

Oneiric Discourse and Dreamlike Narration in Franz Kafka: A Linguistic-Stylistic and Semiotic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Franz Kafka makes waking reality behave like a dream without simply turning every strange scene into a dream scene. The argument grows out of Manfred Engel's distinction between dream record, literary dream, and dreamlike writing, but it adds an intermediate category the dream motif and tests the four levels through close reading of The Metamorphosis, The Trial, The Castle, and A Country Doctor. I focus on the language that carries the effect: causal gaps, unstable spatial and temporal anchoring, restricted knowledge, lexical normalization of the impossible, muted narratorial evaluation, and abrupt shifts in action. Short phrases from the German originals are used as textual anchors. The readings show that dreamlikeness is strongest when several features converge and alter what a protagonist can know, do, or verify. The article proposes a practical sequence marker, narrative function, meaning rather than a new universal theory of Kafka. On this basis, Kafka's oneiric poetics appears less as a collection of explicit dreams than as a recurrent transfer of dream logic into scenes presented as waking life.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, oneiric discourse, dreamlike narration, linguistic stylistics, semiotics, literary dream, narrative causality, time and space.

INTRODUCTION

Kafka's fiction repeatedly places the reader on an unstable border between waking and dreaming. The opening of *The Metamorphosis* makes that problem explicit. Gregor wakes *aus unruhigen Träumen* [from uneasy dreams], yet a few lines later the narrator insists: *Es war kein Traum* [It was no dream] (Kafka 1915: 1177). I take this small denial seriously. The text closes the door on a simple explanation Gregor is not merely dreaming while allowing the waking scene to retain a logic that readers commonly associate with dreams. That tension is more useful than calling Kafka's prose vaguely "surreal" or "strange." It asks us to identify what, in the language and organization of the scene, produces the dreamlike effect.

Kafka scholarship offers several ways to approach that question. Engel (1998) separates factual dream notation, literary dream, and dreamlike writing; his later account of the "dream effect" emphasizes combinations of devices rather than a single marker (Engel 2024). Rabelhofer (2024) studies roughly sixty dream records in Kafka's diaries and letters and notes that dream structures change when they enter fiction. Béziat-Granié (2000) examines the mimesis of dream, Kim (2017) reads *A Country Doctor* as dream narration, and Rogoff (2021) connects dream and power in *The Castle*. Rahamim (2025) shifts attention toward disrupted time, space, and agency, while Kittler (2024) and Gellen (2019) show how visual and acoustic mediation complicate what Kafka's characters can know. A recent monograph by Isolde Schiffermüller is described by its publisher as bringing diary entries, letters, and literary prose into one research frame (Königshausen & Neumann 2024).

The gap is not that Kafka and dreams have been ignored. It lies in the relation among categories that are often handled separately. Engel's three-part distinction is especially productive, but Kafka also uses recurrent dream-related material waking, insomnia, half-sleep, remembered images, and blurred thresholds without always staging a complete dream. I call this middle level the dream motif. The article then makes a second, procedural move: identifying a marker is not the end of interpretation. I ask

what the marker does in the scene and only then what meaning it supports. This marker function–meaning sequence is the article’s main contribution. It is deliberately modest: the aim is to make close reading more testable, not to replace existing theories of Kafka.

For a linguistic-stylistic reading, the wording of the primary text matters. Dreamlikeness may be carried by an unspecified agent, by modal pressure, by a sudden deictic shift, by the absence of a causal connective, or by a calm lexical field surrounding an impossible event. These details shape the distribution of knowledge between narrator, character, and reader. My concern is not simply whether a scene looks dreamlike, but how its language makes uncertainty, compulsion, or disorientation operative.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The close-reading corpus consists of four German primary texts: *Die Verwandlung* (1915), *Der Prozess* (1925), *Das Schloss* (1926), and *Ein Landarzt* (1917). For linguistic points, I use digitized scans of the original German publications available through Wikisource; the scans are page-linked and proofread against the source editions. Bracketed English glosses are my own and are kept short so that the German wording remains visible. Diary and letter material is used only as contextual evidence through the scholarship cited above, not as a second primary corpus in this article. This narrower design allows the stylistic claims to rest on a consistent German-language base.

The reading proceeds in four stages. First, I decide whether the passage is an explicit literary dream, a recurrent dream motif, or dreamlike narration without a stated dream. Second, I identify the linguistic and semiotic features that sustain that classification: causal linkage, deixis, time and space, modality, lexical fields, narratorial evaluation, metamorphosis, information access, and threshold states. Third, I ask what those features do to action and understanding inside the scene. Finally, I move to interpretation. A passage is not classified as dreamlike merely because it is bizarre; when fantasy, absurdity, or symbolism explains the

textual organization more precisely, those categories remain preferable.

