

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.21.1.152>

THE FALL OF THE MAN IN F. KAFKA'S WORKS

Amalya Soghomonyan*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8819-1102>

Yerevan State University, Armenia

I am constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I only feel in my bones and which can only be experienced in those bones.

(Kafka, 1920)

The early 20th-century literary scene was deeply influenced by Franz Kafka, a writer whose stories explore the intricacies of the human experience, power, and existential anxiety. In modern reality, the problem of man's fall remains relevant, and Kafka's artistic experience can help us avoid this ultimate downfall. This article examines the issue of the man's fall, interpreting sin and its realization as key causes of the hero's decline. Historical-comparative, psychoanalytical, and philosophical examination methods are applied in the analysis. The article also discusses the Biblical myth, which Kafka sees as the primary cause of humanity's fall and literary influences that Kafka had. Both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche grappled with the notion of the absurdity of human existence, a theme that Kafka weaves into the very fabric of his narratives. Kafka's stories, with their surreal settings and illogical events, reflect the absurd and often nightmarish quality of human life that both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche alluded to in their works.

Keywords: *fall, transformation, sin, punishment, bio-essence, God, compassion.*

Introduction

Franz Kafka started keeping a diary in 1910 and made his last few entries in 1923, after which he did not make any new entries until 1924. The reason for this was a gradually deepening illness, unbearable physical pain, and suffering. Before he died, he had begged his doctor: "Please let me die, otherwise you are a murderer" (Kafka, 1910-1923). In addition, perhaps a more fundamental reason is a deep spiritual decline, final despair, completely absorbing him, and any effort, including writing, could become

* a.soghomonyan@ysu.am

Received: 26.05.2024

Revised: 23.09.2024

Accepted: 16.10.2024



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

© The Author(s) 2025

unnecessary and meaningless. What is written in *The Diaries* is a thirteen-year-old inner monologue of the great writer's life, which is of exceptional importance. Kafka wrote *The Diaries* not for readers, it was not literature but the inner support of his spiritual life, his only island found in words, where he could retire, be with himself without the outside world, prying eyes, and surroundings.. Kafka asked his close friend and commissioner Max Brod to destroy all of his manuscripts. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the latter did not do that.

Almost all of Franz Kafka's works depict the disappearance and transformation of man. Often, Kafka's novel *The Metamorphosis* is referred to as a fantasy, highlighting that its content deviates from what is commonly considered reality.

The influence of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche on Kafka's works

An admirer of the artistic legacy of the 19th-century Russian literary greats Gogol, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, Kafka clearly expresses his special regard for Dostoevsky. Kafka is united with Dostoevsky by intense, restless, and desperate examination of the eternal counsel and secret of human existence and society, the meaning of good and evil, and the meaning of beauty. It can be safely said that Kafka learned a lot from Dostoevsky, whose exploration of life and psychology reached a form of religious purity. The Bible greatly unites their creative destinies. Sin, punishment, and law are as relevant and discussed concepts in Dostoevsky's works as in Kafka's legacy. *The Book of Job* is one of Dostoevsky's favorite works, and scholars see a Job complex in many of Kafka's writings. Human evil is incomprehensible, mysterious, and problematic for both authors. The nightmarish parallel between Dostoevsky's story of Ivan, a serf boy, and the general who punishes him in *The Brothers Karamazov* can be found in Kafka's story *A Knock at the Gate*.

As surprising as it is, these writers also share similarities in their destinies. Both had complex relationships with their fathers. Dostoevsky's childhood was unhappy due to a gloomy and angry father. In Dostoevsky's works, Kafka often saw reflections of his fate. He once remarked, "I just read something in Dostoevsky that reminded me of my unhappy existence" (Kafka, 1946).

The portrayal of psychological decay in Dostoevsky's work is connected with the themes in European literature and art, which depict the descent of man and his expulsion from the informational system of creation, reducing him to either a symbol or a biological unit. Nietzsche first articulated this human condition with his proclamation, "God is dead", in which "man" should be read instead of God. This perspective becomes clearer when we recall Nietzsche's other assertion: "Man is something to be overcome."

