

Havoc's Children: The Dog Days of Thereafter

Kafka Space  
by

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## Abstract

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Kafka Space - Havoc's Children: The Dog Days of Thereafter

Thesis directed by Professor Stephen Graham Jones

### Kafkaesque:

The fact that such a term exists implies that there is a unifying quality to the manner in which Franz Kafka chose to handle the element of space in his work. After a thorough review of some of his bibliography it became apparent to me that if such a unifying quality exists, it is perhaps most obvious and definable by the pervasive presence of absence. In many of Kafka's novels and works of short fiction, descriptions of space are almost entirely omitted. Entire narratives take place in a single room, often described as simply "a room". Horizons are identified merely as "the horizon". Kafka employs such a minimalist descriptive style in relationship to the element of space that it is what is not said about the worlds he created that is often more interesting than what is.

There are a few notable exceptions to Kafka's absence space in his work. While these bursts of illustrative language hardly seem notable during a time where realism in literature is quite ordinary, they are fairly rare in Kafka's work.

## Description of a Struggle

**Synopsis:** An obsessive middling bureaucrat drags his lovesick coworker out of a bar and tries to get him to open up about his new girlfriend. As they cavort through the night streets, physics and causality seem to become fluid. They stop by the banks of stream to talk with an obese man being carried around on a litter. The fat man tells the travelers about a strange religious fellow he once knew who was a self-flagellation enthusiast. His story complete, the fat man drowns in the river, sad and alone. The two walkers then find themselves a nice spot on the Laurenziberg mountainside where some stabbing takes place.

### **Space:**

*And People in their Sunday best*

*Stroll about, swaying over the gravel*

*Under this enormous sky*

*Which, from hills in the distance,*

*Stretches to distant hills*

Kafka put this somewhat lackluster poem at the beginning of Description of a Struggle. Already, it is apparent that space and people's relation to that space is going to be an important consideration for understanding this piece.

The first reference to space in the body proper of this work is a brief description of the inside of a bar. None of the descriptions of this first area (the bar) stand alone, that is, Kafka chose to illustrate the first area by describing people's relationship to it rather than provide any kind of direct exposition. This is a method Kafka employs in many of his works. Understanding

Kafka space requires readers to carefully extrapolate information from sentences seemingly unrelated to spatial description.

*“At about midnight a few people rose, bowed, shook hands, said it had been a pleasant evening, and passed through the wide doorway into the vestibule, to put on their coats. – Then I saw my new acquaintance somewhat disheveled and out of shape, appear at the doorpost of an adjoining room – In the vestibule stood a housemaid, whom we hadn’t seen before. She helped us with our coats and then took a small lantern to light us down the stairs. – in the weak lamplight which filled the whole stairwell, I could see her lips trembling.”*

A room attached to one or more adjoining rooms with a wide doorway that leads to a vestibule. The vestibule has a dark stairway that leads to the street. That is all we can reasonably infer about this first Kafka space. We are provided with slightly more information about the people and objects within this space, but not much. The bar has no character and no memorable features other than the people in it. It is the lack of details, the intentional absence of description, that defines this and many other areas in Kafka’s stories.

Having exited the minimalist tap house, the narrator and his friend take to the streets.

*“I fell, for there was a step which I had not expected. It made a little noise, the next street lamp was sufficiently far away, I lay in the dark – I was about to place myself under the arch of the tower bridge when it occurred to me that the moon, of course, shone on everything. So I happily spread out my arms in order fully to enjoy the moon. And by making swimming movements with my weary arms it was easy for me to advance without pain or difficulty. To think I had never tried this before! – I remembered that once upon a time I didn’t altogether like an acquaintance, who was probably still walking below me, and the only thing that pleased me*

*about the whole business was that my memory was good enough to remember even a thing like that. But I couldn't afford to do much thinking, for I had to go on swimming to prevent myself from sinking too low. However, to avoid being told later that anyone could swim on the pavement and that it wasn't worth mentioning, I raised myself above the railing by increasing my speed and swam circles around the statue of every saint I encountered."*

If Kafka were a realist or a post-modernist (if such a thing exists) a reader could infer that these supernatural interactions with space were simply the result of a narrator who had drunk too much schnapps. Here, while we are given many reasons to doubt the beneficence of the narrator, we have no reason to doubt his interactions with space. He literally (in every sense of the word) takes a moment to swim through the streets, an act that should, of course, be physically impossible. By taking this surreal plunge, Kafka directly addresses an inherent paradox of space constructed of language: ultimately, there is nothing to it. Space in fiction is defined by the writer and because this story is being told from the first person perspective, the only limitations that apply to the world are the ones that the narrator chooses to accept. It occurs to him to swim through the streets and so he is able to.

