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## AN EXAMINATION OF *THE JUDGMENT* THROUGH THE READER-RESPONSE AND RECEPTION THEORY

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### Abstract

The Reader-Response and Reception Theory, which is the extension and outcome of the perennial hermeneutic readings, provides a dialogical relationship between reader and the text as opposed to the former strict and interpretative disciplines. The theory, which is founded and represented by such figures as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, argues that in the texts there are unmarked or unfilled spaces left intentionally or unintentionally that requires reader's active participation in the construction of meaning. Franz Kafka's *The Judgment* challenges readers' understanding the work as it includes numerous unmarked areas which force its readers into an interpretative vortex. While in its surface level, Kafka's work narrates the story of a man, who writes and informs his friend about his future plans and tells nothing about the source of the latent tension between father and the son and ultimate suicide of the protagonist as a result of his father's condemnation, the reading of the work in the light of The Reader-Response and Reception Theory fills and clarifies the unfilled spaces. The objective of this study is to read *The Judgment* through The Reader-Response and Reception Theory and interpret it in terms of psychological urges, social variables and theological orientations.

**Keywords:** The Reader-Response and Reception Theory, Kafka, *The Judgment*, Unfilled Spaces, Interpretative Disciplines.

### 1.Introduction

*The Judgment*, which was written by Franz Kafka, is seemingly about the tense relationship between a man named Georg Bendemann and his father, which ends up with the father's condemnation of his son to death and Georg's final suicide. Although Kafka's story demonstrates a well-structured story line with a beginning, rising action, climax and denouement, the story at its best is a superb paragon of "Kafkaesque narration" which calls for a literary theory to interpret it in a sound way. Otherwise, *The Judgment*, which the author acknowledged it better than any other of his works, would be in an utter confusion and without any logical interpretation.

*The Judgment* will be analyzed through the lenses of the Reception Theory which assures reader freedom to some extent in the interpretation of literary texts. Application or the employment of the Reception Theory to *The Judgment* will not be without mainstay: Psychoanalytic approach will be the focus of attention in the story's explanation. Cultural and political reading of *The Judgment* will be also briefly touched upon particularly in relation to the father figure. At the end, there will be a reservation for the theological (within the framework of Judeo-Christian faith) reading of the work as Kafka has Jewish origins and his work cannot be thoroughly evaluated without the effect of his faith.

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## 2.1 Fundamental Tenets of the Reader-Response and Reception Theory

Before penetrating into *The Judgment* and its interpretation in the light of the Reception Theory, which is a branch or extension of the hermeneutic discipline in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is beneficial to illuminate what the reception theory is and provide concise information on the theory itself.

The term reception originates from Latin word “recipere” which means correspond with a meaning and the effect of a work. In literature, it means the every kind of communicative and dialogical interaction between the text and the reader. The foundations of the Reception Theory were laid down by Hans Robert Jauss—a scholar in Roman Languages—with the inauguration address in 1967 in Constance School. Jauss’ theory regards literature “from the perspective of the reader or consumer” and observes literature “as a dialectical process of production and reception.”

The relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception. Put another way: literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject—through the interaction between author and public. (Jauss, 1982:15)

According to Jauss, the reader/recipere has precedence in the interpretation of a literary text. Reader is no longer accepted as a passive element in the triangle of the writer, the work and the reader, but he is regarded as the one who forms the meaning in his own right. Hence, interpretation of a literary work cannot be thought without the active participation of the reader.

Jauss argues that dialogical relationship must be preferred over the traditional perception of the history of literature, which values the superiority of the writer and the work. Jauss puts forward that a literary work is not a self-contained object which renders itself all the time in the same fashion to the same reader. Consequently, every act of reading is a different reading from which the reader gains something different from his former engagements with the text in question. Horizon of expectation (Erwartungshorizont) is the catalyst that provides and accelerates the different readings and perception of the same reading. “Jauss explains that the horizon of expectations is formed through the reader’s life experience, customs and understanding of the world, which have an effect on the reader’s social behavior.” (Yumi, 2004:8)

The other significant representative of the Constance School is Wolfgang Iser who is specialized in English Language and Literature. Iser’s view on reception theory was affected by phenomenological approach through which he “decontextualizes and dehistoricizes” the text and reader.

The literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text [by the reader], but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader... The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. (Iser, 1974:274-275)

Iser argues that artistic pole is formed by the writer and the aesthetic pole is shaped by the concretization of the reader. According to Iser’s aesthetic effect (Wirkungsästhetik), reader is the primary force which constructs the meaning. Thus, reader is elevated from the role of a passive receiver to an active participant who interacts with the text. As for the issue of how the meaning will be “generated”, Iser consults the premises of Roman Ingarden on unmarked areas (Unbestimmtheitsstellen) which are utilized by reader to fill the uncertainties (Unbestimmtheit) or void (Leerstellen) left intentionally or unintentionally by the writer. Leerstellen or empty areas in a given work can be defined as follows “Etkileri okurun yorumuna bağlı olan ve bir çok şekilde, hatta belki de birbiriyle çelişkili olarak yorumlanabilen unsurlardır.” (Eagleton,

2004:103)Thus, empty areas in a literary text are the unfilled spaces left by the writer who reserves the blanks to the reader to occupy and extract meaning.

Iser'e göre metinde yazar her şeyi söyleyemez ve ister istemez birtakım yerlerin doldurulması okura düşer. Bunlar basitten karmaşığa, somuttan soyuta çeşit çeşittir ve özellikle basit türden olanları okur farkında olmadan doldurur. Bir romanda "Hasan gece caddede yürürken vitrinleri seyrediyordu." gibi geçen bir cümlede söylenmemiş de olsa biz vitrinlerin aydınlık olduğunu anlarız ve farkında olmadan basit bir boşluğu doldurmuş oluruz. (Moran, 2008:242)

Reception Theory entitles reader with an autonomy or power to interpret texts. Holub argues that reading is a creative process: "The literary work is neither completely text nor completely the subjectivity of the reader, but a combination or merger of the two." (Holub,1984)

The process of construe or giving meaning to text (Konkretisation) is not only bound by the reader and the text separately but by the combination and the interaction of the both. (Tevfik, 2007:119-127)

Etki ne salt metinde, ne de okur tavrındadır;metin, okuma sürecinde güncelleştirilen bir etki potansiyelidir[...].Bu nedenledir ki estetik etki, diyalektik olarak- metin, okur ve bu ikiliarasındaki etkileşim bağlamında analiz edilmelidir. (Iser, 1990:8)

Contemporary literary perception gives priority to reader's understanding of texts which is entirely an indication that reader holds a central position in construing the meaning in a given literary text.

Modernist edebiyat, okuru edilgen durumdan çıkararak, karakter, olay, zaman ya da mekan ile ilgili karanlık bırakılmış birçok noktayı çözmeye davet eder. James Joyes, Franz Kafka, Alain Robbe-Grillet, W.Faulkner, S.Beckett ve daha birçok romancı, şair, oyun yazarı, kimisi az kimisi daha fazla oranda eseri yorumlama ve anlama işine okurun da katılmasını gerektiren eserler vermişlerdir.(Moran, 2008:240)

It must be particularly emphasized that interpretation of a literary text does not occur in a vacuum, which means that reader is not entirely free to give whatever meaning to the text or else the interpretation could be the explanation of any other text as well as the text in hand. Any interpretation ignoring the process of formation and the unity of the work, which jeopardizes and harms the text, would be unconfined.

Yapıtınbütünlüğünü, oluşum sürecini ve koşullarını göz ardı ederek sergilenecekyaklaşımlar da başıboşluğa götürür. Yorumlarımızı yapıttan yola çıkaraktemellendirmek bizi ancak tutarlı yapabilir. (Özbek, 2005:29)

Ultimately, it can be put forward that the Reception Theory introduced the reader/consumer's involvement and interaction with the text for the production of meaning.

