Samsa and Samsara: Suffering, Death, and Rebirth in “The Metamorphosis”

The variety of suffering which plagued the life of Franz Kafka is well documented. The illness which hounded him, relegating him to a life of fitful coughs and extended stays at various sanitariums, is clearly not the least of them. Before dying in Kierling of tuberculosis, Kafka would constantly suffer the most destructive form of reproach a person can endure—his own. Max Brod terms Kafka’s disposition as one of “deep pessimism” (48). Such a disposition might be viewed in part responsible for his haunting tales. Considering “Die Verwandlung,” William Kluback writes, “we wander into a world of violence, of frightful laughter, and terror” (92). Similarly, Franz Kempf notes the view that “Das Urteil” (“The Judgment”) and “Die Verwandlung” (“The Metamorphosis”) depict the “mercilessness of the world” (11). Probing which method(s) Kafka may have employed to communicate torment (metaphor, analogy, parable) is of considerable importance. Scholars nevertheless might agree that regardless of method, Kafka’s writing does indulge pain and suffering.

The apparent misery in Kafka’s writing is perhaps what precipitated scholars to compare his works with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Erich Heller, for instance, believes Kafka’s aphorisms to “read like marginal glosses ... [of] a text by Schopenhauer” (24). T.J. Reed concurs: “the contents of his notes offer sufficient proof that he was intensively occupied with Schopenhauer” (168). This warrants further investigation into the nature of Schopenhauer’s pessimism and its possible influence(s) on Kafka.

For Arthur Schopenhauer, life is what eastern religious philosophy calls Samsara: this life of birth, suffering, sickness, lust, craving, old age, death and rebirth. Stanley Corngold, considering the phrase “ungeheueres Ungeziefer,” reminds us that “Kafka—reader of etymologies—knew what depth of unbeing underlies this phrase” (32). Perhaps, too, Franz Kafka knew the profundity Samsara offered. Like the phrase “ungeheueres Ungeziefer,” it presents the opportunity to torture his character(s) not only with circumstance, but with their own etymology. While discussing “Die Verwandlung” Kafka declares, “Samsa is not merely Kafka, and nothing else” (Janouch 32). Hence, Samsara is very possibly the root word for the family name Samsa in “Die Verwandlung.” It is the purpose of this essay to explore that possibility. To do so I will first discuss the concept of Samsara, and then consider the possible mediators that may have inspired Kafka’s use of the name Samsa in “Die Verwandlung.” This will be followed by a new interpretation of “Die Verwandlung.”

The term Samsara appears for the first time in the Upanishads; by circa 600 B.C. it is a primary tenet of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Samsara (also pronounced and written Sansara) is this world of craving, lust, suffering, death, rebirth, and disease. Indeed, anything that could be considered objectionable in our lives is a part of Samsara. Deliverance from this Samsaric world is the responsibility of the individ-
ual. This deliverance is contingent upon one’s *Karma*, a moral causality, which helps the spiritual-minded justify his own plight. One’s situation is a matter of past and present deeds. It is fatalistic in a manner of speaking, yet it is the opposite of fatalism; each individual has the opportunity to shape his own destiny. One can perform deeds which will secure salvation or at least a higher state of existence. *Samsara* has three common translations: *wander, journey, and bondage* (which is more a translation of the Sanskrit term’s *effect* rather than the word itself). This endless wandering and its effect of bondage, a pessimistic view which the West has difficulty accepting, strongly influenced the thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer works, in part, from the *Oupnekhat*, a Latin translation of the *Upanishads*. Throughout his *Sämtliche Werke*, both in text and footnote, one sees the term *Samsara*, as for example in the following passage:

Nirwana, das Gegenteil von *S a n s a r a*, welches die Welt der steten Wiedergeburten, des Gelüstes und Verlangens, der Sinnenäusung und wandelbaren Formen, des Geborenwerdens, Alterns, Erkrankens und Sterbens ist. ([1894–96] 1:61 n.)

His use of the term is neither surprising nor difficult to explain. The outlines of Schopenhauer’s philosophy have a definite counterpart in eastern thought. Like the Hindus, he believes this world to be comprised of pain and suffering; according to Schopenhauer it is a world that should not be. The responsibility of the individual is to deny the *Ding-an-sich*, i.e., the will. The will is the driving force behind everything and causes endless anguish. The intelligent person recognizes this and seeks to deny the will. Propagation of the species is the most powerful manifestation of the will; voluntary abstention, fasting, and non-avoidance of pain should be our goal. Knowledge, i.e., recognizing this world as *Samsara*, is our salvation. Put simply, Schopenhauer uses the term *Samsara* to show that others, an ancient religion in this case, agree with his philosophy. In the *Parerga and Paralipomena* Schopenhauer addresses those who believe that life’s pleasures outweigh its suffering; to test this assertion, he suggests they “compare the feelings of an animal that is devouring another with those of that other” (2: 292). For Schopenhauer, nothing is more ridiculous than to call pain negative; he sees it as something positive:

I know of no greater absurdity than that of most metaphysical systems which declare evil to be something negative; whereas it is precisely that which is positive and makes itself felt. On the other hand, that which is good, in other words, all happiness and satisfaction, is negative, that is, the mere elimination of a desire and the ending of pain (291–92).

We know Kafka owned and read Schopenhauer’s collected works. Kafka may have simply substituted an *m* for an *n* to modify the sound of the word. However, it was probably not from Schopenhauer that he first became acquainted with the concept of *Samsara*, and he may very well have been familiar with both pronunciations and spellings.

It was Oskar Pollak who, according to Brod, “was the man who won a decisive influence over Kafka in his younger days,” due probably to the breadth of his interests (56). Pollak’s obituary, written by Hugo Bergmann, reads, “the richness of his interests was inexhaustible; but to whatever it might be that got hold of him … he devoted himself completely … [and] forgot everything else for its sake,… In this way he studied the *Upanishad*” (56). There was almost certainly a running dialogue between Kafka and Pollak concerning what they may have been reading or studying. In a letter to Pollak in November of 1903 Kafka writes that he is reading “Fechner
without familiarity or any confide temperament, as Kafka's diary (The Castle) tells us. Kafka was not only one to confide in anyone, nor would he ascribe a great part of himself as tending toward any intellectual or religious movement without being familiar with its philosophy or theology. We may therefore confidently rely on the assumption that Kafka was very familiar with Steiner's writing. Steiner was known to use Sanskrit terms both in print and during lectures; like Pollak, he was familiar with the Upanishads and with Indian religions in general. We know too that Kafka was preoccupied with what he tells Steiner are "the clairvoyant states described by you" (48). There is a heavy concentration of dream entries in Kafka's diary from 1911 to 1913. This is, I believe, evidence of Kafka's study of Schopenhauer. Dreams for Schopenhauer can be a dreaming of reality, hence, at certain times, a matter of clairvoyance. For these reasons alone one can assume that Kafka came in contact with the term in question. However, that Kafka was reading works by Steiner, and believed himself to some degree clairvoyant, returns us to Schopenhauer's Sämtliche Werke. For it was Steiner who wrote the Einleitung for the 1894–96 edition, the edition Kafka owned and referred to in various letters. Steiner, introducing Schopenhauer's philosophy and life, probably seized Kafka's attention with his personal influences and philosophical solutions. Steiner writes:


Schopenhauer's influence on Kafka's writing has been connected with Kafka as late as Das Schloß (The Castle) and as early as "Das Urteil." In October of 1902, while attending a lecture on "Schopenhauer and Nietzsche," Kafka met Max Brod who would become his closest friend. When considering the influence that Nietzsche may have had on Kafka, we might keep in mind that Nietzsche was Schopenhauer's student.
Furthermore, it was not just Schopenhauer’s philosophy but his abilities as a writer that captured Kafka’s attention. While discussing the Bhagavad Gita, a conversation between Gustav Janouch and Kafka turned to Schopenhauer. Kafka admired Schopenhauer’s writing abilities and remarked: “Schopenhauer is an artist in language. That is the source of his thinking. For the language alone, one must not fail to read him” (Janouch 85). According to Walter Jens and Hans Kueng, “[Kafka] read Dostoyevsky to his favorite sister Ottla, along with Schopenhauer and Kleist” (268).

