

**Ministry of Higher Education  
and Scientific Research  
University of Al-Qadisiyah  
College of Education  
Department of English**

**Unreliable Narration in Franz Kafka's**  
***The Metamorphosis***

**Submitted By:**

**Kawther Ali**

**Fatima Falah**

**Supervised By:**

**Instructor . Ahmed Saad Aziz (Ph D)**

## *DEDICATION*

*TO :*

Our reason of what we become today ,

For a debt we can never repay.

It is the will of Allah, the merciful God, to surround us with brilliant and supportive people .Word are not enough to express how grateful we are to our supervisor, **Dr. Ahmed Saad** .His comments and precious guidance have been indispensably valuable .

We record our sincere gratitude to our family for their love, patience and support during the period of preparing this work.

Finally, we are grateful to all those who have helped us in carrying out this work.

## DEDICATION

ii

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

iii

## CONTENTS

iv

## ABSTRACT

v

## Chapter One

### Franz Kafka's Life and Career

1

### Notes

7

## CHAPTER TWO

Unreliable Narration in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* 8

Notes 15

CONCLUSION 17

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

18

## ABSTRACT

A narrator whose perception or interpretation of events in a narrative doesn't correspond with the perceptions of the audience. *The Metamorphosis* is considered modernist fiction, a widely read novella from Franz Kafka. The story follows Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who works to provide for his parents and sister. One morning he awakens to find that he has been transformed into a monstrous insect.

The narrator describes the story from the viewpoint of Gregor, but seemingly offers an objective or factual description of what happens. We read what Gregor sees, what he thinks, what he feels, what he says or wants to say, what he hears. And we read what his family does once he has died. The tone is morally neutral, thus deliberately allowing the reader to make up their own mind as to the meaning and moral of the story. Besides, the beauty of Kafka's story lies in that although he never provides an explanation as to why Gregor has turned into a giant insect, this does not matter. The reader at first cannot help wondering why and how this has happened and indeed, Gregor and his family (his mother mainly) keep on hoping this is merely a temporary situation, and that all will get back to normal in due course. Readers never understand why or how this has happened, but by the end of the story, the why is no longer important.

This research divided into two chapters. Chapter one deals with Franz Kafka's life and career. Chapter two Unreliable Narration in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Finally the conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Franz Kafka's Life and Career**

Franz Kafka is one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century he was born in July 3, 1883. He was born into a Jewish family in the city of Prague. Kafka was graduated from secondary school in 1901 and began his studies at the German University of Prague with a major in law. In 1902 he met another student, Max Brod, who would later become his close friend and confidant .<sup>1</sup>

Kafka completed his legal program in 1906; after a law practicum, he found a job with the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute. In 1907 Kafka took a position at an insurance office in Prague following his graduation from college. It was a terrible fit from the start, with Kafka forced to work a tiring schedule that left little time for his writing.<sup>2</sup>

He lasted at the agency a little less than a year. He quickly found a new job with the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia after turning in his resignation from the agency. As much as any work could, the job and his employers suited Kafka, who worked hard and became his boss's right-hand man. Kafka remained with the company until 1917, when a bout with tuberculosis forced him to take a sick leave and to eventually retire in 1922.<sup>3</sup>

At work Kafka was a popular employee, He had a social personality and a sense of humor. But his personal life still raged with complications. His inhibitions and insecurities plagued his relationships. Twice he was engaged to marry his girlfriend, Felice Bauer, before the two finally went their separate ways in 1917. Later, Kafka later fell in love with Dora Dymant, who shared his Jewish roots and a preference for socialism. Amidst Kafka's increasingly dire health, the two fell in love and lived together in Berlin. Their relationship largely centered on Kafka's illnesses.<sup>4</sup>

For many years, Kafka had not been well, even before he contracted tuberculosis. Constantly strained and stressed, he suffered from migraines, boils, depression, anxiety and insomnia. Kafka and Dora eventually returned to Prague. In an attempt to overcome his tuberculosis, Kafka traveled to Vienna for treatment at a sanatorium.<sup>5</sup>

