from the young patient and his family, we are also in the presence of neighbours and acquaintance who seem to be, inexplicably, multiplying in number. An additional sense of the spectacle, involving the incongruous chants of standers-by and a school-choir, emerges in the crowded second episode in the patient's house where the doctor must perform both as a professional and a guest, and where he will have to face what might be rightly called "performance anxiety." Nonetheless, the same anxiety is part and parcel of his very own house as revealed in the odd incidents in the first episode, problematizing the entire notion of "owning" or "belonging." The apparent message of the first episode is that one cannot own one's own house, and given that the topos "house" also acts as a metaphor for "being," it is possible to argue that the story's doctor is not in full ownership of his own being or self.

THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE

Called for an urgent visit at the beginning of the narrative, the doctor has already stepped out of the house, but is still within the confines of the estate, waiting for his maid, Rosa, to lend a horse from the neighbours. Rosa returns empty-handed, and the doctor, all exasperated, walks "across the courtyard" and "kicks [his] foot against the cracked door of the pig sty which had not

been used for years” (Kafka, 2009, p. 43). Horse, indeed, horses connote mobility, change and livelihood for the doctor, who needs them to practice his profession. It is in the search for the horses that the house/estate becomes uncanny: the doctor discovers a part of the house that has not been revealed to him before. But the narration also suggests that during the search, he also discovers something about himself previously hidden from him. A blue eyed, younger man with an open face, apparently a secret and unknown inhabitant of the estate, comes out of the pigsty as if through a magical act of birth, also bringing out two strong and shapely horses strangely referred to as “brother” and “sister.” Kafka’s narration has clearly become symbolic: in a magical feat, the fantasy has produced a man and two horses from the pigsty whose insides had been little known.

It is possible to interpret both the man and the horses as the doctor’s uncanny doubles emerging from the doctor’s house, and in the metaphorical extension of the sense of the house, from his own self. The old doctor, previously wrapped up in coat and in the process of slowly being buried by the snow, has now discovered an unprecedented physical prowess and virility. Kafka associates this young man with animals—the two horses are apparently his siblings and he comes out of the sty as if it was his den. But he also associates him with the lower realm of sensuality and sexuality. The young man “crawls out” from the nether regions of the pigsty “on all fours,” and the lowly pigsty has suddenly gained in status by producing two exquisite horses, which Kafka renders in a most voluptuous description. The animals are both sensualized and sexualized: in their exit from the pigsty, we see “two horses, powerful animals with strong flanks [that] shoved their way one behind the other, legs close to the bodies, lowering their well-formed heads like camels, and getting through the door space, which they completely filled, only through the powerful movements of their rumps. But right away they stood up straight, long legged, with thick steaming bodies” (Kafka, 2009, p. 43).

This is an odd description whose sexual sense is unmistakable. It fits perfectly with Freud’s understanding of the dream narrative as an indirect representation of sexual desire, which both reveals and censors its actual (latent) content. Describing the dream as a disguised fulfillment of a repressed wish Freud notes that “they are compromises between the demands of a repressed impulse and the resistance of a censoring force in the ego” (Freud, 1925, p. 13). It is possible to detect intimations of the sexual act: there are “thick steaming bodies” and “powerful” flanks that shove (“schoben sich”) through the narrow door space (“Türloch” or door-hole in German) with “the powerful movements of their rumps.” But the same description may equally be understood as an allegorical birth, a creative act in which the old doctor’s imagination creates, forms and delivers “well-formed” (“wollgeformt”) horses that move their bodies nimbly like exotic camels. A horseman or more precisely, a horse-boy (“Pferdeknecht”) who

had been hitherto hiding in a secret recess in the house/estate has been borne out in this powerful movement of the imagination. The maiden, Rosa, remarks the extraordinary discovery in the story's most revealing statement: "one doesn't know the sorts of things one has stored in one's own house" (Kafka, 2009, p. 43). "Being stored" or "being in stock" ("vorrätig sein") implies an asset that has been stowed away and kept in reserve (Kafka, 2008, p. 12). Taking into consideration the following scene where the horse-boy makes a sexual advance on Rosa, it is possible to interpret Rosa's remark as a playful innuendo that points to the sudden burst of sexuality into the openness of the house/estate in the form of a youthful and virile horse-boy.

