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## **Leni's Hand: Animality and Redemption in Kafka's Women**

Carlo Salzani<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Kafka's world is a male world, where women play purely marginal and auxiliary roles and do not possess autonomy but are mere projections of the demons hunting Man. Authority, hierarchy, and the Law have a markedly patriarchal structure: only men are officials, directors, judges, lawyers, and accused; women gravitate at the margins of these structures and thereby mark their boundaries. Placed at the margins of Humanity, they also mark its boundary with Animality; they are, as Deleuze and Guattari write, the "leftover" of the becoming-animal. As boundary figures, they are essentially promiscuous, ambiguous beings, and their distinctive promiscuity is their sexuality. This sexuality is used by and exchanged among the male characters in a circulation of women (quite traditional although hyperbolically exasperated in Kafka's obsessive world), reaching its paradigmatic climax in *The Trial*. Here, a feminine figure, Leni, nurse and housekeeper of the lawyer Huld, can be taken as a paradigm of Kafka's women: she is not only sexually promiscuous but also physically animalized through a little deformation of her right hand. Through an analysis of Leni's character, this article proposes a reading of Kafka's female characters, placed at the intersection between animality and redemption.*

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka, patriarchy, feminine figures, *The Trial*, animality, redemption

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<sup>1</sup>Research Fellow, Department of Philosophy, University of Innsbruck, Austria. Email: [carlosalzani@gmail.com](mailto:carlosalzani@gmail.com)

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1. Sitting on the lap of Joseph K., on the ottoman in the study of the lawyer Huld, the nurse and housekeeper Leni asks K. about his lover Elsa and suddenly asks:<sup>1</sup>

“Has she got a physical defect?” “A physical defect?” K. asked. “Yes,” said Leni, “I’ve got a little defect like that. Look.” She held the middle and ring fingers of her right hand apart; the skin between them went up almost to the top joint of her little fingers. “What a trick of nature,” said K., adding, after he had examined the whole of her hand, “What a pretty claw!” (Kafka, 2009, p. 78)

Leni does not have a hand but a “claw,” *eine hübsche Kralle* (Kafka, 2002, p. 145), a paw equipped with nails. For Heidegger, the hand is one (of the many) features setting apart the human from the non-human, it is what is “proper” of the human as human. In *What Is Called Thinking?* Heidegger links the hand to thinking itself, to *logos*, which sets apart more than anything else humans from the rest of creation, in a typical process of renaming in which the same or analogous functions are differently named when referred to humans or non-humans. On the hand, Heidegger writes,

is a peculiar thing. In the common view, the hand is part of our bodily organism. However, the hand’s essence can never be determined, or explained, by its being an organ which can grasp. Apes, too, have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands. The hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs – paws, claws, or fangs – different by an abyss of essence. Only a being who can speak, that is, think, can have hands and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft. (Heidegger, 1968, p. 16)

Leni’s “claw,” therefore, identifies her as not fully human, as “flawed,” *ein Naturspiel*, a “trick of nature” (Kafka, 2002, p. 145; 2009, p. 78) – as women have always been deemed in the Western tradition. If the paradigm of reference, the “neutral universal,” is Man (male, adult, non-disabled, etc.), any deviation from it is less than human.

And yet, as Elvira Bennet remarks (1998, p. 404), the relationship between Leni and Joseph K. is centered upon the hand, it is a “play of hands.” When, in a later chapter in *The Trial*, K. goes to the lawyer to fire him, Leni positions herself behind the chair on which K. is sitting and begins to caress his hair and cheeks, while Joseph K. tries to stop her from grasping one of her hands, and when she tries to keep him from talking he grasps also the other hand: but “It wasn’t love that made him hold it tight, and she kept groaning and trying to pull her hands free” (Kafka, 2009, p. 137). The breakup between the two happens when Leni frees herself from the grip of K.’s hands, saying: “You’re hurting me. Let go” (2009, p. 138). But in this play of twisting and wiggling, K.’s and Leni’s hands are not what brings them together in common humanity but precisely what divides them, and that is why the hand is the focus of their encounters. A woman’s hand, even when it is not a “claw,” is closer to a mere grasping organ than a correlative of *logos*, and, as such, it presents an *instrumental* rather than *essential* character. Going back in the evening to his room, which he had left untidy on the morning of his detention and now finds perfectly in order, Joseph K. thinks: “A woman’s hand can do so much unseen” (2009, p. 18).

