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Family



Author: Nicole Smith Character Analysis of Gregor in “ The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka In Franz Kafka’s “ The Metamorphosis”, the transformation of the character Gregor from a man to one of the most repellent insects, a cockroach, may seem exaggerated and ridiculous, becoming more so over the course of the story as the action builds and emotions become more charged. Kafka’s intention, however, is to expose and explore the impoverishment of human psychology with respect to the ways in which changes in one’s circumstances and conditions reshape notions of justice and mercy. These themes will be explored further in this character analysis of Gregor in “ The Metamorphosis”. While it is the subject of this character analysis, Gregor who has been mysteriously and inexplicably reduced to one of the lowest forms of animal life in this story by Kafka representing the absurd, it is Gregor’s family in “ The Metamorphosis” whose psychological development is the least human and humane. Gregor has changed physical form, but Kafka clearly indicates that his essential being has not changed in any fundamental way. Gregor still has human feelings and needs, he still wishes to relate with his family and other members of society, and he still wishes to be responsible. As this character analysis of Gregor in “ The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka suggests, his mother, father, and his sister have not changed form, but their metamorphoses are the most profound because they demonstrate how easily one’s beliefs, values, and basic treatment of others can be compromised because of a failure to adapt psychologically. From the opening of “ The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka, the character of Gregor is portrayed as a whole and complex human being. Like many people, he detests his job, but he recognizes that his work is necessary because it supports his family. He applies himself “ with great

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earnestness" (Kafka 35) to his grinding work as a traveling salesman, not only because he wants to support his parents and pay off a debt that they incurred, but because he dreams of sending his sister, Grete, to a conservatory where she can learn to play violin professionally (Kafka 37). At this early point in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" in fact, a character analysis of Gregor would yield rather little in terms of character depth. However, this devotion demonstrates just how thoughtful and compassionate Gregor is. In a brief time, however, it will be shown both in the Metamorphosis and in this character analysis of Gregor that his family members are not nearly as kind and considerate; in fact, they completely lose their capacity for justice and mercy. When Gregor wakes up one morning and learns that he has metamorphosed and Gregor has been transformed into a cockroach he is shocked and incredulous, as any human being would be. Yet he comes to accept, as he must, the irreversibility of his new condition. Though unwanted, there is nothing that Gregor can do to change his situation. The only action that he can, and does take, is to adjust his attitude about this unbelievable change. His family members, however, are apparently incapable of making the same kind of psychological adaptation. Bloom contends in his broad character analysis and study of "The Metamorphosis" by Kafka, that symbolically speaking, Gregor's metamorphosis from man to cockroach represents his "judgment on himself by his defeated humanity" (21) because he cannot find a way to leave his job behind and assert his own needs and identity because of his loyalty and sense of obligation to his family. Upon closer analysis, the judgment of Gregor's family, however, is even more severe and distorting. While they initially try to accept him, his external characteristics preclude their fair treatment of him. They react

irrationally, exercising neither justice nor mercy in their response to his condition. They come to a point at which they can no longer connect the new Gregor with the person he once was, and though only his physical characteristics have changed, they view him with disgust and without compassion. While Gregor is the family member who has become literally dehumanized, the psychological and symbolic dehumanization of his mother, father, and Grete are more profound and severe. In his new state, Gregor is particularly vulnerable to his family member's abuses. His parents and sister, the people who should accept him unconditionally and protect him according to the traditional code of family relationships, are those who abuse him the most. His father wounds him deeply with a newspaper and a walking stick. Poor Gregor remains undeterred. Though wounded, he repeatedly attempts to connect with his family, and he remains capable of being moved by beauty and human expression. The most poignant scene and the one where many of the points touched upon in this character analysis of Gregor in "The Metamorphosis" are realized, not to mention the one that demonstrates the complete collapse of mercy and justice in the family, is when Gregor creeps from his room to hear Grete play her violin. Hearing Grete's music, Gregor feels, as is stated in one of the important quotes from "The Metamorphosis" by Kafka, "as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved" (37). He is erroneous to think that he can connect with Grete by expressing his appreciation for her music, and the stage is set for his complete dismissal and condemnation by his family. He is essentially given a death sentence. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is an exaggerated symbolic tale that tackles an ambitious number of themes. One of the most important of these is the collapse of justice and mercy, even among those

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people who are expected to be most fair and compassionate. Gregor's metamorphosis is indeed terrible, but more terrible still is the psychological corruption of Gregor's family. Their inability to adapt to the changes that have occurred signal a total breakdown in the family structure, and offer a cautionary tale about the fragility of notions of justice and mercy.