

# Existentialism In The Animal Stories Of Franz Kafka

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**Abstract:** Franz Kafka is one of the most prominent writers of the early twentieth century and has had an enormous impact on the literature and thought of not only Europe, but also on world literature. He is one among the major writers who dealt with the inevitable crisis- a part of life of the modern man. Though he never titled himself an existentialist, we can find the major traits of existentialism in his works- uncertainty, absurdity, alienation- to name a few. 'Individual', which constitutes the focal point of existentialism, is the centre of his work. The unique feature of Kafka's short stories is that he not only explores the crux of existentialism in the stories that portray the characters of human beings alone. There are also stories which have animals as protagonists. What is interesting in the animal stories of Kafka is that the animal protagonists express their emotions as human protagonists do. The 'Kafkaesque' atmosphere prevails even in the animal stories and serves the purpose for whatever it was coined. The current paper, through some of Kafka's animal stories, focuses on the expression of the traits of existentialism.

**Keywords:** Animal, ape, dog, jackal, monkey, mole, existentialism

Existentialism, as a movement in the fields of philosophy and literature, evolved as a result of a very strong interplay between these two disciplines. The human being is the locus and focus of this ideology. The essence of existentialism consists partly in its identification of the problems and dilemmas which stem from existence, freedom and choice. The last two concepts enable human beings to define their meaning of life in the realm of life. Freedom and choice have forced human beings to search and define the meaning of life, within the framework of their experience. What is interesting is that identical experience of different thinkers has begotten a multitude of responses. The definition of life as conceived by them is expected to make possible rational decisions despite their existence in an irrational universe and such decisions were expected to determine how humans respond to the given stimulus. Existentialists claim that action and its preconditions are expected to mark the absurd condition of humanity within the framework of man's bondage with the society.

Existentialism focuses on the question of whether or not existence is purposive, of the existential relevance or irrelevance of God, and of the possibility of any transcendental force that lends support to the view that 'man' is the sole creator of his destiny. Notwithstanding internalised ideological diversity, all arguments within the system take individual-centric stand. Existentialism accuses the philosophical traditions of the past of ignoring man and his problems. Its approach is to understand human existence not in terms of some fundamental rational concepts, as it was done by many past masters like Plato, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, etc. It showed no interest in *a priori* and an impersonal conception of reality in human sphere. Instead, it

focussed on the individual in his actual preoccupation with himself and the world. Thus, existentialism raised a revolt against all the philosophies that had ignored the human existents. For the self-realisation and self-assertion, the individual existent is stripped off his role or function and is not seen in fragments as an empirical ego, cogito, libidinal drive, but as a whole being. According to Kierkegaard,

My existence as an individual human being is not then anything to be mirrored in the concept of mind, nor is it a matter of speculation: it is rather reality in which I am personally and passionately involved. I encounter it in life; it is my life (*Irrational Man* 145).

Franz Kafka is a major writer of the modern era and his works today are categorised under the philosophy of existentialism. Kafka's protagonists struggle in their personal as well as public sphere to explore answers to the complex questions posed to him by life. Kafka's stories present not only human beings as the protagonists, but also a huge gamut of animals- apes, horses, mice, dogs, moles, jackals and the list goes on. What is interesting here is that they are different from human beings. Walter Benjamin in his *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death* writes,

You can read Kafka's animal stories for quite a while without realising that they are not about human beings at all. When you finally come upon the name of the creature-monkey, dog, mole-you look up and realise that you are already far away from the continent of man (802).

While some of the animal stories of Kafka have only animal narrators drawing us into their way of thinking, some others have not only the animal narrators, but also the human narrators who are confronted with strange unsettling creatures. From the perspective of the animals, the world of animals is very strange and off putting. Kafka's animal stories challenge our views on both human beings as well as animals. By removing us from the world of man, Kafka's texts give us a chance to rediscover this world anew.