In creating the horses and the horse-boy, the old doctor unleashes primitive sexual energies that need to be tamed and contained. Sexual innuendos and double-entendres inundate the entire scene of horse-hitching. The old doctor orders Rosa to help the horse-boy, who ends up getting harassed by him: "The girl obediently hurried to hand the wagon harness to the groom. But as soon as he was beside him, the groom puts his arms around her and pushes his face against hers... On the girl's cheek were red marks from two rows of teeth" (Kafka, 2009, p. 44).

In an obvious reference to animal sexuality, the old doctor threatens the horse-boy with a whip, calling him in the original German as "Vieh" (Kafka, 2008, p. 13) whose primary signification as livestock and individual animal is extended to beastlike, brutish humans. The surprising lenience with which he treats him reveals the strangely strong bond between them two: remembering that the horse-boy is "a stranger," he thinks this latter should not be treated harshly also because "he is helping me out of his free will when everyone else is refusing to." The suggestion of a kinship and even doubling is reinforced when the horse-boy is said to "take no offence" at the doctor's threat as if through a telepathic sort of mutual acknowledgment.

The doctor's generous treatment of the beastlike, over-sexualized horse-boy results in the loss of control, including the control of his house. When he suggests that he should be the one taking the reins, the horse-boy announces that he will stay with Rosa. The scandalous implication is that he will seek sexual favours from her, which might include the use of violence. Rosa responds to the awful possibility of an impending rape by "run[ning] into the house with an accurate premonition of the inevitability of her fate" (Kafka, 2009, p. 44). She locks up and dims the house in hiding: "I hear the door chain rattling as she sets it in place. I hear the lock click. I see how in addition she runs down the corridor and through the rooms putting out all the lights in order to make herself impossible to find" (Kafka, 2009, p. 44).

This is a strange scene, in which Rosa shuts out not just the overbearing horse-boy but the meek doctor from the house. The narration suggests that the protections of the latter might not be warranted and Rosa might even be suspecting the motives of her master who has already shown

himself to be inappropriately lenient with the horse-boy. The doctor may never be able to control the house or become its master; in any case, he will never be properly heard or obeyed. As he is driven out of the estate by the raging horses that seem to follow only the command of the horse-boy, he hears “how the door of my house is breaking down and splitting apart under the groom’s onslaught” (Kafka, 2009, p. 44). The house is lost to the doctor, who himself has drawn out a sexual beast from it and must therefore assume some of the responsibility of the outcome. The horse-boy is both a stranger and not one; the doctor recognizes his affinity with him at the same time when he disavows it. He experiences the loss of his self at the same time as his loss of his own house; in the strange light of his doubling, he sees himself as irrevocably divided between his previous self and a new, secret, aggressive self that emerges from the estate’s recesses. The fraught relation between his diverging selves is paralleled in the perversion of the architectural/spatial order in the story. The estate is no longer ruled by the authority of the house, but has been taken over by forces emanating from the pigsty.

THE PATIENT’S HOUSE

While the first episode concerns the curious reversal in the hierarchies between the house and the sty, the old doctor and the horse-boy—hierarchies that extend to a plethora of age-old dualisms, such as mind/body and reason/desire, the more complicated second episode agglomerates and condenses various houses of being into one: the house of the invalid. It might even be said that the episode collapses the entire world into this same house. The general theme is being in the world with others, but the intensified rhetoric of obligation, request and plea also indicates that the episode more specifically concerns the responsibilities that such being entails for the individual as well as the professional.

It is indeed in the second episode that the professional and communal responsibilities of a doctor are most directly addressed. But an allegorical level immediately “opens up” as the doctor finds himself magically transported to the house/estate of the invalid. As the following incidents show, there will never be a precise diagnosis despite the persistent entreaties of all the parties involved, and at least initially, the illness is represented as being exceedingly vague. It is possible to argue that the episode of the invalid treats the condition of being in the world as an illness, and the doctor seems to have entered the allegorical house of being. His sympathies obviously lie with the young patient; in fact, he identifies with him so much that it is possible to see him as the story’s second double. A state of mutual confidentiality is hinted in the first gesture of the invalid, who “heaves himself up, hangs around [the doctor’s] throat and whispers in [his] ear, ‘Doctor, let me die’” (Kafka, 2009, p. 45). Another intimate gesture reinforces this strangely immediate bond when the invalid “gropes at” the doctor reminding him of his request (“seine Bitte”). But then there

are other requests coming from the patient's family, that is, his parents and sister. The doctor notes all the pleading gestures: the parents, bent and leaning forward ("vorgebeugt") expect him to pronounce his judgment ("erwarten mein Urteil") (Kafka, 2008, p. 14).

