

# The Curious Case of Kafka's "Odradek": A Trickster in the Old World

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## Abstract

Franz Kafka's "The Cares of a Family Man" is a narrative riddle that has created an interpretive frenzy. Central to the discussion of the short story is Odradek, a wooden bobbin, which veers between being human and non-human. The transgression of identity is informed by an assemblage that makes Odradek a character that is both social and anti-social. Kafka presents this character as a bricolage between the sacred and the profane. More importantly, it is connected to some threads which can be identified as a metaphor for narrative. This paper considers various interpretations of Odradek and compares it with the culture hero, the trickster. Although Odradek is a modernist figure that responds to the angst of the Europe after the Great War, I shall argue that it can be considered as a marginal figure trickster that continuously asserts the need for continuance and survival.

**Keywords:** Kafka, animal, sacred, profane, trickster, assemblage, thing-power, Marxism, psychoanalysis

The enigmatic figure Odradek, featured in Franz Kafka's "The Cares of a Family Man," by design, both invites and defies interpretations. Put simply, Odradek is a personified spool of thread that has been used up by a family man; it is discarded but not fully thrown away. Kafka locates this everyday object in a space that is both real and figurative. He presents its story in such a way that the inanimate object assumes both the body and soul of a human. What Odradek lacks in becoming fully human is something that Aristotle would have argued

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as an essential characteristic of an animal, “a sensitive soul”—a combination of “sensation, appetite and local motion” (Great Books 1.18). Yet it moves: it moves out of the house to visit the neighbors and returns almost like a pet cat and poses in different corners of the house. Its constant appearance and disappearance makes the family man “re-member” and include it as a subject of his care, if not a member of his family. But while it stays within the reach of the family man, it remains out of his care. The ambivalence of Odradek’s existence exudes allegorical possibilities, but it nevertheless maintains its material entity as a wooden object.

Kafka attains this material indeterminacy through his diction. It will not be an overstatement to say that it is language that gives life to Odradek. For example, Kafka describes this wooden object as something that has “lungs” or “legs.” The anthropomorphication helps Odradek transcend its objectified state and embrace a corporeal identity of an animal or a human. Then again, at the end of the short story, the family man ponders: “Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out, but that does not apply to Odradek” (CFM 429). The family man, because of his familial bond, has certain responsibilities, which can be labeled as his “aim in life.” In contrast, Odradek lacks any such aim or conscious activity. In other words, Odradek lacks human desire, which, according to Aristotle again, would connect it to the Great Chain of Being. Odradek’s vegetable existence corresponds with its material component—wood. But it keeps on transgressing boundaries. Earlier, its laughter has been compared to the rustle of “fallen leaves” (CFM 428). The fall image evokes death only to be transcended in the final lines of the story. Its defiance against death brings it to a trans-corporeal reality – to the realm of the immortal, i.e., the divine. There can also be a rather matter-of-fact explanation for such a supposed immortality. Maybe Odradek is nothing more than a machine. The physical description excites one such possibility:

At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. But it is not only a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to that at a right angle. By means of this latter rod on one side and one of the points of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs.” [emphasis added] (CFM 428)

The allusions to Jewish and Christian traditions in this description are obvious: what seemed like an alienated object in a machine age, suddenly posed as a sacrificial crucified figure; the reference to the star is a reminder of the Star of David. Odradek exists in a liminal space between the two Testaments: Old and New, and assumes a spiritual existence. The residue of colorful narrative threads gives this wooden object a spiritual aura as it both links and delinks the Old Testament

and the New Testament. It is suddenly possible to interpret “cross bar,” and “right angle” as nuanced religiosity. However, Odradek is not a mythical figure that has ceased to exist, or that exists only in memory. For Kafka, “No one, of course, would occupy himself with such studies if there were not a creature called Odradek” (CFM 428).