Beyond this, Nietzsche is also a critic of humanity itself – of a humanity that, through its degradation and self-consumption, reached the 19th-century. If we read the phrase "God is dead" in its textual version, we can see that it suggests the

disappearance of Christ-God, overshadowed by the dense shadow of Christ-Man. The denser that shadow, the dimmer the image of God, and the more evident the fall of man.

In Dostoevsky's works, man is psychologically destroyed, yet the foundations of his existence remain unthreatened. In Kafka's works, however, man disappears as an existential entity. He withdraws from the world, loses all his paths, and turns into a biological being that can be anything but human. Kafka implements in literature what Nietzsche did on a philosophical-intellectual level, with the significant difference that, in Kafka's case, "overcoming" has a positive value.

Kafka does not criticize man like Nietzsche. It is absurd and pointless to criticize someone who does not exist, from whom their bio-essence has been removed, leaving only a human mold that may at any moment be exhausted. The vast mindlessness of the external world, the senseless and hopeless nature of life, the absence of any thought and purpose, the presence of foreign and enemy forces, and the complete absurdity of existence create a mythical space where man exists as a condemned, alien being. Every effort to find salvation only makes him more defenseless and helpless because he is doomed from the start.

Kafka himself relives the nightmarish reality of his characters. His external, false objectivism or cold intonation of language, and the excessive accuracy of details that gives them a completely opposite description, "betray" the monstrous sufferings and inner hell that the author experiences "behind the curtain", between words and lines. He knows something that no one talks about. It is his starting point. He knows something his heroes don't. That thing is not said. It is not included in any word, expression, or phrase. Kafka keeps a stony silence – not the restful silence, as Shakespeare says, but a profound and all-encompassing silence.

What Kafka sees is so monstrous that it is impossible to articulate. The image of hell petrifies him, he perceives, as silent as Dante was, by the vision of the empyrean. For Dante, the journey is a form of catharsis, a mental purification. For Kafka, it is a descent, a senseless movement. Dante sees sinners in hell; Kafka sees hell in existence, where there are no sinners or punishment. Existence itself is punishment, and in punishment, there is no justice. Punishment is typically connected with crime, but Kafka's characters are punished without committing any crime. They are not sinners, yet they are all punished – punishment when there is no crime. There is no crime, but there is punishment. In Dostoevsky's novel, there is a crime but no punishment. Dostoevsky's concept of punishment in absentia appears decades later in Kafka's work, in an enigmatic manner. Kafka's subconscious sees a distorted picture of the world. He does not ask where the distortion comes from because that question has no answer. There is the effect, but there is no discernible cause. Negative forces operate on an invisible plane; they are not seen, but the consequences of their activities are evident.

The quest to recognize these forces is as absurd as the reality itself. Kafka's task is to show the destructive influence of these forces on human life. It is not a question of moral psychology or ethics, but of existence. Man becomes estranged from existence, and his efforts to integrate into it alienate him further. The castle, which the Surveyor seeks to penetrate, symbolizes existence, from which man's path is closed. Foreign forces have conquered it and it has become an inaccessible, closed circle for man. The castle doors are closed, and all efforts to enter are futile.

Absurdity admits of no thought or consciousness. The world is a mindless place, dominated by chaotic forces, where consciousness cannot exist; it is expelled from that world, its place relegated to the inner world of man. Although this inner world strives to resist foreign forces, it is doomed from the start to defeat. Since man is his consciousness, he is condemned to deportation and disappearance. He exists only within his consciousness, relying solely on it, on his closed being, but "being is not yet being."

Guilt is always beyond doubt

In the novel *The Trial*, Joseph K is gradually marginalized from the world, losing the possibility of existence, while the Surveyor strives to enter existence but never quite succeeds. One seeks to gain what the other loses, blurring the distinction between them. The court where Joseph K's case is to be tried epitomizes a false human society, a mystically empowered superhuman, super personal, closed, and uncommunicative "universe" – a unique "empiria", contrasting with Dante's empiria, whose influence over human life is infinite in its negative aspect, akin to empiricism's control over the universe.

