“One Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy”:
Kafka, Camus, and Enduring Absurdities

by
Katherine R. Boyle

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in
The Department of English

State University of New York
New Paltz, New York 12561

May 2022
“One Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy”: Kafka, Camus, and Enduring Absurdities

Katherine R. Boyle
State University of New York at New Paltz

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

Michelle Woods, Thesis Advisor
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in English
at the State University of New York at New Paltz
Literary exegesis begs us, over regions, years, and areas of expertise, to understand that humans are nothing if not unyieldingly determined in their search for logical conclusion. To examine the work of Franz Kafka, amongst others, however, is to engage with some of the most nonsensical and illogical, complex and meandering fiction that exists in the corpus of human literature, a path that invites you to criticize even your own foray into the endeavor of explication. “For the inkspot test quality of his texts,” Peter Heller asserts, “teases the reader into the attempt to interpret, entices him into a labyrinth to dismiss him, ultimately, with the experience of non-understanding” (376). Reading writers and artists within the avant-garde or strange absurdist period of the early twentieth century, like Kafka, can feel like being teased for the human instinct of attempting to understand. The very nature of many of these texts, as we will see, begs interpretation and points the reader in the direct of conclusion, while simultaneously removing the very possibility of a logical explication.

As we examine presently the corpus of various figures that produced their literary and artistic works during the early and mid-1900’s, I will be endeavoring to provide something of an expansion of Heller’s observations, as well as an adaptation and application of certain philosophical tenets of existentialism and human meaning-making. In her apt interpretation of Heller’s paper, Michelle Woods argues that:

Heller questions – as he believes Kafka’s work does – what we actually mean by ‘understanding’... Kafka’s work continues to intrigue us... We don’t understand life, in other words, and are constantly, and finally, ineffectively, looking to translate it into answers. Reading Kafka is a re-enactment of that sense of failure and misunderstanding. (1-2)
This mission of social or vital translation upon which Kafka embarks becomes all the more relevant considering his context for writing. There is a similar sense of this in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, in which there always seems to be a piece of the puzzle missing for the reader, as if we are reading in only two dimensions a piece of fiction that was written in three. Gontarski argues that “The commitment of Beckett’s writing is not to the outside, to the world, but to the inside, to itself” (23), revealing that like Kafka, the Rorschach test of Beckett’s theater is likely intended, authorially, to turn up absolutely nothing except for an all-too-human sense of futility. These pieces of literature resist the struggle for meaning, and I propose to study why that is, how this sense of nonsense – absurdity – is conveyed to readers, and if it can be overcome: or, to find meaning in an aggressive mandate of non-meaning, of anti-meaning.

Considered in conjunction with the social, economic, military, and cultural upheaval that was occurring during the early years of the twentieth century, our own context of confusion, despair, and a general sense of yearning for the meaning of it all becomes newly (and uniquely) elucidated as we think about philosophical absurdism as a theoretical mode. In examining this period of literature during the various upheavals of the twentieth century, we find that the literary corpus of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, as well as the artistic works of Alfred Kubin, undeniably engage with, influence, and even instigate considerations of the absurd, notably with the ideas of Sigmund Freud and philosopher Albert Camus. Through their work, the seemingly nonsensical, confusing, and unreal narratives and images that marked this moment of social upheaval can be more effectively examined, and potentially (but not definitely) understood. The notion of meaning (and understanding) is particularly complex in this area, implicating a wide range of human instincts and social assumptions that strive towards absolute explication of literary works. As I discuss these figures and their artistic production, I will ultimately work to
make a logical conclusion regarding the nature of the humanity that is depicted and manipulated in absurd, oneiric narratives, and why there is still an appreciative space for the Kafka story in the contemporary social sphere.

It is important to understand the sociocultural context for these fictions and artistic works, as the events and large-scale cultural experiences surrounding the creation of the objects of this study are highly relevant to their authorship. The early 1900’s saw an expansion in the surrealist movement in art, which happened concurrently with a rise in oneiric literature. The study of dreams and psychoanalytic thought thus became a cultural phenomenon that influenced the work of countless authors, artists, philosophers, and scholars of the time (who were, critically, contemporaries of writers such as Kafka and Beckett). Specifically in Europe, there was a notable tempest taking place during the various upheavals of the early years in the century, explained succinctly by Jan Ernst Adlmann in a piece for *Art for America*: “the ‘Habsburg twilight’ of the 1890s and early 1900s, is also the period when sensitized Austrians were almost universally aware of an insidious, generational unease and beset by a sense of some looming catastrophe” (117). Much of the corpus of artistic and literary production from this period symbolizes the need of creators to grapple with ever-changing, anxious contexts of culture, borders, and norms. Leiter, in his discussion of Kafka and psycho-literary analysis, also refers to the “increased instability of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the crumbling of traditions… a sense of cosmic chaos as a reflection of the social chaos” (339). This chaos was only furthered as the century went on to see the Great Depression and WWII, which provided a similarly tumultuous social context for the later writing of *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett.

As we read figures like Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, we work to grapple with their own grappling – we are trying to find meaning in their search for meaning, a task that is, in itself,
quite nightmarish, or “Kafkaesque.” In many ways, as I will expand upon later, this period of absurdist authorship was an early rehearsal that would predict our current concern with existentialism and meaning, an issue of which this thesis may very well be a product. During periods of cultural tempest and global tension, humans will naturally revert to what they do best: analysis, poetics, and explication.

In order to complete my present study, I will first provide a general background that encompasses the psychological and philosophical concepts that I plan to work with, outlining definitions and laying down rough descriptions of important concepts. I will then move towards an examination of Franz Kafka’s literature, focusing mainly on *The Trial* and the tenets of absurdism present within the novel. Demonstrating a slightly altered concept of unknowability and illogic, I will discuss the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, carefully unpacking the absurdities of Estragon and Vladimir. Third, I will analyze the visual rhetoric inherent in the works of artist Alfred Kubin, attempting to understand the images and themes present in his nightmarish pieces. I will conclude by returning to a discussion of meaning and absurdist philosophy, incorporating these elements into the three figures that I have named and analyzed, and working to understand with a bit more depth humanity’s unending search for meaning.

**The Absurdist Compromises of Psychoanalytic Philosophy**

Although psychoanalysis and larger psychological study troubled Franz Kafka (in his own words: “tibelkeit nach zu viel psychologie” or “nausea after too much psychology” [Marson and Leopold 149, my translation]), one does not have to closely study or passionately agree with the scientific theories of the time in order to be influenced by them. I will make two important notes here. The first is that in making a connection between the theories of Sigmund Freud
(which came to widespread popularity during the late 1910’s and early 1920’s) and the work of Franz Kafka, I do not look to perform a simple psychoanalysis of Kafka’s work, which would likely, on its own, be considered a reductive move. Second, I will not attempt to establish any actual proven connection between the two figures. I am simply looking to denote a certain context in which Kafka’s work was created and reveal a specific manner of thought that may help the reader elucidate more productive meanings from the literature.

Stanley Corngold points out that in a philosophical reading of Kafka’s works, it is impossible to avoid encountering the question of the self, even if Kafka himself did not hold Freud in great favor in his own writings. The most pertinent aspect of Freudian psychology that can be gleaned from Kafka’s work is his presentation of the self as a process of extensive admission about consciousness or human reality. Corngold notes that:

It is tempting to focus on the question of the self, for this self-thing is at once an ontic singularity and an ontological universal; and it recommends itself especially to the Kafka perspective as a meeting place of law (superego) and image (ego). Kafka’s confessional writings contribute abundantly to this topic – despite his occasional disavowal of it. (20)

Despite Kafka’s private disavowal of Freud’s theories, the psychoanalytist influences Kafka’s conception of the self quite clearly. Corngold makes an argument for the recognition of spaces in literary theory and philosophy where a “radical singularity” and a “principal universal intelligibility” (20) intersect, and he hypothesizes that this intersection occurs in the fiction of Kafka, as the author mobilizes legalistic analyses of self and other. In an apt Freudian analysis, Corngold also recommends that der Prozeß is a superego to Josef K.’s ego, demonstrating that much of Kafka’s work operates within the framework of philosophical psychoanalysis, creating
figurations of the unconscious. What is most interesting about Kafka's work is his consistent expansion of this philosophy to the allegorical level, interweaving the elements of psychology into the framework of society in The Trial. The law serves as a superhuman extension of the internal superego and the confessional process happens at a public, legal level. These are the traces of Freud in Kafka's writing that only become larger and more influential as they are examined.