This is not the only place where the narrator takes an active hand in shaping his environment. When the duo reaches the mountain roads, the narrator jumps on his partner's shoulders and begins to define his space by sheer proclamation.

*"The road on which I was riding was stony and rose considerably, but just this I liked and I let it become still stonier and steeper. As soon as my acquaintance stumbled I pulled him up by the collar and the moment he sighed I boxed his head. In doing so I felt how healthy this ride in the good air was for me, and in order to make him wilder I let a strong wind blow against*

*us in long gusts. – Only when the sky became gradually hidden by the branches of the trees, which I let grow along the road, did I come to myself.—I lay down on a branch and, leaning my head against the trunk, went hastily to sleep while a squirrel of my whim sat stiff-tailed at the trembling end of a branch, and rocked itself.”*

The narrator lets the road become stonier and steeper. He lets a strong wind blow. He lets trees grow along the road. The squirrel on the branch above him is no natural rodent, but instead a squirrel of his whim. Here, the narrator does not so much occupy space as he does call it into being. If he and his abused companion were not on the mountain road to tell it to be steeper and stonier and windier, how would that space be defined? It couldn't be. If a tree falls alone in Kafka space it can't make a noise because no one is there to hear it and describe it, not even whimsical squirrels.

When the travelers reach a mountain stream the narrator pauses to take in his surroundings. The description provided is uncharacteristically specific for Kafka.

*“The river was wide and its noisy little waves reflected the light. On the other shore lay meadows which farther on merged into bushes behind which, at a great distance, one could see bright avenues of fruit trees leading to green hills.*

*Pleased by this sight, I lay down and, stopping my ears against the dread sound of sobs, I thought: Here one could be content. For here it is secluded and beautiful. – For there are only mountains and a wide river and I have sense enough to regard them as inanimate. – And all the time I blinked at that sky which was of an unusually promising color. – Ugly clouds rose from behind the mountain. The waves on the river creaked and receded from the wind.”*

There is an inherent discomfort with nature in these lines. While this is a somewhat dull description of a mountainside by most standards, it is positively radiant compared to other Kafka spaces. Within a few scant sentences the scene changes drastically. Ugly clouds blot out the promising sky and drag the narrator's view back to his more immediate surroundings. One also recalls the poem from the beginning of the piece. The enormous sky seems consciously intent on breaking its promise of stretching to distant hills.

Without warning, a tertiary character trundles into the story. The fat man and his retinue of miserable toadies appear out of the woods quite randomly. Chapter 2 subsection "a" is appropriately titled "An address to the Landscape" wherein the fat man offers the following paean to the space around them.

*"Mountain, I do not love you, for you remind me of the clouds, of the sunset, of the rising sky, and these are things that almost make me cry because one can never reach them while being carried on a small litter. But when showing me this, sly mountain, you block the distant view which gladdens me, for it reveals the attainable at a glance. That's why I do not love you, mountain by the water— no, I do not love you. – But it is only the mountain that is so vain, so obtrusive and vindictive – Yes, mountain, you are beautiful and the forests on your western slope delight me,— With you, flower, I am also pleased, and your pink gladdens my soul—You, grass of the meadows, are already high and strong and refreshing.— And you, exotic bushes, you prick so unexpectedly that our thoughts start leaping.—But with you, river, I am so delighted that I will let myself be carried through your supple water. – But now—I implore you—mountain, flowers, grass, bush, and river, give me some room to breathe."*

It is interesting to note that after this elongated exaltation to the environment, the environment serves as the medium for the fat man's suffocation. Again, discomfort and a seemingly dichotomous attitude toward nature is clearly present in these lines. Again, we are called back to poem at the beginning with its enormous sky. As visitors of Kafka spaces, readers can sympathize with fat man. His laments about the obscuring and unattainable qualities of the subject of his address (the landscape) surely mirror our own understandable frustrations with Kafka space. and with nature – recall to poem. Interestingly, contrary to the narrator's earlier assertion that mountain landscape is inanimant, space, seems willing to respond to the fat man's address.

