



## Historical Issues in Sleep Medicine

## Sleep and sleep disorders in Franz Kafka's narrative works

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** As Franz Kafka, one of the most important writers of the 20th century, suffered from severe chronic insomnia disorder and inadequate sleep hygiene that impaired his quality of life, we speculated that sleep disorders would be found in his narrative works.

**Methods:** We read Kafka's complete literary works looking for references to sleep and sleep disorders, excluding insomnia.

**Results:** In Kafka's works, sleeping well and for a long time was used as an allegory of having a pleasant life. We found that some of his characters were disturbed by excessive daytime sleepiness and sleep attacks, circadian rhythm sleep-wake disorders, sleep-related hallucinations, sleep symptoms in the context of heart failure and abnormal sleep behaviors (eg, sleep-talking, sleep-crying, sleep-laughing and dream-enacting motor manifestations). Kafka also recalled a dream where bruxism occurred.

**Conclusion:** Kafka's narrative works contain characters suffering from a wide variety of sleep disorders which in some cases represent autobiographical elements but not in others indicating that he was an astute observer of people, sleep and its disorders. The inclusion of characters suffering from sleep disorders was used by Kafka as a literary resource to enrich his texts.

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## 1. Introduction

Franz Kafka (1883–1924) is an iconic figure of modern literature with a unique literary style that has influenced generations of authors [1]. His works are amazing tales where the protagonists are found in absurd and oppressive situations such as being transformed into a large insect, arrested for unknown reasons, chased and tormented by two balls, or lost in a sinister village. During his lifetime Kafka only published seven short books which received little public attention. While dying from tuberculosis, Kafka ordered his best friend Max Brod to burn all of his unpublished manuscripts. Max Brod, aware of their extraordinary quality and originality, ignored his friend's request; thus, after his death Shoken Books of New York published Kafka's finished and unfinished texts and letters [1,2].

In a previous publication we showed that Kafka suffered from chronic insomnia disorder and inadequate sleep hygiene resulting in chronic sleep deprivation [3]. As these sleep problems impaired

Kafka's quality of life, we speculated that sleep disorders would be present in his narrative works. Therefore, as second part of our work we read his complete literary output and other writings looking for references to sleep and sleep disorders, excluding insomnia.

## 2. Methods

We read Kafka's three unfinished novels (*America*, *The Trial* and *The Castle*), long and short stories, essays, plays, aphorisms, notebooks, untitled pieces, articles, diaries and private letters [4–14]. We found characters suffering from sleep disorders such as excessive daytime sleepiness, circadian rhythm sleep disorders and abnormal sleep behaviors during sleep. Most of these sleep abnormalities were found in the following texts (Figs. 1 and 2).

*America* (also known as *The Castaway* and *The Man who Disappeared*) [4]; this unfinished novel was written between 1911 and 1914 and posthumously published in 1927. Heavily influenced by Dickens' *David Copperfield*, *America* tells the story of a 15 year-old German boy named Karl who immigrates to New York and finds himself in a whirlwind of adventures as a lift-boy in a hotel, wandering with two drifters and as a servant of an obese lady named Brunelda.

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**Fig. 1.** First editions of Kafka's most known works found in the *Franz Kafka Museum* in Prague. A. *The Metamorphosis* (original German title *Die Verwandlung*), a long story written in 1912 and first published in 1915. B. *The Trial* (original German title *Der Prozess*), an unfinished novel written between 1914 and 1915 and posthumously published in 1927. C. *The Castle* (original German title *Das Schloss*), an unfinished novel Kafka began in 1922 and posthumously published in 1926. D. *America* (also known as *The Castaway* and *The Man who Disappeared*, original German title *Amerika*). This unfinished novel was written between 1911 and 1914 and posthumously published in 1927.

*The Trial* [4]; a novel written between 1914 and 1915 and posthumously published in 1927. This tells the story of Joseph K., a bank employee who is arrested upon awakening the morning of his 30th birthday by unidentified agents for unknown reasons. Joseph K. finds himself under arrest with the futile hope of defending himself against a faceless bureaucracy, opaque authorities and incompetent lawyers until he is miserably executed before the trial takes place.