"The castle is equivalent to the court", epitomizes the semantic evolution within the legal realm, where one can wait indefinitely at its doors without gaining entry. Detached from humanity, Law becomes a monstrous mechanism, a supernatural evil. This embodiment is seen in the instrument of torture described in *In the Penal Colony* – a hellish machine crafted by a satanic imagination, embodying the ruthless logic of life stripped of meaning and its mindless cruelty concentrated.

Kafka crafted three pivotal grotesque symbols: the Castle, the Law, and the Torture Machine, intricately interconnected as three counterpoints of the same concept. The Castle symbolizes existence itself, where man is conspicuously absent. The Law represents the mental-logical structure detached from humanity, which transforms into its antithesis in the absence of man. The third symbol, the Torture Machine, epitomizes the State mechanism opposed to man, annihilating him upon detecting any semblance of thought, life, or movement.

In all these representations, man fades into insignificance. Paraphrasing Dostoevsky, we could assert: "If there is no God, everything is possible; and on another level, if there is no man, everything is meaningless". When Gregor Zamsa, the

protagonist of *The Metamorphosis* awakens to discover he has transformed into a cockroach, this revelation evokes no astonishment. The event occurred, to be accepted as fact, albeit one causing anxiety, disrupting the normal course of life, and distorting the accepted way of living for an individual.

Gregor's transformation adds to the family's already overwhelming worries. The reasons for this are unknown, or perhaps there is no reason at all. It simply is because there is no discernible cause and effect in the flow of life. If there is no inherent meaning in that flow, then there exists no connection or interaction between its separate components. Gregor's family members struggle to cope with his extreme distress. Adversity may have eroded their love and compassion, implying that a person can only love another in their human form, within a certain plane of existence. Beyond that, the transformed individual becomes a stranger, unfamiliar, incomprehensible, and possibly dangerous, someone to be rejected rather than loved. However, we cannot discount the hypothesis that Gregor's family members did not truly like or accept him even before the transformation occurred. With Gregor's metamorphosis, the internal connections between his consciousness and his family members are severed. They are no longer bound to Gregor on an inner, conscious level; their connection is purely existential. With the collapse of this existential connection, all ties between Gregor and his relatives dissipate, leaving no force to facilitate communication between them.

In reality, Gregor's family did not harbor affection for him either before or after his transformation. If Gregor metamorphoses into an insect, then they metamorphose into insects with their consciousness. In both instances, Kafka illustrates the complete fall of man, his disappearance, his absence within the realm of existence. In the external world, as existence wanes, Gregor sustains his existence as consciousness. Throughout, his consciousness remains uninterrupted; his transformation doesn't impede his consciousness. This duality epitomizes man's permanent existential state, where he simultaneously exists and does not exist.

Consciousness remains unblemished in Kafka's works; it is the sole reality immune to the absurd. Finally expelled from the external plane and severed from all worldly ties, Gregor Zamza reflects on his family with love and tenderness in his last moments.

Trakl and Kafka

Trakl shares a remarkable affinity with Kafka regarding creative character and destiny. Through his exploration of death, decay, and disintegration, Trakl delves into themes that resonate deeply with Kafka's values. A complex of guilt binds both Trakl and Kafka. Trakl's poetry often evokes an unbroken sacrificial ritual for biblical sin, as seen in lines such as "The night is waiting for our kiss in the bed, where is the whisper – who will atone for your sin?" Sin, as a pervasive aspect of consciousness and an unwittingly earned necessity, permeates the thoughts of both Kafka and many of his

characters. In Kafka's story *The Penal Colony*, for instance, the animal says, "I throw myself into the thorn bushes to punish myself for a sin I do not understand" (Kafka, 1989, p. 550).

Besides literature and art, philosophy is important in Kafka's creative persona. As I. Svitak (Svitak, 1986) asserts, "The philosophical foundation of Kafka's works is an open system of human perception of the world, rather than a philosopher's worldview." This sentiment is echoed by Bert Nagel (1974), who emphasizes that Kafka's task and purpose is not to prove a theory, but to offer us a perspective. Thus, Kafka's philosophy, grounded in a particular human life experience, aligns with the framework of existential philosophy and serves specific objectives.