His most popular and best-selling short story, "The Metamorphosis," was completed in 1912 and published in 1915. The story was written from Kafka's third-floor room, which offered a direct view of the Vltava River and its toll bridge. Kafka followed up "The Metamorphosis" with *Mediation*, a collection of short stories, in 1913, and "Before the Law," a parable within his novel *The Trial*, written between 1914 and 1915.<sup>6</sup>

Even with his worsening health, Kafka continued to write. In 1916 he completed "The Judgment," which spoke directly about the relationship he shared with his father. Later works included "In the Penal Colony" and "A Country Doctor," both finished in 1919.<sup>7</sup>

In 1924, an ill but still working Kafka finished *A Hunger Artist*, which features four stories that demonstrate the concise and lucid style that marked his writing at the end of his life. But Kafka, still living with the demons that plagued with him self-doubt, was reluctant to unleash his work on the world. He requested that Brod, who doubled as his literary executor, destroy any unpublished manuscripts.<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, Brod did not adhere to his friend's wishes and in 1925 published *The Trial*, a dark, paranoid tale that proved to be the author's most successful novel. The story centers on the life of Joseph K., who is forced to defend himself in a hopeless court system against a crime that is never revealed to him or to the reader.<sup>9</sup>

The following year, Brod released *The Castle*, which again railed against a faceless and dominating bureaucracy. In the novel, the protagonist, whom the reader knows only as K., tries to meet with the mysterious authorities who rule his village. In 1927, the novel *Amerika* was published. The story hinges on a boy, Karl Rossmann, who is sent by his family to America, where his innocence and simplicity are exploited everywhere he travels.<sup>10</sup>

*Amerika* struck at the same father issues that were prevalent in so much of Kafka's other work. But the story also spoke to Kafka's love of travel books and memoirs and his longing to see the world. Kafka died in Kierling, Austria, on June 3, 1924. He was buried beside his parents in Prague's New Jewish Cemetery in Olsanske. In 1931, Brod published the short story "The Great Wall of China," which Kafka had originally crafted 14 years before.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike many famous writers, Kafka is rarely quoted by others. Instead, he is



noted more for his visions and perspective .Franz Kafka created fictional worlds in which characters try to make sense of a nightmarish world.Kafka's writing style seems simple and straightforward, but it's full of philosophizing about the absurdity of life. It's not easy to understand one of his stories with only one reading. The term "Kafkaesque" refers to the style in which he wrote and is seen by many as a synonym for "surreal."<sup>12</sup>

His story's are mostly strange, and horrifying. His works are not only fantastic and symbolic, but they are often provoking. Most of Kafka's story's are metaphorical, focusing on the nature of spirituality and the absurdity of life, He inter deep into the minds of his characters and examines their psychology and the motivation for their actions. The sentences seem to go on and on until they end with a surprising or counter intuitive twist. His ability to portrait feelings in words, so that a person can actually feel what he is expressing, is art.<sup>13</sup>

The 20th century opened with great hope but also with some apprehension, for the new century marked the final approach to a new millennium. For many, humankind was entering upon an unprecedented era .From 1908 to 1914 there was a remarkably productive period of innovation and experiment as novelists and poets undertook, in anthologies and magazines, to challenge the literary conventions not just of the recent past but of the entire post-Romantic era.<sup>14</sup>

For a brief moment, London, which up to that point had been culturally one of the dullest of the European capitals, boasted an avant-garde to rival those of

Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, even if its leading personality, Ezra Pound, and many of its most notable figures were American .<sup>15</sup>

The spirit of Modernism a radical and utopian spirit stimulated by new ideas in anthropology, psychology, philosophy, political theory, and psychoanalysis was in the air, expressed rather mutedly by the pastoral and often anti-Modern poets of the Georgian movement (1912–22) and more authentically by the English and American poets of the Imagist movement, to which Pound first drew attention in *Ripostes* (1912), a volume of his own poetry, and in *Des Imagistes* (1914), an anthology. Prominent among the Imagists were the English poets T.E. Hulme, F.S. Flint, and Richard Aldington and the Americans Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and Amy Lowell .<sup>16</sup>