## **2.2 The Judgment and The Psychoanalytic Quest to the Inside of Kafka's Mind**

*The Judgment*, which narrates the story of a man named Georg Bendemann and his alienated relationship with his father, was written by Franz Kafka in 1912 within almost eight hours. Georg Bendemann, who is a young merchant, aims to get married and informs his plans -as usual- to one of his friends living in Russia. Georg's intention to get married and form a successful life, an identity separate from his father's domain,intersect with Senior Georg-his father- who proves to be still powerful and adamant not to give his "throne" to his son. Consequently, the father rejects not only Georg's intention to get marry and reserve his place as a breadwinner to his son, but also he curses and sentences his son to death by drowning. Georg fulfills the condemnation and commits suicide as if he was conditioned or mesmerized by the words of his father.

Although the story can be regarded unreasonable, particularly with its ending and at times over simplistic with a common alienated father and son, the story indeed calls for interpretation as it includes void or empty areas in relation to the Reception Theory.

First of all, it is not only a father-son relationship; it is about a young man who wants to prove himself by "dethroning" his father and it is about a father who is indignant not to be substituted by his son. There emerges an oedipal anxiety and libidinal confrontation between the father and son.

The story opens up Georg Bendemann's writing letter to his friend in Russia: "[...] his friend, who had actually run away to Russia some years before, being dissatisfied with his prospects at home." (Kafka, 1952:2) This friend, who is not entirely introduced and has never appeared in the story, may symbolize Kafka's inner-self whom Senior Bendemann might have appreciated as he failed in his business and ran away from the rivalry with the father. For this reason, friend may function as a repressed part of Georg/Kafka who sacrificed a healthy psychosexual development for he is isolated and "bachelored" by the father. The reason why Georg is writing a letter to someone living in Russia, to someone ostensibly other than himself, lies in the fact that he wants to get rid of a part of himself which is awkward and unable to counteract his father in terms of financial success and as a family leader. That's why Georg wants to get married and get rid of bachelorhood. As Georg plans to get married, he ascribes his celibacy to an unknown friend who has disappeared and begun to live in Russia for some years. That the writer leaves an unfilled space in the story with regard to the Reception Theory presents an opportunity to the reader to judge that the friend in Russia is actually the suppressed part of the central character whom the protagonist sent into exile to a distant country.

The friend in Russia may embody Kafka/Georg's inner self, as the friend is not much affected by the death of the father's wife:

Two years ago his mother had died, since when he and his father had shared the household together, and his friend had of course been informed of that and had expressed his sympathy in a letter phrased so dryly that the grief caused by such an event, one had to conclude, could not be realized in a distant country. (Kafka, 1952:4)

But Georg's business flourishes right after the death of his mother and it seems that he is not as troubled as his father has been disturbed by the loss. "That's the course of nature in the first place, and in the second place the death of our dear mother hit me harder than it did you." (Kafka, 1952:9) In exactly the same manner, Georg takes advantage of the loss of his mother to assert authority over his father as Georg is not deeply affected by the death of his mother. His success in his profession and his eagerness to eradicate his father's authority through marriage- a substitution of mother/wife with his prospective wife- are indications that Georg is not profoundly affected by the loss of his mother which supports the thesis that Georg's friend, who is not much affected by the loss as well, is the personification of the protagonist's suppressed self.

Writer leaves empty areas to the reader to comment on the identity of the friend. At some points, Kafka hints that the friend and Georg may be the same character who sprang from the same neurotic mind. Father's expressions, which reduce two characters into the one, indicate that the friend is a part of his son:

He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you've been playing him false all these years [...]. You could write your lying little letters to Russia. But thank goodness a father doesn't need to be taught how to see through his son. (Kafka, 1952:13)

Father condemns his son as he betrays his friend/inner self. Association between the friend and Georg's inner self can be further inferred from the father's expression on the dichotomy of "innocent child" and "devilish human being" (Kafka, 1952:16) of the same person.