Odradek then is real. At least we are told to believe so. The description of Odradek in the course of the narrative constantly changes shape, reminding one of Proteus in Greek mythology; and it is indeed a Herculean task to grasp its full meaning. One way to approach Odradek then is to compare it with the figure of the trickster, the eternal shape-shifters, found in oral traditions in various cultures. Tricksters too border the realms of both man and animal, and trade with the sacred and the profane as they are often involved in the cosmology and cosmogony of a given culture; Coyote in the American Southwest, Loki in Norse mythology, Reynard the Fox in France, or Brer Rabbit in Africa are cases in point (Erdoes xiii). Similarly, Odradek is niched between man and animal boundaries; as a “star shaped spool for thread,” The anthropomorphization of the household object allows us to think of Odradek as a member of the family, similar to the way a tribal trickster is considered as an uncle or an elder brother in a community. The trickster’s ability to sustain against all odds and to return from an uncanny realm of consciousness is another area that makes the trickster analogy even more pertinent. In what follows I shall argue that much like Kafka’s celebrated piece *The Metamorphosis*, “The Cares of a Family Man” relies on indeterminacy, which can be used to locate Odradek in a narrative tradition where the object can be deemed a trickster. As Barbara Babcock aptly puts it:

No character in literature, oral or written, baffles us quite as much as trickster. He is positively identified with creative powers, often bringing such defining features of culture as fire or basic food, and yet he constantly behaves in the most anti-social manner we can imagine. Although we laugh at him for his troubles and promiscuity, his creative cleverness amazes us and keeps alive the possibility of transcending the social restrictions we regularly encounter” (147).

Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz in their introduction argue that the pithy presence of animals in the trickster stories proves the tribe’s proximity to nature. They quote Howard Norman to claim that trickster stories “enlighten an audience about the sacredness of life. In the naturalness of form, they turn away from forced conclusions, they animate and enact, they shape and reshape the world” (xix). Odradek too, as I shall argue, shapes and reshapes its surroundings. It is a transcendental agency that stands in opposition to the social category of the family man. Its vitality to outlast its other makes it a close cousin of the trickster.

One of the salient features of the trickster is buffoonery. A trickster is known for its great skills of outsmarting its audience, even at the expense of his self-deprecation.

While Kafka animates an inanimate object, giving them some semblance of reality, he begins “The Cares of a Family Man” with an etymological survey of the nomenclature:

Some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others again, believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the world.(CFM 427-8)

The criticism of the academia is obvious in the line where scholars are divided in their opinions as they fail to discern the true meaning of the name. Is it a parody of the renewed interest in the primitive that was in vogue within a modernist frame? It is hard to tell. It reminds one of the efforts of the salvage ethnologists in the 19th century who tried to rescue the folklore of the primitive past as a vanishing art; Franz Boas is a case in point. The tribal trickster became a member of the public because of such ethnographic surveys.

The Slavonic root word of Odradek, as Anya Meksin has pointed out, is an “antiquated verb, ‘odradeti,’ which means ‘to counsel against’. ...seems to advise against interpretation itself, against attempts at meaning making” (“Kafka Project” n.p.). The indeterminacy of such a claim is contradicted by Jean-Claude Milner who traces the origin of the word back to Greece where *Dodekaedron* means “part of something,” (Wikipedia) an idea that is in sync with the physical reality of Odradek. Kafka writes:

One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; at least there is no sign of it; nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind; the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished. In any case, closer scrutiny is impossible, since Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of. (CFM 428)

It appears that Kafka never wanted the name to be decoded, just like he never wanted the bug that Gregor Samsa turned into in “The Metamorphosis” to be identified or named. Judith Ryan who, while reviewing a book by Margret Walter Schneider, is right as she argues, “since it [Odradek] is chosen for the very purpose of naming what cannot be comprehended. In its confusing conglomeration of oddly assorted details, Odradek represents the object as such, which must necessarily remain inaccessible to subjectivity” (264).