The suffocating air in this second house undoubtedly arises from the thick atmosphere of contradictory obligations, requests, entreaties and pleas. In the most remarkably surrealist image in the story, we see the "uncontrollable" horses, "pushing open the window from outside...each one...sticking its head through a window...observing the invalid" (Kafka, 2009, p. 45). The doctor feels as if the horses were "ordering [him] to journey back" ("als forderten mich die Pferde zur Reise auf."). Other demands relate to the previous episode, his conscience reminding him of Rosa and making him blame himself: "What am I doing? How am I saving her?" (Kafka, 2009, p. 45). The doctor is falling sick with obligation; in feeling and yielding to the demands of the family, he is feeling evermore exposed and vulnerable, a state that Kafka evokes by gradually stripping the doctor from his clothes and reducing him to the state of the ailing "young man" ("Junge"). The sister helps him take off his fur coat; the father insists on his drinking a glass of rum with an overly intimate physical gesture: "the old man claps me on the shoulder; the sacrifice of his treasure justifies this familiarity" ("Vertraulichkeit"). In a sexually suggestive gesture, the mother entices him to approach the bed ("die Mutter steht am Bett and lockt mich hin") (Kafka, 2008, p. 15). An increasing sense of familiarity and intimacy is imposed on the doctor and demanded from him. Broken and disorderly thoughts follow; the doctor's voice takes on a plaintive tone in the following sentences, haphazardly lamenting the responsibilities of the profession, reminiscing the loss of Rosa ("this beautiful girl who lives in my house all year long and whom I scarcely notice") and accusing the family of a false alarm ("the young man is healthy") (Kafka, 2009, p. 45). Everyone, however, appear dissatisfied with the doctor's performance; feeling persecuted and irritated by the family's incomprehensible demands, he wonders: "What more do these people expect?" (Kafka, 2009, p. 46).

Just like the doctor's house, the patient's house also turns into a scene of doubling: the narration begins to suggest the identification of the doctor with the young invalid as foreshadowed in the strange ordering of his thoughts: "Badly paid, but I'm generous and ready to help the poor. I still have to look for Rosa, and then the young man may be right and I want to die too" (Kafka, 2009, p. 46, translation altered)¹. The surface rhetoric and

¹ The original reads as "[s]chlecht bezahlt, bin ich doch freigebig und hilfsbereit gegenüber den Armen. Noch für Rosa muß ich sorgen, dann mag der Junge recht haben und auch ich will sterben (Kafka, 2008, p. 16). As different from Johnston's version, which translates "recht haben" as "may have his way" and hence interprets the meaning as a sexual suggestion, we have chosen the more straightforward

the ordering of the thoughts suggest that the “young” man (“Junge”) here is the virile horse-boy, but the death wish mentioned at the end belongs to the young patient also referred to as “Junge.” Two young men, a healthy and a sickly one, are being confused with each other. The sickly one can be understood as the story’s second double, which duplicates the figure of the home-boy by displacing him from the pigsty to the sick room in the house and by exposing him to the eyes of the family, neighbors and the general public. Rosa functions as a figure of the doctor’s munificence and a nagging reminder of untrammelled sexuality, and the sentence insinuates that the doctor’s covert desire of Rosa has been transferred from the horse-boy to the young invalid. In the linguistic whirlpool of the fantasy/nightmare, “taking care of Rosa” takes on a sexual meaning that can no longer be kept secret or disowned by the doctor. A scene of revelation and exposure is about to take place where the doctor will have to publicly confess his desire through his ailing double even if he would rather die.