The themes of betrayal to the friend and mother are somehow connected and brought fore by the father as he greatly favors "prodigal" (Kafka, 1952:3) friend whose businesses "going downhill" (Kafka, 1952:2) and the mother who has given strength to father to establish his authority.

You thought you'd got him down, so far down that you could set your bottom on him and sit on him and he wouldn't move, then my fine son makes up his mind to get married! [...] you have disgraced your mother's memory, betrayed your friend and stuck your father into bed so that he can't move. But he can move, or can't he? (Kafka, 1952:13-14)

Senior Bendemann insists on the existence of a weaker friend, which is the second self of his son, instead of a newly blossoming Georg. Father tries to defend the rights of his own, his authority under the disguise of defending the rights of the exiled friend/weaker second self for he can easily defeat the weaker side of his son. "But your friend hasn't been betrayed after all!"

cried his father, emphasizing the point with stabs of his forefinger. "I've been representing him here on the spot." (Kafka, 1952:14)

At last, Georg seems to acknowledge the fake existence of the friend and the letters when he is confronted by his father's accusation of him as a "leg-puller" (Kafka, 1952:11) and a "comedian" (Kafka, 1952:14) "Yes, of course I've been playing a comedy! A comedy! That's a good expression! What other comfort was left to a poor old widower?" (Kafka, 1952:14)

Engagement and marriage are significant factors which prompt Kafka/Georg to enter into the father's domain. Through marriage, the protagonist believes that he could claim his power over his father who now has lost his wife and suffers from old age. Georg, either consciously or unconsciously is very eager for the role reversal as he believes that during his mother's lifetime, all his talents of any kind are stultified by the presence of his domineering father.

[...] during his mother's lifetime his father's insistence on having everything his own way in the business had hindered him from developing any real activity of his own, perhaps since her death his father had become less aggressive (Kafka, 1952:4)

*The Judgment* can be held autobiographical as it renders clues about Kafka's identification with Georg Bendemann. Kafka's lengthy letter to his father draws parallels with Georg's case. The title is a striking example in tracing the clues for the identification. For instance, Kafka employs legal terms in his letter and calls his father the judge of the family. While Georg Bendemann refers his father "My father is still a giant of a man" (Kafka, 1952:8) which reveals his terror and suspicion of his power and ability to overthrow his father, Kafka addresses to his father in the same manner; "You were so great in every respect" (Kafka, 2008:25). Just like Georg Bendemann, Kafka suffers from strong repulsion and identification with his father and it becomes more apparent particularly when it is taken into consideration the fact that he wrote his lengthy letter to his father after his intention to get married to Julie Wohryzek had been turned down by his father.

No matter how much Georg endeavors to identify with his father by means of shouldering the duty of breadwinning and suppressing him through thrusting his father into bed by covering him as if he was burying a dead man, he could not achieve his aim as his father overpower his son and "sprang erect in bed" (Kafka, 1952:13)

Georg could not get married at the end, which would help him break free from the shackles of his father. As for Kafka, who assumes marriage an impossible task, broke his engagement two times and he could not fulfill and realize the father role. It can be asserted that the function of the father figure both in *The Judgment* and in Kafka's life is similar. Georg's father rejects his son's marriage because of the fear that a possible marriage would mean "the death" of his authority. Senior Bendemann accuses his son that he is attracted to his fiancée out of sexual reasons. "Because she lifted up her skirts," his father began to flout, "because she lifted her skirts like this, the nasty creature." (Kafka, 1952:13)