*The Castle* [4]; this unfinished novel was started in 1922 and posthumously published in 1926. It is the story of K., a land surveyor who is summoned to a mysterious village by its authorities, only to be told on his arrival that he was erroneously requested. He stays in the village attempting to contact inaccessible authorities while wandering through a labyrinth of confusing situations and strange villagers, where everything is uncertain and unpredictable.

*The Metamorphosis* [5]; Kafka's masterpiece, written in 1912 and published in 1915, tells the story of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman living with his parents and sister in Prague, who one ordinary morning awakens in his bed transformed into a giant beetle. Gregor Samsa, as an insect, will spend the rest of the story confined in his bedroom, alienated from his family and society until, exhausted, he dies.

Kafka's stories [5,6]; in addition to *The Metamorphosis* Kafka wrote about 100 short and long stories, but only a few were published during his lifetime. These include the classics *The Judgement* and *In the Penal Colony*. Some of the stories are incomplete and bear no title.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Kafka's concept of sleep

In Kafka's narrative works sleeping well and long is considered important and used as an allegory of having a pleasant and successful life. For example, this is reflected in *The Metamorphosis* when the narrator describes Grete, Gregor Samsa's sister, in contrast to the protagonist that suffers insomnia when he is transformed into a beetle.

**And was his sister to earn her bread, she who was still a child of seventeen and whose life hitherto had been so pleasant, consisting as it did in dressing herself nicely, sleeping long, helping in the housekeeping, going out to a few modest entertainments, and above all playing the violin [5].**

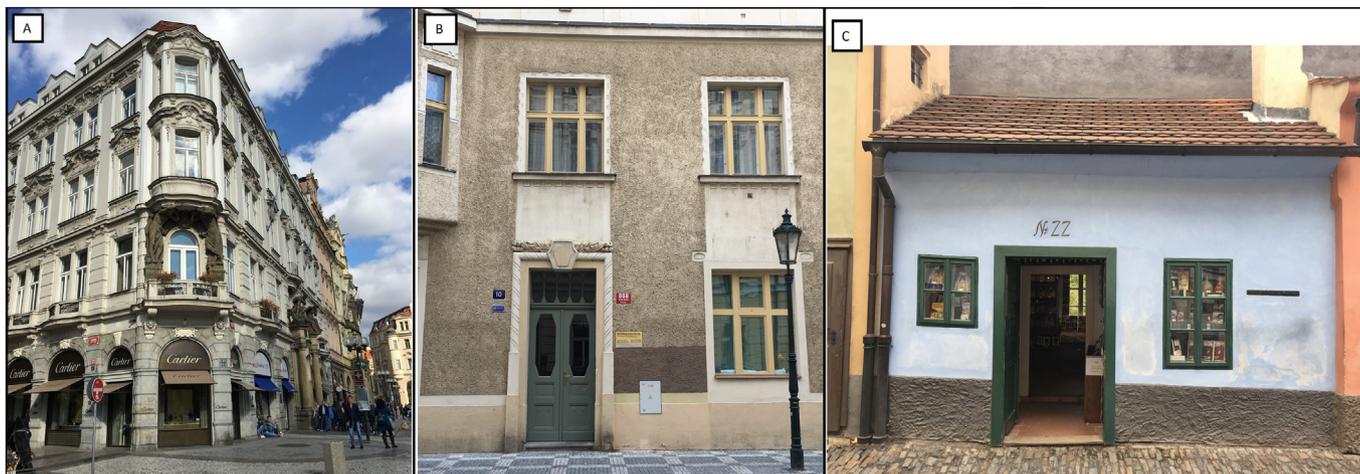
Kafka also highlighted the importance of having a restorative nocturnal sleep when the next day is expected to be hard.

**And now sleep well, so you'll make yourself strong for work. It won't be too tough in the morning, [4]** told the Head Cook to Karl in chapter five of *America* the night before Karl started a job as a lift-boy in the Hotel Continental.