Table 1. *Analytical levels of oneiric discourse in Kafka*

Analytical level	Definition	Main markers	Primary function
Dream record	A biographical notation of remembered dream experience	First-person record; compressed image sequence; waking frame	Documents experience; possible source for later transformation
Literary dream	An explicitly framed dream inside a fictional text	Sleep/waking boundary; concentrated imagery; internal discontinuity	Characterization; symbolic and compositional work
Dream motif	A recurrent dream-related element across the text	Waking, insomnia, half-sleep, remembered images, repetition	Links episodes and semantic patterns
Dreamlike narration	Narration not called a dream but organized by dream-like logic	Weak causal linkage; unstable deictic and temporal-spatial anchoring; epistemic restriction; lexical normalization; metamorphosis	Restructures fictional reality, information access, and protagonist agency

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The four-level distinction becomes clearest when it is applied to an actual sentence rather than to atmosphere. In *The Metamorphosis*, the text names dreams and then immediately refuses them as an explanation: *Es war kein Traum* (Kafka 1915: 1177). The phrase is syntactically plain and lexically categorical. Yet what follows does not restore ordinary reality. Gregor's room, samples, timetable, employer, and family remain recognizably everyday while his body does not. Dreamlike narration here is created by the friction between a realist register and an impossible condition. The explicit denial of dreaming, paradoxically, sharpens the oneiric effect because the reader cannot dismiss the transformation as a temporary mental episode. The same paragraph then returns to objects that can be named

with complete confidence: the room, the walls, the table, and the cloth samples. This sequence is easy to overlook, but it is crucial to the effect. Ontological certainty fails at the level of Gregor's body while referential certainty survives in the room around him. The question "Was ist mit mir geschehen?" [What has happened to me?] is followed not by explanation but by inventory. In stylistic terms, description replaces causation. That replacement lets the reader remain inside a scene whose physical premise cannot be rationalized.

The Trial produces a different kind of pressure. Its first sentence begins with an indefinite agent – *Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben* [Someone must have slandered Josef K.] – and adds that he had done nothing wrong (Kafka 1925: 1). The modal *mußte* [must have] suggests an inference, not knowledge. Cause is grammatically proposed before it is evidentially available. A few pages later the warder states, with blunt certainty, *Sie sind ja gefangen* [you are under arrest] (Kafka 1925: 4). The contrast is striking: the institutional fact is certain, the grounds are not. For me, this is the key linguistic mechanism of the scene. Procedure has a stable vocabulary; causation does not. Josef K. is therefore forced to act inside a system whose assertions are firmer than its explanations. The sentence also shifts responsibility away from any identifiable actor. "Jemand" [someone] occupies the grammatical subject position, yet the person remains unavailable to Josef K. and to the reader. The result is an unusual combination of agency and anonymity: an action has apparently been performed, but the agent cannot be located. This is more than a legal mystery. It establishes the informational pattern of the novel from its first line. K. is compelled to respond to effects whose sources remain structurally out of reach.

The Castle shifts the same problem into spatial language. The first page gives K. a bridge, a village, snow, darkness, and a castle that cannot be seen; he looks upward into what the narrator calls "scheinbare Leere" [apparent emptiness] (Kafka 1926: 1). The reference point exists as an institutional center before it is visually secure. Soon after waking, K. asks whether the previous information might have been something he "nicht vielleicht geträumt hätte" [might perhaps have dreamed] (Kafka 1926: 3).

The question does not turn the chapter into a dream. It marks a failure of orientation. Rahamim's (2025) account of disrupted time-space is helpful here, but the wording adds something specific: spatial deixis and epistemic uncertainty become inseparable. The castle is both a place and a problem of reference. The first chapter repeatedly returns to this uncertainty through sleep and waking. K. is awakened, asks whether the earlier report might have been dreamed, and then confronts an institution that is present everywhere in speech but difficult to fix in space. The repeated verbs of looking, asking, and orienting do not lead to stable knowledge. That failure is what makes the spatial field oneiric in my reading. The problem is not simply that the castle is far away; it is that ordinary acts of reference fail to secure it as an accessible center.

The Metamorphosis also shows how lexical choice can normalize the impossible. After the opening shock, the prose quickly returns to work, lateness, doors, schedules, clothing, and family duties (Kafka 1915: 1177). Gregor's problem is not narrated through a sustained vocabulary of horror. Practical nouns and obligations crowd around the transformed body. That tonal restraint matters. The narration does not match an extraordinary event with extraordinary rhetoric; instead, it lets ordinary language absorb the impossible. I read this as a specifically stylistic form of dreamlikeness: the world becomes implausible while the sentence behaves as if nothing fundamental has happened.

In *The Trial*, restricted knowledge is equally visible at the level of dialogue. The warders can name the arrest, the procedure, and the hierarchy, but they cannot or will not supply a usable reason for what is happening (Kafka 1925: 4-11). Information arrives through officials who possess authority without explanatory adequacy. Kittler's (2024) work on visual mediation and Gellen's (2019) study of sound help widen this observation beyond legal vocabulary: Kafka often makes access to reality depend on channels, intermediaries, and uncertain sources. Dreamlikeness, in this sense, is not just a sequence of bizarre images. It is also a problem of who can state what, with what degree of certainty, and on whose authority.