2. Leni’s dehumanization is declined in a series of further traits. Leni is small and “had a rounded, doll-like face, not only her pale cheeks and chin were round but also her temples and the outline of her forehead” (2009, p.70), traits which, according to Bennet, identify her as “Slavic” (Bennet, 1998, p. 397). Moreover, doll-like is also “a small hand, much smaller than K.’s” (p. 75) and “her dark, slightly protuberant eyes” (2009, p. 70), which makes one think of the dolls in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*, so “uncanny” that Freud took them as a paradigm of the Uncanny itself. Like a doll, Leni is lifted up by Joseph K. and placed on his lap, where at some point, she even manages, in turn, to get on her knees, so small she is (2009, pp. 77, 78).

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However, more than a doll, Leni is a small exotic animal who not only has webbed fingers but also exudes a “bitter, provocative odour, [...] like pepper,” simultaneously attractive and repulsive, and is defined by K’s uncle as “a grubby little tart,” *einem kleinen schmutzigen Ding* (2002, p. 146 / 2009, p. 78). In a typical process of animalization of the animal itself, her animality is reduced to instinct, which in her case (that is, in the case of the Woman) amounts to sexual instinct. Just like a small animal, Leni on K’s lap starts kissing but, above all, biting his neck and even his hair, and when one of her knees slips (probably because she opened her legs), she also drags K. to the floor, in a fall that amounts to a sexual embrace and, as such, is the Fall into sin and the less-than-human (Kafka, 2009, p. 78; cf. Boa, 1996, p. 212). In this Fall, Leni drags all the clients of the lawyer Huld, who, in their second meeting, explains to K.: “This peculiarity is that Leni finds almost all the defendants attractive. She becomes attached to them all, and does appear to be loved by them all” (2009, p. 132). Moreover, Leni is probably, as K’s uncle remarks, not only the nurse and housekeeper but also the mistress of the lawyer (2009, p. 78). In *The Trial* Leni embodies therefore the idea of an (animal) sexuality which amounts to fall and guilt, and which degrades the human (that is, Man) and turns him away from his task and his *quête* (exemplified here by the trial).

Joseph K. does not find Leni’s hand repulsive; to the contrary, he is attracted to it: “in wonderment, [he] kept pulling her two fingers apart and putting them together again, until finally he gave them a brief kiss and let go” (2009, p. 78). But, as Elizabeth Boa remarks (1996, p. 212), what the membrane connects are the middle and the ring finger of Leni’s hand, preventing her thereby to wearing the symbol of legitimate love, the wedding ring. The mark of animality is guilt and degradation but it is also what defines for Kafka sexuality as such – and therefore also Woman. Sexuality (Woman) is what confirms and defines the postlapsarian and sinful state of Man. The coitus, we read in Kafka’s diaries, is the “punishment for the happiness of being together” (Kafka, 2022, p. 344).

3. Scholars have identified in Leni a series of mythical and religious suggestions and references. Walter Benjamin defined her early on as a “swamp creature” (*Sumpfgeschöpf*), like all other Kafka’s women, emerging from a mythical, primigenial world (Benjamin, 1999, p. 809). For Walter Sokel (1964, pp. 188-90; cf. also Kittler, 1992), Leni is a siren, a temptress who tries to seduce and distract Man from his task. The webbed hand seems indeed to relate her to an aquatic environment, but also when it is defined as a “claw” the hand can be related to the claws (*Krallen*; cf. Kafka, 1974, p. 474) of the sirens in Kafka’s short story “The Silence of the Sirens,” where seduction is carried on through silence and not through singing. Here the siren is in fact represented as in classical mythology, not with human bust and fish tail but as a winged being with raptor claws and human face and bust, hence much more like our idea of the harpy. Siren and harpy, Leni seduces with her voice rather than her silence (adhering to the stereotype, she is a gossip), but her goal is nonetheless that of “tying,” “entangling,” and “catching” Man, as an (unsure) etymology of the term “siren” proposes (cf. Bennet, 1998, p. 394; Mykyta, 1980, p. 636).

Bennet (1998, p. 394) links Leni also to Lamia, another mythological creature partly human and partly animal, who kidnapped children and enticed men to feed on their blood and their heart. And Dagmar Lorenz (2002, p. 176) sees her as an undine, the water nymph of mythology, who to acquire a soul had to have sexual intercourse with a man, whence her sexual promiscuity (from which the term nymphomania also derives). But if we remain in the framework of the *Odyssey*, Leni is also Circe, the enchantress who tries to hold the hero from his journey; unlike Circe, however, Leni does not turn her victims into pigs but instead into dogs. In the scene in which Joseph K. goes to the lawyer Huld to fire him, Leni joins the lawyer in sadistically humiliate the merchant Block, another client of the lawyer, who like a dog gets down on all fours (2009, p. 137) and at some point is pulled by his jacket collar by Leni to call him to order, just like one does with dogs (2009, p. 141). “Such a person was no longer a client,” thinks K., “he was the lawyer’s dog. If the lawyer had ordered him to crawl under the bed, as if going into a kennel, and bark, he would have done so with pleasure” (2009, p. 139; cf. Sokel, 1964, pp. 192-93). Nurse, mistress, dominatrix – Leni’s role is that of preventing K.-Odysseus from finding his homeland and his proper and rightful place in the patriarchal order.