Schopenhauer’s pessimism (in addition to his writing abilities) was definitely recognized by Kafka:

The world, if it were nothing but a peep-show, would really be infinitely beautiful. But unfortunately it is not that; rather this beautiful life in a beautiful world has really to be lived through in every detail of every moment and that is no longer so beautiful, but simply tiresome. That’s more or less what Schopenhauer said (Letters 267).

In the wake of such pessimism Brod notes “[Kafka] wants to lump all his literary work together as an ‘attempt to get away from my father’” (24). In a letter to his father, Kafka writes:

My writings were about you, in them I merely poured out the lamentations I could not pour out on your breast. It was a farewell deliberately drawn out, save that, although you, it is true, imposed it, the direction it was given I determined (Father 25).

This offers the opportunity to consider alternatives to Samsara as Samsa’s root word, namely Holland’s suggestion of Samson and Weinberg’s idea of sam jsem.

Weinberg believes that Kafka has formed a phonetic contraction of the Czech “sam (allein) and jsem (ich bin) = ‘ich bin allein’” (238). This then, according to Weinberg, is “ein Schmerzensschrei, der sowohl den Isolierung des Büßers und ungeheuren Ungeziefers Gregor Samsa, als auch die Einzigartigkeit der von ihm ersehnten Messiasrolle (des eingeborenen Sohnes Gottes) treffend bezeichnet” (238). With Gregor’s messianic role, Weinberg ascribes the father’s role “als Jahvegestalt, der Mutter als Verkörperung des jüdischen Glaubens und der jüdischen Stammesangehörigkeit, der Schwester als Seele- und Caritas-figur” (236). There is a multitude of possibilities here. Perhaps for instance, Kafka had both Samsara and sam jsem in mind, if “Samsa is not merely Kafka, and nothing else” (Janouch 32). Maybe Samsa is not simply Samsara or sam jsem, and nothing else. The malaise of being alone could fit with the idea of Samsara.

In Kafka scholarship there is often a tendency toward Judaic and/or Christian interpretation. Adding Samsara (Hinduism, Buddhism) to Weinberg’s Judaic and Christian mix, might suggest the metamorphosis of world religions. It could be viewed as an ecumenical movement; each religion working in tandem, making its contribution to “Die Verwandlung.” Kafka’s interest in and struggle with “religion” could also emphasize each faith’s antagonism toward the other. Gregor’s last name, though, passed on from generation to generation, suggests the longevity and prevalence of Samsara. If there is to be an overview of the possible world religions in “Die Verwandlung,” it might hinge on Samsara’s emphasis on suffering via transmigration.

Having said that, the question remains: does Kafka actually feel “alone” or does he feel trapped within a horrible cycle? Kafka tells us “my writings were about you” (Father 25); thus he may not be alone. Quite the contrary, he may be constantly followed, haunted by the oppressive image of his father. Considering Kafka’s entire body of works, we are presented with an author who takes the role of something one might term transcendent. “Die Verwandlung”
serves beautifully as an example; as in so many of his other stories, the main character appears to be Franz Kafka: that is why we have “K” in Der Prozeß, Bende-mann in “Das Urteil,” and in this case Samsa. Kafka himself considers the similarity between Georg Bendemann’s name and his own. He writes, “Georg has the same number of letters as Franz. In Bendemann, ‘mann’ is a strengthening of ‘Bende’. ... But Bende has exactly the same number of letters as Kafka, and the vowel e occurs in the same places as does the vowel a in Kafka” (Diaries 214). In his works he transcends his existence as merely the author; it is a transmigration of his “soul” into new lives and bodies. He thus watches himself in this new life, his father once again stalking him within, causing suffering and a consequent death, whether by suicide or slow starvation. And as he dies within each story, Kafka views himself reborn in another, whether as a man recalling his “apehood” (Kafka, Report 281), a dog in “Forschungen eines Hundes” (“Investigations of a Dog”), or vermin in “Die Verwandlung.” The same torturous cycle then begins once again. This is why Samsara, denoting rebirth and suffering, is so fitting: with this term Kafka tells us what Gregor Samsa is atoning for, as “Das Urteil” came out of Kafka “like a real birth, covered with filth and slime,” and as the brown liquid drips from Gregor Samsa, we know this vermin might be the rebirth of that first slimy conception (Diaries 214). It may be Georg Bendemann, also known as Gregor Samsa, atoning for his suicide.

According to Holland, Gregor (“Samson”) saves the Samsa family (“the chosen people”) from the three boarders (“the Philistines”) (148–49). Apart from the story of Samson in Judges, Holland states, “in fact, a good deal of incidental imagery of ‘Metamorphosis’ was derived from Isaiah” (149). Reading “Die Verwandlung,” however, one does not find much similarity between Gregor and Samson. Samson possesses great strength; Gregor does not have the strength to get out of bed, he must swing “himself out of bed with all his might” (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 125). Moreover, even if Gregor did possess extraordinary strength, unlike Samson there is no long hair to be cut. Similarly, Gregor does not appear to be, like Samson, a judge of Israel. Nor does the family’s treatment of Gregor correspond to Samson’s familial relationship. Gregor is left in his room with rotten food, and repeatedly driven back into his den of misery by his father. Samson’s family is at his disposal: when he wants to marry a particular woman his family is happy to support him. Holland, however, does not suggest that “Die Verwandlung” is an inversion of the story of Samson; rather, he draws on an analogy. He writes, “Samson’s sacrifice is a traditional analogue to Christ’s; in German he is called Judenchrist” (149). Weinberg and Holland agree that “Kafka has given Gregor a number of Christ-like attributes” (Holland 147). Weinberg refers to Gregor as “Christkind,” and surmises that Gregor’s metamorphosis is related to his desire to send his sister to the conservatoire (237). There does appear to be something ontological about Gregor. Furthermore, Samsara’s emphasis on suffering and rebirth could allow for such an interpretation; but there are other possibilities. Gregor’s savior quality might be explained by eastern philosophy’s notion of the avatar. This will be discussed in further detail later.