"The new Advocate" is a story narrated by an anonymous narrator explaining about one Mr. Bucephalus, a new advocate in the bar. Very interestingly, Bucephalus was the name of the battle horse of Alexander the great. From the description of the animal lawyer it is clear that Bucephalus is the same horse of Alexander the Great, who has now come to the profession of the lawyer. As a legal professional, Bucephalus has escaped the drudgeries of the battlefield. One of the Kafkan scholars, J P Stern has observed that Kafka had "great distrust and distaste" (30) for social institutions. Stern argues that *The Trial* is "a prophetic – or rather an anticipatory – fictional account of both the concepts underlying socialist legislation and the practice of its law courts." (30) Kafka expressed his contempt for legal profession through picturing a battle horse as a lawyer. What is implied here is that the legal profession has lost its sanctity by allowing anybody and everybody into this profession.

According to William C Rubinstein, "The Jackals and Arabs" is a story that deals with the 'Jewish Question' of Kafka's milieu.

There is reason to believe that "Jackals and Arabs" is also concerned with specifically Jewish material (1)

The story seems to be a mixture of logical incongruities. At the same time it acts as a critique of humanity. The narrator of the story is a European traveller travelling across the desert along with a caravan of Arabs. As he is sitting alone at night, he is suddenly surrounded by jackals, who tell him their woeful story. They tell him they have been waiting for him for generations. They have been harassed by the unclean Arabs. The jackals want the European traveller to help them get rid of the Arabs and oust the Arabs out of that region. They even offer a pair of rusty scissors to kill them. At this juncture, the Arab leader arrives and drives the jackals with his whip. He also tells the European that these jackals have the habit of telling the same thing about the Arabs to every European who visits the place. They also offer the same pair of old scissors to kill them. To show him how contemptible these creatures are, he throws the carcass of a dead horse towards the jackals on which they feed on greedily without even realising that they are being whipped by the Arab leader. With a mixture of astonishment and contempt, the European traveller leaves with the caravan.

The story was published in Kafka's lifetime in a Jewish magazine. Many critics when published interpreted this story as a parable about Jewish question and the existence of Jews in an anti-Semitic society. It has the theme of the conflict between the Jews and non-Jews, the contemporary burning problem. The parasite jackals in the story represent the Jews and the Arabs represent the 'host nation'. The European traveller is likened to the 'Messiah' or the saviour who has the ability to save the Jews from the anti-Semitic propaganda. However, Kafka's aim in the story is to debunk the jackals' hope for the saviour from the north as hopeless and naive. The traveller here is pictured as a man who does not wish to be drawn into this matter. Kafka's views about the inability of the messiah to save the Jews from the anti-Semitic conflict are evident from a note of his in *Parables and Paradoxes*, on the messiah he writes,

The messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary, he will come only one day after his arrival, he will not come on the last day, but the last day of all (56).

"A Report to an Academy" is a story about transformation. In order to escape life in a cage, the captured ape Red Peter decides to become human, or rather adopt human behaviour. 'I had no way out but I had to device one for without it I could not live' (250)

The story is a narrative about socialization. Many have interpreted the story as an account of a child's entry into the society by imitating its parents. The act of imitation in the story is done by the captured ape Red Peter who later gains fame by the name Rotpeter. At another level, the story is the representation of the Darwinist principle, 'survival of the fittest' or 'survival through adaptation'.

The animal protagonist of the story is Red Peter. He is a captured animal who mimics human beings to gain a better standard of living. His first role models are the sailors on the ship, from whom he learns the art of smoking, drinking and spitting. Red Peter does not stop at this point. He continues to learn some more polished arts from human beings. His greatest accomplishment learnt from human beings is that of a lecture which he delivers. The entire text is a monologue of Red Peter famously known as Rotpeter. The text was also meant for the stage as a dramatic monologue.

Rotpeter delivers a lecture in front of the academy members regarding his journey- the journey from his life as an ape in the jungle to his present life as a member of the human society. This is an account of the transformation from his ape-self to not-ape-self, for nowhere in the story, we have the acceptance of Rotpeter into human society as a human being. He is not regarded as an animal and is the star of the variety show. He has the capacity to mimic human beings perfectly, but has none to reach the human level. He has successfully lost his animalness but has not completely gained humanness. He has gained an identity other than the one meant for the animals. He even claims to his human audience that he is probably more evolved than they are. He says,

Your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be further removed from you than mine is from me (259).

His bold claim fits well with an arrogance that appears to be a necessary part of his performance as a human. He is least interested in his own judgement by the humans and does not need their acceptance, simply their acquiescence. In his long speech he never expresses his desire to gain freedom from his apedom, but says he just needed a 'way out' from his previous self. He emphasises,

.....freedom is not that I wanted....I repeat: there was no attraction for me in imitating human beings; I imitated them because I needed a way out, and for no other reason (263).

