

# A Self-Referential Story

THIS IS THE TITLE OF THIS STORY WHICH IS ALSO FOUND SEVERAL TIMES IN THE STORY ITSELF \*

This is the first sentence of this story. This is the second sentence. This is the title of this story which is also found several times in the story itself. This sentence is questioning the intrinsic value of the first two sentences. This sentence is to inform you, in case you haven't already realized it, that this is a self-referential story, that is, a story containing sentences that refer to their own structure and function. This is a sentence that provides an ending to the first paragraph.

This is the first sentence of a new paragraph in a self-referential story. This sentence is introducing you to the protagonist of the story, a young boy named Billy. This sentence is telling you that Billy is blond and blue-eyed and American and twelve years old and strangling his mother. This sentence comments on the awkward nature of the self-referential narrative form while recognizing the strange and playful detachment it affords the writer. As if illustrating the point made by the last sentence, this sentence reminds us, with no trace of facetiousness, that children are a precious gift from God and that the world is a better place graced by the unique joys and delights they bring to it.

This sentence describes Billy's mother's bulging eyes and protruding tongue and makes reference to the unpleasant choking and gagging noises she's making. This sentence makes the observation that these are uncertain and difficult times, and that relationships, even seemingly deep-rooted and permanent ones, do have a tendency to break down.

Introduces, in this paragraph, the device of sentence fragments. A sentence fragment. Another. Good device. Will be used more later.

This is actually the last sentence of the story but has been placed here by mistake. This is the title of this story, which is also found several times in the story itself. As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself in his bed transformed into a gigantic insect. This sentence informs you that the preceding sentence is from another story entirely (a much better one, it must be noted) and has no place at all in this particular narrative. Despite the claims of the preceding sentence, this sentence feels compelled to inform you that the story you are reading is in actuality "The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka, and that the sentence referred to by the preceding sentence is the only sentence which does indeed belong in this story. This sentence overrides the preceding sentence by informing the reader (poor, confused wretch) that this piece of literature is actually the Declaration of Independence, but that the author, in a show of extreme negligence (if not malicious sabotage), has so far failed to include even one single sentence from that stirring document, although he has condescended to use a small sentence fragment, namely, "When in the course of human events", embedded in quotation marks near the end of a sentence. Showing a keen awareness of the boredom and downright hostility of the average reader with regard to the pointless conceptual games indulged in by the preceding sentences, this sentence returns us at last to the scenario of the story by asking the question, "Why is Billy strangling his mother?" This sentence attempts to shed some light on the question posed by the preceding sentence but fails. This sentence, however, succeeds, in that it suggests a possible incestuous relationship between Billy and his mother and alludes to the concomitant Freudian complications any astute reader will immediately envision. Incest. The unspeakable taboo. The universal prohibition. Incest. And notice the sentence fragments? Good literary device. Will be used more later.

This is the first sentence in a new paragraph. This is the last sentence in a new paragraph.

This sentence can serve as either the beginning of the paragraph or the end, depending on its placement. This is the title of this story, which is also found several times in the story itself. This sentence raises a serious objection to the entire class of self-referential sentences that merely comment on their own function or placement within the story (e.g., the preceding four sentences), on the grounds that they are monotonously predictable; unforgettably self-indulgent, and merely serve to distract the reader from the real subject of this story, which at this point seems to concern strangulation and incest and who knows what other delightful topics. The purpose of this sentence is to point out that the preceding sentence, while not itself a member of the class of self-referential sentences it objects to, nevertheless also serves merely to distract the reader from the real subject of this story, which actually concerns Gregor Samsa's inexplicable transformation into a gigantic insect (despite the vociferous counterclaim of other well-meaning although misinformed sentences). This sentence can serve as either the beginning of a paragraph or the end, depending on its placement.

This is the title of this story, which is also found several times in the story itself. This is almost the title of the story, which is found only once in the story itself. This sentence regretfully states that up to this point the self-referential mode of narrative has had a paralyzing effect on the actual progress of the story itself, that is, these sentences have been so concerned with analyzing themselves and their role in the story that they have failed by and large to perform their function as communicators of events and ideas that one hopes coalesce into a plot, character development, etc.—in short, the very *raison d'être* of any respectable, hardworking sentence in the midst of a piece of compelling prose fiction. This sentence in addition points out the obvious analogy between the plight of these agonizingly self-aware sentences and similarly afflicted human beings, and it points out the analogous paralyzing effects wrought by excessive and tortured self-examination.