Franz Kafka was probably not a Hindu or Buddhist; however it does appear that he took an interest in their beliefs. One might consider, too, that it is not Samson or sam jesm, but Samsara that appears to connect all three of the stories within the Strafen (“Das Urteil,” “Die Verwandlung,” and “In der Strafkolonie”; Kafka, Briefe 147). Kafka tells Gustav Janouch, “words must be exactly and strictly defined ... otherwise we may fall into entirely unexpected pitfalls” (Janouch 145). It has been suggested that Georg Bendemann (again the mann appears only to strengthen Bende),
is perhaps derived from Bande (bonds, shackles, fetters). Here one might note the connection with Samsara’s translation as bondage. This could be the bondage of Kafka’s relationship with his father, and the bondage of metempsychosis. In “Die Verwandlung,” Gregor Samsa is a Reisender, a traveling salesman, which gives us Samsara’s second translation as “journey.” Der Reisende, the main character in “In der Strafkolonie,” completes the connection. These three stories may not be separate; they could be viewed as the chapters of one story; shackled together by the concept of metempsychosis. We might even call them “Kafkaesque,” in the sense that Kafka is observing himself in various forms, always trying to escape his father. Hence, Verwandlung and its etymological connection with the third literal translation of Samsara—“wandern.” Samsara serves the spirit of Kafka’s writing, and this spirit is one of evasion, even deceit; Kafka intends for his works to be illusory. He alone stands as the exception to the elusiveness of his writing; it is his “escape” (Brod 25), and, playing the role of a fugitive, it is therefore fitting that only he, at the time of conception, knows the tunnels by which he ascends.

I believe it is clear that each of Kafka’s works has its own secrets, and that in the case of the Strafen there exists a common secret. In a letter to Kurt Wolff in April of 1913, Kafka tells him that:

“The Stoker,” “The Metamorphosis” ... and “The Judgment” belong together, both inwardly and outwardly. There is an obvious connection among the three and, even more important, a secret one, for which reason I would be reluctant to forgo the chance of having them published together in a book, which might be called The Sons (Letters 96).

This letter was written before Kafka had written “In der Strafkolonie.” It may be the case that Kafka intended “In der Strafkolonie” to continue his secret connection; this is why the Reisender is again the main character. This is not to suggest however, that the only reason Kafka wrote “In der Strafkolonie” was to continue this connection, but rather, that it may not be beyond Kafka to include such intentions with any other ideas for the story. A diary entry concerning “Der Heizer” and “In der Strafkolonie” further supports such a supposition. In 1915 Kafka writes, “if the two elements—most pronounced in ‘The Stoker’ and ‘In the Penal Colony’—do not combine, I am finished” (Diaries 330). Kafka apparently considered the creation and continuation of such connections somewhat important; this is perhaps why he wants “Das Urteil,” “Die Verwandlung,” and “In der Strafkolonie” to appear under the common title of Strafen. Kafka is clear that “Die Verwandlung” must accompany “Das Urteil” and “In der Strafkolonie” if they are to appear together. He tells Kurt Wolff, “[The] Metamorphosis” might still mediate between them, but without that story you would have two alien heads knocking violently at each other” (Letters 126). If Wolff had wanted to publish “Der Heizer” and “Das Urteil” together without “Die Verwandlung” to mediate between them, Kafka probably would have made the same assertion. All the stories may stand alone; when combining them, however, they must be assembled completely and correctly: “Die Verwandlung” must be the middle story.

“Die Verwandlung” is probably the connector among these three stories. It is the middle point of atonement, suffering by force of transmigration. Gregor Samsa suffers Georg Bendemann’s actions, and in “In der Strafkolonie” Gregor Samsa is born yet again, in yet another story, and suffers yet another life. Schopenhauer writes:

Um allezeit einen sichern Kompaß, zur Orientierung im Leben, bei der Hand zu haben, und um dasselbe, ohne je irre zu werden, stets im richtigen Lichte zu
erblicken, ist nichts tauglicher, als dass man sich angewöhne, diese Welt zu betrachten als einen Ort der Büße, also gleichsam als eine Strafanstalt, a penal colony (Sämtliche Werke [1894–96] 10: 288).

On the same page, Schopenhauer makes clear why this world is a penal colony:

Dies ist S a n s a r a: die Welt des Gelüstes und Verlangens, und daher die Welt der Geburt, der Krankheit, des Alterns und Sterbens: es ist die Welt, welche nicht sein sollte. Und dies hier ist die Bevölkerung der S a n s a r a ([1894–96] 10: 288 n.).

It is important to note that Schopenhauer writes penal colony rather than Strafkolonie, which probably served to capture Kafka’s attention. The etymology of “Strafkolonie” continues his theme of movement or transmigration. Georg Bendemann begins the series, his name representing the bondage of Samsara; in keeping with that, our next two characters are each a Reisender. Verwandlung is connected with wandern, and Strafen provides our collective title. Finally then, the connection between Kolonie and Ansiedler suggests movement, travel, and thus the punishment quality of transmigration (Kluge 463).

The connection between “Das Urteil” and “Die Verwandlung” has been well documented. Corngold in his excellent analysis of Kafka’s “writing” observes, “the hero of ‘The Metamorphosis’ is ‘The Judgment’” (36). Kurz Gerhard writes, “Gregor Samsa ist der im Namen ’östlich’ akzentuierte Georg Bendemann”(172). For Corngold “Die Verwandlung” is the story of a "metamorphosed metaphor”(27). Both of these connections might be extended to “In der Strafkolonie.” For those who disagree with the idea that the Strafen tell the story of a character’s transmigrating soul, there are other alternatives. For instance, an interesting substitution might be the transmigration of metaphor; the “soul” of a metaphor. After all, why wouldn’t Kafka torture Georg Bendemann, Gregor Samsa, and der Reisende with their apparent connection to Samsara?

One might therefore be inclined to believe (1) that Kafka related to Schopenhauer’s pessimism; (2) that Schopenhauer’s writing ability only further enticed Kafka; (3) that he was attracted to his essays on dreams, and their relation to his own experience; (4) that Kafka took note of Schopenhauer’s use of Samsara, the Sanskrit term with which he was probably already familiar; (5) that Samsara, properly understood as wandering, journeying, and bondage, uncovers the secret connection among the Strafen. This leads us to a new interpretation of “Die Verwandlung.”

Kafka’s interest in Judaic and Christian theologies has been well probed in various interpretations. The interpretation which follows, on the other hand, attempts to stress another possible path. This approach makes use of Schopenhauерian and Indian metaphysics. It is based on the concept of Samsara, while keeping in mind that Schopenhauer, for Kafka at least, was probably the mediator of this term. Thus, what may have been taken from Indian philosophy by Kafka, could have been coupled with Schopenhauer’s philosophy or vice versa. Schopenhauer believed his philosophy to be akin to eastern metaphysics, although he was quick to point out that he was unaware of its tenets prior to the conception of his philosophy. Through the lens of Schopenhau{erian metaphysics and Indian philosophy, Franz Kafka’s “Die Verwandlung” requires immediate immersion in the text. Kafka gives so much information on the first page that the horror of the situation confronts the reader. Even the main character has difficulty coming to grips with his predicament: “Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuern Ungeziefer verwandelt” (Kafka, “Verwandlung” 96). Here
Gregor Samsa is immediately enveloped by the slimy birth which is Kafka’s “Das Urteil.” It seems that Kafka is acutely aware of the literal translations of Samsara, and therefore, after introducing his character by his full name, the narrator uses only Gregor thereafter, with one exception, on the first page: “—Samsa war Reisender—” (96). Kafka is perhaps saying that Gregor is not only in terms of Samsara a Reisender; traveling from one existence to another, but he is also saying that Gregor is Samsara; he embodies rebirth and its consequent suffering.