This is the story of the single mindedness of an ape which really survives through its hard work and cleverness. But somewhere, there lies a point, where the ape has no fixed dominion. It neither belongs to the human world nor to the animal world. As soon as it enters home, it is reminded of its original self by its ape wife. But it has come so far in its present life that it can hardly think of its past self and can hardly see the door through which it can go back to its past life. Rotpeter is a very pragmatic hero of Franz Kafka compared to his human protagonists. Joseph K of *The Trial* is obsessed with gaining his freedom and K in *The Castle* with gaining an entry into the castle, both of which prove futile. Rotpeter on the other hand survives because he has accepted the constraints of his existence. As he concludes, "I feel more comfortable and in the human world" (287).



Mathew T Powell in his “Bestial Representation of Otherness: Kafka’s Animal stories”, has looked into this story from the perspective of Jewish problem (135). The young Jews during Kafka’s time were critical of the ways of their parents trying to get assimilated into the mainstream of western society, thereby forgetting their own religious and cultural roots. This story shows Kafka’s own inclination towards proclaiming his Jewish identity. Here Rotpeter illustrates the cost of assimilation. Though this view was expressed during Kafka’s lifetime itself, Kafka himself resisted the allegorical reading of the story.

“Investigations of a Dog”, though an animal narrative, is a story about human existence. Here the narrator dog separates himself from the canine community and starves in the hope of discovering the answer to the question, where the food comes from.

Solitary and withdrawn with nothing to occupy me save my hopeless, but as far as I am concerned, indispensable little investigations, that is how I live (“Investigations of a Dog”: *The Complete Stories* 285).

Kafka wrote this parable after taking voluntary retirement from his work. It gave him ample freedom to pursue his career of writing. At the same time, it made him focus on the questions of his newly found freedom, his persisting illness, his identity and social relationships. The story is an investigation into his critical condition. His own obligation of investigating into his self is evident from the following excerpt from his diary.

This inescapable duty to observe oneself; if someone else is observing me, naturally I have to observe myself too; if no one observes me, I have to observe myself all the closer (“Investigations of a Dog”: *The Complete Stories* 295).

The basic question that Kafka perennially investigated was what justification could be given to his own life of dedication to writing and reflection in contrast to the productive ordinary life of others. Kafka’s dog narrator also investigates the same question. He dedicates his life to ultimately fruitless investigation about the origin of food for the dogs. In the process of investigation, he examines seven dogs which produce music. Then he comes across the aerial dogs, which seem to live up in the air always floating at rest. The narrator in the process of investigating an answer to this question starves almost to death only to be roused from his fast by a hunting dog which drives him away.

The narrator dog never understands the fact that the music dogs are nothing but the circus dogs and the aerial dogs are nothing but the lap dogs or the pet dogs which get food from their human owners. The irony that lies here is that the investigating dog is not at all aware of human beings. He will never be successful in his investigation also as he will be probing into a question for which he will never find an answer. Kafka’s story is an ironic commentary on the search for knowledge, whose very nature is enigmatic.

This story also has got social connotations. The narrator dog though undertakes the investigation for the good of the entire dog community, never feels easy with his own pack. He distances away from his canine community. The artist characters of Kafka, the trapeze artist, the hunger artist and Josephine, the mouse singer can be compared with the dog narrator. The artist characters who though live in the midst of their folk, constantly try to distance themselves away from them. A very precarious theme of the individual and his or her relationship with the community which is a recurring theme in the stories of Kafka finds its expression here.

Some animal stories of Kafka evoke a sense of entrapment experienced by the protagonists. Isolation and Confinement which are the characters added to entrapment. This sense of entrapment is not only the result of external circumstances but also the internal conflict. The external sociological structures and the internal psychological constructs define the existential condition of a being. In a way, the feeling of entrapment becomes determinative for existential truth. The sense of entrapment experienced by the protagonist is best exemplified by “The Burrow”. The story is narrated by a burrowing animal whose existence is devoted to the maintenance, preservation and concealment of the burrow. The story explores the passionate relationship between the protagonist and his construction, his constant scrutiny and modification of the structure. Though his dream is to construct ‘completely a perfect burrow’, which would provide him utmost security and isolation, it seems to be impossible.