Perhaps the most important point to note in a background study of Freud in absurdist 20th-century literature is the issue of authority, punishment, and the state. While dream theory is also highly relevant to the present study, as we will see momentarily, and while I believe that attempting to decipher meaning from the basic Freudian elements of various stories (one that is commonly taken on is "A Country Doctor") can yield fascinating and productive results, this ultimately does not bring us to any profoundly implicative conclusions. Indeed, studying the dynamics of action and punishment, or authority and society in early modernist work are projects that will prove much more groundbreaking in determining Freudian meaning from authors like Kafka, and others that work with absurdist. Moreover, Freudian psychology and sociological pretenses establish much of the philosophical basis for Kafka's legalisms. Philip Rieff writes:

As a negative and penultimate ethic, Freud's is dependent on that which it criticizes — ethics that are positive and ultimate. The ethic of honesty presupposes the existence of repressive authority. This psychoanalytic assumption that the traditional moral values of our culture have been inhibitory depends in turn on a more fundamental assumption, now widely accepted in the social sciences: of civilizations as systems of restraint. (323) The proposal of "civilizations as systems of restraint" clearly reflects the system of ethicality under which Kafka's absurdism is written; in particular, the absurd reveals itself (at the
beginning or the end of the narrative) to be legalistic in nature. Rieff supposes that the logical foundation of honesty as a virtuous principle in the world is based upon the collective understanding that state or national authority, by creation, was made to limit or repress those who live under its laws. In this sense, there is no doubt that drawing a connection between Kafka and Freud is productive, particularly in *The Trial*, Josef K. (as we will see) undergoes a grueling legal process that will review and put into context (and meaning) his entire life up until that point. It seems to him, and to the reader, that everything that he has ever said or thought will be examined and overturned – something that almost perfectly resembles a Freudian, psychoanalytic process of confession. When considering this scientific understanding that was becoming increasingly mainstream and popular during the time that Kafka was alive, it only makes sense that his story would take the psychological turns that it does.

Nonetheless, for Kafka, the inner world of the human mind, or of a collective human mind, is not simply a reflection of the world outside of the limits of the human body. One sentiment that manifests clearly within his literature is the sense that there is an impassable barrier that links thought to reality, or desire to action. This notion precludes success by his characters within each of their respective stories. Marson and Leopold note a section in one of Kafka’s diaries, dated “October 19, 1917” (148). They explain: “Kafka talks of the impossibility of observing one’s own inner world. He says in effect that descriptive psychology, which claims to be able to describe the inner world, really does no more than describe the relation of the outer world to the inner: hence it is a kind of anthropomorphism” (148). Kafka recognized something uncomfortable, or difficult, about psychoanalysis: the notion that the “inner” world only exists in relation to the “outer,” or within the defining limits of a human existence – and is potentially
limited by things like language, definition, dialogisms, and the other infinite drawbacks of humanity.

Marson and Leopold examine *A Country Doctor* and determine that Kafka is working with one of the drawbacks of psychological study and psychoanalysis: that despite the best efforts of scientists, some patients cannot be reached, that “inner” world remains, at times, impenetrable. If psychoanalysis seeks to create a system of logic by which the unintelligible can become meaningful, Kafka seemed to believe that it had failed – and, as Marson and Leopold note, “if [patients] were to be reached at all, a totally new approach was needed” (151). Considering Kafka’s infinite frustration with psychology, and his argument that existing methods to access the mind have been reductive and “anthropomorphic,” it seems that he set out on a sort of literary journey to locate the logic of humanity that Freud, and other psychology scholars, could not. In other words, there may have been a motivation in this writing to characterize the “inner” world, as it might have existed independently from the “outer.” As we turn to narratives like *The Trial*, a clear path opens up to the existential meaning of humanity that Kafka pioneered under the influence of, and simultaneously separate from, Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. Much of this influence seems to have generated a particularly unique brand of absurdity, which I will examine.

As we dive into the unconscious, or preconscious, and perform the psychoanalytic search for meaning that Freud demands of us, we return to the question of humanity and the pursuit of meaning. Humans work tirelessly to chase down some sort of significance in every creation or natural occurrence, even within our own minds and perceptions of the world – a process that Freud worked to explicate, categorize, and truly understand. By this study, I believe that we are naturally brought to the concept of absurdity that is proposed by Albert Camus in *The Myth of*
Sisyphus, one that predicates itself upon and labors to conceptualize the human struggle for meaning and logic. This struggle, as mentioned previously, is one that undergirds the literatures of many modernist authors, including both Kafka and Beckett.

At this juncture, it is necessary to outline the definition (or understanding) of the “absurd” that I will be working with throughout this study. Camus’s definition of absurdity, which is developed as he grapples with the relationship between the absurd and suicide, is presented in a series of human experiences. Absurdity is when you say that you are thirty years old for the first time, and it dawns on you that time is not stopping: you will be forty, and fifty, and sixty, and eventually you will no longer be alive (Camus 5). The feeling also comes when one thinks for too long about the natural world, and while looking at mountains, or fish, or sand, realizes that the natural world cannot be (and will never be) contained by the idiosyncrasies of human language and vocabularies (5). Indeed, there is a sense that any “dropping of the curtain,” any revelation of an unexpected strangeness or complexity, is natural to an experience of absurdity. Perhaps most critically, Camus claims that “this discomfort in the face of man’s own inhumanity” (5), one’s encounter with their own mortality, human failings, or earthly natures, is the absurd. As asserted previously, this understanding of the notion truly goes hand-in-hand with the psychoanalytic tenet of confession and introspection, or the understanding that there is far more to a human, an animal, or to the world than is shown “above-ground.” The underneath of the iceberg, the ID that descends far below the conscious surface of human experience, generates an uncanny absurdity when it suddenly makes itself known in various ways: our visceral fear at the thought of growing older, our selfishness in striving to reduce nature to its linguistic properties, or our unceasing instinct to find out.
As I perform direct literary analysis, I hope to focus on a specific working aspect of the absurd that proves to have a presence in the work of figures like Kafka, Beckett, and Kubin. This is the fundamental disconnect in logic or reality within these fictions, or the sense that the audience has that they are missing a piece of the rationality. Camus defines it logistically as he explains:

“It’s absurd” means “It’s impossible” but also “It’s contradictory”... the magnitude of the absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of [my] comparison. There are absurd marriages, challenges, rancors, silences, wars, and even peace treaties. For each of them the absurdity springs from a compromise. I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. (Camus 10)

When an action takes place in The Trial, for instance, that seems to be silly, such as Josef K. deciding to spend hours of his time romancing Leni when he has a serious trial to be concerned about, there is a fundamental absurdity in the contradictory space between what is expected to happen, and what ends up occurring. The “bare fact” here is, of course, that K. decides to play into the seduction of his important lawyer’s maid, wasting important hours and ruining his reputation, while the “certain reality” of the situation is that K. and his uncle have an urgent legal situation on their hands that is in need of attention and resolution immediately. The space in between, then, is the absurd: that breathlessness that the reader cannot fight when they watch K. throw away one of his only chances at success (and ultimately, survival). The compromise that is so often made between the fact of an action and the reality of a situation (which I will continue to
analyze and attempt to conceptualize) is what plagues the Kafka reader and scholar, and is what makes his fiction, at times, so baffling.

To provide another working example of Camus’s critical definition of absurdity, we can observe the compromise in *Metamorphosis*. The premise of the story, naturally, is that Gregor Samsa turns suddenly into a large insect, with no warning or explanation. The fact that this is an absurd narrative does not necessarily need to be explained, but to do so would further illuminate the important definitional argument that I must make in order to continue my analysis. We have, then, the fact of the action that occurs: Gregor becomes a beetle. This contradicts with the presumed reality of our world, which Gregor is assumed to share: humans cannot turn into beetles. Therein lies the contradiction, a separation between what we appear to understand as logical human beings and something impossible that is taking place (the impossible would not be so strange if Gregor’s world did not appear to be the same as ours). The absurdity, as Camus writes, “lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation” (10).

Incidentally, this contradiction in the action of the story is absolutely critical to the purpose of Kafka’s fiction. It is what allows Gregor (and the reader, of course) to understand Gregor’s true symbolic purpose in the family as an overworked money-maker who is left to die as soon as he can no longer turn a profit for his parents. The intersection of Camus and Freud, then, is where Kafka defines absurdity as performing a pseudo-psychanalytic process of self-discovery.

I want to harken back to my discussion of the absurd as being in relation to the study of man’s search for meaning (an infinitely paradoxical statement, I’ll admit). As I discuss above, multiple times, the search for meaning is fundamentally human, and essentially futile. But the search is complicated even more as humans develop further in the world and compound upon one another in biology, in knowledge, and in questioning. How can we search for meaning in a
world that has been irrevocably marked, changed, and ultimately created by ourselves? Camus reiterates this in his analysis of the absurd, claiming that it “depends as much on man as on the world” (7) and that “the Absurd is not in man… nor in the world, but in their presence together” (10). To experience absurdity is to be human, and yet we plod on in our terrifyingly eternal search for translation, understanding, and explication. To be clear, Kafka and Beckett do not create unintelligible work, but they do create human work, which is bound to transcend understanding and beg for destructive analysis. Woods discusses *The Castle*, writing that:

K can’t stay awake as Bürgel drones on: ‘K. had been half-dozing, but now he was roused again: “What’s the point of all of this? What’s the point of all of this?” he asked himself’ (263). The joke is on us; as readers we have been asking the same question, waiting for some answer to the enigma of the Castle and K.’s fate. (87)

If our goal was to locate the source of Kafka’s strange comedy (in which you laugh in spite of yourself), we can discover it in the “joke” that is played amongst humans and their fictional creations, which we could call absurdity. Camus’s purpose in his discussion is to determine, to state it plainly, if not crudely, whether committing suicide is worth it. If there is no other reason to go on living, he seems to determine, then one must live for the complexities of meaning that exist within all human creation, for “that constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity” (18), or a never-ending search for meaning. It is with this understanding that I propose to begin an analysis of three famously absurdist artists of the early to mid-twentieth century.