His soul is stained and he is caught in a vicious cycle, each life is a curse as a result of past transgressions, and these transgressions have the father entwined in the same fate. For Gregor’s father is also a Samsa and therefore a Reisender. In keeping with that, Georg’s father has also been reborn, and Gregor suffers as a result of his rebirth. This is to suggest that the father judges his son and sentences him to death in “Das Urteil,” tortures his son in “Die Verwandlung,” and then defends (as the officer), the entire process in “In der Strafkolonie.” The instrument of torture may be a metaphor for the doctrine of metempsychosis: it performs a slow, drawn-out process, we never know our crime, yet our transgression is written indelibly on our soul. Our world is a penal system, our lives like Georg’s friend in “Das Urteil” are repeatedly spent in this “colony” (Kafka, “Judgment” 58). Hence, Gregor does not hear the “voice of merely one father,” but the voices of many fathers from many lives (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 139). Viewing Gregor in his new form, Mr. Samsa “[wept] so hard that his powerful chest began to quake” (133). The father is irate and possessed by the anger he feels at the way he was neglected in his past life; although probably not fully aware why, “the father charge[s] pitilessly, spewing hisses like a savage” (138). This is definitely frightening for Gregor, but it is also a saving grace, “a true deliverance” (139). The torture Gregor endures at his father’s hands will speed up his deliverance from this transient life. One must keep in mind, though, that Gregor’s father played a devilish role in “Das Urteil.” Seeing his son, the product of his love for his wife, in such a loathsome state, makes the metamorphosis on some level a punishment for him as well. Both father and son are engaged in a process of atonement.

Within “Die Verwandlung” there is perhaps, like “Das Urteil” and “In der Strafkolonie,” an emphasis on the idea of atonement. This is why, with the exception cited above, the narrator refers to the young Samsa as “Gregor.” The name Gregor is used to more closely delineate Kafka’s use of Samsara, which can mean all the sufferings of the world, i.e., disease, old age, and so on. This is to suggest that the use of Gregor accentuates the process of atonement within metempsychosis. Gregor’s first name is probably taken from Papst Gregor der Große, who was brought to Kafka’s attention and put into the context of Samsara by Arthur Schopenhauer. A brief examination of the context will be helpful. In his essay, “On Religion,” Schopenhauer lashes out at both Jews and Christians, pointing out in his usual fashion what he finds wanting or altogether offensive. Of the latter, the doctrine of predestination is something that Schopenhauer finds particularly atrocious:

Springing from the combination of the Old and New Testaments,...among other things, ... [is] the Christian doctrine of predestination and grace.... [T]he offensive springs ... merely from the Old Testament assumption that man is the work of another’s will and is thereby created out of nothing (Parerga 2: 364).

Schopenhauer believes that Hinduism’s and Buddhism’s doctrine of metempsychosis is far superior. The advantages that one man has over another at birth is a result of his good deeds in a past life and not “another’s gift of grace” (2: 364). Schopen-
Ryan: Kafka

hauer is confident that the doctrine of metempsychosis has over time become readily accepted by almost the entire human race, that is, he points out, with the exception of the Jews. However (and this is what probably inspired Kafka’s use of Gregor), in the case of the Catholic Church Schopenhauer writes:

Eben um den hieraus entspringenden kolossalen Übelstand zu beseitigen und das Empörende des Dogmas zu mildern hat, im 6. Jahrhundert, Papst Gregor I., sehr weislich, die Lehre vom Purgatorio, welche im wesentlichen sich schon beim Origenes ... findet, ausgebildet und dem Kirchenglauben förmlich einverleibt, wodurch die Sache sehr gemildert und die Metempsychose eingemässen ersetzt wird; da das eine wie das andere einen Läuterungsprozess gibt (Sämtliche Werke [1894-96] 11: 50).

Kafka often portrayed Christian characters, and he most likely knew that his audience was predominantly Christian. He probably used the name Gregor because (as Schopenhauer points out) purgatory, like metempsychosis, offers a process of purification. Furthermore, besides having the spelling of “Georg” within the spelling of “Gregor,” and Gregor’s job being the name of the character in “In der Strafkolonie,” this theme of purgatory deepens the connection between “Das Urteil,” “Die Verwandlung,” and “In der Strafkolonie.” Certainly they are all stories of punishment, but Kafka wrote “Das Urteil” on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, and Kafka now utilizes Gregor der Große to further reflect in “Die Verwandlung” the idea of his characters’ atonement. Considering “In der Strafkolonie” and “The Trial,” Max Brod writes, “they are documents of literary self punishment, imaginative rites of atonement” (146). This is perhaps brought to a head by the traveling salesman’s criticism of the entire process; the criticism that ultimately incites the officer’s suicide, therefore inverting the father and son’s role in “Das Urteil.” It is now the son (der Reisende) who forces the father (der Offizier) to take his own life. Here we might also see the accentuation of cyclical- ity in the Strafen. In “Die Verwandlung” Gregor’s life is a purgatory, an atonement for the crimes upon his soul. Georg Benda- mann’s failure to take adequate care of his elderly father is one of those crimes, for “Georg reproached himself for neglecting his father” (Kafka, “Judgment” 66). Moreover, as Kafka told Kurt Wolff, “‘The Metamorphosis’ is the mediator of these three stories: it resides in between ‘The Judgment’ and ‘In the Penal Colony,’ just as purga- tory lies somewhere in between heaven and hell.”

Kafka may be portraying a reality in which death is not a curse, but a goal. He retells a story from that “tremendous world” inside his head (Diaries 222); “Die Verwandlung” was probably formed within his “dreamlike inner life” (302). Kafka, like everyone else, enters his nightmares un- willingly; and this may be the precise locale of Gregor’s purgatory—the nightmare of reality. Schopenhauer remarks that a dream “like the outside world, forces itself on us without our intervention and even against our will” (Parerga 1: 230). It is also possible that the dream aspect of “Die Ver- wandlung” refers to what in eastern phi- losophy is called Maya. Quoting Indian philosophy, Schopenhauer writes:

It is Maya, the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals, and causes them to see a world which one cannot say either that it is or that it is not; for it is like a dream, like the sunshine on the sand which the traveler from a distance takes to be water, or like the piece of rope on the ground which he regards as a snake (qtd. in World as Will 1: 8).

The journey Gregor Samsa embarks on in order to escape life may very well be what Kafka views as his own fate. True, Kafka tells the story in the past tense, but only because it was a dream he had prior to his
writing the story. Throughout the Strafen Kafka is haunted by his father: sometimes when Kafka writes, he is trying to empty his head and escape the suffering of his own notion of inferiority in comparison to his father. Nevertheless, in spite of authoring new existences in various forms, his father still follows through each tale, but this is not a chase:

Gregor scooted away, stopping only when the father halted, and skittering forward again the instant the father moved. In this way they circled the room several times with nothing decisive happening; in fact, because of its slow tempo, the whole business did not even resemble a chase (“Metamorphosis” 163).