The purpose of this sentence (which can also serve as a paragraph) is to speculate that if the Declaration of Independence had been worded and structured as lackadaisically and incoherently as this story has been so far there's no telling what kind of warped libertine society we'd be living in now or to what depths of decadence the inhabitants of this country might have sunk, even to the point of deranged and debased writers constructing irritatingly cumbersome and needlessly prolix sentences that sometimes possess the questionable if not downright undesirable quality of referring to themselves and they sometimes even become run-on sentences or exhibit other signs of inexcusably sloppy grammar like unneeded superfluous redundancies that almost certainly would have insidious effects on the lifestyle and morals of our impressionable youth, leading them to commit incest or even murder and maybe that's why Billy is strangling his mother, because of sentences just like this one, which have no discernible goals or perspicuous purpose and just end up anywhere, even in mid

Bizarre. A sentence fragment. Another fragment. Twelve years old. This is a sentence that. Fragmented. And strangling his mother. Sorry, sorry. Bizarre. This. More fragments. This is it. Fragments. The title of this story, which. Blond. Sorry, sorry. Fragment after fragment. Harder. This is a sentence that. Fragments. Damn good device.

The purpose of this sentence is threefold: (1) to apologize for the unfortunate and inexplicable lapse exhibited by the preceding paragraph; (2) to assure you, the reader, that it will not happen again; and (3) to reiterate the point that these are uncertain and difficult times and that aspects of language, even seemingly stable and deeply rooted ones such as syntax and meaning, do break down. This sentence adds nothing substantial to the sentiments of the preceding sentence but merely provides a concluding sentence to this paragraph, which otherwise might not have one. This sentence, in a sudden and courageous burst of altruism, tries to abandon the self-referential mode but fails. This sentence tries again, but the attempt is doomed from the start.

This sentence, in a last-ditch attempt to infuse some iota of story line into this paralyzed prose piece, quickly alludes to Billy's frantic cover-up attempts, followed by a lyrical, touching, and beautifully written passage wherein Billy is reconciled with his father (thus resolving the subliminal Freudian conflicts obvious to any astute reader) and a final exciting police chase scene during which Billy is accidentally shot and killed by a panicky rookie policeman who is coincidentally named Billy. This sentence, although basically in complete sympathy with the laudable efforts of the preceding action-packed sentence, reminds the reader that such allusions to a story that doesn't, in fact, yet exist are no substitute for the real thing and therefore will not get the author (indolent goof-off that he is) off the proverbial hook.

Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph. Paragraph.

The purpose. Of this paragraph. Is to apologize. For its gratuitous use. Of. Sentence fragments. Sorry.

The purpose of this sentence is to apologize for the pointless and silly adolescent games indulged in by the preceding two paragraphs, and to express regret on the part of us, the more mature sentences, that the entire tone of this story is such that it can't seem to communicate a simple, albeit sordid, scenario.

This sentence wishes to apologize for all the needless apologies found in this story (this one included), which, although placed here ostensibly for the benefit of the more vexed readers, merely delay in a maddeningly recursive way the continuation of the by-now nearly forgotten story line. This sentence is bursting at the punctuation marks with news of the dire import of self-reference as applied to sentences, a practice that could prove to be a veritable Pandora's box of potential havoc, for if a sentence can refer or allude to itself, why not a lowly subordinate clause, perhaps this very clause? Or this sentence fragment? Or three words? Two words? One?

Perhaps it is appropriate that this sentence gently and with no trace of condescension reminds us that these are indeed difficult and uncertain times and that in general people just aren't nice enough to each other, and perhaps we, whether sentient human beings or sentient sentences, should just try harder. I mean, there is such a thing as free will, there has to be, and this sentence is proof of it! Neither this sentence nor you, the reader, is completely helpless in the face of all the pitiless forces at work in the universe. We should stand our ground, face facts, take Mother Nature by the throat and just try harder. By the throat. Harder. Harder, harder.

Sorry.

This is the title of this story, which is also found several times in the story itself.

This is this last sentence of the story. This is the last sentence of the story. This is the last sentence of the story. This is. Sorry.

\* Hofstadter, Douglas. *Metamagical Themas: Questing for the Essence of Mind & Pattern*. Toronto: Bantam Books. 1985. 37-41.

