To a reader with only a passing familiarity with Freudian symbolism, the sexual subtext in Kafka’s most famous work, *The Metamorphosis*, is still rather obvious. However, not all Kafka scholars have welcomed a discussion on the subject. An initial biographical portrait of the author, largely created and maintained by his close friend and literary executor, Max Brod, established “an iconized picture of [Kafka] as a suffering artist, a suffering son, a suffering Jew or all of the above,” a literary sainthood carefully expurgated of the slightest whiff of prurience (Woods 249). It should be noted, however, that Kafka had a deep interest in erotica, and while later academics have duly acknowledged this, with evidence gleaned from his letters and diary entries as well as more recent access to his private collection of erotic literature, the trend among Kafka scholars has been to downplay the author’s erotic interests in favor of his Jewish identity, particularly the possibility that he had foreseen the coming Holocaust and prophesied it in his work. In 2008, when British author James Hawes published a Kafka biography that explored his erotic tastes—including speculation as to whether his extensive collection of erotic literature and illustrations could be considered “pornography” or not—there was a marked backlash from Kafka academics accusing Hawes of “prudishness, sensationalism and even antisemitism,” with one researcher calling Hawes “a preacher of hate” (Connolly). The possibility that Kafka may have predicted the coming Holocaust is apparently seen by many scholars as incompatible with an interest in erotic topics, and therefore that revealing evidence has been largely ignored. The two, however, need not be mutually exclusive. Without making a judgment on Kafka’s prophetic skill, an exploration of his interest in the erotic is rather necessary for a true understanding of his literary output, and quite aside from his private collection, Kafka’s personal correspondence and diaries make it clear that his interest in the erotic was largely academic; he was fascinated with how taboo
subjects could be explored in writing. Furthermore, as a Modernist author influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud, Kafka was equally interested in how symbolism and metaphor could be used to explore the “forbidden” in literature. Of apparent and particular interest to Kafka was masochism as a literary theme: it was an idea to which he would return frequently in multiple works. Perhaps no other work by Kafka best illustrates this marriage of interests than *The Metamorphosis*, where Kafka explores themes of masochism and submission through a Modernist lens utilizing Freudian symbolism.

In her essay on Kafka and the erotic, Anna Katharina Schaffner writes that “among the major European modernists, there are few who engage as extensively with the erotic as does Franz Kafka,” an interest she believes was jointly formed by Kafka’s preferential reading of erotic literature and his fascination with Freudian psychoanalysis (“Seasick” 80). Kafka’s considerable collection of erotica included periodicals such as *Der Amethyst* and *Die Opale*, literary anthologies that encompassed a broad spectrum of genres and explored a variety of sexual topics, their literary offerings interspersed with sexually grotesque Art Nouveau illustrations. (One drawing, for example, *Le Gourmand* by Maurice Besnaux—a pseudonym for accomplished German artist Marcus Behmer—features a toad-like creature with a simian face fellating a plant shaped like a bouquet of penises.) Kafka commented favorably on these periodicals in his diaries and in letters to friends; ironically, the literary executor who worked so feverishly to sanctify Kafka’s place in literary history was also a regular contributor to these erotic collections. Kafka’s interest, however, appears to have been largely artistic and literary, with less emphasis on the sexual. Whatever Kafka’s personal proclivities may have been, his enthusiasm for erotica seems to have been focused on how taboo subjects—including “sado-masochism . . . sexual violence, animality, incest, fetishism and homoeroticism”—could be subversively explored in art through symbolism and metaphor (82). Unsurprisingly, Kafka would explore these same tabooos in *The Metamorphosis*, but with a far subtler touch than that shown in *Der Amethyst* and *Die Opale*, mainly through his use of metaphor and Freudian symbols.

