

A Fairy-Tale Motif in Kafka's "The Judgment"

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Franz Kafka claimed that he wanted to write fairy tales, but couldn't.¹ Nevertheless, the element of magic, the occurrence of the inexplicable, which prevails in fairy tales, has a prominent place in Kafka's fiction, and occasionally motifs are directly borrowed from the *Märchen*. The appearance of a brother and sister (she is Grete) in "Metamorphosis," for instance, points unequivocally to one of the most famous stories in the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Less ambiguously employed and more pertinent to the development of the plot is the fairy-tale topos of the two brothers which figures in "The Judgment."

This motif may be the oldest one of all in the genre.² It quickly became ubiquitous in fairy tales and gained prominence on at least two occasions: as the frame story in the Sinbad cycle and as one of the Grimm brothers' fund, prototypically called "The Two Brothers." This version has two pairs of brothers; one pair, serving to introduce the principal events of the story, establishes the dichotomy which prevails in the world of the *Märchen* (and, for that matter, in the real world), the dichotomy of good and evil and, simultaneously, poverty and wealth. The good but poor brother becomes the father of twins. It is their fate on which the action centers. Not unexpectedly, they go their separate ways; they are bound together, nevertheless, by a magic bond, the ability of each to sense what has befallen the other. When one twin dies as the result of bewitchment, his brother seeks him out and is able to bring him back to life. With their reunion, which will last for all time, the story ends.

Kafka's interest in the motif of the two brothers who are separated but linked by mutual concerns manifested itself at the start of his writing. His diary entry of January 19, 1911, reveals that he had planned a novel about two brothers, whose destiny would take the one to America, while the other remained imprisoned in Europe.³ In "The Judgment" this relationship recurs, only changed to the extent that it involves the friend, rather than brother, of the protagonist. At the heart of the story, written in 1912, is Georg Bendemann's anxiety about an unnamed close friend, whose path has separated him from Georg⁴ and led him into the wilderness of Russia, where he is now languishing. Although Georg feels an obligation to share the fate of the expatriate, the outsider, and to make him a part of his own life as well, Georg contemplates, as the story begins, cutting the ties which have bound the two together. At the same time he rejects an alternative solution to the problem of their disintegrating relationship: one would have to tell his friend "that his previous efforts [*Versuche*] had failed, that he must now desist from [further efforts], that he must return

¹"Gerne wollte ich Märchen (warum hasse ich das Wort so) schreiben . . ." Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1954), pp. 323-24.

²See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 91: "The motif of the two brothers is central to the oldest fairy tale, which was found in an Egyptian papyrus of 1250 B.C."

³Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, pp. 39-40.

⁴Kafka had a brother named Georg who died in infancy.

and let himself be admired by all as a prodigal who has returned for good."⁵ Instead of providing this turn of events and supplying the happy ending which is unending in fairy tales, Kafka gives his story an anti-*Märchen* twist: his protagonist chooses not to rescue his friend, his "brother." Georg announces to his (presumably) dearest friend, dying of a mysterious malady ("[his] yellow complexion seemed to indicate an illness which was progressing," p. 43), that he has replaced their relationship with a new, more satisfactory one, one with his fiancée.

This decision initiates the disastrous series of events which ends with Georg's suicide. He dies, it can be concluded, so that the friend in Russia will survive. As the agent of Georg's destruction the father, the elder Bendemann, appears; the means by which he turns his self-confident and solicitous son into the victim of paranoiac despair is his expropriation of the friendship of the young man in Russia for himself. In a sense, the father in the story is a double figure, at first a kindly but weak old man, whom Georg cherishes, and later the evil father, the sorcerer, who by deceit and cunning deprives the protagonist of his due reward and ultimately destroys him. Georg's suicide is the act of a man in a trance.

Kafka's use of these fairy-tale motifs in "The Judgment" probably came about through the exercise of literary sensibilities rather than as the consequence of conscious borrowing. His comments on the story (see the letter to Felice Bauer, Prague, June 10, 1913, and the diary entry of February 11, 1913) suggest that he wanted to depict the relationship between a father and his son—that is, between Herrmann and Franz Kafka. The friend in Russia, Kafka avers, was created to symbolize the bond between them, their mutual concerns. Most interpreters of "The Judgment" have identified this link (it was, rather, a chain) between the Kafkas as their contention over Franz's avocation, his writing, which represented a denial of the son's destiny as successor to the provider and family patriarch. The conclusion can thus be drawn that the friend in Russia is another self of the protagonist, who is himself the dutiful son Franz Kafka. Kate Flores, for one, has in her analysis of the story labeled Georg the outer Kafka and his absent friend the inner Kafka.⁶ More specifically, A. P. Foulkes identifies the correspondent in Russia as "none other than Georg Bendemann's (alias Franz Kafka's) other self."⁷ This suppressed alter ego, the writer Kafka, who accordingly languishes in exile, becomes the avenging self, when betrayed by Georg (the ego). Through the agency of the father, whose authority he can usurp because of the patriarch's simultaneous denunciation of the aberrant scion, the friend in Russia decrees the death of the dutiful son Georg so that he himself may survive (and Kafka's writing may go on).

