

# THE JUDGEMENT: COMPLICATIONS OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

## Abstract

Franz Kafka has been one of the most influential writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work has deeply resonated with the mind of the readers as they reflect back at the complex modern life we live. In his story *The Judgement*, Kafka deals with the strife of self vs the people in one's life. This paper attempts to dissect this story and analyse the complicated relationships between the protagonist and his family.

**Keywords:** Family, Kafkaesque, Gaslighting, Power, Judgement

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## I. THE JUDGEMENT

Written in 1912, *The Judgement* (*Das Urteil*) by Franz Kafka is considered one of his most autobiographical work. The judgement as the title suggests delves into the realm of law, court, judiciary etc all of which are key features of Kafkaesque. The story shows the power of family and the way their judgements can be equally absolute as the law of the state.

It begins with a young merchant Georg Bendemann who writes letters to his friend in Russia and is unable to tell him about his engagement to the rich and beautiful Frieda Brandenfeld. He is unable to do so as he is aware of the struggling conditions of his friend abroad. His business there had showed promise for a little while but had later failed. He fears that such happy news might make him jealous or sad. Hence, he writes about the death of his mother instead but the reply is almost apathetic. So, he decides to talk about impersonal, small things and random gossip.

In doing so he feels as though he is isolating his friend from himself and after some motivation from his fiancé writes a new letter. He goes to his father for advice after writing the letter but it goes downhill. His old, widower father throws a fit over his friend being imaginary and accuses him of cooking up lies. He also blames him for keeping him in the dark about the business. He says that he was not as affected by the death of his mother. Hurt by this, he coaxes his father to lie down.

The father accuses him of being a terrible son, waiting for his death and goes on a rant about he knew all about the friend of his. He says that he secretly had been in contact with the friend and has won him over to his side. He says that the friend knew everything about his life and goes on to ridicule his fiancé making sexual remarks about her. In his frenzy and anger the father finally calls him a devil and sentences him death by drowning. The story ends with Georg jumping off a bridge to end his life.

Kafka actually reread the story and wrote notes about it in his diary to further explain the characters and the relationships between them. This story which was written in one sitting is one of his complete works on a night when it felt like he had to carry his own weight on his shoulders. The judgement is a result of his encounter with Felice Bauer, his fiancé at the house of his friend Max Brod. He was conflicted about his relationship with her because marrying her felt like a betrayal to his art.

Kafka believed that he was only able to create in loneliness and hence was apprehensive about getting married regardless of how much he loved her. Hence most of his protagonists are bachelors and face similar sort of loneliness. It is the tug of war between the want for a normal domestic life or his life as a writer. After meeting her, he immediately wrote that he was “doomed”. The most important theme of this story hence is bachelorhood along with the complicated relations Georg has with his father and fiancé.

Kafka had unrealistic standards for his writing and was a perfectionist. He did not write for pleasure instead suffered because he could not relay the emotions in his head onto the paper. The judgement gives us a peak into his scattered, genius yet haunting mind as the plot grows more and more raw and intense. His curse of being able to write only in solitude is reflected as the basic nature of his protagonists. They are lonely yet unable to escape the

predicament. Frieda Brandenfeld is obviously Felice Bauer as they also share the abbreviation of F.B.

For Georg, Freida is like a temptation. She symbolizes the sensual, material world. She is the feminine energy associated with earthly desires and abundance. She symbolizes the life Kafka desired but could not attain. His disposition against the worldly distractions reminds us of the poem “Sailing to Byzantium” by W.B. Yeats, in which the author finds the present-day Norway unfit for living as it is surrounded by sensual music and pleasures. The poet craves to go to the city of Byzantium where his soul would be free from mortal boundations and would sing about the glory of the place for an eternity. Maybe Kafka would have resonated with such an idea of a place where he could finally attain the perfection he desired. Freida of course can feel Georg’s apprehension in regard to the marriage. She is however influential and makes him lose contact with his friend. She makes him feel more attracted towards the life of matrimony.

The other major character and influence in Georg’s life is the friend. He makes no physical appearance in the story so that we know about him is through Georg or later his father. This friend is nameless, mysterious and almost shrouded in mysticism. We know that he lives in Russia, his business has failed and struggling financially, and has no contacts in St Petersburg. He has resigned into a life of solitude and bachelorhood. Overall, this friend is pretty much a failure, struggling both in the financial and personal department. We also know that he had once tried to convince Georg to join him in Russia as the trade was similar to what he already was in, but Georg already earned way more that his friend could have imagined. Vice versa he too tries to coax his friend back but he denies. The only redeeming quality of this unsuccessful man is his loyalty to Russia.