**Kafka’s Absurd Process, Unknowability, and “Unworkability”**

Throughout *The Trial*, movements of K.’s story are marked by an unshakeable sense of unknowability. This is natural, as the action of the narrative involves a metaphysically
mysterious trial, about which the defendant knows absolutely nothing. In the introductory note to Breon Mitchell’s translation of the text, it is asserted that the German word that Kafka uses for “trial,” der Prozeß refers not only to the physical hearing itself, but also the transcendent state of being “on trial” that might encompass a larger sense of interdisciplinary decisions and meanings. It becomes pertinent, then, to consider whether the text itself is a long study that strives towards an answer. The very beginning of the narrative seems to pose plenty of questions; as K. is being harassed by the guards in his room: “What sort of men were they? What were they talking about? What office did they represent?... who dared assault him in his own lodgings?” (Kafka 1998, 6). K. can ask his questions, numerous as they are, but there is the overarching, omnipotent sense throughout the story that he will never achieve an answer (or any working understanding of the world in which he lives). As John Dern posits in his discussion of existentialism in the novel, “The ubiquitous ‘Law’ informs virtually everything in both versions of The Trial and is the unseen power behind virtually everything” (100). There is no living separately from the courts and the legal system in this fictive reality.

Perhaps more important than this unknowability (which will be vitally important throughout this study) is the concept of an “unworkability” within K.’s world. Not only can nothing be known, but nothing can be done (about what is known, guessed, presumed, or unknown). More than a simple humanist sense of futility and insignificance, there is a sense of bureaucratic or social unworkability: paperwork does not move through offices, meetings accomplish nothing, petitions are impossible to write, and all legal measures are ineffective. No work can be done in this world. Even the painter Titorelli, who seems to have some kind of influence in the world of the courts, cannot ensure K.’s eventual acquittal in any real sense: “Actual acquittal is best of course, but I don’t have the slightest influence on that particular
result. In my opinion there’s not a single person anywhere who could have an influence on an actual acquittal” (Kafka 1998, 152). The unimaginable omnipotence of human-created forces in combination with the futility of human individuals in the novel allows the illogical and dream-like qualities of the story to blossom and affect the reader profoundly.

These elements of futility in the Kafka text are testimony to his ability to represent the human experience as unbounded and infinitely deep, a tradition that is sometimes without logic. Disorientation is, in many ways, fundamental to the reality of human life, and Kafka’s unworkability triggers a natural and familiar sense of anxiety (an uncanny anxiety, to harken back to Freud). Heller writes:

Our experience of the failure of communication is rich and varied. Typically, Kafka builds on a basic absurdity, on a foundation that is not, on a non-cause, a contradiction, and unresolved question, an unexplained and unexplainable enigma. And we feel that his literary flights and desperate pirouettes may be all the freer for being predicated on absurdity... Kafka proceeds from an unexplained or unexplainable enigma, a not understood or not understandable X. (384)

As Heller works to unravel the problem of interpretation and meaning in Kafka’s fiction, he aptly characterizes the disorienting experience of the protagonist and the reader as a “failure of communication” that is natural to human reality. In a society governed by bureaucracy and inaccessible state bodies, communication is, very often, difficult (and is made all the more so when the subject is marginalized or targeted in any manner, like Josef K.). It is terrifying to have the sense that one cannot do anything about an impossible situation, and in Kafka’s world, every action of the text is predicated on this inaction and unworkability. Here, we find a purposeful connection to the readership. As Heller asserts, the absurdity of logic in the texts is difficult, but
can also be freeing as a careful reader trudges along through the fiction, hoping to find meaning – it is almost a relief when we begin to see that without logic, there may not be meaning. In any case, Kafka’s “desperate pirouettes” establish a conscious relationship with the human reader experiencing the narrative, demanding to be explicated while, somehow, eternally avoiding interpretation.

The experience of reading Kafka; indeed, is most potent in terms of how it burrows into the readers brain, confounding meaning and transcending logical narrative boundaries. While I will later expand upon how this un-logic is mobilized through formal parameters of language, let me first discuss how it manifests in Kafka’s use of time. As readers, we are accustomed to chronological narratives, looking everywhere for markers of year, day, hour, or minute, depending on how specifically descriptive we are expecting the author to be. Kafka’s use of time, then, is nightmarish in the most basic sense. The time that we are signaled to understand, as readers, is vastly different from any narrative time markers that appear in the text. This is not unusual for a novel, of course: at times we might read texts in which years go by in a single sentence, and then two chapters cover a single hour. In The Trial and other works by Kafka; however, the reader is not initiated into the passage of time, and the understood action is, apparently, in slow-motion. Things that appear to be minutes-long take place over hours: while the intimate interaction between K. and Leni seems to happen over the course of a few minutes (and logically, K. would not simply ignore his meeting with Herr Huld, as it is critical to the outcome of his trial), K.’s uncle later tells him: “You crawl off to hide with a dirty little creature who obviously happens to be the lawyer’s mistress, and stay away for hours” (Kafka 1998, 109). Kafka mobilizes time in a nightmarish way, creating in the reader a palpable sense of anxiety.
The unknowability of time comes into play in this anxiety as well. Kafka readers are all uncomfortably familiar with the unpleasant temporal dynamics that he creates, often in dark hallways and buildings where there is no way to sense time passing, and no literary markers are provided to orient the scene in one's head. When K. is called to appear in court at the beginning of the text, he realizes too late that he forgot to ask what time he should show up: "He came to himself with a start and said, to excuse himself somewhat for having simply stood around, 'I just received a call asking me to go somewhere, but they forgot to tell me the time'" (Kafka 1998, 37). The seeming inability of K. to call back and ask for the time of the meeting, and his eventual arrival at the court at the incorrect time ("You should have been here an hour and five minutes ago" [43]) is enough to send any average, employed reader into a mild panic. The unknowability of time and the shadowy nature of whoever speaks to K. on the phone (and where that person is operating from) lends itself to a Freudian analysis of this aspect of the text, if only a very brief one. K.'s inability to successfully communicate about time, across space, belies his misunderstanding of a fundamentally human system, made by and for men like himself. One aspect of Freudian methodology suggests a thematic interpretation of this moment, proposed here by Laurence A. Rickels:

The telephone, then, occupies the place of the unconscious: whatever unconscious may be, as regards its role in psychoanalysis it might as well be the phone or on the phone. Free association allows the unconscious to emerge until a strong transference, put through by analyst or telephone receptionist, reveals to the patient that his freely made connections were always to the same Oedipal line. (216)

This aspect of connection or communication across space (particularly in the verbally based, technological mode of the telephone, which was still new technology at the time that Kafka is
writing) is precisely the element of human relationship that gets lost when characters are experiencing absurd, nonsensical time and space. There is a mode of interpretation in which we might recognize the court and the judges as an extension of K. himself. Josef K. may be calling a guilty unconscious on the telephone to arrange to meet for his hearing, but there are missing details (and a missing sense of urgency) in the communication. At odds with his own humanity, K. reveals his existential relationship to himself.

The third and final “unreal” element of The Trial that I would like to examine here is a little more abstract. It is important to understand space (and place) in Kafka’s novel: often, the actions of the characters and events do not make sense in conjunction with the spaces in which these aspects of the story occur. Many moments are characterized by a bizarre sense of exposure; at times reminiscent of the universal nightmares about a business meeting in your bed, being naked on a stage, or having a school lesson in your bathroom. In the opening moments of the novel, the inspector sits in Frau Grubach’s bedroom, “arranging with both hands the few objects lying on the nightstand – a candle with matches, a book, and a pincushion – as if they were tools he required for the hearing” (Kafka 1998, 13). One can imagine that the imposing figure of the inspector is somewhat softened by his presence in the highly personalized and cozy lodgings of Frau Grubach.