This sequence of events has the same psychological significance as the unfolding of the plot in the fairy tale of the two brothers (in its various manifestations, but particularly in the Grimm brothers' version). According to Bettelheim (p. 90), the topos of the two brothers stands for "seemingly incompatible aspects of the human personality." It is the conflict between his inclination to conform to the expectations of a middle-class society and his need to fulfill his own destiny as a writer which Kafka explicates in his fiction. In "The Judgment" Georg represents the stay-at-home brother who leads a life

⁵Franz Kafka, *Erzählungen* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1976), pp. 48-49. My translation.

⁶See Kate Flores, "The Judgment," in *Franz Kafka Today*, ed. Angel Flores and Homer Swander (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), pp. 5-24.

⁷A. P. Foulkes, *The Reluctant Pessimist* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 100.

circumscribed by convention. His wayward friend has the part of the adventuresome brother and depicts the writer as outsider, dwelling in terra incognita, symbolically Russia, where a revolution is impending or has occurred. As is usual in the *Märchen* which have the motif of the two brothers, evidenced in the Grimms' version, the brothers (in Kafka's account Georg and his friend) are undifferentiated in the beginning: Georg and his friend correspond, both literally and figuratively; they share their lives. In this respect Kafka indicates his initial uncertainty as to his goals. When the one brother asserts his individuality and strikes out on his own, he strays into the dark wood and eventually encounters a witch who turns him into stone. This confrontation Kafka reproduces in a fashion which varies considerably from the course of events in the model. The elder Bendemann is, peculiarly, an ambivalent figure. Assuming the role of both brothers, at first that of the father of the two principal characters, the twins, who is their benefactor, the old man is humble and gracious at the beginning of Georg's visit. Following the general outline of the fairy tale but proceeding with startling suddenness, Kafka in his anti-*Märchen* combines the roles of the witch and the wicked brother who vilifies the twins and alienates them from their father. The elder Bendemann not only destroys the "wrong" twin, the compliant one, he also destroys the instrument which could be the means of his victim's salvation. In the fairy tale this magic totem is a knife, the condition of which reveals to the stay-at-home brother the bewitchment of his twin. In Kafka's story, the elder Bendemann achieves both the demise of Georg and the termination of the life-sustaining correspondence, first by ridiculing it as nonexistent, then by claiming it for himself.⁸ Kafka has provided his true-to-life account with an unhappy ending: the conflict is not resolved—his ambition as a writer and his compulsion to be an obedient son remain unreconciled. The brothers cannot be united; one must be eliminated.

In a climax rife with irony and paradox, Kafka sends Georg to his death. The efficacy of the death sentence which seems illogical can be attributed to the fact that at this point Kafka assumes the role of the father in order to pass judgment on his own actions; in other words, he lets his conscience speak through the elder Bendemann. The verdict is inevitable: Georg Bendemann (Franz Kafka) is guilty of having betrayed his father by being a writer. Paradoxically the death sentence for Georg precipitates the salvation of the friend in Russia; Kafka realizes that the writer must survive. The dutiful son cannot be permitted to persevere at the cost of ending the correspondence and alienating the friend in Russia.

Consequently even the symbolism in the story's denouement is ambivalent. Georg's suicide gives life to the languishing writer: "At this moment an almost endless stream of traffic was crossing the bridge" (p. 53; my translation; compare the endings of "Metamorphosis" and "A Hunger Artist"). The triumph of the writer Kafka, made evident in the symbolism here, is also apparent in his perhaps even unconscious amalgamation of fairy-tale motifs in his story. The deliberateness with which he employed them need not become an issue for contention, since an understanding of the occurrence of the two brothers topos both contributes to an appreciation of "The Judgment" and points to Kafka's skill as a writer, his ability to probe psychological depths and, at the same time, to combine a unique point of view with literary tradition.

⁸Bettelheim proposes that the destruction of the magic object, which seems imminent in "The Two Brothers" "suggests the disintegration of the personality" (p. 96).