Kafka’s writing appears to lament that his father deals with him with “the utmost severity” (163). However, this is what Kafka and Gregor want, for they are “tortured by self-rebukes and worries” (161). Life is a punishment, the metamorphosis is part of life’s cruelty, but in “Die Verwandlung” it turns out to be a possible means of salvation both for Gregor and his family. Subsequently, this vermin could be viewed as exhibiting the qualities of a savior.

What Kafka may depict in “Die Verwandlung” is Gregor within his room continuing his pathetic existence and the theme of “in-betweens.” Even the metamorphosis itself is an “in-between”; Kafka toys with the idea of rebirth and transmigration. By combining Gregor der Große and Samsara, he makes the statement that this is a story not only of a punishment, but of atonement, and that this atonement, this process of purification, is performed through the transmigration of souls. Yet the metamorphosis itself is so abrupt that it seems somewhat incomplete. Gregor is in this state as a result of past evil deeds, and his state is such that it resembles being caught between two fates. Gregor is neither totally human nor is he totally an animal. In addition, although his actions “during his travels” belong to his soul, they do not belong to Gregor himself (121). There is something terribly unfair about this doctrine of metempsychosis. Metaphorically this verminous creation might be Georg Bendemann’s “Judgment,” “covered with filth and slime” (Kafka, Diaries 214). Gregor is trapped, he suffers the bondage of Samsara, and is condemned for a crime that he, in the strictest terms of his present personality, did not actually commit. He is like a man sentenced who has no remembrance of the crime he has committed (like K. in “Der Prozeß”), nor any recollection of the ensuing trial. In fact, he has no opportunity to offer a defense. Gregor does not remember what he did as Georg, he doesn’t remember “Das Urteil”; therefore, in a manner of speaking, this punishment is not fully his. The unfairness of the doctrine of metempsychosis could be viewed as being more clearly criticized in “In der Strafkolonie.” Der Reisende asks, “he doesn’t know his own judgment ... he does not know that he has been condemned?” (Kafka, “Colony” 198). Smiling, the officer replies, “no” (198). The reason why Gregor is unable to control his own physical faculties may be that he does not remember his crime. Gregor is unable to control the punishment; “his many legs, wretchedly thin, ... dance helplessly before his eyes” (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 117): “If he tried to bend a leg, it first straightened out; and if he finally succeeded in taking charge of it, the other legs meanwhile all kept carrying on, as if emancipated, in extreme and painful agitation” (122).

This may bemoan the lack of power Gregor has over his punishment, and the fact of every human being’s existence. Try as we may, we cannot control the circumstances under which we are born, and in this life we can not control other people’s actions. Sometimes we succeed in taking charge of our lives; Gregor “straightens out a leg”; nevertheless, just as one leg obeys, Gregor’s other legs “all kept carrying on” (122). We order our lives in a fashion we
are pleased with, but the people around us interfere, and they affect our plans and progress in life. This was certainly the case for Franz Kafka; he wished to write and quench the compulsion he felt to his art. However his family, especially his father, would interfere. In deference to his familial duty, his duty to his inspiration was often forced to suffer and wait. Kafka writes:

Recently, when I told you that nothing coming from outside could disturb my writing now ..., I was thinking only of how my mother whimpers to me almost every evening that I really should look in on the factory... I [realize] with perfect clarity now only two possibilities remain open to me, either to jump out of the window ... or in the next two weeks to go daily to the factory... (Letters 89).

Apparently Kafka’s family could interrupt his writing, to such a degree, in fact, that he would consider suicide. Under the pressure of duty to his family, Kafka sees only two alternatives, to die or to appease his parents. Similarly Gregor feels the same confinement to two options. However, it is not the interruption of Gregor’s writing for the sake of familial obligation, but suicide itself.

Early in the story Kafka portrays Gregor as planning to quit his job. In reference to his job he cries, “to hell with it all,” if it were not for his family he “would have given notice long ago” (118–19). Living in this Samsaric world, the agonies of life and transmigration are too much for Gregor. He is not deciding to quit his job when he says “to hell with it all”; he is deciding to commit suicide. For “Dies ist S a m s a r a: die Welt des Gelüstes und Verlangens ... es ist die Welt, welche nicht sein sollte” (Sämtliche Werke [1960–65] 5: 356 n.). Hence, it is a life that should not be, Gregor’s job in this life is life, it is pain: he is planning a suicide in order to avoid this torture and avoid his process of atonement. He calls out to the heavens, “God Almighty!” (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 119). With the clock glaring at him, he thinks of his family once again, in contrast to Georg’s lack of concern for his family. Gregor resolves to provide for his family and then “go through with it no matter what. I’ll make a big clean break!” (119). This is, however, not simply a firm resolution, but a matter of hope: “well, I haven’t abandoned all hope” (119). Gregor’s greatest consolation in this life is the future “hope” of suicide (119). Gregor’s consideration of suicide appears to reflect Kafka’s own thoughts of suicide. In October of 1912, just before writing “Die Verwandlung,” he writes in a letter to Brod:

I stood for a long time at the window and pressed against the pane, and there were many moments when it would have suited me to alarm the toll collector on the bridge by my fall.... Dearest Max I am putting this whole thing before you ... not for your opinion, ... but since I was firmly determined to jump ... (Letters 90).

Gregor and the author wish to make a break from life and all its anxiety. Samsara is suffering, life is suffering, and this is a story of suffering. Kafka tries to live his life, he tries to work during the day for a few hours and to come home at night and write. Life however will not allow it.

Here we get to the crux of the issue in “Die Verwandlung.” To be sure the metamorphosis itself is part of the punishment. However, waking to find himself a vermin is only a part of the greater punishment, which is waking itself—life. That Gregor was ever (re)born is the real punishment: as he must suffer the “agonies of traveling” (118). Gerhard Kurz on the other hand, views Gregor’s metamorphosis as “ein neues Leben” (173). For Kurz, Gregor’s metamorphosis is a saving grace, “kein blindes oder tragisches Opfer; ... sondern eine Befreiung, eine Neugeburt” (173). Even with the opportunity for atonement, I propose that Gregor suffers a torturous
rebirth, rather than a new lease on life. I think Gerhard Kurz’s view is compatible with this idea, since he suggests,

der Schrecken ist nicht der Tod, sondern die Existenz; der Tod, wie noch der zweideutige Tod Gregors, Georgs und des Offiziers der “Strafkolonie” ex negativo sagt, ist Erlösung, Befreiung, Gnade, Rückkehr ins Paradies (177).

Kurz, enlisting existence as suffering, suggests that whether vermin or human, Gregor’s goal is death. Samara, with its emphasis on life as pain, supports this view; but it also suggests the possibility of rebirth, rather than an automatic place in Paradise.

In order for Gregor to escape his situation, he must first accept it: he must accept his punishment so as to begin his atonement. By not getting out of bed and facing the world, he runs the risk of perpetuating the ordeal, consequently suffering the same fate in life after life. He tells himself “just don’t dawdle in bed,” for he must get up (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 122–23). Arising from the bed, which seems to have him paralyzed and trapped, might signify his resolution to face, accept, and atone for his past conduct. For most of the first chapter Gregor will not, cannot, accept his punishment. Gregor wishes to escape this course of atonement; he first contemplates suicide, then decides to postpone it, and ultimately dismisses the idea completely (with the qualification of a “hope”), resolving that he is “condemned” and must suffer (125).