Kafka's philosophical boundaries are hinted at in the following reflection: "That's what it's about. Once, many years ago, of course, I sat rather sadly on the slopes of Mount Lavrentev. I thought about what I wanted out of life. The most important and attractive thing, it turned out, is the desire to find such a view of life, in which life, although it retains its natural heavy ups and downs, but at the same time presents it with emptiness, dream, uncertainty with no less clarity.

On the one hand, Kafka's philosophical roots delve into antiquity; on the other, they stand at the forefront of the most influential philosophical system of the 20th century: existentialism. In Kafka's library, alongside works by Plato, K. Marx, F. Schlegel, S. Kierkegaard, and F. Nietzsche, one finds the biggest influences on Kafka: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Kafka resonates deeply with Schopenhauer's teachings, from epistemology to theories of suffering and aesthetics.

Schopenhauer states that life, with its failures, disappoints hopes and contradictions, bears the stamp of inevitable suffering, and it is difficult to understand how one can fail to see it (Schopenhauer, 1986). Schopenhauer's philosophy emphasizes the pervasive presence of suffering in human existence, suggesting that every pain we endure serves as a reminder that it could have been avoided had we not earned it. Schopenhauer views suffering as the only accurate guide to human life, asserting that there is neither past nor future, only the eternal condemnation of life, drawing parallels between human and animal existences.

As already mentioned, Nietzsche's influence on Kafka is also profound and foundational. In Kafka's work, one can discern a response to Nietzsche's famous phrase "God is dead", with a tendency to deny and affirm. Scholars identify connections between Kafka's fables and Nietzsche's mythological nihilism, particularly in their elaborations and references to ancient and biblical themes, such as the myth of Abraham. Both Nietzsche and Kafka share a passion and desperation to recognize reality and truth, leading to nihilism in one case and pessimism and absurdity in the other.

Kafka's assertion of "the impossibility of living", as noted by Bert Nagel (1974), is central to his philosophy. In Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we encounter the

idea that “Man is a tightrope between the animal and the superman – a tightrope on the precipice. What is great about man is that he is a bridge, not a goal. What can be loved in a man is that he is a passing and transitional being?” Kafka’s story *The Bridge* echoes this sentiment: “I was cold and stiff, I was a bridge over one of the mountain chasms. On this side, I stuck my toes in the soil, on the other side, I stuck to my hands and so firmly, hand and foot, I remained attached to the fragile clay” (Kafka, 1931).

Numerous parallels can be drawn between Kafka’s philosophy and Nietzsche’s ideas. While Kafka is primarily recognized as a writer, he also embodies the essence of a philosopher. Central to his concerns are the problems of human existence and the relationship between truth, reality, consciousness, life, death, and other existential understandings. For Kafka, every encounter of consciousness with the fact of existence is inevitably tinged with tragedy. This awareness deepens further when one encounters the enigma on the journey toward recognizing existence.

Kafka interprets human existence and its associated problems not through a consistent examination of logical cause-and-effect connections but through paradoxical solutions. He denies the existence of objective reality, presenting in his *Diaries* a dual consciousness of time, space, and the authorial self. While expressing a specific human self, it simultaneously encompasses universal traits. The reality Kafka describes arises from concrete human experience, a reality perceived in the present moment, unique and unrepeatable.

Through example, Kafka asserts the ultimate significance of existence: death. He refrains from passing judgment on reality, devoid of rebellion, instead documenting its impasse with cold awareness. Much like himself in *The Diaries*, Kafka’s characters inhabit liminal states characterized by fear, death, guilt, and punishment. “It is only in such states that one notices how each person is truly lost within themselves. Comfort is found only in passing judgment on others and the laws that govern them and everything else” (Kafka, 1910-1923).

Conclusion

In modern reality, the problem of man's fall remains a pertinent and complex issue, and Kafka’s artistic oeuvre provides valuable insights into navigating this ultimate downfall. Kafka’s exploration of the fall of man, with a focus on sin and its realization is a pivotal cause of the protagonist’s decline. Kafka’s literary works predominantly depict the disappearance and transformation of man, often straying from conventional reality.