Leni is also a witch, as indeed Joseph K.'s uncle calls her (2009, p. 72) and as again her webbed fingers, a traditional mark of witchcraft, seem to suggest (Boa, 1996, p. 212). But she is also a mix of sacred and profane: in German Leni can be the nickname or short form both of Helene and Magdalene, and refers therefore both to the Homeric Helen from the *Iliad* and to the Magdalene from the Gospels, traditional archetypes of the carnal and sensual woman. Just like Magdalene, Leni remains strongly sexualized even when she mortifies herself in the care for the sick (the lawyer Huld) or with the pettiest of men, the merchant Block, in front of whom she kneels down "to scratch off some wax that had dripped on to his trousers" (2009, p. 129). Saint and whore, mix of religious and obscene, the *eros* Leni embodies never manages to be entirely covered by the *agape* that she should represent (to male eyes), and when she bends over the lawyer to caress his long white hair, in a chaste gesture of caring, Joseph K. cannot help noticing "the beautiful lines of her body as she stretched" (Kafka, 2009, p. 139; Boa 1996, pp. 211, 214-15).

Leni is finally the *femme fatale*, that is, the projection of all desires and fears of Man, and as such, in all her many roles and transfigurations, she never escapes the patriarchal symbolic system that constructed her (Boa, 1996, p. 223). Indeed, the persistent descriptions of her physical features, much more frequent and detailed than for all other characters in the novel, construct her body as the page on which this system writes and shows itself (Bennet, 1998, p. 397). That is why, as Heinz Politzer argued more than five decades ago (1966, p. 192), Leni embodies the idea of Woman in Kafka.

4. Kafka's world is a masculine world, where women, as the first great Kafka commentators – from Walter Sokel to Heinz Politzer and Erich Heller – already noted, have merely marginal and auxiliary roles: they do not enjoy autonomy but are just a projection of the demons that haunt Man. Authority, hierarchy, the Law have a markedly patriarchal structure: only men are functionaries, directors, judges, lawyers, accused; women gravitate at the margins of these structures and mark thereby their boundaries. Placed at the margins of Humanity, they also mark its boundary with Animality; they are, as Deleuze and Guattari write (referring to Leni), the "leftover" of the becoming-animal (1986, p. 64). As boundary figures they are essentially promiscuous and ambiguous beings, and their distinctive promiscuity is sexuality. This sexuality is used by and exchanged among the male characters in a (very traditional even though hyperbolically exasperated in Kafka's obsessive world) circulation of women which reaches its paradigmatic peak precisely in *The Trial*.

As Ruth Gross remarks (1983, p. 578), it is by now a common place of Kafka scholarship that Kafka's women work as "connectors," and indeed this is the title of the chapter that already Deleuze and Guattari devoted to women (and artists) in their book on Kafka (1986, pp. 63-71). Women put the male characters in communication with each other (Leni, for example, connects Joseph K. to the lawyer Huld and the merchant Block) and with the institutions (the court, the castle), but they are never in contact with each other. What acts as connector is their sexuality, in the paradigmatic (according to Deleuze and Guattari) roles of sister, maid, and whore (1986, p. 64). As Gross argues (1983, p. 578), women work therefore as a verb, transitive or auxiliary, taking the action from the subject to the object – without ever being subjects or objects themselves. At the same time, women are also seen as obstacles and hindrances for Man's fulfillment of his "high" tasks (this is Larisa Mykyta's main argument [1980]) and to look for their help is seen as a weakness, a deviation, and the sign of the inevitable failure. During his conversation with Leni in the study of the lawyer Huld, Joseph K. thinks in mild surprise: "I'm enlisting women helpers" (2009, p. 77); and in the scene in the cathedral the priest reproaches him: "You seek too much help from others, [...] especially from women" (2009, p. 152).