Often, these subversions of space are not as cozy, but instead are hot, dizzying, and stifling (and described so well that this discomfort is experienced by the reader). In the fourth chapter, K. visits the law offices in the attic, where the waiting room is a thin hallway and the offices are connected to the hallway by thin walls and vents. A woman who works there says:

The sun beats down on the attic beams and the hot wood makes the air terribly thick and stifling... on days when the traffic of involved parties is heavy you can hardly breathe,
and that’s almost daily… then if you take into consideration that a great deal of wash is hung out to dry as well – the tenants can’t be entirely forbidden from doing so – it will come as no surprise that you feel a little sick. (73-74)

Place becomes weaponized in the Kafka novel: not only is K. being manipulated, strung along, and tormented by the abstract systems of der Prozeß, he is also being physically attacked by the places that the legal circumstances have forced him into. As a human being, K.’s body is affected and altered by the trial, as many of the legal spaces that he enters invade his body with a grotesque, palpable stuffiness and unbearability. Some of this physical illness seems to stem from his errant search for meaning, which seems to be unexpected and discouraged by the shadowy hierarchies of the courts: “This nausea results from the sense of contingency K. feels as he tests various ideologies in an attempt to discover the truth of his situation… that is, to try to discover meaning in social structures erected by man” (Dern 99). The imposing structures of the law, the overarching power that follows K. everywhere he goes, are not only the natural vestiges of a bureaucracy that is necessarily hostile and inaccessible, but are also a defense mechanism against K. discovering anything that could facilitate a productive fictional world. Here, absurdity precludes meaning, and the stuffy bureaucracy defends against intelligent meaning-making by any character, or the reader.

This unbearable nature of space in The Trial implicates not only physical reality, but also the metaphysical responsibility of human existence and existential ontology. For Kafka, the physical world as manifestation of the absurd contributes to the sensation that humanity is undergoing punishment for some unknowable and unpayable debt, rendering any and all functions of society repetitive, invasive, and soul-crushingly futile. We can see this absurdist topos, too, in “A Country Doctor” by Kafka. Leiter analyzes a few different perspectives on the
story and places them within the context of absurdity, as it is defined by different disciplines. He writes: “crashing in on [the doctor], the absurdity of the world, the blizzard of snow, ‘filling all the spaces’ between him and his patient, *impinges on his consciousness*, reminding him of the perilous condition of existence” (340, my emphasis). There is a sense that the environment demands punishment, which is echoed in *The Trial*, as K. is forced into spaces that are not amenable for human biological functions (like breathing regularly and with fullness). Thus, spatial figurations that may have been formerly nonsensical begin to take up the thematic responsibility of punishing K. as he is simultaneously targeted and beaten down by the far-away processes of the court. The threat is not only coming from the lawyers or *der Prozeß* that they represent, and not simply from within his own body, but from a physical environment and atmospheric space that demands futility and mandates discomfort.

Indeed, this subversion of “place” often results in a general reimagination of figurations of control and punishment, themes that already permeate much of Kafka’s work. For example, the hierarchy of power between judge and defendant is subverted when K. finds that “the law court offices [are] in the attic of [an] apartment building” (Kafka 1998, 65), which is overrun by unsupervised children, working-class families, and their accoutrements. In a completely strange scene later on in the novel, we are introduced to the illogically located punishment of K.’s reality as we watch the guards Franz and Willem being flogged by a man (wearing a chest-high leather suit, interestingly) in a storage closet at K.’s place of work. The reader is dipped slowly into the unreality: the flogging makes some amount of sense as a punishment, but why in a closet, at a bank, in candlelight, at nighttime? This theme persists across various productions by Kafka: in another one of his novels, *Amerika*, Karl (the protagonist) is cornered by his ex-boss in a room made of glass that sits in a busy hotel lobby.
Besides, the walls of the porter’s lodge were entirely made up of enormous glass panels, through which you could see the crowds of people flowing into one another in the lobby, just as clearly as if one were in their midst. Yes, there seemed to be no corner in the whole porter’s lodge that could be concealed from the eyes of those outside. (Kafka 1996, 131)

The sudden and unexpected powerlessness of Karl at the hands of the Head Porter here engages with a sense of anxiety in the reader: a nervousness that regards the futility of the human body at the hands of those in power. Those who are powerful, in almost every Kafkaesque circumstance, are those who control the logic of literary reality: those who are able to mobilize space in whichever way they please are consistently the figures who make the rules. This power also lies with the people who are said to “know” that which is, to a protagonist and reader, unknowable—most importantly, these are the shadowy figures that operate the bureaucracy. Here, Kafka plays to the most undeniable, universal human fear: that of unknown figures in power, controlling and demanding an eternal futility of the masses.

Kafka’s narrative is necessarily, and fundamentally, oneiric. His oneiric mode, critically, is not a lighthearted surrealism or escapist fantasy (at least in the extent to which such a fantasy would be an improvement upon reality), but his dream-writing induces anxiety, terror, and the uncanny. Dream interpretation is a critical aspect of psychoanalysis, as dreams were thought to provide imperative information about the status of one’s inner world, or unconscious. Kafka’s fiction almost invariably reflects this. Shoshana Benjamin posits that in order to compose a poetic text, one must access a part of the mind that is distinct from that part which produces normal communicative strategies: “The poetic text emanates from a system of mind different from that responsible for the production of ordinary language discourse. (I assume it is the same
system as that which produces the dream.)” (90). Thus, The Trial is not only a variation on normal thought or logic in thematic elements, but also in the formal situation in which it was composed by the author. It is not oneiric only in readable, consumable, thematic elements (like action, character, plot, events), but also in its very writing. Benjamin’s argument here allows us to reimagine the poetic mind as essentially dreamlike, producing texts that lack logic in the same way that a dream might. Kafka’s fiction is so fictionalized and made so abstract, that in a sense, it could be considered poetry – if we consider poetry to be more artistic than fiction – thus, we can see why Kafka’s illogic remains so haunting.

This oneiric mode is further heightened and developed as a particular philosophical starting point within the text, by the idea of awakening from sleep, or the transition from being in bed to being out of bed. In both Metamorphosis and The Trial, the story begins with characters waking up from sleep to an absolutely absurd situation: “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect” (Kafka 1971, 89) and “Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested” (Kafka 1998, 4). The nonsensical story plots begin immediately when the protagonists wake up, but it doesn’t seem like the “uneasy dreams” cease when they open their eyes and get out of bed. Within this oneiric literature, there never even seems to truly be an awakening. The reader is led to question whether or not these characters ever actually wake up: “To wake up from a night of uneasy dreams and find oneself transformed into a giant insect is, in a sense, not to awaken at all” (Benjamin 95). As mentioned, humanity is entirely fascinated by dreams and trying to locate meaning, particularly during the rise of psychoanalysis. The Trial seems to reckon with what would happen if we never woke up, if we were able to actively
analyze dream as reality – in this way, the story becomes a satirical representation of this search by its oneiric mode, symbolizing our endless futility in dream and waking life.

Fundamental to the oneiric mode is, as I have mentioned, *der Prozeß*, or the unending reach of the court system in the story. That paranoia is what renders the story as nightmarish, almost condemning man’s search for meaning as bringing on unending horrors of bureaucracy and social systems. All of these things are, notably, created and maintained by humans. Kafka gives us a glimpse into a representation of Camus’s philosophy of the absurd, which, we can recall, asserted that the absurd is generated in the intersection of the human and the world. Josef K.’s fears lie within his discovery of an absurd cadence to his actions and to the world that he lives in, and his struggle is borne of a dream: it stems from his inability to accept the contradiction between the fact of his innocence and the reality of his arrest. This is absurd, this is surreal. Derrn asserts that “K. has ‘awakened’ this condemnation, has begun to experience the metaphorical nightmare Welles describes and depicts so well on the screen: the nightmare that results from the contemplation of one’s contingency” (98). It is only in exploring the absurd that he begins to fight against it, and it is only when he fights against it that he finds that it cannot be settled within him. This, more than anything, is a philosophical interpretation of not only psychoanalysis and dream theory, but what it means to be human in a world that makes increasingly less sense.

With *The Trial*, Kafka truly proposes a treatise on the purposes of life itself. It is usually easiest (and most readily supported by primary evidence) to not make an attempt at interpreting Kafka’s absurdism, as it is generally accepted that this was not what the author wanted. In that understanding lies some kind of key (as much as I hesitate to use such a volatile term) to interpretation: *The Trial*, when considered in this lens of unknowability and liminality, critiques
the widely accepted human right to know. In interpretation, there is a profoundly human arrogance, which assumes that all textuality must have purpose. Leiter eloquently hints at this revelation: “Summoned into the night, the doctor sees himself as he really is, a terrifying failure because he so totally misunderstood the condition of man in the universe” (340). While this statement, and Leiter’s larger paper, analyze “A Country Doctor,” the phrasing “summoned into the night” works incredibly well in our conversation on The Trial. Even though Josef K.’s story begins at dawn, on “one morning” (Kafka 1998, 3), he is always being pulled into the dark, into spaces without time, unaware of daylight or reality. To be summoned into the court in the tenements, or to enter the candlelit sickroom of the lawyer who is to save your life, is just as disorienting as being called out into the dark abyss of a snowy, country evening.