As a good observer of people and habits, Kafka described the following normal and common aspects of sleep:

- (1) The need of restorative sleep after a hard day, as noted in the short story *Description of a Struggle* (1907–1908): **My sleep was deep and dreamless. Neither the waning moon nor the rising sun awoke me. And even when I was about to wake up, I calmed myself by saying: "You made a great effort yesterday, so spare your sleep," and went to sleep again [5].**
- (2) How upset someone can be when their nocturnal sleep is interrupted, as seen in chapter four of *America* when Karl arrives in the middle of the night to an inn and asks for a room: **Karl was received by a tousled old landlady who was annoyed at having her sleep disturbed, and almost without hearing him she scolded him without interruption to walk softly, led him to his room and closed the door, but not without shushing him with a Psst! [4].**  
This is also depicted in the story *Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor* (1915), when a lonely man comes home to find that two annoying celluloid balls have invaded his apartment and prevent his sleep by bouncing under his bed during the night [5].
- (3) Postprandial naps in *Letter to the Father* (1919): **In hot summers, when you were tired after lunch, I saw you having a nap at the office, your elbow on the desk [10].**
- (4) The fact that sleep can be induced by alcohol as seen in *The Castle*: **K. had a night-cap handy. On the tray that Frieda had left on the floor there had been a small decanter of rum. K drained the little bottle to the dregs [4].**
- (5) Loud snoring when he compared the noise made by the propeller of a plane with the snore of a fat man in *The Aeroplanes at Brescia*, a short story published in the journal *Bohemia* in 1909 [6].

Kafka also wrote beautiful descriptions of how a person falls asleep naturally. These can be found in the short story *Wedding Preparations in the Country* (1906–1907) **She was sleepy, she rested**



**Fig. 2.** Some of the houses in Prague where Kafka wrote his novels and stories. A. Oppelt House, Pařížská 1, Prague. Kafka's family moved to the fourth floor of this house in 1913. Franz lived there intermittently until 1922. Here he wrote many stories including *The Hunger Artist* and *The Castle*. B. Bilekgasse 10, Old Town, Prague. Kafka moved here in the summer of 1914 and started to write *The Trial*. C. Golden Lane 22, Prague. Seeking a quiet place to write, here, between November 1916 and April 1917, Kafka wrote some short stories for the book *A Country Doctor*.

**her left elbow on a blue bundle, and her head dropped heavily against her hand, which pressed through the flesh of the cheek to the cheekbone [5] and in chapter four of *America* (Karl soon noticed that he was very tired and could barely stay awake through the night. The picture fell from his hands, then he laid his face on the picture, whose coolness felt good on his cheek, and with a pleasant feeling, he fell asleep) [4].**

### 3.2. Excessive daytime sleepiness due to sleep deprivation

The protagonists of *America* and *The Castle*, Karl and K. respectively, exhaust all their resources and strength in futile attempts to obtain their goals. This leads to almost no sleeping at night, resulting in episodes of irresistible daytime sleepiness.

In *America*, one day Karl awakens at 4.30 A.M. to ride a horse. That same evening he finds it very difficult to remain awake while he engages in a conversation with his host Mr. Pollunder: **Karl was now beginning to feel sleepy and could no longer catch perfectly all that Mr. Pollunder was saying, or at least intermittently, he pulled himself together from time to time and rubbed his eyes to discover that Mr. Pollunder had noticed his drowsiness, for that was something he wished to avoid at any price [4].**

In another passage of *America*, one morning Karl is in the apartment of Brunelda and tells her: **I've had no sleep for 24 h and been rather upset. I'm terribly tired. I hardly know where I am [4].** Brunelda tells Karl to sleep on the floor on a pile of curtains, but as soon as he falls asleep, she sends him to sleep out on the balcony. It is then when Karl experiences an episode where he is sleepy, and walks clumsily and disoriented even wishing goodnight to Brunelda: **Quite dazed with weariness, Karl crept down from the heap of curtains and trailed slowly to the balcony door; a piece of curtain material had wrapped itself round his foot and he dragged it indifferently with him. In his distraction he actually said as he passed to Brunelda: "I wish you good night" [4].**

In *The Castle* K., who is very tired and sleepy after a long hectic day, accidentally enters into the room of the secretary Bürgel at 4 A.M. Bürgel and K. engage in a long conversation during which K. is unable to remain awake and falls asleep three times. After leaving Bürgel, K. arrives exhausted to the taproom and the landlady allows him to sleep on the floor: **When Karl woke up (...) he learnt that it was already evening and that he had slept for well over 12 h [4].**

In *The Castle* [4] and in the short story *The Married Couple* (1922) [5] Kafka also described sudden-onset sleep episodes where the characters experienced no warning of sleepiness before falling asleep (ie, "sleep attacks").