This paradoxical and yet so traditional position fully inscribes Kafka in what Ernst Pawel calls "the lugubrious patterns of hormonal politics that ruled male conduct in his class and time" (1984, p. 179). Patterns which, however, in the Habsburg Empire at the turn of the twentieth century presented a peculiar constellation. In 1903, the twenty-three-old philosopher Otto Weininger, a Jew converted to Protestantism, published *Sex and Character* (2005) and a few months later shot himself in the heart in the house where Beethoven had died. This book, steeped in misogyny and antisemitism (Weininger was what today is called a *self-hating Jew*), immediately became a best-seller and, as difficult as it is



today to understand this, had a great impact on the (male) conscience of the time – and, many scholars argue, also on Kafka’s imagination. We know that Kafka, like many others, read the book early on and, although he never commented on its theses, it can be argued that there exists a “profound isomorphy,” as Reiner Stach puts it (1987, p. 62), between the image of the woman in Kafka and in Weininger. For both, Man is a transcendent and spiritual being, whereas Woman is a natural being, *ein Naturwesen*, who as such identifies with sex. Many are the parallels, also biographical, which can be and have been established between Kafka and Weininger, and all seem to flow into Politzer’s conclusions, according to which their misogyny originated in a mistrust in their own identity and above all in their own virility, and in the horror for what is not rational and in particular for sexuality. Although they may have disagreed about the nature of paradise, Politzer concludes, the neo-protestant Weininger and the Jew Kafka “held strikingly similar views of hell, especially the inferno of sex” (1966, p. 197).

5. The success of *Sex and Character*, it has been argued, is perhaps due to the progressive disintegration of the traditional gender roles in *fin de siècle* Europe: confronted by this menace, the European male reacted with attitudes of defense and scorn – the very attitude we find in Kafka’s works. And yet, Kafka immense fame has always been based on a supposed “universality” of his oeuvre, which has outlived all fashions, movements, trends, and cultural and social changes. This critical homogeneity begun to be questioned at the beginning of the 1980s by salutary feminist critiques, which showed how Kafka’s work is always about a male voice talking to a male ear. This markedly male perspective must be taken into consideration, these critiques argue, in the analysis of Kafka’s work without being forced or seduced into accepting its universal value.<sup>2</sup>

Evelyn Torton Beck, whose 1981 seminal essay started this interpretive trend, has centered her readings of Kafka precisely on this point, also emphasizing how Kafka’s androcentrism presents clear homoerotic traits, and arguing therefore that the sexual repulsion that seems to emerge from his fiction and diaries shows his homoerotic inclination (cf. e.g., Beck, 1983, p. 566; 1995, p. 35). James Hawes, in a more recent book (2008), has instead strongly objected to the common place that paints Kafka as timid, inhibited and sexophobic (and thus homosexual); to the contrary, Hawes argues that Kafka, who was a consumer of pornography, did not bind himself to women of his class because he liked sado-masochistic sex and preferred therefore prostitutes and women from the lower classes on whom he could impose his own tastes and whom he could dominate. None of these two theories can be materially proved, but ultimately they are symmetrical and rest on the same assessment of an essential contempt for women. Beck (1983, p. 567; 1995, p. 41) adds to her list of evidence Kafka’s Jewish milieu, traditionalist and strongly patriarchal, in order to decline his intrinsic contempt for himself with an interiorization of the then-dominant antisemitism and homophobia.

However, an important point Beck emphasizes is that, although preserving and perpetuating the patriarchal ideology, Kafka also unmasks and exposes the subjection of women and the structures that imprison them (Beck, 1983, p. 568; 1995, p. 41). Beck emphasizes the perpetuation of the ideology more than its exposition, but other modern readers have taken the opposite perspective, being more interested in the unmasking and denunciation than the perpetuation, and have proposed more complex and cogent readings. Gross (1995, p. 71), for example, remarks that in Kafka presents, the male characters are not more real than the female ones and that his oneiric and obsessive world presents nothing “typical,” not even about the relationships between the sexes. Gross tries this way to make the woman question in Kafka more complex, and yet it is quite difficult to deny the “typicality” of power relationships in his writings, where even the most miserable of men feel entitled to possess and mistreat women; also undeniable is the Weiningerian paradigm for Kafka’s women. Dagmar Lorenz (2002) proposes a more complex reading, starting precisely from the cultural and social earthquake that was progressively disrupting and confounding gender roles and paradigms and had produced, among other things, also Weininger and *Sex and Character*: starting from the many and so different new roles now available, Kafka deconstructed, according to Lorenz, the very concept of gender as bound to fixed roles. Gender is, in Kafka, a question of “positionality” and not of biology,

<sup>2</sup> Vivian Liska (2008) offers an excellent overview of these positions, including those previous to the 1980s.

as shown not only by the sexual freedom that Kafka's women take for themselves (this means, for Lorenz, their promiscuity), but also the feminization of many male characters, who are timid, passive and emotional "like a woman" – and, according to Weininger's antisemitic misogyny, "like a Jew," since Jews are the most feminine of races.<sup>3</sup>

Lorenz (2002, 186) emphasizes another fundamental point: Kafka not only links and correlates femininity and Jewishness – to deconstruct and de-essentializing both – but also links them to animality, to which he applies the same de-essentializing strategy: the boundaries between species are as unstable and confused as those between genders and races. Metamorphoses, transitions, and "leftovers" of becoming-animal problematize all categorical distinctions shown as unstable, ideological, and relative. Leni's hand is the picklock that can perhaps even allow us to crack the safe of Western carnophallogocentrism.