As we read The Trial in conjunction with the present study, it becomes clear that there is a teasing sense in the Kafka novel (and in the story of the country doctor) that laughs at the protagonist for considering that he may be of any kind of importance to the universe. The downfall of Josef K. is not that he is a guilty human, but that he tries to consider his guilt as being unique, evidenced, or critical to the happenings of society in any way – The Trial is, then, his journey of accepting futility. In his analysis of Kafka as he relates to another relevant figure that will be discussed momentarily, Alfred Kubin, Philip Rhein writes that “[Kafka and Kubin] do not seek to resolve man’s social problems but rather to release man from them so that he can attain a level of understanding that transcends the imposed limits of time and space” (63). This release, in many ways, is the acceptance of the absurd, which is the fundamental philosophical basis for the novel. Using his dream narratives, illogic, time confusion, and unknowable parameters of rationality, Kafka creates a timeless and universal statement on introspection and living through absurd times. His characters (and by extension, his readers) must accept that
human life is not owed any abundance or satisfaction, and with that, what seems to be nonsense suddenly becomes horrifyingly familiar.

**The Anti-Epistemologies of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot***

While Samuel Beckett read and interacted professionally with the work of Kafka, it occurred only after Kafka’s death. Beckett is well known for rejecting any comparisons with Kafka, likely in a natural and understandable attempt to establish himself as an independent literary figure rather than an epigonic one. In a critical interview published by the *New York Times*, Beckett discusses his views on Kafka’s literary production:

> The Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose. He’s lost but he’s not spiritually precarious, he’s not falling to bits. My people seem to be falling to bits. Another difference. You notice how Kafka’s form is classic, it goes on like a steamroller – almost serene. It seems to be threatened the whole time – but the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form. (Beckett quoted in Shenker 1)

If this is a criticism, it is a vastly productive one: Beckett accurately notes the nature of the absurdity within the Kafka text, as within his own. Imperatively, he locates Kafka’s “consternation” within the formal elements of the story. The abstract ideas employed by literature such as *The Trial* are not, necessarily, the point of anxiety, as the existential basis of life remains quite coherent and congruent with reality. Rather, the “consternation” is deployed in the formal points of the story: the plot, the settings, the language, *der Prozeß*. Contrastingly, Beckett deals with larger, more urgent existentialisms. This opposing “consternation behind the form” that he mentions is poignantly expressed in the problem of Godot in the infamous play, *Waiting*
for Godot. Here, the gap between Kafka and Beckett seems to become surreally wide – I will attempt, momentarily, to bridge it.

As we move into the action of the play, it is clear that much of the narrative motion that would generally be possible in a dramatic setting is hindered by that familiar sensation of unworkability (that I have previously mentioned). Estragon and Vladimir seem, at first, to be regular men in a regular world, but the dysfunctionality of logic in the drama immediately becomes clear:

ESTRAGON: Charming spot… Inspiring prospects… Let’s go.

VLADIMIR: We can’t.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.

...

ESTRAGON: And if he doesn’t come?

VLADIMIR: We’ll come back to-morrow.

ESTRAGON: And then the day after to-morrow.

VLADIMIR: Possibly.

ESTRAGON: And so on. (Beckett 1976, 376-377)

Much of the action in Waiting for Godot is founded on inaction, or the inability of the main characters to do absolutely anything productive at all. For Estagon and Vladimir, “going” does not mean movement, as “let’s go” is proposed multiple times, and it is always followed by a moment of silence, stillness, and stagnation. The characters may want to leave, go, move, but it is not possible. The audience is imbued with a sense of helpless anxiety, watching the ominous
existentiality of Godot freeze the two men in place on the stage. The first act ends with a chilling reminder of inability:

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let’s go.

*They do not move.* (427)

While the profound unworkability on the part of the two men is marked by some abstract sense of anxiety, Beckett’s note from the interview with the *New York Times* remains relevant. The element of consternation is ensured not by any actual processes in the drama, but by a metaphysical sense of stillness and limitation. In opposition, Kafka’s unworkability (that is, still, markedly similar in its effect on the audience) operates through a literal narrative figuration. While Estragon and Vladimir are imprisoned by an unspoken, existentially punishing force, Josef K. is similarly imprisoned by an earthly boundary: the vast and endless justice system. However, Beckett also employs an element of existentialism in his formal figurations as well (in a way): when the words “coming” and “going” do not have the epistemological significance expected of them, there is a absurd formalism that undeniably appears (and functions). There is a false dichotomy between the sense of “to come” and “to go” here. Godot, who is expected to appear throughout the play, does not seem to exist in a reality where he could, potentially, arrive. Estragon and Vladimir continually plan to leave their little spot throughout the action, but the audience begins to get the sense that they can never move from their location next to the tree. I would argue that this is as formal as a sense of consternation could possibly be.

The absurdity here is not only in the parameters of a narrative situation, or simply present in any kind of contradiction or compromise between two simultaneously true realities, but it is also in the conversation that takes place (necessarily, of course, because this is a play). Beckett’s
situational logic is confusing and nonsensical, but the real anxiety comes when reading the
dialogue. Antony Johae argues that “the dividing line between paradox and the absurd is
unknown; ambiguity is immanent and prevarication is the norm. Peroration is pointless and
dialogue communicates nothing” (103). It is a restless readership that reviews these
conversations, wondering when someone will say something that is clear or true. The play, at
times, reads like The Trial in that it depicts two men grappling with the futility of their words and
actions, in such a seriously philosophical way that at one point, suicide is considered (Beckett
1976, 380). Ultimately, they do not end their lives (something that Camus would certainly be
pleased to hear), and there does not seem to be a settlement between our protagonists and their
absurd situation. Moving from the vestiges of their minds outwards, the narrative arc of the play
is just as nonsensical as the teetering psychological state of Estragon when he proposes suicide.
Johae asserts that “breakthroughs in the plot, where the normal chain of reasoning is established
and where deductions are expected to lead to a predicted change, instead frequently deviate in
the direction of irrelevancy or end up in a state of confusion or contradiction” (103). Moving out
from the interpersonal dialogue, Johae observes the same confusion in action that I have named
above as “unworkability.” Beckett presents, representationally, the flaws in communication that
are natural to human speech and communication. To be without misunderstandings and
confusion is to be inhuman, and Estragon and Vladimir are presented as existing entirely within
the human realm of contradiction, illogic, and absurdity in language. This is something that we,
during the technological era of texting and social media, are all too familiar with; it is the most
contemporary permutation of nonsense.

A second element of Waiting for Godot is the interplay between waking, sleeping, and
dream in the play. In particular, Estragon is plagued by a constant inability to go to sleep, even
though he clearly wants to. Often, this bizarre insomnia is perpetuated, and caused, by Vladimir himself. Within the first ten minutes of the action, Estragon begins to fall asleep, and Vladimir wakes him up. To this, Estragon exclaims “I was asleep! Why will you never let me sleep?” (Beckett 1976, 378). He has had a dream as well, but Vladimir insists that he will not hear it (“Don’t tell me!... DON’T TELL ME!” [378]). During the second act, Estragon manages to fall asleep once again, but begins having a nightmare and “wakes with a start, jumps up, casts about wildly,” (446) according to the stage directions. Once again, Estragon attempts to tell Vladimir about his dream “Ah!... I was falling—... I was on top of a—” (446), but Vladimir once again exclaims “Don’t tell me!” (446). The first absurdity here is that Estragon cannot achieve sleep, which is – naturally – something that would make most of us anxious. The second is that even as he sleeps, his pre-conscious self cannot escape the world of dreams, and whatever is affecting him so deeply that he is having nightmares about it cannot be communicated to his one companion. Indeed, there is a crisis of connection between our two protagonists. We can observe a preclusion of interpersonal communication in this strange reality of *Waiting for Godot*; the reader gets the sense that, in a similar manner to being in a waiting room with strangers, you do not go into the profound details of consciousness – you stick to small talk. And, to digress for a moment, I will note that the play resembles, in many ways, an actual modern waiting room at a doctor’s office: a promise of care and appreciation, an uncomfortable proximity to that which you are unfamiliar with, endless waiting for an elusive figure, and an unreal liminality in setting. In both of these rhetorical situations, there is an inhumanity, or a fluorescence: whatever Estragon’s problems might be, Vladimir (and subsequently, the audience) cannot know about them. The characters survive, barely (for mentions of suicide abound) in this strange, altered
reality of the country road. They cannot sleep, and they cannot connect with one another. Therein lies the absurdity, and this tense opposition to humanity.