In *The Castle*, when K. arrives to the village after a long journey he experiences a sleep attack, as described by the narrator: **Then he must have fallen asleep, for when a loud voice roused him he found that his head was lying on the old man's shoulder [4].**

In another passage of *The Castle* a sleep attack is experienced by one of K.'s assistants while he was eating: **They were all very sleepy; one of the assistants had actually fallen asleep over his food; this amused the other assistant greatly, and he did his best to get the others to look at the vacant face of his companion [4].**

In *The Married Couple* a businessman visits an old man named N. at his home. At one point it seems that N. is unexpectedly dying, but we learn that he is actually having a sleep attack: **N. sat with wide-open, glassy, bulging eyes, which seemed on the point of failing; he was trembling and his body was bent forward as if someone were holding him down or striking him on the shoulders; his lower lip, indeed the lower jaw itself with the exposed gums, hung down helplessly; his whole face seemed out of drawing; he still breathed, though with difficulty; but then, as if delivered, he fell back against the back of his chair, closed his eyes, the mark of some great strain passed over his face and vanished, and all was over (...) [5].** The businessman is relieved when N's wife explains that N. is not dead and that is simply asleep: **"He's fallen asleep," the wife said, smiling and shaking her head (...). N. moved, yawned loudly, allowed his night-shirt to be put on, endured with a mixture of annoyance and irony his wife's tender reproaches for having overstrained himself by taking such a long walk, and strangely enough said in reply, to provide no doubt a different explanation for his having fallen asleep, something about feeling bored [5].**

### 3.3. Circadian rhythm sleep-wake disorders

In *America*, Kafka described two characters suffering from circadian rhythm sleep disorders; a young boy with shift work disorder and a young man with inadequate sleep habits who worked by day and studied by night [4].

When Karl arrives to The Hotel Occidental he meets Giacomo, a young Italian boy who works as a lift-boy. As a result of his

alternating day and night 12-h shifts he frequently falls asleep at his post and is fired because of this.

Karl also met the young man Josef Mendel who works long hours during the day in a department store and pursues his degree studies at night. Perplexed by his habits, Karl asks him when does he sleep, and Josef responds: ***I'll get some sleep when I'm finished with my studies. I keep myself going on black coffee (...). If it weren't for black coffee Monty wouldn't keep me for a minute (...). I simply don't know how I would get on in the shop if I didn't have a big bottle of coffee under the counter, for I've never dared to risk stopping the coffee-drinking; but you can believe me that if I did I would roll down behind the counter in a dead sleep*** [4].

### 3.4. Heart failure-related sleep symptoms

In *The Trial*, an elderly lawyer named Dr. Huld had insufficient nocturnal sleep and excessive daytime sleepiness, probably related to heart failure [4]. In chapter six, Joseph K. and his uncle Albert visit Dr. Huld for legal advice. Once they enter the house, we learn from Leni, Dr. Huld's nurse and mistress, that the lawyer is ill and bedridden because of a heart disease. In fact, Dr. Huld conducts all his business from his bed.

***"Oh, Albert," said the lawyer, falling back onto his pillow as if this visit meant he would not need to keep up appearances. "Is it really as bad as that?" asked K.'s uncle, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I don't believe it is. It's a recurrence of your heart trouble and it'll pass over like the other times." "Maybe," said the lawyer quietly, "but it's just as much trouble as it's ever been. I can hardly breathe, I can't sleep at all and I'm getting weaker by the day"*** [4].