In *The Judgment*, the father prevents his son's marriage because of the anxiety and excessive fixation he feels for the potential loss of authority and the father does this on the pretext that his son's prospective fiancée lacks moral qualities. This situation echoes in Kafka's life in the same manner. Kafka's father, Hermann, comments on Kafka's fiancée Felice Bauer as follows: "She probably put on some sort of fancy blouse, as only those Prague Jewesses know how" (Kafka 11:2008) Tyrannical fathers, both in Kafka's real life and his fictitious life in which Georg personifies in *The Judgment* hinder the natural handover the familial power from father to son. What's more, Georg is threatened by Senior Bendemann if he could manage to marry, he could never assume the role of his father as his father would outwit him and distance his wife from him: "Just take your bride on your arm and try getting in my way! I'll sweep her from your very side, you don't know how!" (Kafka, 1952:15) It is clear that there is a tension, anxiety or libidinal confrontation between the father and son. As father has lost the mother, the sexual partner and the son has found his own spouse, father fears death what he could do if his

authority would be undone by his son who begins to enjoy the fruits of his newly-gained freedom. Thus, the father tries to demonstrate as best as he can he has not lost all of his power.

Stay where you are, I don't need you! You think you have strength enough to come over here and that you are only hanging back of your own accord. Don't be too sure! I am still much the stronger of us two [...] I'm far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last strength I have, it's enough for you, too much for you. (Kafka, 1952:15)

The father not only proves his physical strength over his son but also does he challenge his son that he is still more powerful than his son in professional domain.

All by myself I might have had to give way, but your mother has given me so much of her strength that I've established a fine connection with your friend and I have your customers here in my pocket! (Kafka, 1952:15)

The father figure seems to be all-powerful not only in individual sphere but also in social, political and religious domain. These father figures are those who control, direct and rule people and they never give in handing over the established power. Georg's story about a riot during the Russian Revolution proves this. (Kafka, 1952:13) The priest, who is a father figure in the story, cuts a cross figure on his palm and shows it to the people who gather together under his balcony. The priest possibly tries to calm down the crowd not to challenge the established system and values. The story pleases Georg's father to an extent that we are informed by the narration that he himself told the story once or twice. The father figure, who is personified with a priest -a religious father this time- tries to suppress a social revolution against the political father of that time.

In individual level, father functions as superego, which decrees what is right and what is wrong. Georg's acceptance of his father's condemnation without any opposition or questioning and his rushing out to execute the father's sentence, "death by drowning" demonstrate that he is aware of his "guilt" that is his eagerness to occupy the father's domain. His father seems to have known his children for a long time even better than the son knows himself.

So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you've known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being! (Kafka, 1952:16)

Apart from the psychological perspective, father's condemnation or curse can be interpreted as a quasi-divine will and God's judgment which crashes man's illusion about his self-sufficiency and wish for happiness in the world.

*The Judgment* presents an interpretative vortex in terms of psychological reading too. Accusation hurled at Georg by his father and Georg's acceptance of the capital sentence without opposition remind the long established collective unconsciousness and initiation to overthrow the power/father figure. In this case, Georg's efforts cannot be taken solely as an individual culpability.

In addition to the psychological approach to the "ultimate problem of *Das Urteil*"-the original title of Kafka's work- that is the complexity of its interpretation, Kafka's work can be dealt with a cultural perspective as well.

Kafka, who can be regarded as an expatriate, has Jewish origins. The culture and the circumstances of his time in which he lives, force Kafka/Georg to accept whatever befalls on his lot. It is the culture which associates self-interest with betrayal. That's why Georg accepts his father's "judgment" without rebellion for he has already been feeling the burden of being criminal.

What sort of culture produces a personality so willing to conform, even to the point of self-destruction? It is a culture of self-absorbed isolation, a culture of narcissism, in which the individual is so self-centered that he becomes self-blind (Lasch). It is a culture in which self-interest has become congruent with betrayal: Georg's betrayal of his friend and the memory of his mother, as well as his disregard for his father. (Rolleston, 2003:97)

Rolleston points out and highlights the reason of Georg's unquestioned "self-destruction" by overlapping it with the culture in which Georg/Kafka lives that force individuals to accept self-interest and betrayal.