6. From these analyses, a much more complex and cogent image of Kafka's women emerges: not only subjugated, marginal, and animalized, but also independent, inaccessible, and manipulative. And on the other hand, the image of men – like Joseph K., at the same time authoritarian and servile, pretentious and weak, with whom it is impossible that the readers, even male readers, identify themselves – is progressively weakened, exposed, and ridiculed. Elizabeth Boa (1996, pp. 241-42) speaks, in this regard, of a true "demolition of dominant masculinity": by showing masculinity (and ultimately humanity) as petty and despicable, Kafka opens new spaces of redefinition and renegotiation. Larysa Mykyta (1980, pp. 631-32, 639) understands, therefore, Kafka's female characters as apparatuses that unmask, through their "impurity," any pretension of purity, consistency, and coherence of the centers of power to which they belong (the court, the castle) and which they essentially represent: the sexualized, impure and excluded woman subverts and breaks the patriarchal continuum that sexualizes and excludes her, showing thereby the deceptive and delusive nature of its alleged universality, purity and stability.

Boa (1996, pp. 186, 241) argues that this incessant deconstruction of patriarchal Law implies the necessity of its transformation and identifies in a character in *The Trial*, Fräulein Bürstner, a possible hint to this future transformation: Fräulein Bürstner not only is the only female character who deserves the bourgeois and respectable title of Fräulein (Miss), but she is also a typist (Kafka, 2009, p. 11), who, although working at the margins of Writing, of Authority, and of the Law, seems nonetheless to have managed to put a foot inside these spheres. Fräulein Bürstner is also the last character Joseph K. sees as he is taken away to be executed, and the fact of seeing her makes him aware of "the futility of his resistance" (2009, p. 162) – perhaps of the futility of any resistance against the inevitability of transforming the horrible law which oppressed him and now kills him; hence also of any resistance against the inevitability of women's inclusion. K.'s death signifies, for Boa, the pointlessness of living in such a Law and in such a power structure, and therefore, K.'s final renouncing this (exclusively masculine) world. Moreover, K. dies "like a dog" (Kafka, 2009, p. 165), which can be read as a final renouncing also species hierarchies. And yet, is it really through the progressive inclusion into the Law and into Power (although in transformed forms) that Kafka's women can be redeemed?

Does not, to the contrary, the power of Kafka's women consist precisely of existing outside the structures that imprison, oppress, and kill the male characters? And if this is the case, their salvation does not consist precisely in their exclusion? As many scholars have noted, these female characters, living at the margins of the Law, ultimately exist beyond good and evil, beyond morality, guilt, and shame that make Kafka's masculine world so oppressive and unbearable. They are never judges, lawyers, or functionaries, but they are also never accused: patriarchal Law circulates exclusively among the male characters, who alone are the accusers, the mediators, and the accused, excluding women entirely. This does not mean, however, that women are "innocent," but instead that their impossibility of being guilty (or accused, which for Kafka is the same) invalidates the very opposition between guilt and innocence (and also many of the other dichotomies which structure the masculine world). In the (oppressive) economy of (masculine) salvation, these female figures are un-

<sup>3</sup>It is necessary to point out, as Gross does (2012, p. 222), that gender is a modern concept and for Kafka did certainly not exist.

savable – and that is why they manage perhaps to escape the deadly grip that condemns instead all male characters.

7. There is no redemption in Kafka's stifling world, only outside of it. Women's liberation cannot consist in their admittance into an enlarged model of the androcentric (and anthropocentric) world that Kafka describes and denounces and which precisely rests on the exclusion of women (and of many other creatures). Max Brod relates a conversation from February 1920 in which he asked Kafka: "So there would be hope outside our world?" Kafka replied, smiling: "Plenty of hope – for God – no end of hope – only not for us" (Brod, 1960, p. 75). There is no hope for us (Kafkaesque males), for our andro-anthropo-centric world, based and built on exclusion, division, subjugation, and domination. However, there is infinite hope outside this world, outside this model, outside this logic. Infinite hope for animals, for women.

#### Conflict of Interest:

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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