Reacting against what they considered to be an exhausted poetic tradition, the Imagists wanted to refine the language of poetry in order to make it a vehicle not for pastoral sentiment or imperialistic rhetoric but for the exact description and evocation of mood. To this end they experimented with free or irregular verse and made the image their principal instrument. In contrast to the leisurely Georgians, they worked with brief and economical forms.<sup>17</sup>

World War I brought this first period of the Modernist revolution to an end and, while not destroying its radical and utopian impulse, made the Anglo-American Modernists all too aware of the gulf between their ideals and the chaos of the present. Novelists and poets parodied received forms and styles, in their view made redundant by the immensity and horror of the war, but, as can be seen most clearly in Pound's angry and satirical *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), with a note of anguish and with the wish that writers might again make form and

style the bearers of authentic meanings.<sup>18</sup>

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Biography Resource Center Biography Display.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> B. Ashbrook, "Franz Kafka," in *Reference Guide to World Literature*, St. James Press, 1994,p.231.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid,p.234.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Bloom, *Franz Kafka by Chelsea House Publishers* ,2003,p.13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid,p.14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> James Hardin, *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka*(New York : Camden House,2002),p.18.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid,p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Brown, *The Twentieth Century, The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume IV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press ,1998),p.98.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid,p.99.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.britannica.com/art/English-literature/The-20<sup>th</sup> century](https://www.britannica.com/art/English-literature/The-20th-century)(Accessed\_\_ in 8/12/2017).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Unreliable Narration in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis***

Unreliable narration has become a common occurrence in modernist and postmodernist fiction. Therefore, not surprisingly it has drawn serious attention from a number of prominent literary critics, especially from those involved in the field of narratology. Curiously, their views on the functions and types of unreliability differ quite significantly. Thus, when Wayne Booth came up with the original definition of unreliable narration, his approach was considered as rhetorical and oriented on the implied author's ironic intentions to create distance between his idea behind the narrated events and the actual report by the narrator. Later on, however, the studies of unreliability followed the main trend in literary criticism, consisting in the shift of attention from the ideas of the author to the text itself, and subsequently to the reader response to it.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this presentation will be to follow the evolution of the unreliability theory and demonstrate that the excessive reliance on the cognitive reception theories leads to the misunderstanding of the original idea of unreliability as conceived by Wayne Booth. The big pitfall of the cognitive approach is that it pretends to discard as much as possible the idea of the authorial presence behind the text, whereas discovering this presence is the only way of understanding unreliability in a most diligent manner. In this respect it may be claimed that the theory of unreliability has become a victim of the dominance of the cognitive theories in literary criticism. As a moot point of modern literary criticism, unreliability may initiate the reversal of the current general trend towards the

return to a thorough consideration of the role of the author during the interpretation of literary texts.<sup>2</sup>

Thus among other aspects of the theory, V.Nunning and Bruno Zerweck emphasise the importance of cultural-historical approach in analysing unreliability. Both researchers assert that unreliability hidden in one and the same novel may be interpreted differently in various cultural and historical periods. V. Nunning insists, however, that eventually unreliability has to be evaluated based on the knowledge of the norms and values dominating at the time when the novel was written. In fact this presumption implies that the author's or the implied author's norms and values must be taken into account.<sup>3</sup>

Tamar Yacobi constructs a theory which includes five types of resolution of the textual tensions that may result in unreliability. It is significant that several of them rely heavily on the idea of the authorial intention. Thus with the genetic type of resolution, the source of tension in the text is in the change in the author's perception of his own text; whereas with the generic type, it is the author again who decides to reconcile some discrepancies between the fictional world and the real one by subjecting them under the conventions of a chosen genre.<sup>4</sup>

Ansgar Nunning's case is perhaps the most demonstrative of all. Having advocated for the cognitive approach for a long time, A. Nunning eventually recognises the necessity of evaluation of the authorial role in the consideration of questions of unreliability. Such a turnaround in his own views may be explained only by Nunning's realisation of the fact that it is impossible to omit the author, or at least the idea of the implied author, from the proper considerations of

unreliability. In one of his latest essays on the subject, A. Nunning comes to the conclusion that a valid analysis of unreliability must rely on a tripartite structure that consist of an authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of these recent trends in the theory of unreliability, it is possible to assume that the idea of the authorial intention will slowly fight its way back also in other fields of literary theory. Subsequently, both critics and ordinary readers will only win if more attention is paid to what authors say about their own works of fiction in their interviews or letters to their editors or friends. <sup>6</sup>