### 2.3 How Much Judeo-Christian Notions Enter into *The Judgment*?

After having elaborated on the reverberation of *The Judgment's* psychoanalytic and cultural interpretation and revealed the effects of political echo (with the priest/father figure, who cuts a cross in his palm, to manipulate the mob for the political father) it will be beneficial to trace a different reading of the work with regard to theological interpretation.

Senior Bendemann-the father of Georg- represents the authority of law with its connotation to the laws found in the Old Testament. Father's dark room symbolizes the Holy of Hollies in the Temple which is a direct reference to the Jewish faith. The mother, who passed away three years ago but whose effect still exerts a power on the family, reminds both Shekhinah, the divine wisdom and the Virgin Mary. Father's scar on his thigh reminds Jacob's scratch on the same location which he was wounded after he wrestled with the angel in the Old Testament. *The Judgment* is rich in terms of Jewish theology particularly for the association of angry father with the jealous God of Israel "[...] for I the LORD thy God [am] a jealous God(Cogliano,2004: 42)

The "Schreckbild seines Vaters" (dreadful image of his father) does indeed suggest an angry Jehovah, a reminder of the authority of tradition, who punishes Georg for his apostasy into worldly pursuits. (Rolleston, 2003:105)

Senior Bendemann's favoritism between Georg and his friend "He would have been a son after my own heart" (Kafka, 1952:13) recalls the story of "stolen blessing" in the Old Testament between the two brothers Jacob and Esau. (Cogliano, 2004:14-15) Allusions are not only confined to the Old Testament; there are references to Bible as well. Kafka deploys Christian overtones and images throughout *The Judgment*. Georg's hanging from the bridge after jumping out to death symbolizes Jesus' crucifixion. Georg with his "innocence" and "devilish" side, which his father refers at the end of the story, make him a scapegoat which represents both Jesus -with his innocence- and Judas who have betrayed his friend as Georg has betrayed the friend who is living in Russia. This binary opposition in Georg's nature is hinted by his father who denounces him "an innocent child" and at the same time a "devilish human being". (Kafka, 1952:16) In the intersection of innocence and delinquency, Ellis draws attention to Georg's and Jesus similarity: "Christ was crucified because his humility was felt to be arrogance, his meekness to be aggressive and his advocacy of childlike innocence to be devious and insidious."(Ellis, 1974:209)

It is clear that Kafka could not break free from his Jewish origin as its effects faintly surface in *The Judgment*. This is particularly valid in view of the Reception Theory when one fills the empty areas left by the writer.

### 3. Conclusion

While former hermeneutic studies, which originated from theological inclinations, preoccupied with a single reading and understanding of a given text, later studies led to the multiple readings and understanding which was supported with the emergence of the Reception Theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

*The Judgment* by Kafka, which is dealt with in this study, proves to have and render different sorts of reading and interpretation with regard to the Reception Theory. When Kafka's work is handled with the precepts of psychological approach, there emerges an oedipal anxiety and a fierce competition between a father and son. Through the lenses of the Reception Theory, father and son are observed to be oppositional forces which aim to overwhelm one another

When the work is handled with a cultural point of view as indicated above with reference to James Rolleston, the interpretation of Georg's complete surrender to his father's curse "death by drowning" comes to have a different explanation: a consequence of socially conditioned behaviour of an individual.

*The Judgment* can have further interpretation when one considers the theological impact on the work: Libidinal confrontation of the father and son turns into the relationship between a transcendental power/God and people, which men cannot escape but submissively accept the wrath of God because of his worldly pursuit of wish for power.

Last of all, the opportunity for the multiple interpretations and options for construing numerous meaning from the same text arise from the permission of the Reception Theory which provides chance to reader to comment on the work, fill the blanks within certain limits and grants the wealth of interpretation of texts as it is observed in the case of *The Judgment*.

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