Although condemned to life, “condemned” to working and suffering, through reflection, “indeed the calmest reflection was far superior to desperate resolves,” Gregor decides he must get out of bed (123). With getting Gregor out of bed, Kafka positions him to suffer within his purgatory. By living through the reproaches of his life and family, and by denying suicide, he may have the opportunity to escape the cycle of transmigration. Gregor would rather not get out of bed and open the door to his family. To do so, he believes he deserves support, even applause. In keeping with that, while attempting to open the bedroom door, “everyone should have cheered him on … ‘atta boy, Gregor …’ they should have shouted” (132).

Again Schopenhauerian and eastern metaphysics might be taken into consideration. Gregor has traveled from one life to the next, the father always close behind. Now that Gregor has tossed himself from the bed, he is better situated to foresee the species of his punishment for he “[does] possess such foresight” (135). More to the point, he is preparing to try and suffer his punishment properly; he wants to attain an escape that will be permanent. Near the end of the first chapter Gregor knows his “final recovery from all sufferings [is] at hand” (136). By remaining in his wretched state, avoiding suicide, leading an existence which resembles that of an ascetic, and restoring his family to a dutiful order, he can hopefully achieve his salvation—a permanent death.

Gregor is desperate that the director be made aware that he has extracted himself from the bed. Even while being attacked by his father, Gregor is most concerned with the disposition of his job or life (which his job represents), so much so that he “had no time for his parents: the office manager was already on the stairs” (137). If the job represents life for Kafka, the director is probably an ontological figure, the office manager his intermediary, and Gregor, like the errand boy, “[is] the director’s creature” (120). Sitting above everyone, the director “talks down to the employees from his great height” (119). He judges everyone’s conduct, thus Gregor is “deeply obligated to the director” (134). It is of the utmost importance to Gregor that the office manager “report all this accurately,” for the director is easily “swayed against an employee” (134). Kafka has created a punishing God, one who is hasty with His
judgments. He could be nothing else but punishing, having sentenced his children to this Samsaric world: again and again we live in a pathetic state, suffering disease, rebirth, and the reproach of our creator; we are a creation that “can so easily fall victim to gossip, coincidences, and unwarranted complaints” (134). Nevertheless, even though Gregor’s life and sentence are not understood, he must face the world of wandering and accept its bondage. To do so the world of transmigration offers a recipe.

Kafka seems to utilize the outlines of Schopenhauer’s remedy for the will-to-live, this blind driving force which is the author of our pain. It is through quelling the desire to live that we emancipate ourselves. This emancipation is death:

Death says: You are the product of an act that ought not to have taken place; therefore, to wipe it out, you must die. To die willingly, to die gladly, to die cheerfully, is the prerogative of the resigned, of him who gives up and denies the will-to-live (World as Will 1: 507-08).

According to eastern philosophy Gregor can exhibit such willingness by conducting himself as an ascetic. Schopenhauer believes that one must abstain from sexual activity, there must be non-avoidance of injury or degradation from others, fasting, and even self-torture. Out of this discomfort, Gregor will grasp what will hopefully lead him toward salvation, i.e., death. This is not to suggest, however, that suicide is an option; for Schopenhauer “suicide is a phenomenon of the will’s strong affirmation” (1: 398).

So in a great way acceptance is the answer to all of Gregor’s problems. Because his problems are so egregious, Gregor continuously balks in his efforts at self denial. He has gotten himself out of bed, thereby affirming a degree of willingness, but he shies away from his decision. This is demonstrated by his consumption of food, which is an affirmation of the will-to-live, although one could deem this consumption too as a form of punishment. The food Gregor eats is putrid: compiled of “half-rotten vegetables, some bones … coated with a solidified white sauce, … [and]some cheese that Gregor had declared inedible two days ago” (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 145). Kafka seems to make every natural act an act of suffering. In Kafka’s eyes Samsara and purgatory require the utmost misery if only because they are both religious terms. Kafka tells Gustav Janouch that “illness, pain, [and]suffering are the most important sources of religious feeling” (Janouch 100).

Certainly Kafka has taken every measure to intensify Gregor’s plight. Even the help Gregor receives from Grete causes “him great suffering” (“Metamorphosis” 152). Not in keeping with so many of his other stories (e.g., “Forschungen eines Hundes,” “Bericht für eine Akademie,” “Ein Hungerkünstler”), Kafka did not choose an animal with fur, which is odd, since for Kafka fur appears to cause and represent misery. He tells us this in a letter to a friend: “white dresses and sympathy become you best of all, whereas furs conceal the timid girl … and cause suffering” (Letters 29).

Instead he chooses the form of an insect, which turns out to be for good reason. By giving him the form of vermin, Kafka burdens Gregor with a fervent will. The greater the will-to-live, the more potent the torture. It is difficult for Gregor to deny his will; for instance, he experiences the “tremendous urge” to shoot out from under the settee, and “beg” for food (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 144). The will-to-live has varying degrees within various species. A human being, for example, will cut off his arm to save his life, but a hurt insect will simply engage in its most immediate act. That is to say that an insect, as Schopenhauer points out, will continue to eat “when the back part of the body is nearly torn off and hangs by a mere thread of gut” (Parerga 2: 298). This is the case, because the degree to which an animal feels pain is contingent on its degree of knowledge or intelligence.

An insect being very low on the evolution-
ary scale would feel less pain than, say, a dog. Not so, however, with Gregor; his will is that of an insect, but his intellect is that of a man. This makes for a will that is all the more powerful and torturous; it is, like “Die Verwandlung,” a hybrid made for pain. Schopenhauer writes: “the will is the string, ... knowledge the sounding board, and pain the tone” (2: 298). It should be noted that these ruminations and their connection to Schopenhauer are not arbitrary; both quotes are taken from an essay that would have captured Kafka’s attention, “Doctrine of Suffering of the World.”

So Gregor is “repeatedly yanked awake by his hunger”; and if it’s not hunger, it is his “fretting amid vague hopes” (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 143). The street lamps create light on the ceiling of his room, but where Gregor resides “it [is] dark” (141). Just as Georg’s father had been left in an “unbearably dark” room (Kafka, “Judgment” 63), so, too, does Gregor live in darkness. Grete would in the meantime sweep out the leftovers in Gregor’s room. This, however, is probably not just food. No one is really taking care of Gregor: this dismal room is not just full of rotten food, but probably Gregor’s feces and urine. Grete upon entering the room races “over to the window, ... yank[s] it open ...” lingering there briefly no matter how chilly the weather and inhale[s] deeply” (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 152). This is where Gregor “received his food every day” (146).

Gregor experiences ignominy throughout the story. The sight and probably stench of Gregor is so repulsive that the maid “implore[s] the mother on bended knees to dismiss her” (147). Gregor soon begins again to accept his only recourse. After succumbing to his hunger in the beginning of the second chapter, Grete later reports that “now once again nothing’s been touched” of Gregor’s daily fare (147). Gregor experiences moments when his resolve to die overtakes his desire to live: eating now “[gives] him no pleasure whatsoever” (154). Beginning once again to accept this judgment as his own allows him to “more effectively” control his body (155). Nevertheless, even in the midst of all his misery and the prospect of an unending cycle of rebirths, Gregor once again falters. This time, though, it is a violent reaction and therefore all the more pathetic.