The distinction between unreliable narrations with a narrator and without is not meant to replace other current distinctions between varieties of unreliability in fictional narratives. The main interest of our proposal lies in the way it uses the theory of fiction in order to shed light on narrative unreliability. Narrative unreliability, in our view, is a complex phenomenon in that its explanation presupposes some such theoretical underpinning .<sup>7</sup>

An unreliable narrator is one of the most powerful tools available to a writer. His unreliability might be obvious to the reader throughout, it might be revealed gradually, or it might come as a revelation that provides a major plot twist. An unreliable narrator is one of the most powerful tools available to a writer. His unreliability might be obvious to the reader throughout, it might be revealed gradually, or it might come as a revelation that provides a major plot twist.<sup>8</sup>

It is a character who tells the reader a story that cannot be taken at face value. This may be because the point of view character is insane, lying, deluded or for any number of other reasons. The phrase “unreliable narrator” was first used by

the literary critic Wayne Booth in the early 1960s. The technique has been around as long as literature itself has been though. In fact, prehistoric humans probably sat around fires knowingly listening to one hunter who always exaggerated his feats.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes the narrator is unreliable by nature. In other words, some stories are told by narrators who are such terrible people that they cannot tell their stories objectively. In general, even people who commit the worst crimes justify their actions to themselves. A classic example is the murderous narrator of the Edgar Allan Poe story “The Telltale Heart”.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps one of the most famous is Vladimir Nabakov’s Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged man with a predilection for underaged girls or “nymphets” (as he calls them). In *Lolita*, Nabakov signals Humbert’s unreliability to the reader in a number of ways such as his outrageous claims, his endless justifications for shocking acts and his contempt for others. Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* is another example of a reprehensible character sharing his unreliable narrative with the reader.<sup>11</sup>

Dishonest narrators can also be used to great effect in stories of crime and mystery. It can be difficult to discuss these types of narrators without spoiling the story, but both Agatha Christie’s classic novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and the recent Gillian Flynn best seller *Gone Girl* employ unreliable narrators whose lack of trustworthiness is crucial to the construction of both novels’ mystery. Often in books like these the reader starts out trusting the narrator and only as the story goes on realises that something is amiss.<sup>12</sup>

This type of narrator is not always deliberately deceptive. Sometimes, a narrator is unreliable due to youth or naïveté. The young autistic narrator of *The*



Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon or the five-year-old narrator of Emma Donoghue's Room are simply reporting the world as they understand it. These books rely on readers to make inferences based on clues given by narrators who do not always accurately interpret events.<sup>13</sup>

The unreliable narrator is particularly useful for horror and supernatural fiction writers who want readers to question the line between fantasy and reality. The classic 19th century tale The Yellow Wallpaper is one famous example of this type of narrator. A more modern example is Yann Martel's novel The Life of Pi in which readers wonder increasingly about the truth of events described by the narrator.<sup>14</sup>

There is sub type of narrator that differs from those listed above. This narrator is unreliable due to having incomplete or incorrect information. For example, the narrator of Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier initially misunderstands nearly everything she learns about her new husband's dead wife, and therefore, the reader does as well.<sup>15</sup>

One particularly skilfull use of the unreliable narrator that combines several of the above types is Lionel Shriver's We Need to Talk About Kevin. Besides withholding information from the reader, the narrator's report of events is ambiguous. Unlike some of the unreliable narrators listed above, Shriver leaves much of the judgement up to the reader.<sup>16</sup>

There are dangers in using this type of narrator. Readers do not always understand that a narrator is not the final voice of truth and authority. They may even confuse the narrator with the author. The unreliable narrator is most obvious

in mystery plots where the narrator's unreliability is generally revealed as part of the resolution. In other cases, it's important to plant clues along the way to ensure that the reader understands and perceives the situation in a way the writer does not.<sup>17</sup>

