

The metamorphosis by f. kafka

Literature



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Franz Kafka belongs to those writers of the twentieth century whose fiction express sorrow over the fracturing of human community. Though Kafka remains exceptional in that he enjoyed no public recognition during his lifetime, his world-fame came to him only after his death. His well-developed, modernist parables often do not have any fixed meaning, yet they reflect the insecurities of an age when faith in old-established beliefs has crumbled. Kafka masterfully combines within one framework the knowable and mysterious, an exact portrayal of the factual world with a dreamlike and magical dissolution of it. By unifying those contrary elements he was able to achieve some new fusion style in prose fiction. The analysis of one of his works will allow seeing in what way Kafka attains that profound quality of his expression of the experience of human loss, estrangement, and guilt - an experience increasingly dominant in the modern age.

Kafka's best-known story *The Metamorphosis* is the demonstrative example of Kafkaesque paradox which consists in clashing the realism of commonplace detail with not just improbable but absurd turns of events. The inner world of Kafka's character seeps from imaginable to actual, Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* transmews into an insect as the only way to manifest his insect-like relationship to the world, where he lives. It is no dream.

The Metamorphosis is peculiar as a narrative in having its climax in the very first sentence: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." (Kafka, 19) The rest of the story falls away from this high point of astonishment in one long expiring sigh. This form of narrative, which contradicts all conventional concepts of presenting the discourse, violates the rules just the same as the

people's faith in particular ancient beliefs had been violated in the twentieth century. As it is known, the traditional narrative bases on the drama of dénouement, the so-called solution of complications and the coming to a conclusion.

For Kafka such form is not acceptable because it is just exactly the absence of dénouement and conclusions that is his subject matter. His story is about death, but death that is without dénouement, death that is merely a spiritually petering out. The first sentence of *The Metamorphosis* announces Gregor Samsa's death and the rest of the story is his slow dying. However, in no case Kafka's protagonist is going to give up meekly. He struggles against the reality of life which, actually turned out to be a death for him; in his case, it follows, his life is his death and there is no escape. For a moment, it is true, near the end of his long dying, while listening to his sister play the violin, he feels "as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved" (Kafka, 76); but the nourishment remains unknown, he is locked into his room for the last time and he expires.

What Gregor awakens to on the morning of his metamorphosis is the truth of his life. His ordinary consciousness has lied to him about himself; now he is confronted with the transference from his habitual self-understanding into the nightmare of truth. That dreadful dream, which he got into, reveals, in fact, reality, which he could not have understood before - he is a vermin, a disgusting creature shut out from "the human circle." (Kafka, 33) At this point it should be underlined that Kafka prefers to use a metaphor, so that Gregor Samsa is not like a vermin but he is vermin. Anything less than metaphor, such as a simile comparing Gregor to vermin, would diminish the

reality of what Kafka is trying to represent. Gregor appears in a dream and it is only natural that a dreamer, while dreaming, takes his dream for reality. However, his metamorphosis is indeed no dream but a revelation of the truth. And this truth is composed of an array of facts.

First of all he grasps the deteriorative effect of his job upon his soul, the job that materially supports him but cuts him off from the possibility of real human associations:

Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the office, and on top of that there's the trouble of constant traveling, of worrying about train connections, the bad and irregular meals, the human associations that are no sooner struck up than they are ended without ever becoming intimate. The devil take it all! (Kafka, 20)

He has been sacrificing himself by working at his meaningless, degrading job so as to pay off an old debt of his parents' to his employer. Otherwise " I'd have given notice long ago, I'd have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him." (Kafka, 21) But even now, with the truth of his self-betrayal pinning him on his back to his bed, he is unable to claim himself for himself and decide to quit—he must wait " another five or six years":

Once I've saved enough money to pay back my parents' debts to him—that should take another five or six years—I'll do it without fail. I'll cut myself completely loose then. For the moment, though, I'd better get up, since my train goes at five. (Kafka, 21)

Another truth revealed through metamorphosis is the situation in the Samsa family: on the surface, the official sentiments of the parents and the sister toward Gregor, and of Gregor toward them and toward himself; underneath, the horror and disgust, and self-disgust: "... family duty required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience." (Kafka, 65) His metamorphosis is a judgment on himself from the standpoint of his defeated humanity. Philip Rahv has very suggestively analyzed the subjective meaning of the insect symbol here by showing that quite frequently brothers and sisters are symbolically represented in dreams as animals or insects and that, since in this story of family life one of the underlying themes is the displacement of Samsa in the family hierarchy by his sister, it should, on the psychological plane, be looked upon as, on Kafka's part, a construct of wish and guilt thoughts. (Rahv, pp. 61-62)

Gregor breaks out of his room the first time hoping that his transformation will turn out to be "nonsense"; the second time, in the course of defending at least his hope of returning to his "human past." His third eruption, in Part III, has quite a different aim. The final section of the story discovers a Gregor who tries to dream again, after a long interval, of resuming his old place at the head of the family, but the figures from the past that now appear to him—his boss, the chief clerk, traveling salesmen, a chambermaid ("a sweet and fleeting memory"), and so on—cannot help him, "they were one and all unapproachable and he was glad when they vanished." (Kafka, 69) Defeated, he finally gives up all hope of returning to the human community. Now his existence slopes steeply toward death. His room is now the place in which all

the household's dirty old decayed things are thrown, along with Gregor, a dirty old decayed thing; and he has just stopped eating.

At first he had thought he was unable to eat out of "chagrin over the state of his room" (72). But then he discovered that he got "increasing enjoyment" from crawling about the filth and junk. On the last evening of his life, watching from his room the lodgers whom his family have taken in putting away a good supper, he comes to a crucial realization: "I'm hungry enough," said Gregor sadly to himself, "but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here am I dying of starvation!" (Kafka, 74) In giving up at last all hope of reentering the human circle, Gregor finally understands the truth about his life; which is to say he accepts the knowledge of his death, for the truth about his life is his death-in-life by his banishment from the human community. But having finally accepted the truth, he begins to sense a possibility that exists for him only in his outcast state. He is hungry enough, he realizes, but not for the world's stuff, "not for that kind of food." (Kafka, 74)

When Gregor breaks out of his room the third and last time, he is no longer trying to deceive himself about himself and get back to his old life with its illusions about belonging to the human community. What draws him out of his room the last night of his life is his sister's violin playing. Although he had never cared for music in his human state, now the notes of the violin attract him surprisingly. Indifferent to the others, at last he has the courage to think about himself. The filthy starving underground creature advances onto "the spotless floor of the living room" where his sister is playing for the three lodgers. Here Kafka makes use of the idea that music expresses the

inexpressible, that it points to a hidden sphere of spiritual power and meaning.

Creating in *The Metamorphosis* a character who is real and unreal, replete with meaning and empty of self, Kafka encourages his readers to fill in the void that exists at the center of the insect-Gregor's self. Thus, as a reader, one can come to conclusion that Gregor's metamorphosis is a symbol of his alienation from the human state, of his "awakening" to the full horror of his dull, spiritless existence, and of the desperate self-disgust of his unconscious life.

Reference:

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Rahv, Philip. (1939). *Franz Kafka: the Hero as Lonely Man*. *The Kenyon Review*, I (1)