In chapter eight, Joseph K. visits the lawyer to announce the decision to withdraw his case from him because of inefficiency. When he arrives, Leni tells Joseph K. that the lawyer needs to take his soup before talking to him, and at this point, we learn that he also suffers from excessive daytime sleepiness.

***Leni said: "I'll take him his soup first," and she poured the soup into a bowl. "Only there's a risk that he might go to sleep immediately, he always falls asleep after food"*** [4].

### 3.5. Bruxism

Bruxism is a repetitive muscle activity characterized by clenching or grinding of the teeth and by bracing or thrusting the mandible [15]. In his diary and private letters Kafka described more than sixty dreams that he recalled [9,11–14]. In a letter to Felice Bauer, presumably written during the night of April 4–5, 1913, Kafka explained a dream he had where his teeth and jaw were grinding.

***The night before last, or the one before that, I dreamed continually about teeth; they were not orderly teeth in a mouth, but a mass of teeth fitted together, exactly as in children's jigsaw puzzles, and the whole lot guided by my jaw, were in some kind of sliding motion. I mustered all my strength to express something which, above all else, was very close to my heart; the movement of these teeth, the gaps between them, their grinding, the sensation when guiding them*** [11].

### 3.6. Parasomnias and abnormal sleep behaviors

An episode of sleep-related auditory hallucinations is found in the short story *Description of a Struggle* (1907–1908).

***Although I did not dream, my sleep was not free from a continuous slight disturbance. All night long I heard someone talking beside me. The words themselves I could hardly hear, except isolated ones like "bench ... by the river," "cloudlike mountains," "trains ... amidst shining smoke"*** [5].

In chapter seven of *America*, an obese female singer named Brunelda appears to have a parasomnia. The event during which she groans and moves in her sleep while she has a nightmare is witnessed by Karl [4].

Karl fell asleep, and only in his first half-sleep was he disturbed by a tremendous groan from Brunelda, who was apparently disturbed by bad dreams and rolled around on her bed [4].

In a previous passage of the novel, we learn that Brunelda snores and talks in her sleep.

***Karl heard the calm breaths of the three sleepers; by far the loudest noise came from Brunelda, who snored in her sleep as she sometimes did in talking*** [4].

We found two characters who displayed minor behaviors during sleep, namely laughing and crying.

In *America*, Karl arrives to a small inn and enters a room where two drifters, Robinson and Delamarche, are sleeping. The narrator described how Robinson sleeps: ***His cheeks had a still a trace of roundness, and he laughed very kindly in his sleep, so far as Karl could tell as he stood on his tiptoes from a distance*** [4].

The incomplete story *The Burrow* (written between 1923 and 1924 and published posthumously in 1931) tells the story of a mole building an elaborate and complex labyrinth of tunnels. Kafka writes from within the mind of the mole a passage describing how the animal finds tears in its eyes upon awakening from pleasant dreams: ***Sometimes I dream, that I have reconstructed the labyrinth, transformed it completely, quickly, in a night, with a giant's strength, nobody having noticed, and now it is impregnable; the nights in which such dreams come to me are the sweetest I know, tears of joy and deliverance still glisten on my beard when I awaken*** [5].

## 4. Discussion

We found that sleeping well and long were a metaphor of having a happy life, and that some characters experiencing troubles were sleep deprived.

Kafka portrayed himself in some of his protagonists and other characters. They are lonely, single men who live alienated from the world and are found in dramatic situations needing to fight against obstacles [2]. For example, *The Metamorphosis* is rich with autobiographical elements. The protagonist, Gregor Samsa, portrays the negative aspects of Kafka's personal life such as vulnerability and helplessness [1,5]. It is the tale of a man who is isolated despite living with his parents and sister in Prague. The room in which Gregor Samsa lives had the same structure and size as the one Franz Kafka was living in (with his parents and sisters) on the fourth floor of Niklasstrasse 36, Prague, when he wrote the story in only three weeks [1]. *The Metamorphosis* begins with this classic sentence: As Gregor Samsa, awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect [5]. Kafka conceived *The Metamorphosis* in the same place where the story starts, in bed upon awakening, Sunday morning on November 17, 1912, when he was desperately waiting for a letter from his fiancée Felice Bauer [1,11]. Not surprisingly, when Gregor Samsa is transformed into a beetle, he suffered from insomnia and had maladaptive habits such as taking naps in the evenings, like Kafka used to do [3].