As with his interest in erotica, Kafka frequently wrote about Freud in personal correspondence, and “regularly attended an introductory seminar series on psychoanalysis” (Schaffner, “Seasick” 80). One work with which Kafka was no doubt familiar was Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1905, in which Freud first discussed his theories on the phenomenon of masochism. Masochism, in the Freudian view, is firmly linked with subconscious guilt and a need to be punished—usually for what the masochist perceives to be sexual transgressions. This need to be punished exists along a broad spectrum. On one end, it can manifest as a desire for mild humiliation and physical chastisement, gradually increasing in force and scope. On the other, it can manifest in what Freud termed “the death instinct,” or a desire for literal execution (Freud, “Economic” 160). Kafka wrote the masochistic urge and the desire for chastisement into his characterization of Gregor Samsa; he even intended at one point to publish *The Metamorphosis* as part of a collection entitled *Punishments* (Kafka, “Letter” 64). In *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist’s sexual transgressions are threefold: his incestuous desire for his mother, represented by her repeated appearances in a state of undress and associations with ladies’ underwear (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 13, 32-33); his incestuous desire for his sister, hinted throughout but more or less explicit in his fantasy of imprisoning her in his room and kissing her naked throat (39); and in his desire for the picture of the woman in furs (3, 28-29). Gregor Samsa is humiliated and punished repeatedly—by his employers, his family, their lodgers, and the charwoman; even his metamorphosis from man to “monstrous insect” is a humiliation and a punishment (3). He is subjected to beatings by his father as a punishment for frightening his mother and sister (17, 31-32), and eventually dies from a combination of the final beating, starvation, and general neglect (43), an anticlimactic death that fulfills Freud’s “death instinct” in the ultimate act of submission. Quite apart from specific textual details, the main arc of the story is a near-perfect illustration of Freud’s theories on the nature of masochistic tendencies.

*The Metamorphosis* also plays on Freud’s concept of the Oedipal complex and all its characteristics and permutations, many of which can result in masochistic desires. The Oedipal complex—a child desiring the parent of the opposite sex, with subconscious hostility toward the other—was considered a normal stage of psychosexual development in Freudian theory. However, Freud noted that it was possible to
become arrested in that development, a condition which contributed to “passive fantasies (which later become masochistic)” (Freud, "Child" 203). The male child desires the mother—in itself a passive role, that of the child submissive to the parent—and therefore despises the father, yet he is powerless against him. This impotence against the dominating father is seen in Kafka’s work from the very beginning: Gregor Samsa is trapped in a job he hates, contributing to feelings of stagnation and helplessness, yet he continues in the job due to the needs of his family and the expectations of his father. His metamorphosis and subsequent beating at the hands of his father would understandably deepen any Oedipal resentment. Gregor’s profound passivity, however, makes that resentment difficult to articulate. When he discovers that his father had a “nest egg” laid by all the time, Gregor thinks:

To be sure, he might have used this surplus to pay off more of his father’s debts with his boss, and the day on which he would have been able to divest himself of his post would no longer have been nearly so far off, but as things stood, his father’s arrangements were no doubt for the best. (Kafka, Metamorphosis 23)

Despite being more than justified in his feelings—of indignation, at the very least—Gregor can only articulate his resentment through a type of passive-aggressive submission.

According to Freud, the passive principle of the Oedipal complex includes a fear of symbolic castration at the hands of the father-adversary; it is this fear that keeps a male child from acting on their desire for the mother (Barfi 108). When Gregor rushes out to stop the general manager from leaving, he terrifies his mother, who “shrieks[sole] and [flees] from the table into the arms of Gregor’s father” (Kafka, Metamorphosis 16). Gregor’s father, having “won” the Oedipal conflict by the mother choosing his protection over a confrontation with Gregor, proceeds to drive Gregor from the room in a scene replete with phallic imagery and overtones of homosexual, incestuous rape—a final symbolic domination by the father-adversary:

[Gregor] began, with constant anxious glances back at his father, to turn around as quickly as he could . . . Perhaps his father discerned his good intentions, for he did not hinder him in this operation but instead even guided his rotation . . . from a distance, using the tip of his stick . . . What Gregor heard at his back no longer resembled the voice of merely a single father . . . Gregor thrust himself—come what would—into the doorway. [Then] his father administered a powerful shove from behind, a genuinely liberating thrust that sent [Gregor] flying, bleeding profusely, into the far reaches of the room. The door was banged shut with the stick, and then at last all was still. (16–17)

The father’s cane, used to beat Gregor back into his room and slam the door behind him—thereby closing the door on Gregor’s access to the mother and the domestic “kingdom”—is the more obvious of Kafka’s phallic symbols, yet the frequent and careful descriptions of Gregor’s new, insectile legs have phallic undertones as well (Barfi 108). These legs are described as tiny and uncooperative; they flail about “in an unnerving frenzy” (Kafka, Metamorphosis 6). Despite bearing his new insect weight rather well—Gregor is delighted by their efficiency (15)—they are rendered ineffectual by the father’s attack with his superior phallus: the cane. In his flight from his father, Gregor is wedged in the doorway of his room while “his little legs dangled trembling in midair, while on the other they were crushed painfully beneath him”; the attack leaves “one of these diminutive legs” with such “grievous injuries [that it] now trailed lifelessly behind him” (17). Gregor has been symbolically castrated by his father; in “castrating” Gregor, his father reasserts his claim over the mother, the sister, and the domestic kingdom as well. Gregor had stepped into the role of the father by working for the family’s maintenance, and assuming the responsibility of providing for his mother and sister. With the beating, Gregor’s father therefore emasculates his son and reclaims the role of patriarch and provider for himself.