The letters Georg writes to his friend feel as if they are dedicated to himself. A soliloquy by Kafka where he bears his emotions, his fear of marriage, and talks about business. Georg hence signifies the part of Kafka who has given up on writing and gotten married. He has the family life he craved, a well-established business and is well respected in the society. Whereas the friend becomes the other part of him, his “inner child”, who has escaped the worldly affairs into a faraway land to pursue his passions. It is like his wild fantasies being materialized. The fact that the friend is not as successful might be because of Kafka’s own insecurities about his writing.

He has however through the character of the friend escaped the authority of his father and lived his life of solitude. He is a bachelor who lives almost like a hippie, almost like a martyr, yet denies to leave the city which has brought him financial ruin for he values his freedom more. Away from the capitalistic society he has been able to preserve his conscience and kept his soul pure. He is not tainted by the sensual temptations of life and is able to follow his true calling without being distracted. He becomes a figure of a hero, brave and mysterious, who has not given up on his path regardless of the hardships he faced along the way.

The attempts to bring each other to their side is the tug of war in Kafka’s own mind. He is unable to choose between his artistic passion or his love for his fiancé and even if he chooses one, he cannot completely let go of the other. Thus, his find is never completely at ease, feeling a sense of loss on either paths, the two alter egos though have become perfect

solution each living out the life he desired. Kafka was forced into a desk job by his father after completing his graduation. It was the safe life which everyone lived to pay their expenses even if they hated it. He could not leave his job completely either and just continued writing in his free time. Though when he falls in love, it complicated things as now he felt he had no time for his craft. The statement of the beloved that they should not have gotten engaged if he had such a friend now makes sense. The friend is the symbol of his apprehension toward marriage.

This desire for escape is common among authors and poets, they crave place where their artistic abilities can flow freely and they can create in peace away from the tumultuous world of responsibilities. In a sense Kafka becomes a romantic searching for respite in a faraway land, away from the clutches of his father, the societal expectations and the exhausting life he led. But like all escapists he too has to return to reality. He does end up writing a long letter to invite his friend for the marriage. It is an act of acceptance, of waking up from a dream like fantasy.

In the final part of the story the judge is father. The judgement is cruel, unfair, one without any court, lawyers or trials but absolute. The figure of father is common constant present in almost all of Kafka's work as his own father, the overbearing tyrant that he was, had left a huge impact on his psyche. Even as the father is sick and stricken by grief, he appears huge. It is a call back to Kafka's own body insecurities especially in comparison to his father. He always feared that one night his father would come back to his room and throw him out in the balcony in the freezing cold of the night. He felt absolutely powerless in front of his father. The trauma so ingrained into his being that even the image of a weak, frenzied figure of him could overpower him easily. The father too is aware of his own power as he chastises his son without any regard of consequences. His words become the truth, no facts or feelings are considered.

"Georg shrank into the corner"( The Essential Kafka 552) in face of his father, already a sign of submission. When his father accuses him of making up stories about this friend and trying to prove him mad, he is unable to defend himself. His explanations fall on deaf ears as the pleas of a convict whose punishment is already decided. Georg truly does care for his father as he concerned by his dirty underwear, his weak physique, has noticed how he does not eat enough. He tries to be a good son to his father by trying to lay him down and convince him to go to the doctor. His actions are taken as otherwise though as he is accused of wanting his father dead.

The father being a figure of such authority probably could not come to terms to his own mortality and weakening state. As a man of society, he is paranoid about losing power over his finances as the business is completely run by his son. There is fear, paranoia, distrust towards his son. Death would be the final release but he is not yet ready to give up his power and abuses it till the very end. He is pathetic man trying to cling on the remnant of his past. He personally attacks Georg by claiming that he was not affected by the mother's passing as much as he was and accuses him of taking advantage of the situation. though from the contents it is quite clear that the truth is quite the contrary as Georg seems to be good, well-intentioned son.