The importance of sleeping well is also depicted in the story *Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor*, where two bouncing balls disturb the protagonist's sleep [5]. Notably, this short story was written when Kafka moved to a rented room in 1915 on Lange Gasse street (Zum goldenen Hecht house), Prague, where he was disturbed by external noises [1]. In his diary entry of February 10, 1915, Kafka noted the following about his new home: ***First night. My neighbor talks for hours with the landlady. Both speak softly, the landlady***

**almost inaudibly and therefore so much the worse [9].** Five weeks later in a letter written to Felice Bauer on March 23, 1915, he commented: **Someone right above my head in a studio stamps around all day in heavy boots and has installed some kind of quite pointless noise-machine to simulate the sound of a game of nine-pins. A heavy ball is rolled at great speed along the full length of the ceiling, lands in a corner, and comes slowly bumping back [11].**

To earn a living, Kafka had to work in the mornings at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute in Prague and he wrote during the night [1]. A similar timetable is identified in the character of Josef Mendel in *America*, a young man who does not have time to sleep because he works in a store during the day and studies at night [4].

Kafka described interesting examples of characters suffering from sleep attacks due to insufficient nocturnal sleep, such as those found in *The Castle* and in *The Married Couple*. We are aware of only few references suggesting that Kafka experienced episodes or irresistible sleepiness. In a letter that Kafka wrote to Grete Bloch written on February 11, 1914, he stated: **I did sleep on and off, but for the last two days hardly at all (...). There are moments in the office while talking or dictating when my sleep is more real than when I am asleep [11].**

Kafka provided descriptions of sleep disturbances that we are not aware he suffered from. They included the sleep symptomatology associated with heart failure, bruxism and abnormal sleep behaviors. These descriptions were accurate and suggest that Kafka was an astute observer of life and people.

In *The Trial* the advocate Dr. Huld is ill, bedridden and has insufficient nocturnal sleep and daytime hypersomnia related to a heart problem as recognized by uncle Albert, the nurse Leni and Dr. Huld himself [4]. The sleep of patients with heart failure can be fragmented because of repeated central or obstructive apnea [15]. Patients with heart failure may complain of sleep loss, non-restorative sleep and excessive daytime sleepiness. The description of Dr. Huld does not include clinical elements of heart failure such as lower limb edema, orthopnea, or a gradual crescendo-decrescendo respiratory pattern. Despite this, we think it is plausible that Dr. Huld suffered from heart failure since this is a chronic condition characterized by relapses that in severe cases is associated with rest dyspnea, insufficient nocturnal sleep, fatigue, and hypersomnia, as depicted in the character of Dr. Huld [4,15].

Patients with parasomnias display abnormal behaviors during sleep such as screaming, talking, singing, laughing, crying, walking, running, eating, punching, kicking and jumping out of bed [15]. However, healthy people with normal sleep may also display these behaviors, (although less frequently and not as severe) suggesting that dream-enacting behaviors are not exclusive to parasomnias. In a population study, more than 50% of undergraduate students

reported having awakened from a dream to find that they were actually speaking, crying or laughing [16]. Kafka was probably aware of this phenomenon, and described characters laughing (Robinson in *America*) and crying (the mole in *The Burrow*) during their sleep. In *America*, Brunelda is an obese woman who talks, groans and moves in her sleep [4]. It is possible that these manifestations correspond to those abnormal vocalizations and movements displayed by some patients with parasomnias such as REM sleep behavior disorder, or with severe obstructive sleep apnea during the brief arousals that occur at the end of apneic events [17].

In conclusion, our study shows that a wide range of sleep disorders are found in Kafka's narrative works. They represent elegant and clever elements that were inserted to enrich his literary style.

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## Conflict of interest

None declared.

The ICMJE Uniform Disclosure Form for Potential Conflicts of Interest associated with this article can be viewed by clicking on the following link: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2018.12.015>.

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