What is particularly interesting about this resolution to the Oedipal conflict is the possibility of Gregor’s complicity in his punishment. Freud’s theory of the Oedipal complex included a “fantasy of punishment,” the need to be absolved from guilt from a perceived (and typically sexual) transgression (Barfi 108). In Gregor’s case, that transgression would be his subconscious sexual desire for his mother and sister. As previously noted, Freud theorized that this normal stage of psychosexual development—or psychosexual awareness, part of the identity-forming process—could be arrested for various reasons, leaving the individual mired in
subconscious guilt which then manifested in masochism or a pathological desire to be punished (Freud, “Child” 185, 193). Guilt and emotional indebtedness were of interest to Kafka for personal reasons; his relationship with his own father was apparently an exercise in guilt and dominance that may have been mirrored in the relationship between Gregor and his father. By all accounts, Kafka’s father was a domestic tyrant to Kafka’s mother and sisters alike, while Kafka’s relationship with his mother was a close and loving one (Barfi 108). Kafka also suffered from a lack of self-confidence and blamed this on his father; in one letter to him, Kafka wrote: “Out of these many occasions where, in your clearly expressed opinion, I deserved a thrashing but was spared by your mercy—again, intense feelings of guilt. From every side, I was in your debt” (qtd. in Barfi 109).

Kafka’s interest in Freudian psychoanalysis being well-established, it seems inevitable that Kafka would have examined his own life against Freud’s theories, and while there is apparently no overt evidence that Kafka harbored masochistic tendencies, he would have been well aware of Freud’s linking of guilt with the masochistic impulse. There is also ample intertextual evidence that masochistic punishment was of particular interest to Kafka.

Beyond Kafka’s letters, diary entries, and written commentaries on erotic literature, there is a clear connection between The Metamorphosis and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s influential masochistic novella Venus in Furs (Schaffner, “Seasick” 80). The male protagonist of the latter desires to become the slave of the female object of his infatuation—a “slavery” that becomes progressively more humiliating at the protagonist’s request. Masochism was a repeated theme in Sacher-Masoch’s works, of which Venus in Furs was the most famous; Austrian psychiatrist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing noted that his patients “referred to Venus im Pelz as the most accurate portrayal of their own desires,” and coined the term “masochism” from the author himself (Lang 22). There has been some disagreement among scholars regarding Sacher-Masoch’s influence on Kafka, largely due to a perceived lack of evidence—although, given the backlash surrounding James Hawes’s work on Kafka’s collection of erotica, the preservation of Kafka as an object of literary veneration cannot be discounted. Nevertheless, and despite this apparent whitewashing of Kafka’s thematic interests, there are two important details that connect Kafka’s work with Sacher-Masoch: Gregor Samsa’s framed picture of the woman in...
furs (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 3), and the very name of his protagonist.

The significance of the picture of the woman in furs is one of the less subtle details in the novella, heavy in its sexual symbolism, particularly its centrality to the scene where Grete and her mother set about clearing the furniture from Gregor’s room:

His sister immediately noticed the new entertainment of crawling about the room, that Gregor had devised for himself—his peregrinations left behind sticky trails here and there—and [when] she got it into her head [to remove] the furniture that impeded his movement . . . he burst out of hiding . . . changing direction four times as he raced about, for he really didn’t know what to save first, but then his eyes lit on the picture of the lady clad all in furs . . . and quickly he made his way up to it and pressed himself against the glass, which adhered to him, pleasantly cool against his hot belly. (26, 28-29)

The sexual connotations in the scene are almost comedic; they briefly transform Kafka’s work into something approaching bawdy farce—Kafka’s broad wink at *Venus in Furs*. In addition, the name of his protagonist has a further connection with Sacher-Masoch’s work. The main character of *Venus in Furs*, Severin, has a metamorphosis of his own. He is transformed from “an independent gentleman into a butler, complete with livery and servant quarters and obliged to obey the most outrageous commands of his mistress” and takes the new name of Gregor; Sacher-Masoch takes pains to explain that the new name—and therefore the new identity and subsequent loss of self—marks the beginning of the protagonist’s “descent into humiliation” (Angress 746). Gregor Samsa, of course, suffers his own loss of self and humiliations as a result of his metamorphosis; Gregor’s transformation is the “punishment for his servile character and sado-masochistic tastes, to which the Venus in furs picture alludes” (Schaffner, “Seasick” 85). The connection between Kafka’s work and *Venus in Furs*, and the transformations of its like-named protagonists, suggests that Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis was subconsciously willed by Gregor himself—the ultimate act of masochism, submission, and punishment for his “sins.”