If the first episode chooses horses and a horse-boy to symbolize desire, the second chooses a wound and a sick boy to do the same. The family demands that the illness be properly diagnosed and exposed, and the doctor must confess (“zuzugeben”) that there is something hidden and secret in the young man’s body that must be brought to light. Heralding the sexual nature of the revelation, the horses are heard to be “whinnying” and the doctor ironically notes that “the noise is probably supposed to come from higher regions in order to illuminate his examination” (Kafka, 2009, p. 46). The higher regions suggest the windows, the heavens and heavenly intervention simultaneously, but as discussed previously, the horses also refer to the creative powers of the lower regions of being localized as the pigsty in the preceding episode. John J. Brancato claims that the “unearthly” horses, Brother and Sister, suggest the incubus and succubus, male and female demons that the family fear will take the boy’s life (Brancato, 1978, p. 175). In any case, the horses that gaze in from the windows connect the young sickly man with the horse-boy, but as opposed to the latter, the former is held captive inside a house and totally powerless.

The invalid’s wound signifies the private, hidden and secretive, held dear because it has hitherto escaped the searching gaze of others in the family or in public. The pigsty was the hidden recess in the house that kept creative and sexual energies in secret store; but here it is the intimate body rendered uncanny by way of a wound called and coloured “Rosa:”

On his right side, in the region of the hip, a wound the size of the palm of one’s hand opened up. Rose [“Rosa”] in many different shadings, dark in the depths, brighter on the edges, delicately grained, with uneven patches of blood, open like a

translation “may be right,” which keeps the essential ambiguity of the original wording.

mine above the ground. That's what it looks like from a distance. Close up a complication is apparent. Who can look at that without whistling softly? Worms, as thick and long as my little finger, themselves rose coloured ("rosig") and also spattered with blood, are wriggling their white bodies towards the light with many little legs holding fast onto the inside of the wound. (Kafka, 2009, p. 46, translation slightly altered)².

We are in the thick of the wound's winding textures, which Kafka describes at length, moving from the surface, covering different shadings and exposing the depths. We had not seen the inside of the pigsty from which horses and a boy were born, but Kafka here deploys a penetrative, anatomical and one might even say architectural gaze looking inside the body. The wound is somewhere around the private parts of the body, which Sanders' and The Grimms' dictionaries, consulted by Freud in his essay on the uncanny, is referred to as heimlich, that is, intimate, hidden and kept away from other's side for the sake of public decency (Freud, 1919, p. 220). This is a terrible wound carrying the colour "Rosa" as well as all the sexual colourings of the first episode associated with Rosa the maid. The doctor first sees the opening of a mine ("Bergwerk") in the wound, which implies deeper recesses and treasures, but on closer look, a much more horrifying sight opens up: that of the worms. Yet Kafka adopts a tender tone in the description, and the allusion to actual fear appears "softly" ("leise") tempered and even playful ("who can look at that without whistling softly?"). In this very image of impending death, there is a wealth of small but tenacious, rose-coloured life.

The worms are as surprising a discovery as the horses; there is terrible beauty in the wound also because it stands for something that has been kept secret. It has also been kept secret from the doctor's self, being projected on to the body of the young invalid and discovered in the shape of a "Rosa" coloured wound. The "poor young man" cannot be helped; his desire cannot be openly expressed. So when the doctor observes that the young man is "dying from this flower on [his] side," there is no question that this is the same (desire for) "Rosa" that is only allowed to grow and die inside the body. In revealing the young man's wound, the doctor has also revealed his own secret desire. The rest of the story concerns the awkward negotiation of one's private secret in face of public demand and moral obligation. Characteristically, the doctor is divided between his confidential relationship with the patient and his responsibilities toward the public. Just as his previous alliances has shifted between the house and the pigsty, being

² In order to keep the evocation of Rosa in the original wording, we have translated "rosa," Kafka's stark reference to the colour of the wound, simply as "rose" as different than Johnston's "rose-coloured."

the master of his house and hosting the virile horse-boy, he is not sure whether he should be on the side of the patient who wants to die or the public that demands a cure.

