Multiplicity of Meaning in Kafka's "Poseidon": A Study Through Reader-Response and Death of the Author Theories

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Abstract: This paper examines Franz Kafka's short story "Poseidon" through the lenses of Reader-Response Theory and Death of the Author, highlighting how literary meaning is shaped more by readers than by the author's intentions. In "Poseidon", Kafka reimagines the Greek god as an overburdened bureaucrat buried in paperwork, rarely seeing the sea he is meant to rule. This ironic depiction invites varied interpretations, depending on each reader's background, beliefs, and engagement with the text. By applying these two modern theories, the paper argues that the richness and depth of "Poseidon" lie not in Kafka's biography or purpose, but in the multiple meanings that readers extract from the story's absurdity and symbolism.

Keywords: *Literary Theory, Interpretive Strategies, Authorial Intent, Textual Meaning, Absurdism, Bureaucracy, Myth Reinterpretation, Reader Interpretation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka's short parable "Poseidon" offers a rich example of literary absurdism, merging mythology with modern existential concerns. In this story, the Greek god Poseidon—traditionally known as the mighty ruler of the seas—is ironically depicted as a desk-bound bureaucrat, completely absorbed in performing administrative tasks. Rather than roaming the oceans or displaying divine power, Kafka's Poseidon is preoccupied with calculations, ledger books, and paperwork. Kafka notes with sharp irony: "He does not travel at all. The sea, he says, is too turbulent." This statement highlights the absurd contradiction at the heart of the story: the god of the sea avoids the very domain he is supposed to govern, using bureaucracy as a means of isolation and avoidance.

At first glance, this characterization has led many readers and critics to interpret Poseidon as a symbolic representation of Kafka himself. As someone who worked in a government insurance office and often expressed disdain for the mechanical nature of bureaucratic life, Kafka's personal experiences seem to echo in Poseidon's fictional plight. Such interpretations often fall under biographical criticism, where a writer's life is used to explain the themes and characters in their work.

However, this paper proposes a different approach—one that deliberately moves away from the author's background and instead places interpretive authority in the hands of the reader. By applying Reader-Response Theory and Roland Barthes' concept of the "Death of the Author," this analysis argues that the meaning of "Poseidon" does not reside in Kafka's life, intentions, or historical context, but rather emerges through the act of reading and interpretation. Each reader brings their own perspectives, experiences, and expectations to the text, shaping its significance in personal and often contradictory ways. This

shift from author-centric to reader-centric theory opens "Poseidon" to a broader range of meanings—from a critique of capitalism to an allegory of spiritual detachment, or even a satire of divine dysfunction.In using these two theoretical frameworks, this paper will explore how "Poseidon" functions not as a fixed narrative with a single meaning, but as an open-ended literary text that invites multiple interpretations. Ultimately, Kafka's story becomes not just a commentary on bureaucracy or mythology, but a mirror reflecting the interpretive freedom of modern literary theory itself.

Reader-Response Theory and the Subjective Reader

Reader-Response Theory is a literary approach that emphasizes the role of the reader in giving meaning to a text. Unlike traditional critical approaches that focus on the author's biography or the historical context of a work, Reader-Response Theory asserts that meaning is not embedded in the text itself or dictated by the author's intentions. Instead, meaning is actively created through the interaction between the reader and the text. Every reader brings their own emotions, experiences, cultural background, and interpretive framework, which shape how they understand and respond to a story.

Applied to Kafka's "Poseidon", this theory opens up numerous possibilities for interpretation, depending on who is reading the story and in what context. Kafka presents Poseidon, not as a mythological hero or powerful god, but as a weary bureaucrat, bogged down by the paperwork required to manage his domain. This portrayal immediately invites the reader to question the absurdity of the situation. Kafka writes: "He would rather do the work himself than entrust it to someone who might not do it exactly his way." This single line can resonate differently with each reader. For example, someone with managerial experience might interpret Poseidon's refusal to delegate tasks as an example of micromanagement, highlighting a toxic work ethic based on control, mistrust, or perfectionism. Another reader, perhaps someone who has felt overwhelmed in a bureaucratic or corporate environment, might see the story as a reflection of modern labor alienation, where one's role becomes so consumed by procedures and regulations that the actual purpose of the job is forgotten.

Furthermore, readers familiar with classical mythology are likely to experience the story differently than those who are not. Knowing that Poseidon is a powerful sea god in ancient Greek mythology, a reader might find Kafka's version of him tragically comical or deeply ironic—Poseidon, with the capacity to summon storms and rule the oceans, is reduced to a desk clerk who rarely, if ever, sees the sea. This contrast could be read as a satirical commentary on how even the most powerful beings, whether gods or humans, can be trapped in the machinery of responsibility and administration.

