

The Father's Shadow: Autobiographical Guilt in Kafka's Short Fiction

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Abstract

Franz Kafka's short fiction consistently explores the psychological and ethical weight of guilt. This guilt often appears less as a moral failing than as an inherited state of being. This study examines autobiographical guilt in three key short works: *The Judgment* (1913), *In the Penal Colony* (1919), and *A Hunger Artist* (1922). It connects these themes to Kafka's troubled relationship with his father, Hermann Kafka, as expressed in *Letter to His Father* (1919). The paper argues that Kafka's characters are shaped by a deeply ingrained paternal authority that functions as law, punishment, and self-denial. Through detailed textual analysis and insights from scholars such as Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Erich Heller, the study demonstrates how Kafka transforms personal familial guilt into broader existential anxiety. The father's shadow emerges not merely as a biographical influence but as a structural element of Kafka's narrative world, where judgment is unpredictable, punishment follows ritual, and identity is shaped through submission to an unfathomable authority.

Keywords: Autobiographical Guilt, Paternal Authority, Existential Anxiety, Internalized Punishment, Modernism

Franz Kafka's work is deeply intertwined with the psychological impact of his father, Hermann Kafka. Hermann's commanding personality—physically imposing, economically successful, and emotionally authoritarian—profoundly shaped Kafka's fragile sense of self. In his autobiographical document *Letter to His Father* (1919), Kafka confesses: "You asked me why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you" (Kafka, *Letter* 10). This statement is deceptively simple, yet it reveals a complex psychological structure of fear, paralysis, and internalized guilt.

The circular logic of the sentence is especially significant. Kafka cannot explain his fear because the fear itself prevents explanation. The father demands rational justification—"why are you afraid?"—yet the son's very inability to respond becomes proof of weakness. Fear here is not episodic; it is structural. It operates as a condition of speechlessness. The syntax of the sentence mirrors this paralysis: the clause "partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you" folds back upon itself, demonstrating how paternal authority blocks communication. The son cannot defend himself because the father controls the terms of dialogue. Thus, guilt emerges not from wrongdoing but from incapacity—the incapacity to speak, to justify, to assert oneself.

Moreover, the father's question places the burden of explanation on the son. Instead of recognizing his own intimidating behaviour, Hermann Kafka frames the issue as the child's irrational weakness. This dynamic creates a double bind: the son feels fear, yet he must also feel guilty for feeling it. The fear becomes self-reinforcing. Kafka internalizes the father's judgment to such an extent that he begins to doubt the legitimacy of his own emotional experience. The inability to answer becomes further evidence of inadequacy.

This psychological pattern reverberates throughout Kafka's fiction. His protagonists repeatedly face accusations without clear charges and struggle to articulate a defence. They are overwhelmed not only by external authority but also by internalized self-doubt. In *The Judgment*, Georg Bendemann accepts his father's condemnation without argument, as if his guilt were self-evident. In *In the Penal Colony*, the condemned man is denied explanation altogether; guilt precedes understanding. In *A Hunger Artist*, the protagonist cannot justify his fasting except by confessing a personal deficiency— "I couldn't find the food I liked"— which again turns inability into guilt.

The quotation from *Letter to His Father* thus serves as a psychological key to Kafka's narrative world. Fear silences, and silence confirms authority. The father does not need to shout continuously; his power has already been internalized. Kafka's admission reveals how paternal dominance becomes an inner tribunal. Even in the father's absence, the son remains judged.

Furthermore, the tone of the confession is restrained rather than accusatory. Kafka does not openly condemn his father; instead, he analysis himself. This self-directed scrutiny reflects the transformation of external discipline into inward self-surveillance. The father's authority becomes part of the son's consciousness. Such internalization explains why Kafka's fictional characters often participate in their own punishment. Georg runs toward the river; the officer in *In the Penal Colony* submits himself to the machine; the hunger artist continues fasting long after public interest fades. Each figure embodies the logic of the quoted confession: fear disables resistance.

The phrase "I maintain that I am afraid of you" is also revealing. The verb "maintain" suggests argument or defence, as though Kafka must defend even his own fear. This defensive posture indicates how deeply paternal authority shaped his perception of reality. The son must justify emotions that, in healthy relationships, would require no justification. Fear becomes a contested claim rather than an acknowledged experience.

Thus, this brief passage encapsulates the emotional atmosphere that permeates Kafka's literary works. It illuminates why his characters confront overpowering figures—fathers, officers, officials, abstract courts—who accuse and judge them without transparent reasoning. In *The Judgment*, *In the Penal Colony*, and *A Hunger Artist*, the father's shadow appears both literally and symbolically, shaping narratives of guilt that are simultaneously autobiographical and existential. The fear articulated in *Letter to His Father* evolves into a universal condition within Kafka's fiction: a world in which authority is unquestionable, explanation is impossible, and guilt exists before action.