The wound then hints at a deeply secret place in the body represented as an intimate house, which the boys tries to protect from the eye of the others. This most significant image has led to many diverse interpretations: for instance, Katherine Stockholder in her psychoanalytic interpretation of the wound, *Rose and the doctor's desire*, claims that the wound identifies the boy with the doctor in so far his incapacity to act against the groom (lack of sexual response) and lack of power to move toward his patient. Stockholder attributes this lack of power as a state of castration: the wound representing a castration wound and in extension a more generalized inability to move or be potent in the world (Stockholder, 1978, p. 335). According to Rochelle Tobias the wound is not affixed to the body of the patient or to that of the doctor, but it joins these two separate persons under one sign: the sign Rosa, which may also be considered as a symbol for the wound in Christ's heart, "a symbol of the wound Christ suffers as a man and that overcomes as a Messiah" (Tobias, 2000, p. 127). However, the symbol of the wound that Christ overcame becomes a symbol of a wound that reveals the limits of the doctor's competency. The doctor fails to act as a model for the healer as well as for the saviour (Tobias, 2000, p. 128). Similarly, Bluma Goldstein traces the repercussions of the saviour figure in her article, "A Doctor's Odyssey" claims that the country doctor fails to be a Zaddik, and ideal healer and a saintly figure in Jewish tradition (Goldstein, 1968, p. 122). These interpretations all emphasize the doctor's medical incompetency and his lack of authority in religious terms by treating the notion of the cure as medical as well as religious. Indeed, stripped off his authority, not trusted by the villagers and with feelings of inadequacy, the county doctor is hardly a saviour ("I'm no improver of the world and let him lie there") (Kafka, 2009, p. 45). As the chorus of schoolchildren sing ("only a doctor, only a doctor") (Kafka, 2009, p. 47), the villagers clearly do not trust in his diagnosis, demanding him to go back to the patient again.

Kafka himself doubted the competency and the expertise of the doctors. Regarding his sister's doctors, he entered the following in his diary on 5 March 1912: "Those revolting doctors! Businesslike, determined and so ignorant of healing that if this business-like determination were to leave them, they would stand at sick-beds like school-boys" (Kafka, 1948, p. 247). One should not forget that Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis, for which the cure was not to be found. In his letter to Milena Jesenská he expresses his feelings of disillusionment with his doctors: "Certainly doctors are stupid, or rather, they're not more stupid than other people but their pretensions are ridiculous; none the less you have to reckon with the fact that they become more and more stupid the moment you come into their clutches" (Kafka, 1983, p. 26).

Kafka's views on religion were more complicated. He saw religion as some kind of an obstacle that he needed to get rid of in order to pursue his art freely. His misgivings about religion, a common trait among artists, were also tied to the main authority figure in his life: his father. Kafka wrote to his life-long friend, Max Brod in 1921: "Most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Jewishness behind them, and their fathers approved of this, but vaguely (this vagueness was what was outrageous to them). But with their posterior legs they were still glued to their father's Jewishness and with their waving anterior legs they found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration" (Kafka, 1977, pp. 288-289). Such statements clearly reveal that Kafka failed to resolve his personal issues with his father who never approved of him. Acting like a Jewish authority, his father wanted him to pursue a similar career like his own and never showed him any affection since his childhood. Significantly, Kafka's short story, "The Judgement" (1916) and his diaries are entirely about his relationship with his father and may be read as works that problematize and complicate the idea of Jewishness represented by the father figure.

One can easily notice Kafka's lack of trust in doctors and his ambiguous relationship with religion and religious authority in Kafka's protagonist. However, one should also take into account of the general tone of nihilism throughout the entire story that may be attributed to the cultural and historical milieu in which Kafka wrote his short story. After the unseen carnage of the First World War, the entire atmosphere in Europe can best be described as pessimistic, demoralized and hopeless. The notion of Europe itself was threatened and challenged. In the words of the renowned French poet Paul Valéry, Europe experienced almost an emotional rupture after the war: "she [Europe] felt in every nucleus of her mind that she was no longer the same, that she was no longer herself, that she was about to lose consciousness, a consciousness acquired through centuries of bearable calamities" (Valéry, 1977, p. 95). This Europe, which Valéry also identifies as "the elect portion of the terrestrial globe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a vast body," was left without any sense of direction" (Valéry, 1977, p. 102). It is possible to associate the unique quality of all of Kafka's works—a quality that we call "Kafkaesque"—with such lack of direction as well as with incompatibility, inadequacy and emotional rupture. In "The Country Doctor," for instance, the country doctor is left with this loss of direction, or lack of direction. The end of the story clearly alludes to such loss of direction: the horses that previously carried the doctor to the patient's house in a speedy way, now drag aimlessly in the snow carrying the naked doctor; not taking any orders, they now head towards an unknown place.

