**5. The physicality and sexuality repressed by Kafka’s protagonists, usually busy professional men, returns in frightening or disgusting forms’. Discuss this statement with reference to *Ein Landarzt*.**

Kafka’s short story *Ein Landarzt* tells the story of a doctor going out on a night call to see a patient who is gravely ill. The story, although it is never described as a dream, ‘has the alogical surface texture of the dream; details appear not as links in a chain of causation but merely because they happen to come to mind’.[[1]](#footnote--1) Not least because of this, it lends itself to interpretation using Freud’s theories of the dream, discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This approach is further justified by the fact that there is direct evidence, both in the text and in Kafka’s letters and diaries from 1917, when *Ein Landarzt* was written, that he had read *The Interpretation of Dreams* and had an interest in psychoanalysis and dream theory.[[2]](#footnote-0) Using Freud’s theories, it is possible to unlock the ‘physicality and sexuality’ repressed by the doctor in *Ein Landarzt*, that emerges in other aspects of the story. Freud talks about dreams as the fulfilments of wishes, and suggests that the less acceptable we find a wish, the more we repress it, and the more distorted the wish is when it reappears in dreams.[[3]](#footnote-1) Through this process, we see the conscious and unconscious mind in a constant struggle with each other, and it is as a result of this struggle that the manifest dream (the dream which we remember when we wake) emerges. By treating *Ein Landarzt* as a dream narrative, or the telling of a manifest dream, it is possible to analyse and come to an understanding of the hidden desires of the country doctor, and the way they re-emerge in the narrative in a different form, as through the process of distortion in dreams. This essay will discuss the emergence of the doctor’s repressed desires in certain aspects of the short story *Ein Landarzt*.

The strongest, and in many ways most brutal example of physicality and sexuality in *Ein Landarzt* can be seen in the character of the *Pferdeknecht*. The *Knecht* comes crawling out of the doctor’s pigsty on all fours, and is described as showing his ‘offenes blauäugiges Gesicht’ (p.168). This stark contrast between the animal and the human characterises the *Knecht* – he is driven by animal desires or by ‘some kind of energy, not paralysed by thought’ [[4]](#footnote-2) as can be seen in his brutal treatment and implied rape of Rosa, the doctor’s maid. Not only this, but the *Knecht* can also be viewed as the doctor himself, or more explicitly as the doctor’s subconscious self; the *Lust-Ich* described by Freud. The physicality that the doctor endeavours to repress comes out, by means of distortion, in the *Knecht*. Thus, the *Lust-Ich* is satisfied in its desires and the wish, that in waking life is repressed by the *Real-Ich*, is fulfilled. The efforts of the *Real-Ich* can be seen here as well, when the *Knecht* bites Rosa in the cheek and the doctor comes to the defence of Rosa ‘”Du Vieh,’ schrie ich wütend, “willst du die Peitsche?”, besinne mich aber gleich, daβ es ein Fremder ist; willig aushilft, wo alle andern versagen’ (p.169). The doctor’s *Real-Ich* quells his violent wish to whip the *Knecht* for his behaviour against Rosa, when he recognises the act of whipping as brutal and unacceptable, especially given that the *Knecht* is helping him, and therefore he restrains himself. Thus we see the doctor repressing even a form of repression (the whipping of the *Knecht*) which takes us back again to Freud: it is not in the repression itself that the problem lies, but in *too much* repression. The physicality repressed here twofold by the doctor must re-emerge.

The horses, which emerge from the doctor’s own pigsty at the call of the *Pferdeknecht*, also present a powerful image of physicality. The idea of the *Knecht* as the form through which the sexuality and physicality of the doctor returns is added to by the fact that, if anyone, it is he who is in control of the horses. They come forth at his command and their emergence from the pigsty is a very physical and somewhat grotesque image:

‘zwei Pferde, mächtige flankenstarke Tiere schoben sich hintereinander, die Beine eng am Leib, die wohlgeformten Köpfe wie Kamele senkend, nur durch die Kraft der Wendungen ihres Rumpfes aus dem Türloch, das sie restlos ausfüllten. Aber gleich standen sie aufrecht, hochbeinig, mit dicht ausdampfendem Körper.’ (p.168/9)