A Country Doctor condenses these effects into speed. On page 20, the doctor is carried from his yard to the patient's house as if the second space opened directly in front of the first (Kafka 1917: 20). The transition is not argued for; it simply happens. By the end, Kafka names the contradiction in a compact lexical opposition: "mit irdischem Wagen, unirdischen Pferden" [with an earthly carriage, unearthly horses] (Kafka 1917: 26). The paired adjectives *irdisch/unirdisch* place the ordinary and the impossible in the same grammatical frame. Kim's (2017) description of the story as dream narration is persuasive, but the close reading shows why: dreamlikeness is carried by syntax, spatial compression, and lexical pairing before it becomes an interpretive label. The syntax of the arrival scene is especially revealing. Clause follows clause with almost no pause for explanation: the horses start, sound overwhelms the doctor, and the patient's courtyard seems to open directly before his own. The sentence does not narrate travel as a measurable interval; it converts distance into an instantaneous transition. Here the dreamlike quality is not an abstract theme imposed on the story after the fact. It is produced in the pacing of the sentence itself.

Table 2. *Dominant configurations of dreamlikeness in selected Kafka texts*

Text	Dominant marker cluster	Discourse effect	Interpretive function
<i>The Metamorphosis</i> (Kafka 1915: 1177)	Metamorphosis + lexical normalization + work/home lexicon	An impossible body is narrated in an ordinary practical register	Makes estrangement a lived condition rather than a spectacle
<i>The Trial</i> (Kafka 1925: 1, 4)	Indefinite agency + modal inference + procedural certainty	The arrest is certain while its cause remains unavailable	Turns epistemic restriction into an institutional condition
<i>The Castle</i> (Kafka, 1926: 1, 3)	Spatial deixis + invisible center + dream/waking uncertainty	Reference does not produce stable orientation or access	Links spatial obstruction with knowledge and power
<i>A Country Doctor</i> (Kafka 1917: 20, 26)	Compressed movement + abrupt transition + earthly/unearthly pair	Ordinary syntax carries impossible spatial movement	Makes dream logic visible in the organization of action

Table 2 does not classify the four works once and for all. It records the dominant configuration visible in the passages

discussed here. What changes from text to text is not simply the presence of a marker but the work it performs. In *The Metamorphosis*, dreamlikeness grows out of bodily impossibility absorbed into domestic and occupational language. In *The Trial*, it is built through the gap between procedural certainty and causal ignorance. In *The Castle*, spatial reference repeatedly fails to secure access. In *A Country Doctor*, action outruns ordinary spatial sequence. The comparison is useful because it keeps the four-level model tied to sentences and scenes rather than to broad labels.

This comparison also clarifies what the four-level model adds to earlier work. Engel's distinction makes it possible to separate dream notation, literary dream, and dreamlike writing (1998, 2024). The added category of dream motif accounts for recurrent threshold material that is neither a full dream nor merely an atmospheric effect. The marker function meaning sequence then turns those categories into a reading procedure. Rabelhofer's (2024) work on dream textures and Rogoff's (2021) analysis of power in *The Castle* show how readily form and interpretation can be connected, but the connection still has to be demonstrated passage by passage. That is the purpose of the model proposed here. The model also clarifies the status of the dream motif. A motif can persist even when no complete dream is narrated. Waking, half-sleep, sudden recollection, and the suspicion that an event might have been dreamed can connect otherwise separate scenes. This intermediate level matters for Kafka because it prevents a false choice between explicit dreams and a wholly dreamlike world. It gives the analysis a place for recurrent threshold signals that organize meaning without turning the entire text into a dream allegory.

LIMITATIONS

The article is deliberately narrow. It does not count the frequency of oneiric markers, and it does not claim that every Kafka text follows the same pattern. The close readings are based on four German works and on selected passages where the linguistic evidence is especially clear. A larger study could test the model

across Kafka's complete fiction, compare independent readers' classifications, and examine whether the same marker clusters appear in other Central European modernists. For the present argument, the smaller corpus has one advantage: each interpretive step can be checked against the wording of the primary text.

CONCLUSIONS

Kafka's dreamlike narration is most persuasive when it is read in the grain of the language. The opening of *The Metamorphosis* denies a dream while allowing waking reality to keep dream logic; *The Trial* gives institutional statements more certainty than their causes; *The Castle* turns spatial reference into an epistemic problem; and *A Country Doctor* compresses movement until ordinary geography no longer governs the action. These are not identical effects, and that difference matters. The four analytical levels dream record, literary dream, dream motif, and dreamlike narration help keep them apart, while the marker function meaning sequence shows how to move from description to interpretation. I would therefore locate Kafka's oneiric poetics not in the sheer number of dreams but in the recurrent ways his prose lets ordinary linguistic forms carry extraordinary realities.

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