Meanwhile, readers from a capitalist or post-industrial society might focus on the broader existential implications of the story. Poseidon becomes a symbol of the modern individual who, despite being in a position of power or authority, feels disconnected from purpose and meaning. The endless workload and self-imposed isolation can be seen as metaphors for the emotional and psychological costs of a system that prioritizes efficiency, control, and productivity over connection, experience, or fulfillment.In essence, "Poseidon" acts like a mirror, reflecting the values, anxieties, and interpretations of each reader. A single story can give rise to countless meanings—not because Kafka encoded all of them intentionally, but because the reader constructs meaning during the reading experience. This is the central claim of Reader-Response Theory: literature does not dictate a single "correct" interpretation; instead, it exists in dynamic interaction with its audience. Meaning is fluid, flexible, and contingent on the reader's own life, knowledge, and interpretive context. Kafka's brief but potent story "Poseidon" thus demonstrates the power of literature to adapt and evolve in the hands of each new reader.

Death of the Author and the Liberation of Meaning

In his influential 1967 essay "The Death of the Author," French literary theorist Roland Barthes challenges the traditional notion that an author's intentions, background, and personal history should be central to interpreting a literary work. Barthes argues that once a text is written, it becomes independent of its creator. The act of writing severs the author's control over meaning, and the reader becomes the active agent in the process of interpretation. According to Barthes, to insist on recovering the author's original intent is to limit the text's potential. In his words, "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text."Applied to Franz Kafka's "Poseidon", this theory invites a fresh perspective that moves beyond Kafka's biography. It is well-known that Kafka was a Jewish writer, plagued by ill health, who worked in a government insurance office—details often cited to explain the recurring themes of alienation, authority, and absurd bureaucracy in his work. Many traditional interpretations of "Poseidon" draw direct parallels between Kafka's job and Poseidon's obsession with paperwork, assuming that Kafka was using this mythological figure as a stand-in for himself. However, Barthes' theory warns against this biographical fallacy, suggesting that such an approach restricts the richness and multiplicity of meaning that a text can generate on its own.

In "Poseidon," Kafka offers little to no commentary or explicit explanation for the god's absurd predicament. The story is intentionally ambiguous and minimalist, offering readers a strange image: a sea god buried in administrative duties, rarely venturing to the ocean he rules. Kafka does not elaborate on why Poseidon refuses to delegate tasks or how he ended up in such a situation. The line "I am just working through it," spoken by Poseidon in defense of his endless paperwork, is particularly open-ended. This phrase lacks a clear subject or moral and can be interpreted in multiple ways.From a Barthesian standpoint, this vagueness is not a flaw but a strength. It invites the reader to draw their own conclusions and create meaning based on the textual elements alone, rather than relying on Kafka's life or supposed message. One reader might see Poseidon's situation as symbolic of existential dread—the idea that even a god, supposedly omnipotent, is bound to meaningless routines and incapable of escape. Another might interpret it as a critique of modern alienation, where individuals lose sight of their identities and passions due to the monotonous demands of structured systems. Others

might view it as a paradox of divine impotence, wherein supreme authority is rendered powerless by its own obsessive rituals and fear of losing control.

According to Barthes, none of these interpretations are "correct" or "incorrect." The value of the text lies not in uncovering Kafka's original purpose, but in exploring the interpretive possibilities the text allows. Once published, "Poseidon" belongs not to Kafka, but to the readers who bring it to life through their unique perspectives. In this view, the author becomes irrelevant, or "dead," because the text is autonomous and capable of speaking beyond its creator's voice.Thus, "Poseidon", when read through the lens of Death of the Author, becomes a rich, multilayered narrative whose meaning is not confined to Kafka's personal experience or intended message. Instead, the story's strength lies in its openness—its resistance to fixed interpretation, its refusal to resolve into a single moral or symbolic reading. The liberation of meaning that Barthes describes is evident in how each reader might see something different in Poseidon's absurd predicament, making Kafka's story a timeless and endlessly interpretable literary work.

Intersection of Theories: Open Textuality in "Poseidon"

When examined through the combined lenses of Reader-Response Theory and Roland Barthes' concept of the Death of the Author, Franz Kafka's "Poseidon" reveals itself as a profoundly open and polysemous text—that is, a literary work with multiple, often coexisting meanings. These two theories, while distinct in their focus, converge on a key idea: the meaning of a literary work is not something preordained or fixed, but something that emerges through active interpretation by readers, independent of the author's intentions or historical context.

Reader-Response Theory, as discussed, positions the reader as the central figure in the creation of meaning. Each individual's background, cultural context, personal experiences, and emotional state influence how a text is interpreted. Barthes' "Death of the Author," on the other hand, asserts that the author should not be seen as the authority over the text's meaning. Instead, meaning is created in the language of the text itself and in the act of reading. Together, these theories shift the focus from Kafka—the historical author—to the dynamic and interpretive role of the reader.