Seen thus, Odradek is a product of the unconscious –a creature of the “id,” while the family man becomes the “ego.” In other words, it is “the Other” of the family man’s “Self.” Its repeated and intermittent return is analogous to Freud’s Sandman story

as expounded in his seminal essay "The Uncanny." Just like the spyglass in Hoffman's story that Freud analyzed to forward his ideas on Uncanny, Odradek is the object that makes the "unfamiliar familiar," the "secret non-secret." It belongs to "the class of frightening thing (s) that leads us back to what is known and familiar" (930). But what is there for the family man to be frightened, rather feel guilty about? The family man has a house, but Odradek, as it confesses, has "no fixed abode" (*CFM* 428). The house can be a metaphor for shelter, protection in the way conscience, religion, morality, superego, or any other institutions protect a man. It can be a belief system. By the same token, Odradek does not have any fixed faith base. The greatest anxiety of the family man involves the fear that the object will outlast the subject, the Other will keep on haunting even after the Self has ceased to be. The same idea recurs in trickster narratives: the trickster never dies; even if it does, it keeps coming back like in the animation film "The Coyote and the Roadrunner." In the final few lines, the family man ponders: "Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children, and my children's children? He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful" (*CFM* 429).

Is death a sign of loneliness that the family man is worried about? Odradek in contrast will keep on forming bonds with his children and children's children. Odradek's survival means that it will be social, albeit tribal, like that of a trickster.

Odradek's existence in the after-life has left critics divided; there seems to be little agreement whether this creature belongs to heaven or hell. Like Paul Klee's Angels, Odradek remains suspended between heaven and hell. Adorno for one, believes that Odradek's "life-world symbolizes the utter profanity, the 'hell' in which things exist under capitalism: used-up, forgotten, left for lost or without employment, they call in vain for our care" (Vatter 47). Adorno, in his "Notes on Kafka," identifies the latter's textual world as "hell seen from the perspective of salvation" (qtd. in Corngold 35). Conversely, for Agamben, Odradek represents "heaven." After all, Odradek's world is "a place where nothing has its proper place and every object has lost all relation to functionality or instrumentality, a type of ambivalence that can only be found in "heaven." For utopia is found wherever things can be enjoyed (or used) without being used up (or consumed); wherever our dealing with things escapes the confines of a rationalized and professionalized activity" (Vatter 47).

It suddenly seems that Odradek is simply a relic of some lost theology. After all, the diabolical nature of its "abode" located it in what Adorno calls a "negative theology." Stanley Corngold, summarizing Adorno's position, posits that "Kafka's theology – if one can speak of such at all – is antinomian with respect to the God of the Enlightenment, the Deistic *deus otiosus*... Both are instances of a God total, abstract, and indeterminate, whom Kafka finds finally 'mythic'; the 'absolute difference' of the hidden God 'converges with the mythic powers' (34). We have seen Ted Hughes' trickster crow engaging in such negative theology. In "Theology," Ted

Hughes writes “No, the serpent did not/ Seduce Eve to the apple/ All that’s simply/ Corruption of the facts” (ll.1-4, 92). Hughes is credited for his creation of the literary trickster, Crow. His Crow offers a counter canonical narrative in which crow exists at the womb door to detect death in birth (“Examination at the Womb Door”). The trickster Crow is responsible for the creation of genitals in humans while God was sleeping (“A Childish Prank”). Figures of the tricksters thus render a negative theology with which Odradek too can be affiliated.

So far, we have seen how Odradek keeps on switching between Marxian and Freudian paradigms. The family man’s encounter with Odradek is a great meeting point of these two ideologies. Once the family man sees Odradek leaning against his bannister, he is compelled to engage in a conversation. The family man assumes that his Other lacks his sophisticated vocabulary; much like Viktor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s novel:

Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him--he is so diminutive that you cannot help it – rather like a child. "Well, what's your name?" you ask him. "Odradek," he says. "And where do you live?" "No fixed abode," he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance. (CFM 428)