While the mother and sister rest, having just moved some of Gregor’s furniture, Gregor scurries to decide what he will save for himself. Gregor is again racing backwards towards life, and all its horror. “He quickly scrambled ... and squeezed” against himself the picture of the woman in fur (159). This fur may represent suffering, the torment found in life. In spite of all life’s despair, Gregor, like us, covets it. Similar to a man on his death bed, even what was once considered horrible does not appear so bad in the face of death. At the brink of death we often long for even the hardships in life. In a peculiar way, this is the self-torture Schopenhauer demands of someone who is to achieve extinction. For clearly Gregor isn’t clinging to the happiness in life, but the misery which the fur represents. “He clung to his picture,” and his life, “refusing to surrender it”; he does this even though his life is no more than the stains he leaves on the walls (160).

After causing his mother to faint (the sight of Gregor is just too disgusting), Gregor then races out of his room for a second time. Hence, “they circled the room several times” (163). Here Kafka might be alluding to the cyclicality of the father-son relationship. This is the relationship that in so many of Kafka’s stories is portrayed over and over, i.e., the father is represented literally or metaphorically as the author of punishment. Time and time again the image of Kafka’s father follows him in his stories of anguish. Gregor’s father “fill[s] his pockets with fruit ... hurling apple after apple” (164). One apple digs “right into [Gregor’s] back” (164). Although this is probably a literary play on Kafka’s Judaic heritage, this “red” apple might also be viewed as a representation of desire, in
terms of eastern philosophy, the desire to live (164). This persistent craving has embedded itself in Gregor throughout “Die Verwandlung” and is now thrown at him by his father. Gregor lumbers around with what “reminded even the father that Gregor … was a member of the family” (165). Here Kafka might mean that Gregor still possesses the will-to-live, that which is common to all humanity.

In the third chapter, as Gregor’s condition worsens, the family decides “to swallow their repulsion and endure” (165). In the meantime, Gregor for the most part denies his urges: he “was now eating next to nothing” (171). In the third chapter Kafka tells us what species of vermin Gregor is. The charwoman screams at Gregor, “you old dung beetle!” (171). It is difficult to deny that this vermin is a scarab. A dung beetle, whether written in English or in German (“Mistkäfer”), is a scarab. Kafka could have surmised this simply by glancing in his dictionary. Moreover, in the light of Samsara, perhaps connecting all three of the Strafen, setting forth a theme of transmigration, this must be a sacred scarab: resurrection fits with Kafka’s theme of transmigration. When Gregor covers himself with his “sheet,” Kafka is alluding to this scarab’s sacredness; he enshrouds Gregor (153). Furthermore, the metamorphosis is so abrupt that it resembles a resurrection. Apparently, Kafka knowingly utilized the insect which in Egyptian lore is the symbol for resurrection.

There has been over time a considerable amount of attention lent to Kafka’s wish that Gregor, in his state as vermin, never be drawn. Kafka pleads that it not be drawn on the grounds that it would “restrict him” (Letters 114). Scholars for the most part have interpreted what Kafka tells Wolff as suggesting that this vermin, if drawn, would cause the restriction of his meaning. I disagree. Of course, it could very well be the case that the restriction of meaning is that the depiction of Gregor as anything other than a scarab restricts him to “Die Verwandlung,” which does not allow him to move from story to story. However, Kafka is not making an argument; in a state of panic he makes a plea: “Not that, please not that!” (114). He is not worried that Gregor’s meaning will be restricted: he is frightened that, by disclosing Gregor’s actual species, a scarab, the secret connection among the Strafen will be discovered. The themes of resurrection, transmigration, purgatory, and suffering would no longer belong to him alone.

Gregor’s function within the story appears at times to correspond to the characteristics of a savior. Gregor provides not so much the metamorphosis of the family, but the restoration of the family, which elicits further consideration of Kafka’s sources. Perhaps there is something else of eastern origin in Gregor’s function. The father’s situation invites such consideration, for he certainly has been restored to a position of duty, causing one to wonder if Kafka, continuing his probable use of eastern philosophy and religion, had the notion of an avatar in mind. Again he would have run across this term via Schopenhauer: “The New Testament … must somehow be of Indian origin, as is testified by its thoroughly Indian ethics which carries morality to the point of asceticism, by its pessimism and its avatar” (Parerga 2: 380). An avatar, also spelled avatara, is an incarnation of God. Jesus Christ and Krishna alike would be considered avatars; both appear in order to restore dharma or duty. Krishna, for instance, says “whenever there is fall of dharma, … then I create myself, to establish dharma I appear in age after age” (qtd. in Chandola 31). The notion that Gregor is an avatar might explain part of Gregor’s effect on the family. There is, it appears, the erosion of duty within Gregor’s family. Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita warns: “For when the family decays, the eternal family-dharma dies; unrighteousness overcometh all the family, when dharma dies” (qtd. in Thadani 6).
Because of Gregor’s metamorphosis, Gregor’s father “who had not done a lick of work in five years,” begins to work again (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 150). Even though in the beginning of the second chapter we are told that “he had grown very fat, becoming rather clumsy” (151). By the end of the same chapter:

The father stood quite steady, in a snug blue uniform with gold buttons,...his heavy double chin unfurled over the high stiff collar of the jacket. ... [His] black eyes gazed fresh and alert; the once disheveled hair was now glossy, combed down, and meticulously parted (162–63).

Mr. Samsa stands erect like a general or the officer who would later appear in “In der Strafkolonie.” Meanwhile the sister has gone through her own restoration. She is at first portrayed as dutifully taking care of Gregor, showing concern for his eating habits, intuitively attending to Gregor’s likes and dislikes, even demonstrating “self control” (153), whereas earlier the parents “had often been cross with her for being, they felt, a somewhat useless girl” (153–54). As she shows less and less regard for Gregor, (“she certainly saw the dirt ... but she had simply made up her mind to leave it there”), her concern for her own future rises (170). “The sister, having found a job as a salesgirl, was studying shorthand and French every evening in hopes of ... eventually obtaining a better position” (166). Even the mother, who was in the first two chapters protected by the family, is now more independent and efficient. Barrling what the charwomen would attend to, “everything else was taken care of by the mother along with her great amount of needlework” (168). In order to secure more money the entire family takes the initiative to take boarders into the house, and they work together in order to do so. Gregor has restored them to proper duty and self sufficiency: as opposed to being the leeches of his work as a salesman they exhibit responsibility. In the end, as a result of Gregor’s eventual death, the sun comes out, and a family excursion ensues. The family then realizes that their jobs “[are] ... exceedingly advantageous and also promising” (188). They now have a future; life has meaning.

This is not to suggest that a happy ending ensues, it is actually (unbeknownst to the family) exceedingly tragic. Prior to the father, who like a general, barks the order for the three tenants to “leave my home at once!” (185), Gregor foresees that his pains will “ultimately vanish altogether” (182). He is inspired to this realization by his sister and her music. He appears to grasp that, not just suffering, but the acceptance of his death is his ultimate solution. Schopenhauer is once again indispensable to our interpretation.