Similarly to The Trial, Waiting for Godot’s world is without logical time markers. Most of the stage adaptations of the play demonstrate this in the way that is most logical to the stage: there is simply no change of set or lighting throughout the action, and the background remains as one, consistent, almost unbearably liminal shade of grey. There may be a tree, a mound of earth, and/or a few props, but a general recollection of the most popular versions of the play leaves you with a sense of strange emptiness, without night, day, atmosphere, weather, or variation of any kind. Like Sartre’s setting of the sitting-room with no windows in No Exit, to be without the markers of natural time (and place) is a mind-numbingly hellish scenario. Once again, I am brought back to thinking about the waiting room, or exam room, of a doctor’s office – these are notoriously fluorescent and without windows. Sometimes if you wait long enough in one, in a certain season, you will finish your appointment to find that both the light level and the weather outside has completely changed – it is disorienting. Apart from setting, time is the force that serves the disorientation of the protagonists, and it is a primary element of the drama that I will be focusing on in my analysis.

A defining feature of Waiting for Godot’s action is Estragon’s amnesia. It flows throughout and fills up the text, and there is a fundamental understanding that Estragon will not remember events even a few hours after they happen. Vladimir does not seem to be plagued by the same problem; as a matter of fact, Estragon seems to be struggling infinitely more than his companion in countless ways. At various points, Estragon moves to leave, but cannot, and has to be reminded that the pair are “waiting for Godot” (376), in a statement that is so obvious to the
audience that it becomes absurd to continue hearing it. During the second act, the following exchange occurs after the pair’s interaction with Pozzo and Lucky:

ESTRAGON: You dreamt it.

VLADIMIR: Is it possible you’ve forgotten already?

ESTRAGON: That’s the way I am. Either I forget immediately or I never forget.

VLADIMIR: And Pozzo and Lucky, have you forgotten them too?

ESTRAGON: Pozzo and Lucky?

VLADIMIR: He’s forgotten everything!

…

ESTRAGON: And all that was yesterday, you say?

VLADIMIR: Yes of course it was yesterday.

ESTRAGON: And here where are we now?

VLADIMIR: Where else do you think? Do you not recognize the place?

ESTRAGON: Recognize! What is there to recognize? (433-434)

This continual deficiency of Estragon presents itself in that he cannot seem to sleep, nor can he remember things that happened earlier in the dramatic action. This is an interesting feature of the play. Years after Beckett wrote Waiting for Godot, the scientific community began to develop a theory of sleep that proposed that getting a sufficient amount of sleep allows the human brain to process information and consolidate things that were learned within the time that the individual was actively awake and functioning. Sleep allows us to functionally process the meaning of things that happen to us and allows us to store things within our memory – essentially, to sleep, and to remember, is to be human. Estragon’s experience on the country road is without time, as he cannot recall things that happened in the past, and his future is equally uncertain. The
audience begins to get the sense that there does not exist a past or a future, but only a present (and usually, a painfully confusing one). This is a particularly fascinating feature of Beckett’s absurd literary production, and only enhances the anxiety of those who have to watch Estragon struggle to sleep, remember, and to be a human being in this strange world.

Indeed, Estragon’s struggles seem to only compound themselves. It becomes clear within a few pages of the second act that he has experienced some bizarre, inhumane punishment during intermission. Similarly to Kafka’s *The Trial*, punishment is defined and implemented with the same level of absurdity as the rest of the action, and always has a meaning that is more profound than discouraging a behavior or rehabilitating someone “bad.” Estragon enters disturbed and upset, severely mercurial and marked by some basic instability. As Vladimir attempts to comfort him, he is unsure of whether he wants to be left alone, held, talked to, or ignored. Then, the following interaction takes place, and it is vitally important in understanding Beckett’s absurdity:

ESTRAGON: You couldn’t have stopped them.

VLADIMIR: Why not?

ESTRAGON: There was ten of them.

VLADIMIR: No, I mean before they beat you. I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing.

ESTRAGON: I wasn’t doing anything

VLADIMIR: Then why did they beat you?

ESTRAGON: I don’t know.

VLADIMIR: Ah no, Gogo, the truth is there are things escape you that don’t escape me, you must feel it yourself... Perhaps you weren’t [doing anything]. But it’s the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it, if you want to go on living. (432)
As I have mentioned, Estragon is a critical (and tragic) figure to look at here, but Vladimir provides perhaps the most important insight for the audience into how the world of the play operates. In many ways, there seems to be no sense to much of the action within the play. Vladimir’s assertion that punishment may happen even when one is innocent, if the individual is innocent in way that is guilty, opposes the epistemological understanding of language: the words “innocent” and “guilty” lose meaning, and what sort of a reality is that?

Within the very form of the language that Beckett composes (and here, it might be important to recall his statement in the *New York Times* interview at the opening of this section), there is a fundamental illogic, a backwardness, perhaps even a sense of consternation. It might be worth it to question whether illogic in formal elements of a fiction is enough to generate the elusive sense of “consternation,” a query to which I would respond that it absolutely is enough. In speaking about form, we must also mention the protagonists. Gontarski refers to “the consciousness of form in the abstract, ‘dehumanized’ protagonists, and the patterning of repetition” as a “means of creating a reflective art and of countering the essentially realistic… nature of the subject matter” (23). The characters are aware of their own abstraction and absurdity, which allows the symbolic effort of the play to work against what is, naturally, a fairly realistic basis of logic (i.e. waiting for a person to show up when they promised to meet you somewhere). Once again, we are called to return to Camus’s problem of true fact and immutable reality: Godot is expected to come, and there is a purpose for Estragon and Vladimir to be waiting, but he is never going to come. Therein lies the absurd.

It is important, once again, to recognize the historical (and sociocultural) context in which this close reading exists. Beckett is also writing during the early twentieth century, although the play is composed closer, to be sure, to the middle of the century and
postmodernism. Nonetheless, it is written during the era of great scientific and psychological discovery and on the heels of Freudian psychoanalysis and dream interpretation. Gillespie points out, as he discusses Kafka and nightmare, that “these transpositions [between the world and mind] often open the gateway to nightmare. There is a curious linkage between surrealist impulses and the succumbing of expressionist artists to the long wave of a new cultural direction in psychology” (93). As the world is just beginning to make sense of why we dream, many authors looked at the psychological climate and decided that grappling with nightmare had a much greater exigency. Fictions such as Kafka’s and Beckett’s works were readily moving to interpret, represent, and analyze in poetics the cultural upheavals being caused by new theories of the mind and of humanity. This, necessarily, points to more abstract concerns about our incessant need for meaning-making.

With this, the parallels between Kafka and Beckett become strikingly clear. Estragon becomes very similar to Josef K., in that he is the victim of a backwards and nonsensical “society” (a more fitting word might just be “world”) that inflicts punishment on those who do nothing, if they do nothing in the wrong “way.” He is beaten, he forgets, he tries to sleep and is forcibly awoken, he tries to sleep and is startled by a nightmare, he speaks and is not heard, he cannot remember yesterday. Estragon is Josef K., if K. existed within the most absurd and nonsensical parameters of literary imagination, without the grounding sense of civilization, other people, times, and dates surrounding him both literally and figuratively. As this parallel is drawn, we might understand both characters to be dehumanized within their respective environments, as both are brought within an unnamed control and experience the full extent of futility, a loss of agency that goes beyond humanity and into animality, or thingness. While K. dies and Estragon lives at the end of the play, we are left wondering if it is possible for him to be alive at all. K.’s
final words in *The Trial* apply reasonably enough here, as well: “Like a dog!... it seemed as though his shame was to outlive him” (Kafka 1998, 231). There is an ultimate, and undeniable, dehumanization that is mobilized by the written absurdity of both authors, in their settings that oppose humanity and in elements both formal and thematic.

**Kubin’s Absurdism and the Art of Nightmares**

To move back towards Kafka’s illogic, and the influential forces that may have preceded this literature, it is imperative to analyze the art and artistic ethos of Austrian illustrator and writer, Alfred Kubin. Kubin is well-known for his grotesque, dark, and complex images, and was a contemporary of Kafka’s. The two “met in Prague in 1911, when the artist’s reputation was already admired by the unknown writer” (Mitchell 399). Despite a dark and troubling youth that was marred by the death of his mother and a suicide attempt (amongst other things), Kubin developed into a likeable, talented artist who often had relatively close artistic relationships with his contemporaries. In her piece for the New York Times, Grace Glueck reveals that like Kafka, he was presumably influenced by Freudian psychology, and had likely read Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, and so dealt in his art with similar concerns that Kafka so often worked with: absurdity, death, time, anxiety, and the questioning of humanity. As James Mitchell says, “In imaginative, prophetic power, in horrific vision of the world, Kubin deserves comparison with his younger friend and fellow Czech, Franz Kafka” (398). For my purposes here, I will focus on just a few specific illustrations that were created by Kubin, and will analyze some recurring themes within this art that connect in both logic and figurative theme to Kafka’s works.
One of the most well-known illustrations (that we generally find on the front page of criticism, or in the thumbnail of videos about Kubin), is his work that is entitled “The Egg,” which was drawn fairly early in Kubin’s career (fig. 1). The drawing depicts an emaciated, skeletal woman with a painfully large, pregnant stomach that emits a glowing light. She stands next to a rectangular hole in the earth (a grave, presumably), and in the back of the image, there is a mysterious idol- or golem-like figure that sits in shadow. After the immediate observation of the huge, swollen stomach, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the dark hole next to her, that seems to lead down into an abyss. This feature of the image, where some of the illustrative action is hidden within or underneath is found in other works by Kubin: in “Pendulum” (1903, fig. 2), a man holds onto a snake’s tail as he swings into a dark abyss, and in “Danger” (1901, fig. 3); a massive humanoid creature reaches off of huge cliffs into some large body of water where a boat is fleeing.