The Judgment is one of Franz Kafka's clearest and most powerful stories about a father's control over his son. Composed as Kafka himself recorded, in a single night of intense creative energy in 1912, the story stages a dramatic confrontation between Georg Bendemann

and his father that quickly escalates from domestic conversation to metaphysical condemnation. The narrative initially presents the father as weak, aging, and dependent; yet within moments, this frailty dissolves, and he rises with terrifying vitality to pronounce the unforgettable sentence: “I sentence you now to death by drowning!” (Kafka, *The Judgment* 88).

The force of this declaration lies not only in its violence but in its juridical tone. The verb “sentence” transforms the father into judge, court, and executioner simultaneously. There is no evidence presented, no procedure followed, no opportunity for appeal. The private space of the family home becomes indistinguishable from a courtroom. Indeed, the father’s speech resembles both a legal verdict and a divine decree. His authority appears absolute, unchallengeable, and self-legitimizing. The language of law fuses with the rhetoric of prophecy, elevating paternal anger into cosmic judgment.

Georg’s reaction is equally significant. He does not argue. He does not demand justification. Instead, he internalizes the verdict almost immediately, rushing toward the river as if fulfilling a duty rather than resisting injustice. His final words— “Dear parents, I have always loved you”—reveal that obedience persists even in the face of annihilation. Love and submission become indistinguishable. The son’s identity dissolves into the father’s command. The tragedy, therefore, is not merely that Georg is condemned, but that he consents to the logic of condemnation.

Critics frequently read this scene as a symbolic reenactment of Kafka’s own psychological subordination to his father, Hermann Kafka. In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka repeatedly describes himself as small, inadequate, and crushed beneath his father’s overpowering presence. He writes of feeling “nothing in comparison with you,” articulating a lifelong sense of inferiority. The father in *The Judgment* dramatizes this disproportion. His sudden transformation—from a seemingly helpless old man to an energetic, towering authority—mirrors Kafka’s perception that paternal power could expand at any moment, overwhelming resistance. The transformation is not logically explained; it is experienced as psychological truth.

Erich Heller observes that for Kafka, the father functioned as “the measure of all things, the ultimate tribunal” (Heller 62). This insight illuminates the structural role of the father in the story. He does not merely accuse Georg of specific failings; he defines the very standards by which Georg is evaluated. Georg’s supposed betrayal of his friend in Russia is vague and arguably trivial, yet the father’s interpretation renders it catastrophic. The crime itself is less important than the father’s power to name it as such. Thus, guilt precedes proof. Authority creates reality.

Furthermore, the father’s oscillation between weakness and dominance reflects the instability of paternal authority in Kafka’s imagination. At first, Georg appears in control—successful in business, engaged to be married, confident in his independence. Yet this independence proves illusory. The father takes back his authority with great force, showing how weak and unstable the son’s independence really is.

The narrative suggests that paternal authority does not diminish with age; rather, it becomes more symbolic, more absolute. The father rises from his bed almost supernaturally, embodying a force that transcends physical limitation.

These dynamic parallels the psychological pattern articulated in *Letter to His Father*. There, Kafka describes how his father's criticism penetrated deeply into his consciousness, shaping his self-perception long after the actual moments of confrontation. In *The Judgment*, the father's words are sufficient to determine Georg's fate. No external enforcement is necessary. The son enacts his own execution, demonstrating the complete internalization of paternal law.

The story's structure reinforces this interpretation. The narrative moves rapidly from ordinary domestic realism to surreal condemnation without transition. This abruptness mirrors the unpredictability of paternal anger described in Kafka's autobiographical writings. Authority erupts without warning, and its pronouncements carry the weight of inevitability. The reader, like Georg, is denied explanation.

Thus, *The Judgment* becomes not simply a story about a tyrannical father but a profound allegory of internalized authority. The father represents a law that is at once personal and transcendent, intimate and absolute. His command fuses familial power with divine justice, transforming private conflict into an existential crisis. Through Georg's drowning, Kafka dramatizes the devastating psychological consequences of living under a tribunal that is both external and internal—one that defines guilt before action and demands obedience unto death.

The guilt that drives Georg to suicide is never clearly defined. His alleged betrayal of a friend in Russia seems insufficient to justify execution. Instead, guilt in Kafka's fiction operates as an ontological condition. Walter Benjamin famously remarked that in Kafka's world, "guilt is never doubted" (Benjamin 127). Georg's immediate acceptance of the death sentence demonstrates his internalization of paternal authority; he does not protest but rushes toward the river, declaring, "Dear parents, I have always loved you" (Kafka, *The Judgment* 89). The tragic irony of this statement underscores the paradox of filial loyalty: love becomes submission, and submission leads to self-destruction. The autobiographical connection becomes evident when compared with Kafka's diary entry: "My writing is all about you" (Kafka, *Diaries* 1912). Thus, the father's shadow emerges as the concealed force behind Georg's downfall.