Curiously enough, the lack of communication shows how distant the two have become. Prehistoric man was close to nature including animals. With the advent of technology, man has learned to master nature, but it has detached itself from what was once natural. Even the communication with animals has changed. One can now mimic an animal to have a semblance of communication. Odradek’s silence shows how distant it has become from the family man. Peter Stine, in an interesting article “Franz Kafka and Animals” posits that Kafka’s animals are his way out of “spiritual anxieties,” and “His animals emerge as indicators of the far pole of dispossession from ourselves and each other, and we stand in the same relation to them as God does to us” (61). Stine’s analysis adds another dimension to the interpretative frenzy. We have already argued that Odradek is more than a household object of a family man and its neglected plight is a reminder of how modern man under

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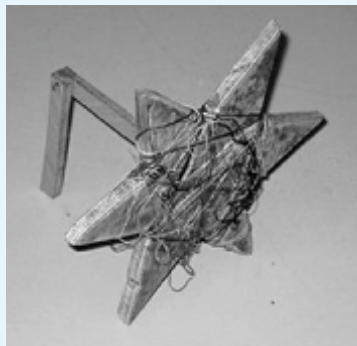
<sup>1</sup>Let us remind ourselves, however, of several elements of the animalistic stories: (1) there is no possibility of distinguishing those cases where the animal is treated as an animal and those where it is part of a metamorphosis; everything in the animal is a metamorphosis, and the metamorphosis is part of a single circuit of the becoming- human of the animal and the becoming-animal of the human; (2) the metamorphosis is a sort of conjunction of two deterritorializations, that which the animal proposes to the human by indicating ways-out or means of escape that the human would never have thought of by himself (schizo-scape); each of these two deterritorializations is immanent to the other and makes it cross a threshold; (3) thus, what matters is not at all the relative slowness of the becoming-animal; because no matter how slow it is, and even the more slow it is, it constitutes no less an absolute deterritorialization of the man in opposition to the merely relative deterritorialization that the man causes to himself by shifting, by traveling; the becoming-animal is an immobile voyage that stays in one place; it only lives and is comprehensible as an intensity (to transgress the thresholds of intensity).” (Deleuze and Guattari, 35)

capitalism has alienated himself from the mode of production. But Stine now tells us that the body that exists without a soul can only be that of an animal.

Tricksters too exist without any conscience. In one Hopi story, Coyote tricks the badger to make love to his wife. Trickster stories are all about continuance and survival. Kafka's return to the animal, Stine maintains in line with Walter Benjamin, is "an act of recovery, a reversal of time into the past" (58). Deleuze and Guattari in their *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* make a survey of the "animalistic stories" and points out three elements. For them, the becoming-animal process in Kafka's stories has two poles: "a properly animal pole and a properly familial one" (36). Odradek too oscillates between these two poles. No wonder, Kafka includes "family man" in the title of his story.

For the object to be animated enough to become either an animal or a familial subject (human), Odradek needs certain agency. Jane Bennet terms this power as "thing power": "A thing has power by virtue of its operating in conjunction with other things" (354). Loosely drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "assemblage," Bennet expounds her ecological materialism by maintaining that "matter has an inclination to make connections and form networks of relations with varying degrees of stability" (354).

Odradek's return to the family man can be construed as its inclination to form a network. Then again, its constant departure from the household and existence on the margin make him a contender for the trickster category. Finally, we can add that Odradek is a conundrum. But the mystery of Odradek centers on its shape-shifting ability: it is an object that keeps switching places between human and non-human. It is also the cause of anxiety for the family man. An anti-social object, with machine-like assemblage, will outlive the tradition that the family man upholds. Odradek will keep on living with severed threads wrapped around it. Such a tale of man-animal can only find its parallel in trickster narratives. Odradek is indeed a trickster of the Old World.



"Odradek"

Source: <http://escritsdetercer.blogspot.com/2011/01/el-odradek.html>



Paul Klee, "Angelus Novus."  
Source: <http://1.bp.blogspot.com/>

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