Even simply in the dark corners of Kubin’s vignettes, that never fully give away the context or scenery of the drawing, there seem to be shadows and things that are hidden. The
different planes, or levels, in these drawings, seem to reflect the sense of dimensional thinking that was being analyzed at the time by both mainstream scholars, and figures like Sigmund Freud. The notion of a hidden dimension to humanity, and the exploration of the logic of an “inner world” is also explored by Kafka, of course. The strangeness of the images is, undoubtedly, reflected in Kafka’s stories, as they too have a literary manifestation of that hole in the ground, hidden top of a cliff or in a dark abyss: “Just as in a Kubin print the eye may encounter a bewildering agglomeration of figures and objects of a dearth of them, the reader of Kafka’s stories faces either lucidity or lunacy” (Mitchell 400). In the works of Kafka and Kubin – and Samuel Beckett – there is something hidden around the corner of various figurations (of plot and language, or of image) that we just can’t quite get at: the reason that Josef K. is on trial, exactly how Gregor Samsa turned into a giant beetle, where and who Godot is, and so on. There is often a part of the illustration that is hidden or obscured by a visual plane for Kubin, leading the viewer to ask: “What is hiding? What are we missing?” Indeed, Kubin wrestles with this same figuration of absurdity that Kafka and Beckett do with their literature.

Another feature of Kubin’s art is the backgrounds, or lack thereof, within each image. As an artist who was “thwarted in painterly aspirations by his failure to master color” (Glueck), Kubin’s most vividly disturbing and powerful illustrations take place in grayscale, or simple sketches with a black pen or pencil. The often flat, gray backgrounds render many of the images uncanny and unsettling, when we, as humans, are used to understanding the physical context of images. We are brought back, in viewing these, to the many productions of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot that feature few (if any) scenery pieces and backdrops. A lack of landscape, and therefore, a lack of context, works to remove any logical or foundational meaning from Kubin’s scenes. This is also similar to our literary counterparts: within the context that they are spoken, the words
of the literature(s) often mean nothing, or make no sense to the reader (i.e. in *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir decide to leave or move, and then they explicitly do not move, as stated in stage directions). In the absurd, epistemology of language means nothing, and the context of the situations that characters are in do not have their usual influence on the outcome of the situation. Because the search for meaning and context is a fundamentally human one, Kubin’s empty, flat backgrounds suggest an inherent antipathy to the abundant contexts of the romantic era that preceded him, which, naturally, favored the human instinct for detail and information. The darker, grayscale vignettes reflect a lack of logical context, and preclude any sense of grounded, epistemological meaning that would be inherent in things like color, background, landscape (and at times, depth), elements that are generally imperative to illustrations that feature a subject in the foreground. This is critical to his absurdism; any lack of meaning reflects a simultaneous and meaningful artistic decision.

Finally, Kubin’s art centers creatures more than it does humans or regular, typical human figures. The illustrations include depictions of monstrous crabs, countless skeletons (or skeleton-adjacent figures), huge serpents, blob-like ghosts, titanic golems, giant apes, and some cross between a cat and a seal, amongst countless other creatures. After a complete list of the various animal figures used by Kubin, Mitchell observes that “evidently for Kubin only the most grotesque creatures could thrive on the bitter concoction called ‘life’: gigantic insects, many-legged, serpentine, spidery… the frightful menagerie of nightmare” (399). For Kubin, these grotesque creatures were meant to oppose humanity, or dominant notions of how humanity should be described or characterized. For the purpose of brevity, I will not stop to examine a specific example of this artistic operation, but will generalize about the feature in Kubin’s art more generally. These figures are, truly, a bizarre manipulation of what it means to be human,
illustrated in a painful physicality. There is usually, in the illustrations, an allusion or reference to figurations of suffering, but the figures are never tragic – they are only without logic. This makes them, above all, unsettling to an audience of humans that are comfortable with their ontological status. Moreover, there are often images of hybridity (human-animal), or mutation that compounds humanity with itself (or with death, or with the scenery in the illustration). It is necessary to note that the turn towards personification in literature in art did not necessarily stop at animal figures. One of Kafka’s most fascinating ventures into writing about non-humans is his story “The Cares of a Family Man,” in which the protagonist is a sentient spool of thread, a “family man,” who can speak, move, and exercises free will (Kafka 1971). Much of Kubin’s art contains conglomerations of shapes and figures that are often vague and amorphous, some seemingly objects, which he illustrates in the scene alongside recognizable human figures and often bestows them, artistically, with the ability to act. Kubin asks us to consider what humans are and what they could be, which is not so much an existential question as it is an absurd conclusion.

This introspective urge that plays itself out in Kubin’s art is yet another vestige of Sigmund Freud’s psychological theories and propositions. At the heart of psychoanalysis is the humanist desperation to locate within the mind some elusive secret of being, and even if Freud’s logic and methods were, perhaps, flawed, much of his mission was a natural impulse: “unaided by the old transcendental ethics of guilt, or by the rationalist ethics of a future harmony through knowledge, the Freudian lucidity may pierce the deepest shadows of the self without dispelling one degree of gloom” (Rieff 322). Kubin creates representations of this lucidity in searching through the mind and within dreams, painting nightmare in its most vivid, confessing to the futility of human form, psyche, and knowledge. His animals ask us to consider what it would
mean to escape humanity, to hybridize with another biological form, to become past psychological possibilities. These images are ones of dream, but specifically (and importantly), they are images of nightmare. Johae makes the claim that “dream is all too often transformed into a nightmare precisely because of the modern psyche, hemmed in by repressive arbitration from without, finds itself cut off from its pre-history, from the time when it was free” (111). Glueck agrees, arguing “his work celebrates compellingly – particularly in the haunting early images – the deep vein of irrationality in art (and in us) that won’t go away” (C25). To write and illustrate nightmare is to confront what we do not, and cannot know about ourselves, it is to have that uncanny feeling that there is something at our core as humans that cannot be put into words, it is to look at a stranger on the street and realize that they have a deep, rich experience of life that we may never know anything about. As Glueck writes, there is something that is vastly irrational about ourselves and the all-too-human creations that we compose, like art and literature, and that urge to make meaning out of ourselves and those extensions of ourselves is an instinct that cannot easily be erased.

As with Kafka, Alfred Kubin is uniquely relevant today. To ponder on the purpose of humanity and question the hegemonic systems of meaning-making within society is an apt project for the twenty-first century, particularly as we find ourselves in times of ever-compounding global crises. Adlmann discusses the zeitgeist within which Kubin worked, and on contextualizing his work responsibly:

Today, we see Kubin’s brooding apparitions not only through a post-Freudian lens, but also from the far side of an intervening century that would prove more cruel, more nightmarish, than anything the artist could ever have envisioned in his youth… [the 1890’s and early 1900’s] is also the period when sensitized Austrians were almost
universally aware of an insidious, generational unease and beset by a sense of looming catastrophe. (117)

While the influence of Sigmund Freud may have preceded his work most immediately, Kubin’s artistic purpose also had much to do with the “kairos” of his artistic ethic, and the situations that he was most closely experiencing. As Europe was beginning to feel the early political and socioeconomic tensions that would eventually lead to the first World War, Austria prepared for and felt the economic effects of the end of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918. With this context behind his work, Kubin productively drew for a humanity that would see an unprecedented explosion in number, conflict, and opinion over the following 100 years. Working in the study of the dark and nightmarish absurd at that time demanded that one be in natural comparison to others, like Beckett and Kafka, as the world was just beginning to process the extent of human consciousness and meaningful ability. To ask after the relational and emotive potential of humanity is a project that we continue to undertake today, which is why Kubin remains relevant particularly in the extent to which he illustrated disease, anxiety, idol worship, darkness, and death.

