

# The metamorphosis literary analysis

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Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, can be described in no other way than "Kafkaesque", meaning absurd and/or completely out of the ordinary. In this novella, Gregor, the protagonist, transforms into a monstrous vermin. His mother, father, and sister are forced to adjust their lives to accommodate to living with a human-sized insect in the house.

Kafka's purpose is to reveal the true nature of modern families who have time to interact with one another. In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka explores the four stages of isolation through symbolism, plot, and contrasting characterizations of Gregor and his family. The very first symbol in *The Metamorphosis* is a picture that hangs on Gregor's wall. Kafka describes Gregor's surroundings in great detail, making sure to include a lengthy depiction of a cut out picture of a lady "sitting upright, dressed in a fur hat and fur boa" (Kafka, 1). The lady sits, symbolizing all that is human and civilized, and yet sets herself apart by enveloping herself in the animal world.

Kafka uses the lady in furs to exemplify the first stage of isolation: misunderstanding. While misunderstanding can be defined differently for various isolation situations, in Gregor's circumstance, the misunderstanding comes from inadequate comprehension of the change that has become Gregor. Gregor hopes that his family will accept the transformation calmly (Kafka, 15), when in reality Gregor's family cannot comprehend his predicament and, out of fear, shuts him away from their gaze. Gregor, like the lady in furs, is isolated in the animal world, even though he considers himself fully human on the inside. In the first stage of isolation, Gregor is in a state of confusion about himself and his familial relations. At this early stage,

he chooses not to entertain the thought that his family is no longer willing to house him, feed him, or love him.

Kafka uses Apples to symbolize the second stage of isolation: denial of love from the family. Gregor's denial of love stems from the misunderstanding and fear his family originally feels. When Gregor's father finds that Gregor is out of his bedroom and that Gregor has caused his mother to faint, Gregor's father becomes enraged, "fills his pockets from the bowl on the sideboard, and throws apple after apple" (Kafka, 35) at Gregor until he returns to his room. The apples symbolize the forbidden fruit from the biblical Garden of Eden that caused Adam and Eve to be thrown out of the garden.

Adam and Eve were isolated forever from the riches and splendor of the garden. Similarly, Gregor is thrown away from his father's love, never to gain it again. At this stage in Gregor's isolation, Gregor begins to realize that his family no longer wishes him there. However, he does not want to accept this fact just yet because he was so sure of his family's love before his transformation. Kafka utilizes the plot of *The Metamorphosis* to illustrate the succeeding stage of isolation: the acceptance of isolation.

Acceptance of isolation occurs when the isolator consciously and decisively puts another in isolation and the other accepts that he is, in fact, isolated, and no longer tries to tell himself otherwise. Kafka presents this stage as the most important stage of isolation for both the isolator and he who is isolated because it is an "eye-opener" for both. In *The Metamorphosis*, Grete, the isolator, finds her "eye opener" in the realization that she is no longer obliged to be the subordinate sister to Gregor. This stage of Gregor's

isolation is Grete's realization of a higher status in the household. Even though, as the plot progresses, she is subjected to more and more household work as her parents age, she takes this as a symbol of acquiring a higher position in the home.

This sense of a new status over Gregor is pleasing to Grete, as though she were finally, slowly, moving forward in life. Gregor, the isolated, comes to accept his isolation when his sister rearranges the furniture in his room by way of removing all but a desk and the picture of the lady in furs. The empty room now appears to Gregor as though his family has “abandoned all hope of his recovery and callously left him completely on his own” (Kafka, 31). It is at this moment that Gregor realizes his family never wanted for him to be healed. Above all, Kafka takes time in this moment of the plot to allow Gregor his “eye opener”: that he has been in isolation his entire life, segregated from the love and warmth of a family he knew only in correspondence.

At the same time, Kafka allows Gregor the discovery that he actually prefers isolation. Gregor “congratulate[s] himself on the precaution he picked up while traveling of locking the doors” (Kafka, 9) in order that he could enjoy his privacy. For Gregor, the acceptance of his isolation is not depressing, but instead liberating, and he finds himself “crawling crisscross over the [empty] walls and ceiling” (Kafka, 30) in delight. Kafka shifts the mood dramatically when he writes of the last stage of isolation, capitulation, through contrasting characterizations of Gregor and the other members in the household. This stage begins slowly after acceptance, as the isolated recoils once more from fully giving in to isolation.

However, capitulation itself comes rapidly once all hope of love is finally relinquished. After acceptance, Gregor is weak and losing liveliness. At the same time, those around him are gaining strength from his weakness and each building their own, independent characters. Near the end of the novella, Gregor's family hires a charwoman to come in the mornings and clean the house. Kafka characterizes the charwoman as an "old widow who must have weathered the worst in her long life with the help of her sturdy bone structure [and] was not particularly disgusted by Gregor" (Kafka, 40). The charwoman is a strong, vociferous character who gives a stark contrast to Gregor's weak, neglected figure.

Grete sets herself apart from Gregor after consciously isolating him in his room. She becomes leader of the household and main bread-winner. In a way, Grete's independence and leadership is revealed through Gregor's increasing dependency on others. Kafka introduces the most contrast between the characters of Gregor and Grete when Grete plays her violin for three boarders. Gregor is so moved by the music that he gains one last iota of hope and tricks himself into believing that he cannot be "a beast if the music moved him so".

Gregor makes one final attempt to love and be loved. He crawls out of his room and into the sitting area where Grete is playing. Grete, however, clearly still considers Gregor completely isolated from her life and quickly shuts, bolts, and locks Gregor back in his room (Kafka, 48), thereby confirming his isolation once and for all. She urges her parents to accept that they "have to try to stop thinking that this is Gregor" (Kafka, 47). Grete

convinces her parents to completely give up the idea that Gregor still has human characteristics.

The full contrast that Kafka writes between Gregor and his sister comes swiftly the next morning when Gregor gives in to his weakness. He gives in to never again living a human life and gives up hope of ever living freely. That next morning, Gregor capitulates to Grete's deliberate and complete isolation, and dies. It is only then that Grete's parents see how Grete has blossomed into a pretty and voluptuous young woman" (Kafka, 51). Gregor's character is now at the completely opposite end of the spectrum from Grete's character. Gregor has no life left in his insect carcass, whereas Grete has as much life in her as ever.

Out of Gregor's insane desire to be loved came Grete's sanity and admiration from her parents. Out of Gregor's dying came Grete's living. Out of Gregor's hideous capitulation to life came Grete's beautiful liberation from duty. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* may seem out of the ordinary to the reader, but is truly a biography of modern family interactions. Indeed, *The Metamorphosis* reveals that modern families who are not accustomed to spending time with one another are not always the best functioning families. While on the surface, *The Metamorphosis* is a book about an insect locked in a room, Kafka writes to explore the four different stages of isolation through symbolism, plot, and characterizations.

Kafka symbolizes, with the picture of the lady in furs, the confusion of Gregor's transformation. He symbolizes, with apples, the father isolating Gregor from his love. Through the plot, Kafka writes of the most important

stage of isolation: acceptance. Lastly, through contrasting characterizations of Gregor and his family members, Kafka shows Gregor's capitulation in contrast to Grete's personal transformation. The novella is truly Kafkaesque in its fantastical writing and exploration of isolation.