By describing the horses in so physical a way, Kafka strengthens the link between the horses and the *Knecht*, and throughout the text juxtaposes this image of strength and prowess with the doctor’s lack of control over the hoses. When the doctor leaves the patient’s house the horses are slow and he cannot make them go any faster: ‘”Munter!” sagte ich, aber munter ging’s nicht’ (p.174). This creates a contrast with the former departure of the horses, where the *Knecht* cries ‘Munter!’ and claps his hands, and the horses move so fast the journey passes in the blink of an eye (p.169). In spite of the very physical or animal image they present on first appearing, the horses also display some more human characteristics: while the doctor is examining the patient they watch him, their heads through the window, and their whinnying serves as a reminder of Rosa and her plight to the doctor. They are given more than merely animal significance; indeed they are described at the end of the story as being unearthly, which shows that their role in the narrative is more important than merely the role of two animals.

Parallels have been drawn between the horses and Plato’s theory for the tripartide human soul. ‘He describes a charioteer with two horses, a white horse that symbolises intellect and a dark horse that represents instinct. The rider symbolises moral intelligence and is both rational and moral.’ [[5]](#footnote-3) The fact, not only that Kafka’s doctor has no control over the horses, but also that by the end of the story the horses are barely even attached to one another shows the fragmented state of the doctor. He is utterly powerless in every aspect of the story, and has no control over what takes place: the only time he himself has a direct influence is when he flees his patient’s sickroom, naked, and the result of this is the nightmarish end to the story: ‘Nackt, dem Froste dieses unglückseligsten Zeitalters ausgesetzt, mit irdischem Wagen, unirdischen Pferden, treibe ich mich alter Mann umher’ (174). This shows the doctor’s feelings of impotency and awareness of and frustration with his own lack of control.

Further to this, there is also the fact that the horses and the *Knecht* are both found in the *doctor’s own* pigsty, and on their appearance Rosa says ‘Man weiß nicht, was für Dinge man im eigenen Hause vorrätig hat,’ (p.168). This is clearly a slightly flippant and ironic reference, on the part of Kafka, to the very obvious Freudian idea that nobody knows what is concealed in his or her own subconscious. The fact that the doctor’s subconscious, from whence come his animal desires, is a pigsty is also telling: what emerges will not be something clean and pure, but rather something (perceived as) dirty and rotten.

Another very significant symbol in *Ein Landarzt* is that of the wound the doctor eventually discovers in the side of the patient. The fact that the boy has so serious a wound but that it goes unnoticed by the doctor until he sees the boy’s sister flapping a bloodied cloth, shows that he is not good at his profession. This idea is furthered by the fact that at first he pronounces the patient to be healthy and then after seeing the wound he says ‘Armer Junge, dir ist nicht zu helfen’ (p.172). In the first case, if the boy is healthy the doctor need do nothing for him, and in the second he pronounces the boy to be beyond help, and therefore again does not have to do anything. He is both powerless to do anything to help the boy, and powerless to help Rosa in her plight, which adds to the general sense of the doctor’s impotency, felt throughout the story.

Another important symbol of the sexuality and physicality repressed by the doctor in *Ein Landarzt* is that of the wound the doctor discovers in the side of the patient he has been called out to see. It is described thus:

‘In seiner rechten Seite, in der Hüftengegend hat sich ein handtellergroße Wunde aufgetan. Rosa, in vielen Schattierungen, dunkel in der Tiefe, hellwerdend zu den Rändern, zartkornig, mit ungleichmassig sich aufsammelndem Blut, offen wie ein Bergwerk obertags’ (p. 172).

The fact the wound is described as being ‘Rosa’ instantly connects it with the doctor’s maid. Eric Marson and Keith Leopold draw attention to the fact that Rosa is the only character given a name in the whole story, and when this is taken into account the connection becomes even more potent. [[6]](#footnote-4) Whilst they take the wound to be the psyche or soul of the boy, and Rosa to be the psyche of the doctor, I think another possible interpretation, which is perhaps more explicit, is that the wound is another representation of what the doctor is trying to repress: his sexual attraction to Rosa. On closer inspection the wound proves to be infested with worms.