**The Myth of Sisyphus: Reinterpreting Absurdism and Meaning**

Thus, we arrive back at the central issue of absurdity, its popularity, the ways in which it was represented in twentieth-century literature, and how the notion has evolved over the past century. Fundamentally, the question of absurdity is one of meaning-making, as I hope I have made clear above. As many others do, Benjamin asks us to consider the central question, “What makes interpretation so difficult?” (102). To a limited end, my study here has been attempting to provide a response to this question. Benjamin hints that one facet of the interpretive project is
making meaning from poetic, dreamlike texts, “poetic texts tend to give us pause and may indeed cause us to deliberate at length over what things mean. One can spend untold hours trying to grasp the meaning… with no guarantee of success” (102). Understanding that the abstract quality of fiction like Kafka’s stems from his writing of illogical non sequiturs and nightmarish scenarios, but his oneiric mode is not the final act that precludes a productive project of interpretation. Ultimately, it is a specific application of a philosophical theory of absurdity that allows one to most effectively understand the plight of Josef K.’s futility, Vladimir and Estragon’s endless dialogic confusions, and Kubin’s strange illustrations of nightmare and inhumanity.

As I asserted in the introduction of this analysis, humanity seems to have an undeniably instinctual need to search for meaning in all aspects of the world and creation. In the most basic sense, the inability to complete this search is the cause of the absurd feeling, as Camus would have it. There is an inherent, biological need to make sense of the world, which manifests with particular strength in the field of literary criticism. Mark Anderson posits that “for one of the tricks that reason plays on us is that knowledge, insofar as it orients us in the world and gives us a sense of mastery, is also a form of pleasure, not just cognition, and that, therefore, epistemological categories are not free from emotional, affective investments” (382). We biologically, and therefore naturally, invest our emotions in working out the epistemology of the objects around us, and in interpreting things “finally” or “correctly.” Heller seems to respond to this fact of our biology, with a succinct point on Kafka:

Let us admit, then, that we don’t understand, that we cannot interpret the marten, nor accept it without interpretation; that, generally, Kafka’s fictions do not make sense in the way expected of most literary works, that they seem subject to rational elaboration to a
degree sufficient only to raise the question: What does this mean?, but insufficient to answer that question. (Heller 380)

In many ways, this is the joy of reading an author like Kafka, or Beckett, because we are faced with an unheimlich challenge, something that brings out the feeling of liminality in our experience: potentially being conquered in our unending battle of interpretation. If we cannot make sense of Kafka, and if we throw up our hands, we give up to the forces of un-meaning—and in that, we face the absurd. Indeed, this is very closely the feeling that Camus described when he worked to name the absurd sentiment in a human.

The downfall of humanity is that sometimes, we cannot find meaning, and perhaps more importantly, in those instances, we cannot admit to ourselves that our search for understanding has failed. We create layers of theory, criticism, bureaucracy, and academia to deter unpleasant non-meanings like the liminality of Kafka’s stuffy spaces, or the anxiety of Godot never showing up. Heller writes: “We don’t want to admit that we ourselves are constantly and strenuously engaged in imposing meanings on the recalcitrant material… constantly denying the failure to understand and to make sense of life” (385). This is not a revolutionary statement to make, but it is particularly important to consider in a time of global crisis, when we are working to make sense of seemingly absurd situations that happen politically, economically, and virally. As we read Kafka and Beckett and as we view Kubin, they tease the feeling of confronting non-meaning (even anti-meaning) out of the repressed place where it has been hidden and forces us to face our non-understanding. This is his philosophy, and this is his absurdism, that is of and about the tendency of humans to create nonsense and look for meaning within it. When we look at places like Titorelli’s apartment and the flat, grey landscape where Godot is supposed to arrive, situations like Gregor Samsa’s sudden transformation into a beetle and Estragon’s
inability to sleep, we can observe that formally, this is how the authors portray the absurd. There is; however, a critical, modern application of Camus’s theory.

As mentioned previously, during my review of Sigmund Freud’s psycho-philosophy, Josef K. does not seem to be going through a trial of any logical sort, but admits, canonically, that he is working through a strange, pseudo-psychoanalytic confessional process of examining himself: “His entire life, down to the smallest actions and events, would have to be called to mind, described, and examined from all sides. And what a sad job that was” (Kafka 1998, 127, my emphasis). Even our protagonist is open about the fact that attempting to make meaning out of one’s own experience, or to look inside of one’s inner world and analyze the contents, is the definition of a futile mission. The story, then, becomes one of a man’s struggle against his own unconscious self (a rhetorical purpose that is uncomfortably Freudian, and uncomfortably familiar). With this, it becomes necessary to take a close look at the final scene in The Trial.

In the end, Josef K. is killed by soldiers. Camus posits that “suicide, like the leap, is acceptance [of the absurd] at its extreme… In its way, suicide settles the absurd… But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled” (19). In his analysis of the absurd and whether suicide is a productive revolt against the sentiment of absurdity in the human experience, he concludes that while ending one’s life would seemingly “settle” the absurd, or make it go away, this is not productive, because the absurd cannot go away. Absurdity is the defining characteristic of the human experience, so to give into it is to devalue life. To return to the novel, there is an interesting back-and-forth in K.’s mind about whether he should resist the soldiers efforts, or whether he should accept their sentence and execution: “K. resisted. ‘I won’t have my strength much longer, I’ll use it all now’” (Kafka 1998, 227), “the futility of resistance was suddenly clear to him” (227), “In spite of all their efforts, and in spite of the cooperation K.
gave them, his posture was still quite forced and implausible” (230). He even considers suicide, notably: “K. knew clearly now that it was his duty to seize the knife as it floated from hand to hand above him and plunge it into himself. But he didn’t do so; instead he twisted his still-free neck and looked about him” (230).

Instead of killing himself, K. chooses to let the men take care of him, while tilting his head upwards to look around, gaze at his surroundings, and find a human figure to ponder. This rejection of the opportunity to commit suicide is critical. “The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death” Camus argues, “it is essential to die unreconciled and not of one’s own free will” (19). Because K. is killed, the absurd is not settled. Suicide would have ended the absurdity in Kafka’s narrative, but this execution constitutes the acceptance of the absurd. This reflects the reality of absurdity in the human world, because Josef K., after a novel-length struggle, accepts that there is no meaning to life. After railing against the nonsensicality of living, he is doomed to die, but rejects suicide, and the absurd lives on. The shame in being human, it seems, is that we cannot be anything else, so K. dies like a dog, in an extremely weighty simile. It is not a metaphor. “Like” is the first word in the sentence, putting an emphasis on the separation – he is like an animal, but he is not one, because if he was, he might not be facing the absurd. Perhaps we, like animals, are led to think that we are confused and floundering in our search for meaning, and that we will die at night, looking for something that means something, persecuted and wondering why we didn’t try harder to push off the yoke of our own, manufactured reality. Absurdity is a product of humans, and the human mind, only – and this is an explanation for all of the trouble that we find ourselves in.

Kafka depicts, wonderfully and painfully, the cruelty of bureaucracy, but only as he emphasizes that this cruelty is caused by a uniquely absurd quirk of humanity. The cruelty, in
short, is absurd. This is not an unfamiliar concept and explains Kafka’s enduring presence and popularity amongst scholars: his prose (or poetry) reflects the complex society that we live in with uncanny precision and enduring power. We live today, more than any time in history, under a complex array and infinite hegemony of capitalist systems that were designed to value profit over life. Because these systems are uniquely human, as they were created by humanity and continually operate by, within, and amongst humanity, they are dense and absurd.

Camus argues that “there can be no absurd outside the human mind” (11), and we can see that when capital and technological projects extend the limits of the human mind, the layers of uncanny absurdity that lie within it become only more terrifying. We call insurance companies only to encounter layers of answering machines and recorded messages, and we might make our claim, but we will never be confident of a response. We work with various companies with supervisors and managers unnamed, with vague deadlines and nobody truly responsible for serving as a point of contact. We live in an age of conspiracy, marked by illogical evidence and ever-moving rhetorical goalposts, waiting for leaders to effect change that we know will never come. We work and learn within a pandemic, with contradictory statements on policy, inaccessible medical care, unequal treatment, and an unknowable future. The systems that perpetuate absurdity in our daily lives preclude human connection by their nature and were created by the very species that is condemned to suffer within them. Corngold notes that:

There have been trials in American courts conducted in a language that the accused literally could not understand; in others, the condemned was not present when his sentence was read. In one such case, counsel alludes plainly to the penultimate paragraph of The Trial, which includes the sentence “Where was the Judge whom he had never seen?” (18, my emphasis)
Thus, absurdity, whether it takes the form of nightmare, bureaucracy, or endless waiting, is always relevant to the situation of society, so long as that society continues to be dominated by a human-designed, human-led capital system. We work to find meaning within it, and we cannot, and then we continue to work. Our continued determination to survive and understand the layers of humanity constitutes a productive revolt, and so we continue to face the absurd with persistence, and even an optimism. Indeed, we may be Sisyphus, but we are also the stone, we are also the mountain, and “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 24). Thus, even during the technological age, marked by war, division, and pandemic, the works of Kafka, Beckett, and Kubin endure. They are, above all else, stubbornly unceasing in their attempts to sweep readers off of their feet and upend the essential notion of “meaning” in both scholarly criticism and life.
Works Cited