*“At that moment the surrounding mountains began to shift in hasty obedience, then withdrew behind a curtain of fog. Although the avenues stood firm for a while and guarded the width of the road, they soon merged into one another. In the sky in front of the sun lay a humid cloud with a delicately transparent edge in whose shade the country sank deeper and deeper while everything else lost its lovely outline.”*

-vivid description followed by highlight of litter bearers plight. Remember how sparse things were in the beginning.

What follows from there is a multi layered description of several backstories. Space within space within space. Then a return to the mountain and watch the fat man subsection drown and get back to their conversation/ self stabbing.

*“As though our sorrow had darkened everything, we sat high up on the mountain as in a small room, although a little earlier we had already noticed the light and wind of the morning. We sat close together in spite of not liking one another at all, but we couldn't move far apart*

*because the walls were firmly and definitely drawn. We could, however, behave absurdly and without human dignity, for we didn't have to be ashamed in the presence of the branches above us and the trees standing opposite us.”*

What happens on the mountain apparently stays on the mountain. Immediately after, stab city. Diversity of treatment of space. Written at age 20. Distant hills lead to distant hills, space is easy to change impossible to change, permanent and only in existence as it is relevant to the people observing it. Nothing about Kafka space is “attainable at a glance”, as the author put it. Even absent or extremely sparse descriptions of space, seem to have hidden relevance in this work. What that relevance might be is anyone’s guess. Early work, but many of the treatments of space found in Description of a Struggle are repeated throughout Kafka’s career.

### **The Metamorphosis**

**Synopsis:** Gregor Samsa, a middling bureaucrat, awakes one morning to discover that he has become a large bug. This transformation has an immediate and negative effect on his employment situation and his relationship with his family. Some awkwardness occurs as his doting sister rearranges the furniture in his room. A particularly embarrassing incident transpires when Gregor scares away a number of paying renters. His family, including his sister, eventually declares that he is absolutely no good. Whereupon, Gregor dies, sad and alone. Everyone still alive looks to the future optimistically.

### **Space:**

*“His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out – hung a picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a*

*pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady with a fur cap on and a fur stone, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!”*

A lot of real estate devoted to this description in the second paragraph of an already face paced story. Vulgar exclamation point. Demands importance. Again, we start with a rather banal space. We know that there is a window showing an overcast sky and the start of rain. The room contains a bed, a writing desk, a carpet, and little else. Its a room, a small one, with a giant bug in it. Easy to picture, all good hypothetical questions are.

The door. Who is in, who is out, boss shows up. Almost a comedy, but hard to laugh at. The room is next to two other rooms, described only as the left-hand room and right-hand room. Family literally cheers him on for opening the door. Once they get the door open, nothing good happens.

As soon as they do, boss retreats, family is shocked and mom, for some reason opens a window.

*“Behind his father, his mother had torn open a window, despite the cold weather, and was leaning far out of it with her face in her hands. A strong draught set in from the street to the staircase, the window curtains blew in, the newspapers on the table fluttered, stray pages whisked over the floor.”*

A vacuum. What is outside but overcast and rain. Where do people go and come from? It seems noteworthy that when this initial confrontation takes place, Gregor’s father responds by shooing back into his room rather than sweeping him out the front door and into the street.

Family settles in to life with a large bug. Once again, doors and access take a central position in the text.

*“Once during the long evening one of the side doors was opened a little and quickly shut again, later the other side door too; someone had apparently wanted to come in and then thought better of it. Gregor now stationed himself immediately before the living-room door, determined to persuade any hesitating visitor to come in or at least to discover who it might be; but the door was not opened again and he waited in vain. In the early morning, when the doors were locked, they had all wanted to come in, now that he had opened one door and the other had apparently been opened during the day, no one came in and even the keys were on the other side of the doors.”*

A question of access. Why not leave? Why wouldn't all of them leave? Characters relationship to Kafka space reveals the anti-realist tendencies in Kafka's work. A definitively modernist concept? Ask the experts, but certainly a deliberate gaming of descriptive method, a deliberate practice. Grammar grammar

Sister is the only one to keep entering the room on a regular basis, usually just to feed Gregor more trash. The cook quits and no one wants to stay in the house but no one wants to leave it alone either. People keep leaving the house. Parents seek gainful employment. No doctor comes, and no locksmith either. If the world is still turning outside the small home, the reader would have no way of knowing it. The bug Gregor can only watch the world slide out of view.