The lack of motivation, direction and possibly a future resonates most notably in the country doctor's paradox, whereby he feels obliged to carry out his duty only to realize his efforts are futile. This paradox is similar to the paradox of many a modern protagonist in literary fiction, which

Martin Halliwell describes as “the sense that a moral position must be ventured, but accompanied by a simultaneous realization of the impossibility of doing so” (Halliwell, 2001, p. 3). The doctor’s following words suggest that he has always been ready to carry out his duty: “I am employed by the district and do my duty to the full, right to the point where it’s almost too much. Badly paid, but I am generous and ready to help the poor.” (Kafka, 2009, p. 45). However, he also finds himself mostly inept and lets himself be directed: “what am I supposed to do?” the doctor asks, “if they use me for sacred purposes, I let that happen to me as well” (Kafka, 2009, p. 47). From an existentialist standpoint, the doctor strives to carry out his duty repetitively but without any result as if it were a Sisyphian task, that is, without being able to find a cure for the wound or a solution regarding Rosa.

The wound, we argue in our close reading, signifies such a paradoxical existential state, in which the individual is divided between the desire to keep the secrets of his being/house and the demand from the outside that he reveals them. This is indeed a state for which there might be no cure; in any case, the notion of “cure” in the story is ambiguous and even empty. If there is anything akin to a cure, it is the improbable solution of balancing between the right to privacy, secrecy and difference on the one hand and the public demand for openness and transparency on the other. In a striking statement that reveals the crux of the story, we hear the doctor complain: “it’s easy to write prescriptions, but difficult to come to an understanding with people” (Kafka, 2009, p. 46). The real problem is understanding the human condition of wanting to be left alone in one’s privacy (or with one’s wound) while feeling obliged to satisfy the often contradictory and incomprehensible demands of others. As Aaron Manson notes, the word Kafka uses for “understanding” (“verständigen”), which also implies reaching a consensual agreement does not exist between the villagers and the doctor because they have discordant expectations of a doctor’s duty. The villagers expect spiritual healing not a physical or sensual one (Manson, 2005, p. 310). The increasingly inconsistent speech of the young man reveals that he himself is divided on this issue. While he demands to die in a previous instance, he now poses an ambiguous question to the doctor: “Will you save me?” whispers the young man, sobbing, quite blinded by the life inside his wound” (Kafka, 2009, p. 47). It is not clear what this “saving” (“retten”) entails and his contradictory state of simultaneous despair (sobbing) and awe (being blinded/dazzled or “geblendet sein”) suggests that he might want to stick to the life inside the wound rather than give up on it.

There is no solution, no cure: the doctor complains that as always, something impossible has been demanded from him (“Immer das Unmögliche vom Arzt verlangen”) (Kafka, 2008, p. 18). He is well aware that on this particular issue there is no difference between him and his patient. This is indeed the point in which he literally transforms into the young man, whose status as a potential double has been intimated

throughout. The scene becomes more populous, with guests “coming in on tip toe,” with families and village elders taking his clothes off and laying him by the invalid on the side of the wound. The borders of the house have become shifty and fluid: it is not just in front of the family but the entire village that a confession must be made, a “cure” or understanding established. The house has become a commons area, and in an ironic development, it has also become a secular church whose choir is conducted by the schoolteacher.