How can a writer do this? There are a number of ways. One is by showing the reactions of other characters. This can work for other types of information as well. The narrator may react in a way that is clearly inappropriate, and the reader can realise this when the narrator does not. Another is the nature of the situations or characters themselves. From the moment we learn that Humbert Humbert is courting Lolita's mother in order to get closer to the teenage daughter, we understand that there is something wrong with our narrator.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes, the unreliability of the narrator is only gradually revealed. The reader may in fact trust the narrator through much of the novel. With this approach, it's important to layer in clues throughout the first part of the novel without making them obvious. This ensures that in looking back, the reader does not feel cheated by the switch.<sup>19</sup>

First-person narrators are characters within the story telling the events of the plot from their perspective. Sometimes, these characters deviate from the truth or have mental conditions that limit their abilities to tell the story accurately. We call these characters unreliable narrators.<sup>20</sup>

An unreliable narrator is a character whose telling of the story is not completely accurate or credible due to problems with the character's mental state or maturity. Some literary critics argue that there is no such thing as a reliable

first-person narrator since every character is affected by his or her past experiences in the telling of a story, but most first-person narrators attempt to give the most accurate version of the events. An unreliable narrator, however, holds a distorted view of the events, which leads to an inaccurate telling of the story. This can give readers or viewers a chance to offer their own interpretations.<sup>21</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Zerweck, Bruno, “Historicizing Unreliable Narration. Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative” *Fiction, Style* 35 (2001),p,16

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid,p.17

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Tamar Yacobi , “package deals in fictional narrative : the case of the narrator's unreliability” Vol. 9, No. 2, *Contemporary Narratology* 2001,p.6

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid,p.8.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul,1982),p.23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid,p.25.

<sup>11</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1978),p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen,1983),p.153.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid,p.154.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Frank K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, translated by Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1984),p.47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. New York: Cornell University Press,1978),p.79.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid,p.80.

## **CONCLUSION**

In *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka, the author uses the omniscient narrator along with the structure of the book to reflect Gregor's feelings through

passive aggression. The narrator does not see and report things from Gregor's standpoint, making the limited narrator not very reliable. Having the story in a third person point of view seems more ambiguous, contrary to a first person narration with an active voice and the inner mind of the protagonist. Kafka's artistic intent of passive aggression results by having the narration in a third person perspective.

Through such narration, realistic restriction emanates the protagonist's disabled consciousness. Even though the narration focuses on the inward characters and scenes, the tone of the narration emphasizes the action of others, making the focus and the relationship appear to be outward (Kafka, 138). So the events seem like first hand accounts when they actually represent restricted reports of the events, or Kafka's use of the passive voice.

The nature of this task however, gives Gregor an active voice so that he can explain his thoughts, feelings, and his rational, philosophical reasoning to what has happened to him and how he feels about it. The task consists of a dramatic monologue that plays the self-perception of Gregor against the view created by the omniscient narrator.

Kafka examines the inner-workings of mankind's psyche through the development of plot, narrative styles, and symbols exhibited in the text. The author explores what happens to an individual's state of mind when placed in trying, even supernatural and implausible, physical situations.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Ashbrook, B. "Franz Kafka," in *Reference Guide to World Literature*, St. James Press, 1994 .

Banfield, Ann. *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the*

*Language of Fiction* .Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul,1982.

Bloom, Harold .*Franz Kafka* by Chelsea House Publishers ,2003 .

Brown, Judith .*The Twentieth Century, The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume IV* .Oxford: Oxford University Press ,1998.

Chatman, Seymour .*Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1978.

Frank K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, translated by Charlotte Goedsche. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1984.

Hardin, James .*A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka* .New York : Camden House,2002.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* .London: Methuen,1983.

Yacobi , Tamar. “package deals in fictional narrative : the case of the narrator's unreliability” Vol. 9, No. 2, *Contemporary Narratology* .2001.

Zerweck, Bruno. “Historicizing Unreliable Narration. Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative” *Fiction, Style* 35 (2001) .

Biography Resource Center Biography Display.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/English-literature/The-20<sup>th</sup>century>.