“For in reality day by day things that were even a little way off were growing dimmer to his sight; the hospital across the street, which he used to execrate for being all too often before

his eyes, was now quite beyond his range of vision, and if he had not known that he lived in Charlotte Street, a quiet street but still a city street, he might have believed that his window gave on a desert waste where gray sky and gray land blended indistinguishably into each other.”

We don't even get a horizon. Conventional medical wisdom suggests that transformation into a large insect is, in fact, a valid reason to seek professional healthcare. Gregor's family may be poor, but they are not so poor that they can't afford to walk across the street in search of aid.

What does Gregor want? Other than to feel the cooling glass of his muff lady against his bug belly? He looks outside, but doesn't go outside. He is finicky about his food and the feng shui of his room but never makes much of an effort to communicate, beyond defiling his premises with footprints on the walls and piles of insect dooky.

It's obvious that Gregor is not only a giant cockroach, but he is also a complete loser. The longer he spends haunting his bedroom the more his family comes to resent him. His mom and sister give up trying to figure out what furniture configuration will be best for Gregor and start using his room to store unused brickabrack/ detritus. Gregor's room becomes absolutely full of filth, filth that Gregor rolls in to instill guilt in his family. When Gregor commits the ultimate sin and lets himself be seen by outsiders, that is the straw that breaks the camels back. Or rather, that is the apple that breaks the insect's back.

Sister leads the charge to excommunicate the insect. They lock him in his room where he dies and shrivels up, to be thrown out with the next day's garbage. Mom throws out the borders and dad fires the chamberwoman, then all three of them leave the space permanently.

“All three of them left the apartment together, which was more than they had done for months, and went by tram into the open country outside the town. The tram, in which they were

the only passengers, was filled with warm sunshine. – The greatest immediate improvement in their condition would of course arise from moving to another house; they wanted to take a smaller and cheaper but also better situated and more easily run apartment than the one they had, which Gregor had selected.”

Again, space is defined by characters link to it rather than by elaborate description. Unreal, crying out for importance, but ultimately indecipherable. Classic Kafka, perhaps only rivaled in the Trial for its sparce descriptions.

Human

### **In the Penal Colony**

The narrator, an explorer, famous Western investigator, and all around middling bureaucrat from out of town is called upon to witness a peculiar and gruesome execution. The method to be employed is a magical murder machine that scratches the condemnds alleged sin into their flesh until they die of exanguinashion. () doesn't think much of this methoed of execution and declines to write a fluff piece on the practice for his periodical. The local constable, a long standing proponent of the machine, is quite upset by the regection and proceeds to climb onto the thing himself. He dies, sad and alone, and the machine falls apart. () and two terciary characters retire to a nearby pub for a drink. Afterword, () avoids any further awkwardness by departing the island

### **Space:**

An execution is at hand, but not one that seems to be terribly interesting to anyone. Even the space where this story takes place seems inherently bored with the impending butchery.

“Nor did the colony itself betray much interest in this execution. At least, in the small sandy valley, a deep hollow surrounded on all sides by naked crags, there was no one present save the officer, the explorer, the condemned man, -- and the soldier. The condemned man looked so like a submissive dog that one might have thought he could be left to run free on the surrounding hills—On one side of the pit the excavated soil had been piled up in a rampart, on the other side of it stood the apparatus”

A surprising splash of adjectives, familiar surrounding hills. Almost like a video game environment. We also know that this story takes place on an island. Stark, but not quite as stark as the bar at the beginning of Description of a struggle.

The apparatus gets a very thorough description. Almost seems like something that could be built. The Harrow, built with a spanner. A mouse trap like process

The space is only alive, functioning and well defined when it was popular.

“Anyhow, the machine is still working and it is still effective in itself. It is effective in itself even though it stands alone in this valley. And he corpse still falls at the last into the pit with an incomprehensibly gentle wafting motion, even though there are no hundreds of people swarming around like flies as formerly. In those days we had to put a strong fence around it, but it has long since been torn down.” – The officer

Description in the past tense, a little unusual.

The officer goes on and on about how swell his skin descraperator is and tries to convince the explorer to support expanding the program. Explorer rejects these advances. The officer doesn't take it well, kills himself. The story comes to an obvious end when the apparatus goes

all Killroy and shakes itself apart. There is some brief awkwardness between the three surviving men, they retire to a nearby teahouse.