When applied to "Poseidon", these ideas offer a liberating framework for analysis. Rather than searching for Kafka's personal critique of his bureaucratic life or projecting his psychological struggles onto the story, the reader is free to explore the symbolism, contradictions, and ironies of the text from their own vantage point. The central image of Poseidon—a sea god who has become so entangled in paperwork that he rarely, if ever, visits the sea—emerges as a metaphor that can be interpreted in many ways. For some, Poseidon's detachment from the sea may serve as a commentary on how people become estranged from their identities, passions, or true roles due to the burdens of modern responsibility. Just as Poseidon is meant to rule the sea but is instead consumed by administrative duties, individuals in contemporary society often find themselves trapped in work that feels meaningless or disconnected from their true interests or values. Others may read this disconnection as a critique of hierarchical power structures, suggesting that even the most powerful figures are constrained by systems that demand conformity, routine, and control—paralleling how modern institutions reduce human agency through endless layers of bureaucracy.

Moreover, Poseidon's obsessive control over his work, refusal to delegate, and dissatisfaction with subordinates can be interpreted as symptoms of anxiety, insecurity, or the illusion of control. His fixation on order ironically leads to chaos of the self, as he is unable to fulfill his actual purpose. The sea, vast and ever-changing, contrasts sharply with his static, paper-filled desk, suggesting a deeper symbolic divide between freedom and rigidity, nature and structure, imagination and duty. Crucially, Kafka never offers a clear resolution or definitive moral. There is no explicit explanation of why Poseidon behaves the way he does, nor does the story conclude with any transformative insight or catharsis. This deliberate ambiguity is what makes the text fertile ground for interpretive exploration. It resists closure, allowing readers to project onto it a wide array of concerns—psychological, political, spiritual, or existential.

In this way, "Poseidon" becomes what literary theorist Umberto Eco might call an "open work"—a text that invites participation, interpretation, and engagement. Each reader, in encountering Kafka's image of the sea god lost in paperwork, brings their own symbolic sea to Poseidon's desk: their own questions, frustrations, experiences, and meanings. The interaction between reader and text becomes not just interpretive but creative—a reconstruction of meaning that can differ from one reading to another.Ultimately, Kafka's "Poseidon" illustrates how a text can transcend time, authorial context, and conventional meaning to become a space of ongoing dialogue between reader and story. The theories of Reader-Response and Death of the Author together emphasize that literature is not a message to be decoded, but an experience to be co-authored by those who read it.

CONCLUSION

Franz Kafka's "Poseidon" may appear on the surface as a brief, somewhat humorous narrative that plays with mythological irony—recasting the powerful sea god as a beleaguered bureaucrat trapped by paperwork. However, a deeper exploration reveals that the story functions as much more than just a simple tale or allegory. It operates as a complex literary space where meaning is not fixed or handed down, but actively constructed through the process of reading and interpretation.Through the lens of Reader-Response Theory, "Poseidon" invites readers to bring their own individual experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds to the text. Each reader's engagement shapes how they understand Poseidon's peculiar predicament, whether as a reflection on alienation, the absurdity of bureaucratic systems, the loss of personal identity, or existential frustration. This approach emphasizes that meaning is not inherent or predetermined but is instead fluid and shaped by the dynamic interaction between reader and text. The story's openness encourages readers to become co-creators of its meaning, enriching it with layers of subjective significance.

Complementing this, Roland Barthes' Death of the Author challenges the idea that Kafka's personal biography, his social circumstances, or his psychological struggles should be the guiding force behind interpreting the story. By decentering the author's authority, Barthes liberates "Poseidon" from the confines of biographical criticism and allows the text to stand on its own, independent of its creator's intentions. This freedom enables the text to resonate across time and cultural contexts, making it accessible to readers who may never share Kafka's background or historical moment but can still find relevance and meaning in the story.Together, these two theories shift the focus from author to reader, from fixed meaning to interpretive plurality. They show that "Poseidon" is not simply Kafka's commentary on work, bureaucracy, or mythology, but rather a parable about the very nature of meaning itself—a nature that is elusive, subjective, and constantly reimagined. The story embodies the idea that literature is a living dialogue, one that evolves and transforms with each new reader who encounters it.

Ultimately, "Poseidon" exemplifies what literature becomes when readers are placed at the center of the interpretive process. It is no longer just a text to be decoded or explained, but a dynamic space for reflection, questioning, and meaning-making. Kafka's short story demonstrates the power of open textuality—where meaning is not a closed conclusion but an invitation to endless exploration. This transformative understanding reaffirms the enduring relevance of "Poseidon" as a work that continues to engage readers in a conversation about agency, identity, and the creative act of reading itself.

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