Schopenhauerian metaphysics includes the metaphysics of music. Schopenhauer views music as a “copy of the will itself” (World as Will 2: 257). Furthermore, Schopenhauer proposes that we, through music, seize the actual shape of our emotions. Music does not represent the feelings of the artist, but is in a manner of speaking without content; emotion stands naked before us. Schopenhauer writes:

[Music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, peace of mind themselves, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motives for them (1: 261).]

Music, too, can quiet the will-to-live; it leaves it for the moment docile. From “the sound of the violin,” Gregor sees in the deepest recesses of the self what he really needs—death (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 174). While Grete plays, “he felt as if he were being shown the path to the unknown food he was yearning for” (176). Some have suggested that Gregor experiences incestuous impulses toward Grete. Although the
pain of an incestuous relationship could fit within the idea of Samsara, perhaps in this instance, he is acceding to death, i.e., the “food” he longs for is a permanent demise (177). Interestingly, Kafka authors not just the sister, but the entire family, as a result of their new-found solidarity, working together to kill Gregor, thus saving him from his present state of suffering. “The father arrived with the music stand, the mother with the sheet music, and the sister with the violin” (174). Having restored the family to good order, Gregor is thereby provided with the inspiration to allow “his final breath [to leave] from his nostrils” (182). As discussed, the apple in Gregor’s back represents the desire to live. This apple now decays in Gregor’s back, and the desire to live is rotting. He no longer resists death, he accepts it.

Kafka first hints that Gregor will be emancipated, and then seems to state that Gregor’s final goal was not reached. Kafka may allude to this with the aid of the mother and sister, both of whom have great meaning for Gregor. They represent the precise means of Mr. Samsa’s and Gregor’s torture; both women may symbolize (re)birth. In the first chapter, “Gregor could not help snapping his jaws a few times at the sight of the flowing coffee” (137). In the company of his mother, the flowing coffee reminds Gregor of birth; it might represent a woman’s water breaking. Unconsciously, nothing has more of an unsettling affect on Gregor than the thought of (re)birth. The rage of countless past lives wells up inside him, and he can not help but snap his jaws. In the third chapter the mother, in the presence of Gregor, “stretch[ed] out her legs and press[ed] them together” (181). This suggests that the cycle of births is coming to an end. Even Gregor foresees his “pains … ultimately vanish[ing]” (182). Kafka, though, sentences Gregor to yet another life of suffering. For in the end:

As they were conversing, both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, upon seeing the daughter becoming more and more vivacious, realized almost in unison that lately, despite all the sorrows that had left her cheeks pale, she had blossomed into a lovely and shapely girl. Lapsing into silence and communicating almost unconsciously with their eyes, they reflected that it was high time they found a decent husband for her (188).

Grete is fertile, ready now in the eyes of the mother, father, and Kafka to start a family. She will continue the cycle of (re)birth. Unlike the mother, she does not clamp her legs together; she “stretch[es] her young body out,” suggesting that her legs are allowed to rest open, alluding to the eventual rebirth of Georg and Gregor. Kafka appears to make the statement that Gregor is reborn, for our character in “In der Strafkolonie” is a Reisender. Perhaps there has been movement up the ladder of rebirth; Gregor is still a traveling salesman, but he is no longer vermin. Samsara, this world of suffering, in endless cyclic motion, supports this interpretation. Der Reisende sits in judgment of the doctrine of metempsychosis, and the father (der Offizier) desperately needs his approval. Beyond the suicide of the father figure, there appears to be another inversion of roles: where Kafka had sought the approval of his father, in “In der Strafkolonie,” it is now the father who seeks the approval of the son. Our hero, however, does not approve; he refuses to support the “judicial procedure” of metempsychosis (“Colony” 200). Even though he, like Schopenhauer, recognizes that this world is “a penal colony, [and] that unusual measures [are] needed here” (200).

It is inspiration which Kafka said he “dread[s] rather than long[s] for” (Brod 90). With “Die Verwandlung,” however, I suggest that Gregor’s demise is a matter produced by a moment of inspiration. It is Grete’s violin, the sound of musical notes, which quiets Gregor’s passion for life and inspires him to allow “his final breath” to
exit ("Metamorphosis" 182). Max Brod writes, “thus, [for Kafka] art serves the religious principle of giving a meaning to life” (Brod 97–98). In the end I agree with Brod; however, I believe Kafka offers “meaning” as a goal which is found through a process, the search for inspiration. Gregor searches for inspiration, and finds it through the music of Grete. This I think is Schopenhauerian with a Kafkaesque twist. Inspired to die, Gregor “[is] so moved ... [that] he felt as if he were being shown the path to the unknown food he was yearning for” (Kafka, “Metamorphosis” 176). The rebirth of Georg Bendemann, the suffering of Gregor Samsa, and his transmigration as Reisender, suggests that Gregor could not break the cycle of transmigration. Therefore, Kafka tortures his hero with yet another life in this Samsaric world. An eastern influence such as the idea of Samsara calls perhaps for a redefinition of what we mean by the term Kafkaesque. In light of the “secret connection” among the Strafen, it is not sufficient that Kafkaesque should merely arouse images of the grotesque or the unjustly accused and persecuted (Kafka, Letters 96). If one accepts Samsa as Samsara; and if Samsara “connects” “Die Verwandlung” with “Das Urteil” and “In der Strafkolonie,” further review of the two corner stories, in this context, might be justified. Knowing that Kafka believed “Das Urteil” to be his breakthrough provides the possibility that Samsara was an element of Kafka’s development; therefore a part of what Kafka might view as Kafkaesque. Kafka’s work should not merely be compared to eastern philosophy, but viewed as being in part made of eastern philosophy. Furthermore, this approach might warrant another examination of Kafka’s historical personage. This could begin with further scrutiny of what Kafka meant by the word dream. The concept of Samsara suggests that Kafka’s works contain a quality which goes beyond that of the ordinary dream. This quality, which is probably the result of a Schopenhauerian metaphysical influence, an influence which is itself comprised of eastern philosophy, culminates in a propensity towards eastern born art and philosophy. Beyond the works by Rudolf Steiner which Kafka owned and which have their own eastern elements, and in addition to the twelve volumes of Schopenhauer’s Sämtliche Werke, Kafka’s personal library holds yet more eastern works. Die letzten Tage Gotamo Buddhos might top the list, and Joo-Dong Lee in his study Taoistische Weltanschauung im Werke Franz Kafkas, counts no less than 25 books concerning Chinese philosophy, religion, and literature.  

This might be considered evidence of a continuing, even a growing interest in eastern philosophy. Kafka’s personal library supports the idea of Samsara, which I have endeavored to present as a viable alternative to the theories of Samson and jesem- sam. Both become less likely as one considers that: Kafka points to Schopenhauer as “an artist in language” (Janouch 85); Samsara may connect the Strafen etymologically; and the narrator refers to Gregor almost exclusively by his first name with the exception of the statement “Samsa war Reisender” (“Verwandlung” 96). In other words, and in keeping with one of Samsara’s most common translations—Samsa is Samsara.

Notes

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1See also Weinberg 316–17.
2Eduard Hermann, Populäre Theosophie (Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Friedrich, 1897).
3Rudolf Steiner, Die Erziehung des Kindes vom Gesichtspunkte der Geisteswissenschaft

4See, for instance, Brod 130.
5See, for instance, Holland 149.

Works Cited