In *In the Penal Colony*, the theme of paternal law shifts from family dynamics to bureaucratic machinery. The story centres on a device that inscribes a condemned man's sentence onto his body until death ensues. The officer asserts, "Guilt is never to be doubted" (Kafka, *In the Penal Colony* 145). This statement mirrors the father's unquestionable authority in *The Judgment*. The apparatus may be interpreted as a symbolic extension of paternal discipline, engraving guilt onto the flesh just as Hermann Kafka's harsh criticisms inscribed shame onto his son's psyche. In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka recounts episodes of humiliation, including the well-known incident in which his father left him outside in the cold as punishment. The apparatus in *In the Penal Colony* renders such emotional punishment brutally physical.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that in Kafka's work, "the law is no longer transcendental but immanent, internalized" (Deleuze and Guattari 50). In the penal colony, the condemned man remains unaware of his crime; the law operates beyond comprehension. Similarly, Kafka often felt condemned without identifiable wrongdoing. The officer's obsessive loyalty to the machine resembles Hermann Kafka's rigid adherence to authority and order. When the officer ultimately subjects himself to the apparatus, the machine malfunctions and kills him without revealing. This moment symbolizes the collapse of blind

obedience to paternal law. The traveller's detached observation further reflects Kafka's ambivalence: he recognizes the brutality of authority yet feels powerless to intervene.

The father's shadow also manifests in *A Hunger Artist*, though in subtler form. The protagonist's voluntary fasting may be interpreted as self-punishment rooted in internalized guilt. The hunger artist confesses, "Because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else" (Kafka, *A Hunger Artist* 300). His statement conveys a profound sense of inadequacy and alienation, echoing Kafka's feelings of estrangement from his father's robust, practical world. Hermann Kafka valued physical strength and commercial success—qualities his frail, introspective son believed he lacked. In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka writes, "You are a real Kafka in strength, health, appetite" (Kafka, *Letter* 15). The hunger artist's emaciated body thus stands in stark contrast to paternal vitality.

The hunger artist's performance becomes an unending attempt to gain recognition from an indifferent audience. His fasting is observed, regulated, and ultimately dismissed as obsolete. Like Georg and the condemned man, he is confined within a system that defines him by his perceived deficiencies. Stanley Corngold suggests that Kafka's protagonists embody "a negative theology of selfhood," in which identity is constructed through absence and guilt (Corngold 103). The hunger artist's death in a cage signifies total self-erasure, while his replacement by a vigorous panther symbolizes society's preference for vitality over introspective suffering. The father's shadow persists as the normative standard against which the son measures—and inevitably diminishes—himself.

Across these three stories, autobiographical guilt becomes embedded within the narrative structure. Kafka transforms personal experiences of paternal intimidation into metaphors of law, judgment, and punishment. The father evolves from a literal parent into an abstract authority, yet his psychological function remains constant. The abrupt condemnation in *The Judgment*, the mechanical cruelty in *In the Penal Colony*, and the quiet self-denial in *A Hunger Artist* each represent the variations of the same internal conflict, the son's submission to a condemning presence.

Scholars have long debated whether Kafka's guilt is primarily theological, existential, or psychological. While theological interpretations emphasize Jewish concepts of sin and divine law, autobiographical readings foreground Hermann Kafka's influence. Heinz Politzer contends that Kafka's oeuvre dramatizes "the trial of the son before the father" (Politzer 89). Paternal authority merges with divine judgment, suggesting that Kafka's spiritual anxiety was rooted in familial experience. His diaries repeatedly express a sense of unworthiness: "I am nothing but fear" (Kafka, *Diaries* 1913). Such reflections reveal the emotional intensity underlying his fiction.

Kafka's narrative style further reinforces the atmosphere of guilt. His restrained, lucid prose renders absurd events disturbingly plausible, mirroring the unquestioned authority of the father. In *The Judgment*, the father's transformation remains unexplained; in *In the Penal Colony*, the machine's brutality is described with clinical precision; in *A Hunger Artist*, the protagonist's suffering is presented as spectacle. This stylistic restraint intensifies the sense of inevitability. Benjamin observes that Kafka's clarity conceals a "storm blowing from Paradise" (Benjamin 140). This "storm" may be understood as the father's overwhelming presence, shaping both the thematic and structural dimensions of Kafka's art.

The autobiographical dimension does not reduce Kafka's fiction to mere confession. Rather, it demonstrates how personal trauma can generate universal symbolism. The father's shadow becomes emblematic of modern alienation, in which individuals confront impersonal systems that judge without explanation. Kafka's characters internalize authority so thoroughly that resistance appears futile. Even the officer's attempt to preserve tradition in *In the Penal Colony* culminates in self-destruction, underscoring the futility of unquestioned obedience. The hunger artist's final whisper—"I always wanted you to admire my fasting" (Kafka, *A Hunger Artist* 301)—reveals a desperate longing for acknowledgment that remains unfulfilled. This longing echoes Kafka's enduring desire for paternal approval—a desire perpetually denied.

Conclusion

In Kafka's short fiction, the father's shadow operates as a powerful fusion of autobiography and existential inquiry. Through Georg's drowning, the condemned man's execution, and the hunger artist's self-starvation, Kafka dramatizes the inescapable entanglement of guilt and authority. What begins as personal fear of the father evolves into a broader meditation on judgment, punishment, and the fragile formation of identity in the modern world.

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