It is important to note, however, that despite some scattered outrage over its content when the novella was originally published, *Venus in Furs* was not considered erotica per se, but a “respectable text, written by a prized author in a key fictional form favored by the German middle class” (28, 38). Like Kafka, Sacher-Masoch appeared to have an alternative, literary motive; his interest in masochistic tendencies was less an exploration of erotic desire than a commentary on the imbalance of power in romantic relationships. The male protagonist of *Venus in Furs* “literally forces the heroine to mistreat him and educates her to be his tyrant,” inverting the power balance; when a submissive forces an intimate partner to act as the dominant, the lines between dominance and submission are necessarily blurred (37). A similar power inversion can also be seen in The *Metamorphosis*, particularly between Gregor and his sister Grete. Gregor’s transformation forces Grete into the role of caregiver; she provides food for him and takes on his maintenance with a jealous fixation that brooks no interference (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 19, 35). However, it is a fixation that soon results in resentment, neglect, and Gregor’s eventual death from inattention and starvation (43). If Gregor’s transformation was self-willed—unconsciously initiated by Gregor’s deep-seated guilt for his sexual transgressions—then Gregor essentially forces Grete into the role of dominant mistress, compelling her to fulfill his incestuous fantasy. In relinquishing control, Gregor asserts control over the object of his desire.

Why did Kafka choose to weave these themes of dominance and submission through his works? They are not solely in *The Metamorphosis*; other Kafka works that share these themes include *The Man Who Disappeared*, *In the Penal Colony,* and *The Trial* (Schaffner, “Seasick” 82). It is simplistic to say that his personal tastes were the deciding factor; given his easy familiarity with and private discourse on erotica, it is likely that Kafka would have been less metaphorical in his writing if titillation had been his literary object. In his writings, however, there is nearly always an imbalance of power, and explorations of dominance and submission were frequent in Modernist literature (82-83). For many Modernist writers, guilt had been largely freed from the Judeo-Christian concept of sin, but it still required punishment; ironically, the search for the absolution and catharsis of punishment permitted the punished to regain control over their lives—a control that many felt they lacked in the atmosphere of post-WWI Europe (83). If again, Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis is seen as self-willed, albeit subconsciously, it is a
punishment that nevertheless restores some of Gregor’s control; he is, after all, freed from the burden of his humiliating job and the necessity of caring for an apparently ungrateful family (Kafka, Metamorphosis 22). Modern psychoanalytic thought on masochism, building even today on the work of Freud, theorizes that masochistic fantasy and practice can be a response to the search for meaning—a Modernist characteristic with which Kafka likely identified. In the post-WWI shattering of culture and traditions, and a general apostasy from Judeo-Christian concepts of justification, masochism created a new deity in the form of the dominant “partner,” who in turn supplied their own form of justification (Shpancer). In true Modernist fashion, Grete becomes Gregor’s “goddess,” his justification in the absence of meaning, with whom he feels “a nearly monstrous urge to . . . throw himself at [her] feet, and beg” (Kafka, Metamorphosis 19). It is the crowning paradox of masochism that in relinquishing control voluntarily, control is thereby restored. In subconsciously willing his transformation, Gregor is freed from his servile life and given an animalistic one where his transgressive desires for his mother and sister may be expressed. Unfortunately, his subconscious need to be punished for these desires, symbolized by his family’s rejection, leave him with no recourse but death, the final masochistic release.

Kafka’s interest in Freud’s psychoanalytic theories and psychosexual symbolism was both personal and artistic. While he no doubt saw elements of his own tense, guilt-laden relationship with his dominant father in the Freudian Oedipal complex and its accompanying masochistic potential, it was as a Modernist writer that Kafka’s exploration of masochism through a Freudian lens saw its fullest realization. Efforts to suppress Kafka’s interest in masochism for the sake of maintaining some rarified literary status are doing the author a disservice. Analyzing his work with a thorough understanding of his erotic interests is necessary to truly grasp the multiple layers in the cumulative body of his fiction, but most particularly in his most famous work, The Metamorphosis. Kafka’s exploration of taboo topics through metaphor—both subtle and not—marks a modernist effort to make sense of and comment on life in post-WWI Europe. Freud’s psychoanalytic theories gave Kafka the tools and the symbolic language he required to explore Modernist themes of dominance, submission, and the relinquishing and restoration of control in a world where all traditional boundaries had changed.

Works Cited

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