He is completely unable to defend himself as the father lands his last blow by telling him how he has been in contact with his friend for a long time. He has been writing to him telling him everything about his life. Georg had painstakingly formed his letters to his friend to appease him and not make him feel jealous. His father's acts of being in contact to his friend behind his back ruins all his efforts. He claims that he has taken the friend to his side, so much so that he crumbles the letters by Georg in his left hand and instead reads his in his right hand. He has stolen the one friend he held dear. The later ego that was created to escape the tyranny of his father was never free either. It had all been an illusion as he could never escape his clasps.

The father is very much gaslighting Georg. He is manipulative and could be compared to Mother Gothel for Disney's "Tangled". They are both parental figures who want to completely control the lives of their children. "I just listened to the sound of complete and utter betrayal and followed that." (Tangled 56:33) It's the subtle ways that these parents guilt trip their children accusing them of crimes they have not committed, to gain an upper hand over them. The aim is to make them question their own sanity, judgement and perception so that they only see the picture that is shown to them by the parents. Gaslighting is an age-old tactic used by dictators, employers and even by family members as seen here to push one absolute narrative forward. It is to manipulate them into thinking that they can only rely on the gas lighter for reliable information even about themselves.

The respective love interests are the new figures that are able to influence and give a new narrative to the protagonists. they are a threat to the authority as they take in a more important place in their lives. The discussion of the living conditions after marriage and the implication that the father would live alone as Georg leaves with his fiancé is a major threat. Hence the strong disapproval from the father who demeans her of enchanting his son with her sexuality.

The hit song "Mother Knows Best" (Tangled 12:25-14:29) from the movie is an apt description of the tactics used by these parents. the song is full of lies, deceit, belittling Rapunzel into believing she is worthless and poking at her insecurities. Mother Gothel knows to hit where it would hurt the most and feeds her lies all her life. Rapunzel though unlike Georg is able to break free from his vicious cycle and see her own truth as she escapes the tower and find her own truth.

Georg on the other hand is not as lucky. Unlike Mother Gothel the manipulator is his kin by blood, which makes it all the crueller. "So, you've been waiting to pounce on me!" (The Essential Kafka 554) The escape he thought he had made was also just a lie making the figure of the friend a paradox. He is so utterly unable to break free that in the end he gives on arguing for rights too. The father lands a final hit by confirming that Georg had been living a life of delusions knowing nothing of the outside world. It is the last answer, the truth of his life presented before him and now all that awaits is the judgment.

The father calls him an "innocent child" yet also "the very devil" (The Essential Kafka 554). The dichotomy of this statement is very perplexing as even in the judgement the judge has contradicted himself. The readers question the unfairness of the verdict. The sentence of "death by drowning" (The Essential Kafka 554). This is the last act the father does before he crashes down to the bed, his sickness catching up to him. Even in the face of

death he was able to condemn his son to death. He was successful as Georg jumps off the bridge and commits suicide. His entire life he could not make a single decision without the influence of his father. Even his end was on the dictates of that man. The ones who hurt you most after all the ones closest to you.

“But I always loved you, dear parents”(The Essential Kafka 554) The last words of Georg are heart-breaking as he simply states he truly did love his parents. Regardless of the upbringing and the pains he suffered under the seemingly unloving father, he truly cherished him. He looked for his approval about the letter because he genuinely valued his opinion. He states that his father is irreplaceable to him both in business and his life. It was not that he did not mourn his mother but probably that he had to be strong to maintain and grow his father’s legacy.

Often times children have to grow up too early because of the loss of a parent or the parents being emotionally abusive. Gregor and Kafka are two children who matured before they should have. In his letters to his father Kafka does not exactly blame his father for his behaviour. He understands that his father was also young and did not know what else to do. It was probably how he himself was raised as a child.

To his father the issue seemed very normal. He could not understand the emotional damage it caused on the young mind of his child. The strict punishments made him more obedient but also damaged Kafka internally. He describes how his father made decisions for him when it came to choosing friends and partners.

Hermann Kafka was a man of confidence because he had climbed the social ladder solely on his own efforts. He was a man of experience hence he deemed his opinions the correct one. Anyone else was just an immature fool. He was right because of who he was not because what he thought. He dominated Kafka intellectually, demanded respect and submission. He did not treat him like a child, did not play along his childlike attitude but was always pre occupied with his own work. So, in the truth the one who was unable to truly love was the father. As a child Kafka starved for the love and attention of his father rather, he got absolute orders. and yet he could not bring himself to truly hate the man because he was his father and he truly did love him.

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