But the most beautiful thing about my burrow is about its stillness. Of course, that is deceptive. At any moment it may be shattered and then all will be over (330).

One day, the animal is awakened by the hissing sound. After negating various possible causes, he comes to a conclusion that the noise must be coming from an animal which has invaded his burrow. The narrator searches for the intruder in vain. In the process of searching, the narrator partially destroys the burrow. But his fear can neither be ruled out nor be confirmed. The animal is constantly worried about the outside enemies, totally unaware of the enemies coming from within. Kafka's story gives a very vivid description of these enemies.

They are beings within the depths of the earth; not even the legend can describe them, even those who become their victims have scarcely seen them; they come; you can hear their scratching just below you in the earth, which is their element, and already you are lost (349).

The readers are given a description of the behaviour of the narrator animal when he is haunted by such insecurities. In his anxious stricken search for the enemy, he hunts and kills smaller animals. He might feel the same way as his victims feel on his approach. According to Max Brod, the hissing sound produced in the story is not the sound produced by any animal, but the deep sigh of the narrator animal. The story also has the personal denotations for Kafka, for he suffered from chronic tuberculosis and he gave out a hissing sound while breathing. Other sounds, rattling and wheezing also accompanied hissing sound. Kafka called his cough 'an animal', a threatening one as his ill health always alienated from the rest of the world.

According to Caroline Duttlinger, the author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Franz Kafka*, "The Burrow" is a masterly case study of the psychodynamics of paranoia (109). One should be aware of the focus that one is making in the outer world for one's own safety. If it fails the target turns towards oneself. In the absence of the outside target, the process of self-destruction begins. The narrator of the story is entrapped in his own reasoning. Kafka's letter to Milena effectively explains the theme of "The Burrow", where he writes,

It is a road one keeps following, happier and happier, until arriving at the realization of some bright moment that one is not progressing, but simply running around inside one's labyrinth, only more nervously more confused than before (17).

Writing about the works of Kafka and commenting on his protagonists, Albert Camus writes in his *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*.

Kafka's world is in truth an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the tormented luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come of it (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* 82).

When we study the works of Kafka and make an attempt to analyse the situation of the protagonists, the above statement of Camus sounds apt. On the very outset, in the first reading, Kafka's narrative creates a sort of confusion in the readers for the unusual and unheard of places occurring in his narratives and the characters face the situations which rather sound unnatural. But with the subsequent readings, we get the rhythm of the narration and successfully comprehend the gravity and the intensity of the situation in which the characters are placed. Astonishingly we tend to feel that more or less the situation of every individual is the same in the world. Interestingly, the way in which we cannot separate the author from his heroes, the same way, the readers too tend to attach themselves with the characters of the novels and the stories of Kafka in several matters.

The existential status of the protagonists of Kafka is qualified by a very noble virtue, 'Steadfastness' that gives a new dimension to the attitude of his protagonists. As we have already discussed, Kafka's protagonists cannot be separated from their creator. As Kafka struggled to fight with the conflicts, both inner and those associated with the outside world, they too confronted such conflicts. But they show a deep sense of steadfastness in combating them. It may be Joseph K of *The Trial*, K of *The Castle* or Gregor Samsa of *The Metamorphosis* – to name a few. Joseph K shows a great deal of dignity even at the face of his impending death, coming to know about the impossibility of attaining his goal of becoming the land surveyor, K never stops his efforts to accomplish the same and the same is true with Gregor Samsa when he dies an orphaned death as an insect.

The animal protagonists of Kafka -the horse lawyer Bucephalus in his uncertainty, the jackals in their powerlessness and oppressed state, human turned ape Red Peter in challenging the notion of identity, the philosophical investigator dog in his search for knowledge and in the pursuit of truth and the paranoid rabbit like creature in its isolation suffer from the existential angst and are constantly tormented by the indifferent and dehumanised world. But they make these situations the means for their emancipation. In short, anxiety, despair and the sense of forlornness does not altogether make them pessimistic. The uniqueness of Kafka's animal heroes lies in their firm and unwavering attitude in their struggle to come out of the nightmarish situations. In fact, Kafka by creating such characters successfully reconstructs the philosophy of existentialism.

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