Among 19th-century Russian literary giants such as Gogol, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, Kafka held particular reverence for Dostoevsky. Their shared exploration of the eternal mysteries of human existence, the meaning of good and evil, and the complexities of society united them. The Bible, a cornerstone of Dostoevsky’s worldview, also significantly shaped Kafka’s creative vision.

Sin, punishment, and the concept of law feature prominently in both Dostoevsky's and Kafka's works. Kafka's literary endeavors also parallel Nietzsche's philosophical musings, albeit with a nuanced difference: while Nietzsche advocated for the triumph over human limitations, Kafka portrays the inevitability of man's descent into insignificance. Moreover, Kafka's portrayal of psychological decay mirrors themes prevalent in European literature and art, depicting the decline and expulsion of man from the creative sphere, reducing him to a mere symbol or biological entity.

In essence, Kafka's works offer a poignant examination of the human condition, resonating with timeless themes of suffering, guilt, and the quest for meaning. His profound insights into the complexities of existence continue to captivate readers, inviting them to ponder the enigmatic nature of reality and the inexorable march toward human insignificance.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

References

- Beicken, P. (1998). *Franz Kafka: life and work*. Stuttgart: Klett, 123-152.
- Benjamin, W. (1981). *Franz Kafka: Suhrkamp*. Frankfurt: Routledge, 43-65.
- Brod, M. (2003). *Franz Kafka: Uznik absoluta*. Moscow: Literary Giants, 17-286.
- Derrida, J. (1999). Before the law: a philosophizing reading of Kafka's stories. *Odyssey Enabled*, 5, 181-220.
- Hackermüller, R. (1990). *Kafka's last years: 1917-1924*. Munich: German Edition, 9-174.
- Kafka, F. (1999). *A chronicle compiled by Roger Hermes*. Berlin: Cambridge University Press, 9-272.
- Kaus, R. (1998). *Narrated psychoanalysis by Franz Kafka*. Heidelberg: Revisions on Literary Theory, 17-36.
- Nagel, B. (1974). *Kranz Kafka: aspects of interpretation and evaluation*. Berlin: The International Fiction Review, 19-308.
- Northey, A. (1988). *Kafka's mischpoche*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 12-91.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1986). *On the vanity and suffering of life*. London: Repeater, 6-572.
- Svitak, I. (1986). Literary theory and comparative literature. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 53.

**ՄԱՐԴՈՒ ԱՆԿՈՒՄԸ Ֆ. ԿԱՖԿԱՅԻ
ՍՏԵՂԾԱԳՈՐԾՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐՈՒՄ**

Ամալյա Սողոմոնյան

Ֆրանց Կաֆկան, որի ստեղծագործություններն ուսումնասիրում են մարդկային փորձառության, ուժի և էկզիստենցիալ ճգնաժամի խնդիրները, մեծապես ազդել է 20-րդ դարասկզբի գրական դաշտի վրա: Ժամանակակից իրականության մեջ մարդու անկման խնդիրը մնում է արդիական, և Կաֆկայի գեղարվեստական փորձը կարող է օգնել մեզ խուսափել վերջնական անկումից: Սույն հոդվածը փորձ է քննելու մարդու անկման խնդիրը՝ մեկնաբանելով մեղքը և դրա գիտակցումը որպես հերոսի անկման հիմնական պատճառներ: Հոդվածում քննարկվում են նաև աստվածաշնչյան առասպելը, ինչը Կաֆկան համարում է մարդկության անկման հիմնական պատճառը, և գրական ազդեցությունները հեղինակի վրա: Կաֆկայի պատմությունները՝ իրենց սյուրռեալիստական միջավայրով և անտրամաբանական իրադարձություններով, արտացոլում են մարդկային կյանքի անհեթեթ և հաճախ մղձավանջային նրբերանգները, որոնց անդրադարձել են և՛ Դոստոևսկին, և՛ Նիցշեն:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *անկում, փոխակերպում, մեղք, պատիժ, կենսաէություն, Աստված, կարեկցանք:*