In a passage fraught with metaphysical meaning, the doctor laments the waning of religion. It is medical science and doctors that have now been made responsible to provide salvation, obliterating the need for priests: “[People] have lost the old faith. The priest sits at home and tears his religious robes to pieces. But the doctor is supposed to achieve everything with his delicate surgeon’s hand” (Kafka, 2009, p. 47). The specific achievement hinted at here, however, is ambiguous just like the cure. The passage contains a dizzying array of religious suggestions rendered in an ironic tone: seemingly comparing himself with Jesus Christ, the doctor notes that he has not offered himself (“angeboten”). Yet, in a half-hearted act of martyrdom, he accepts to be sacrificed and “used” for “sacred purposes” (“zu heiligen Zwecken”) (Kafka, 2008, p. 18). The doctor’s ramblings hint that he is conflicted about seeing himself as an agent of cure, but his reference to the priest also suggests that the cure in question might be thought of as being metaphysical. By focusing on this specific passage and drawing on the Jewish tradition that faith can heal bodies as well as souls, Aaron Manson argues that the meaning of Kafka’s story is theological and that the priest’s authority has become obsolete and the physician’s authority is ineffectual (Manson, 2005, p. 302). According to Manson’s analysis, Kafka was highly influenced by Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which mainly suggests that religion is an illness, and that for Kafka the cultural meaning of illness is “its originally religious meaning” (Manson, 2005, p. 308). Manson links the lack of faith with the historical background, i.e. World War I, being a Jewish, and the feeling of moral decay Kafka expressed in his letters, and interprets this story as an elegy to a culture that has lost faith, wherein it is impossible to perform one’s duty (Manson, 2005, p. 310). John J. Brancato also points to the relation between science and belief, the country doctor’s impotence and suggests that in Kafka’s narrative modern man has tried to make science replace his ancient beliefs, but it is unable to perform well in this sacred capacity as the country doctor becomes as helpless as the patient he is supposed to cure (Brancato, 1978, p. 173). Yet, something more mundane might be hinted at in the passage than the more elevated themes of religion, belief and science. It might be surmised that the doctor is talking here of a metaphorical cure for the awkward state of being in the world where one must hide their wounds (or sins) while being forced, urged, entreated to reveal them. The doctor has become a Catholic priest of sorts, helping his patient confess and bringing him under the

surveillance of the public gaze. In doing so, however, he has also become an oppressive agent, unwanted by the patient, who is there to force the patient to reveal the secrets of his body/house that he holds so dear.

It is obvious that the doctor is identifying with the intractable patient; indeed, he is turning into him. Kafka's language strikingly effaces the difference between the doctor and the young man; it is not clear, for instance, who the reference is in the first two lines of the choir's song: "Take his clothes off, then he'll heal / And if he doesn't heal, then kill him / It's only a doctor, it's only a doctor" (Kafka, 2009, p. 47, translation altered)³. Kafka deploys the word "heilen" ambiguously, that is, both intransitively, as in "healing from a wound" and transitively, as in "healing a wound or a patient" or curing him/it. By omitting the object in the first two lines, he seems to be referring to the patient; this is indeed a more sensible meaning in view of the common medical practice whereby the patient is made to take off his clothes for examination. But the village people have already begun to take off the doctor's clothes; both the context and the third line indicate the doctor as the reference in the first two lines. The doctor needs healing and must heal himself, and in the following scene where he is left alone with the patient as they both lie naked in the sickbed, his identification with the young man is complete.

What we hear next is less a dialogue between the doctor and the patient, and more a monologue in which the doctor seeks solace in thinking about the universality of his own predicament. The young patient accuses the old one of giving him "less room" on the bed; his status as a patient is being diminished by the doctor who is beginning to occupy his bed, pretending to be the patient himself. It is as if his older, supposedly wiser version were taking control, asking him to give up his illness and expose his secret wound. The invalid's complaint intimates that there must remain something hidden in the individual even when this may lead to his death and demise. He can no longer own the wound, which has now been exposed to the public gaze. A curious lament follows: "I was born into the world with a beautiful wound; that was all I was furnished with" (Kafka, 2009, p. 48). The voices intermingle; in the dreamiest instance in this exceedingly dreamy narrative, it is impossible to tell whether the doctor who is lying on bed is hearing or dreaming the invalid's lamenting voice.

