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Curriculum Vitae

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Animal Representation in Franz Kafka's Work

More than any other western writer, Franz Kafka repeatedly used nonhuman animal figures in his work. Vermin, mice, jackals, an ape, a mole-like creature, a dog, a vulture, a tiger, a horse, a marten-like animal and a half-cat-half-lamb crossbreed all appear as protagonists in his writing. These nonhuman protagonists can be found in Kafka's stories, such as "The Metamorphosis" ("Die Verwandlung"), "Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk", ("Josefine, die Sangerin oder Das Volk der Mause"), "Jackals and Arabs" ("Schakale und Araber"), "A Report to an Academy" ("Ein Bericht fur eine Akademie"), "The Borrow" ("Der Bau") and "Investigations of a Dog" ("Forschungen eines Hundes"), "A Little Fable" ("Kleine Fabel"), "The Vulture" ("Der Geier"), "Leopards in the Temple" ("Leoparden in Tempel"), "The Tiger" ("Der Tiger") "The Animal in the Synagogue" ("Das Tier in der Synagoge"), "A Crossbreed" ("Eine Kreuzung") and "The New Attorney" ("Der neue Advokat"). Parallel to their salient place in his fiction, nonhuman animals are ubiquitous in Kafka's biographical texts as well; A reading of Kafka's diaries, biographies and letters exposes a unique concern for nonhuman animals.

In spite of this prominent characteristic in Kafka's oeuvre and biography, most critics neglect the animalistic aspect of his work, and the representation of nonhuman animals in Kafka's stories is considered a mere allegory to human issues, such as parents-child relations, alienation from modern society, Judaism and Zionism, metaphysical or psychoanalytic ideas etc. The nonhuman animals in Kafka's work, as normally in literary works, have become an "absent referent", whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else's existence or fate. The allegorical approach towards Kafka's poetics has been highly criticized for decades. Unlike typical allegories, Kafka's works have no simple allegorical key, as their literal level cannot be reduced to one specific theme.

Alternatively, I propose reading Kafka's animal stories as representations of nonhuman animals and their relation with humans. Indeed, most of all of Kafka's nonhuman figures are anthropomorphized: they talk, behave, or at least think, in human terms. Nevertheless, unrealistic elements do not necessarily render the literal level irrelevant. Kafka's animal stories, in which nonhumans are not described realistically, raises questions on the nonhuman condition, the human-nonhuman relations as well as the border between humans and nonhumans. The fact that this type of questions has rarely been raised is presumably a result of the critics' anthropocentrism. It seems nonhuman animals are not considered significant or interesting enough to stand as the subject of literary works and therefore they are automatically reduced to human issues.