‘Würmer, an Stärke und Länge meinem kleinen Finger gleich, rosig aus eigenem und außerdem blutbespritzt, winden sich, im Innern der Wunde festgehalten, mit weißen Köpfchen, mit vielen Beinchen ans Licht’ (p.172).

This is a disturbing and very detailed phallic image, and shows the extent of the doctor’s repression: his attraction to Rosa has emerged again, but this time distorted into an even more frightening, grotesque form. The sexual nature of the wound is clear not only from its description, but also from the fact that it occurs in the hip area of the boy. The doctor’s reaction to the wound also serves to develop this link between Rosa and the wound, and the *Knecht* and the doctor. If the *Knecht* represents the doctor’s *Lust-Ich*, and his rape of Rosa satisfies the doctor’s desire for Rosa, then it is natural that on looking at the wound, he would feel, instead of the revulsion felt by the reader at its description, a certain admiration, which indeed he does: ‘Wer kann das sehen, ohne leise zu pfeifen?’ (p.172). The wound is, therefore, another means through which the desires of the doctor, to which he pays little regard and can indeed overlook, just as he initially overlooks the wound and does not punish the *Knecht* for biting Rosa: he does not wish to be faced with these desires because he deems them to be unacceptable. However, the fact that the worms the wound is infested with are so small suggests that ‘sex is another responsibility the doctor cannot perform, just as he is unable to perform his professional duty.’ [[7]](#footnote-5)

The doctor in Kafka’s *Ein Landarzt* represses his own physicality and sexuality, and it therefore returns, through his subconscious, in various frightening and disgusting forms. They appear first as the *Pferdeknecht*, who is presented, apart from having blue eyes, as scarcely human in his behaviour: he has control over the unearthly horses and he has none of the social problems experienced by the doctor. The doctor’s repressed physicality and sexuality also appear later in the form of the wound in the side of the patient he has been called on to attend, in an even more grotesque and startling image. By applying theories from Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* we can see the internal workings of the doctor’s mind, and analyse what is essentially a professional stress-dream, but also shows the doctor’s latent sexual attraction to his maid Rosa.

**Bibliography**

Campbell, Karen J, ‘On the Sources of Kafka’s Landarzt’, *The German Quarterly*, Vol.60 No.3 (Summer 1987) [accessed via JSTOR 29.11.2013]

Freud, Sigmund, “A dream is the fulfilment of a wish” and “Distortion in dreams” from Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol.10, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1981

Guth, Hans ‘Symbol and Contextual Restraint: Kafka’s “Country Doctor”’, *PMLA* Vol. 80 No. 4 (September 1965) 427-431 [accessed via JSTOR 29.11.2013]

Kafka, Franz, ‘Ein Landarzt’, *Erzählungen*, Reclam, 2010

Manson, Aaron, ‘A Theology of Illness: Franz Kafka’s “A Country Doctor”, *Literature and Medicine* Vol. 24 (2005), 297-314,

[accessed via <http://search.proquest.com/docview/221135089?accountid=10673>]

1. Hans Guth, ‘Symbol and Contextual Restraint: Kafka’s Country Doctor’, *PMLA,* Vol. 80 No. 4: 427-431 (p.427). [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Karen J Campbell, ‘On the Sources of Kafka’s Landarzt’, *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 60 No. 3: 420-431 (p.421). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Sigmund Freud, *‘Distortion in Dreams’*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud. Vol.10 pp134-162, London, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Guth, 1965, p. 430 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Aaron Manson, ‘A Theology of Illness: Franz Kafka’s “A Country Doctor”’, *Literature and Medicine* Vol. 24 (p.301) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Eric Marson, and Keith Leopold, ‘Kafka, Freud and “Ein Landarzt”’, *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 37 No. 2: 146-160 (p.153) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Manson, 2005, p. 305 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)