In attempting to console the invalid, the doctor might also be consoling himself when he observes the "wound is not so bad. Made in a

³ Ian Johnston translates these lines as "take his clothes off, then he'll heal/ and if he doesn't cure, then kill him" (Kafka, 2009, p. 47). Whereas Kafka's diction is far from clear in relation to the "heilen" that is taking place, Ian Johnston's translation implies that an unambiguous reference is made to the doctor in the second line: he translates "heilen" as "cure" in the second line as opposed to the first line where he deploys the more straightforward "heal."

tight corner with two blows from an axe. Many people offer their side and hardly hear the axe in the forest, to say nothing of the fact that it's coming closer to them" (Kafka, 2009, p. 48). Reading Kafka's story as a display of the imperturbable officiousness of the human mind in coming to terms with reality, as an effort to put a rational façade on the irrational that dominates our lives, Hans P. Guth parallels the axe in the forest with Camus's "slow persistent breeze" in *The Stranger* that shows inevitability of the fate and futility to control reality. The wound in this case symbolizes "the basic existential fact that makes our intellectual exertions a palliative rather than a cure" (Guth, 1965, p. 429). While we agree with Guth's emphasis on the existentialist argument behind the story, one cannot fail to notice the strange turn in this particular section: what becomes consolatory is having felt the opening of the wound, which the doctor represents as a privilege of sorts. Others, the doctor seems to suggest, are not aware of being wounded or having been equipped/furnished with a wound ("Ausstattung"); yet the doctor does not at all clarify the merits of such awareness. There might be no merit, and the doctor may be deceiving the invalid, which also means, deceiving his own self, a possibility suggested in the invalid's question: "are you deceiving me in my fever?" The doctor's response to him is overly performative, reinforcing the suggestion of deception: "it is truly so. Take the word of honour of a medical doctor" (Kafka, 2009, p. 48).

HOMELESSNESS

At the end of the narrative, where the doctor escapes from the invalid's house, Kafka conjures up a melancholy image of homelessness. It is obvious that the doctor cannot feel at home in the house of others, where he is held responsible for curing wounds that would rather not be cured. In exposing the invalid's Rosa-coloured wound, the doctor also exposes his own illicit desire for Rosa and renders himself increasingly vulnerable. Being in the house of others implies responding to their demand, request and order for the revelation of one's secrets; horrified at this prospect, the patient/doctor withdraws into and hides in the opening of an inward, intimate, secret wound. But the others always win the battle; they have already found out about the wound "Rosa," leaving the doctor no option other than escape. As the doctor "drags through the snowy desert like old men," he hears the choir of children singing an ironic song that announces his essential lasciviousness to the entire world: "Enjoy yourselves, you patients. / The doctor's laid in bed with you!" ("Freut Euch, Ihr Patienten, / Der Arzt ist Euch ins Bett gelegt!") (Kafka, 2008, p. 20). The lines expose the scandalous truth of the doctor: he is essentially debauched and cannot be trusted even in his professional life (he might lay in bed with his patients!). This, according to Etti Golomb Bregman implies that the doctor's unconscious wishes to violate social taboos, which in turn raises the fear of punishment (Bregman, 1989, p. 82). By interpreting the doctor's failure, his inability to complete his mission, and his doubts using Freud's notion of ambivalence as a

characteristic of obsessional neurosis, Bregman contends that the country doctor's perpetual struggle between opposite unconscious forces leads to doubts and an inability to complete actions. Thus, as the ending also implies, such inability produces a feeling of frustration and despair (Bregman, 1989, p. 78). Bregman is certainly correct in making these insightful observations regarding the doctor's psychology, but what must also be emphasized in the scene is the ingenious way with which Kafka literally transforms such internal despair into an ironic and absurd event in the external world, in this instance the mocking chant of the school-choir, that oppresses and persecutes our protagonist.

In line with our discussion of home/homelessness, the wound of the doctor's entire being has been exposed and he has now been forced to wander in exile from his own house that was never properly owned. "I'll never come home at this rate," the doctor foresees and continues: "in my house the disgusting groom is wreaking havoc [and] Rosa is his victim" (Kafka, 2009, p. 48). The narrative ends with an acute depiction of homelessness, a helpless and endless wandering in a world where houses are controlled by wayward sexual forces that demand secrecy or stifling familial/societal pressures that demand exposure. In Kafka's dismal literary world, there is no home where the doctor or anyone for that matter can fully feel at home, i.e. in peace with his own private being and in comfort with others.

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