“In the ground floor of the house was a deep, low, cavernous space, its walls and ceiling blacked with smoke, it was open to the road all along its length. Although this teahouse was very little different from the other houses of the colony, which were all very dilapidated even up to the commandant’s palatial headquarters, it made on the explorer the impression of a historic tradition of some kind, and he felt the power of past days. He went near it, followed by his companions, right up between the empty tables that stood in the street before it, and breathed the cool heavy air of the interior.”

It turns out to be the final resting place of the ex-commandant, designer and chief proponent of the apparatus and its place in the local justice system. His grave is set into the teahouse floor under a table. On it are inscribed the following words:

“Here rests the old Commandant. His adherents, who now must be nameless, have dug his grave and set up this stone, There is a prophecy that after a certain number of years the Commandant will rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait!”

A very vivid space, and the obvious importance of the grave stone is impossible to avoid. The explorer beats a hasty retreat. Why? Who can say? Leaves the island.

## **The Burrow**

### **Synopsis:**

A carnivorous burrowing animal describes his neurosis and gives a detailed description of the warren he has dug out for himself.

**Space:** This story, although an incomplete story, is a unique piece for Kafka. Non-human narrator, all about space. Unlike other Kafka spaces the burrow in *The Burrow* is a clearly defined area. The mole narrator

“All that can be seen from the outside is a big hole; that, however, really leads nowhere; if you take a few steps you strike against natural firm rock. I can make no boast of having contrived this ruse intentionally; it is simply the remains of one of my many abortive building attempts, but finally it seemed to me advisable to leave this one hole without filling it in. True, some ruses are so subtle that they defeat themselves.”

A hole that leads nowhere, that is an appropriate summary of the entire story. Indeed, this is perhaps one of the most concise and forthright definitions of Kafka space that I have ever encountered. Very concerned with access and appearances. More of a writer than a mole. Irony

The narrator mole defines his space as:

“The most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness. Of course, that is deceitful. At any moment it may be shattered and then all will be over. For the time being however, the silence is still with me. For hours I can stroll through the passages and hear nothing except the rustling of some little creature, which I immediately reduce to silence with my jaws, or the pattering of soil which draws my attention to the need for repair; otherwise all is still.”

Silence, detachment, small meaningless death, yes we are clearly in a Kafka space. Underground, in the burrow, the space is always the same, fixed.

“The fragrance of wood floats in; the place feels both warm and cool.--

; if you take a few steps you strike against natural firm rock

Quality of the soil.

Hard work, often changing mind about defensive tactics/ store room redistribution.

Despite pathological descriptions of where all the rooms are, the constant changing of those rooms makes the space quite unmappable.

“My constant preoccupation with defensive measures involves a frequent alteration or modification, though within narrow limits, of my views on how the building can best be organized for that end. Then it sometimes seems risky to make the Castle Keep the basis of defense; the ramifications of the burrow present me with manifold possibilities, and it seems more in accordance with prudence to divide up my stores somewhat, and put part of them in certain of the smaller rooms; thereupon I mark off every third room, let us say, as a reserve store-room, or every fourth room as a main and every second as an auxiliary store-room, and so forth.”

Very deliberate description, but also oddly imprecise. Pages of similar description and his relationship to that ever changing space. All changes to the burrow are matters of rather extensive self reflection and deep angst on the part of the mole narrator. At one point, when debating how to divide his pantry of mole goods, the narrator says the following.

“Besides, it is stupid but true that one’s self conceit suffers if one cannot see all one’s stores together, and so at one glance know how much one possess.”

It turns out that the mole is the middling bueracrate of the animal kingdom. Sleep schedules, efficiency reviews, mole is concerned strictly with functionality rather than astectic, not unlike a certain modernist from Prauge.

“Once more I let my passages lead me where they will, I come to more and more remote ones that I have not yet seen since my return, and that are quite unsullied by my scratching paws, and whose silence rises up to meet me and inks into me. I do not surrender to it, I hurry on. I do not know what I wantm probably simply to put off the hour, I stray so far that I find myself at the labrynth; the idea of listening beneath the mos covering tempts me; such distant things, distant for the moment, chain my interest.”

The beast beneath. Am I in someone elses tunnel? Etc

Nothing happens beyond a little walking around and fretting

“I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful.” These are the first words of The Burrow, but by the end it is clear that the burrow is doomed to be perpetually unsuccessful and incomplete. We can’t rely on the narrator of this subterranean introspection, anymore than we can trust the ever shifting walls of his den. The Burrow is one of the most vivid and complex examples of Kafka space.

The story is not really complete -

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