

Kafka's metamorphosis in context to his era

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One of the major German writers was a Jewish, middle class resident of Prague, a man named Franz Kafka, who wrote disturbing, surreal tales. Writing in both short story and novel form, his work was published posthumously by a friend, Max Brod, who ignored his requests to burn his writings upon his death. Because his friend disobeyed his last request, Kafka's work has become iconic in western literature, even producing its own connotations. The term "Kafkaesque" has come to mean mundane yet absurd and surreal circumstances of the kind commonly found in Kafka's works ("Kafka", 1).

One of the most widely read and famous of these works concerns a man who wakes up one day and discovers he is an insect. Literally. Known as *Die Verwandlung* or *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka wrote this story quickly, completing it between November and December 1912.

Because of its bizarre subject matter, his tale has been subjected to a wide variety of interpretations. Although critics vary widely in those interpretations, the basic story involves a man who awakens in different form: he is now an insect; a "giant monstrous vermin;" yet all he wants to do is get to work.

He has provided for his family and feels the pressure of helping them even now. However, in this new context, he cannot speak with his family members. Judging only by appearances, his relatives become repulsed by him, calling him a burden.

Each time he enters to try to be in their midst, they act mean; his father even goes so far as to throw an apple, which subsequently gets infected

after it embeds in his back. Although Gregor becomes a veritable prisoner of his dirty, grimy room, his family does provide food and other nourishment-for a time. But they so abhor his appearance and treat him so despicably, that his sister finally declares that “ that thing must go.” His mother doesn't even offer a word of protest. Because of his outsider status with his family, Gregor returns to his room one last time; desirous of relieving them of their burden. He lies down. And dies.

Both the structure and the setting of the story resemble that of a drama. The structure builds dramatically, with a series of three crises, leading to a denouement. Each section of the story has a defined area where the story takes place; a limited space as in plays. With the exception of Gregor, the other characters are one dimensional.

Thus, Kafka works out of the traditional Aristotelian framework of three acts consisting of a beginning, middle, and end. Yet his style is ordinary. Has he been overrated? His plot is limited in scope, a series of episodes in the life of a character, rather than a full development. The characters are also limited. So what exactly did cause this Kafkan phenomenon? Kafka dealt with the subject of contradiction and the absurd— with a sense of impotence against the absurd conditions and banalities of the world. Although not attracted to any “ isms’ of thought philosophically, politically, artistically, or religiously, he simply expressed his own soul (Artile, 1).

Despite his lack of referencing, the wider world nevertheless laid claim to him.

The Jews saw him as their own visionary. They were convinced he foresaw the arrival of the Holocaust. Yet Kafka was not a religious Jew, going to synagogue only four times yearly with his father and having a bar mitzvah at age 13. Too absorbed in his personal frustrations to pay much attention to political developments, Kafka could not help becoming cognizant of the increasing xenophobia and anti-Semitism of those around him.

He thought that Palestine was a good solution and often talked of moving there to operate a café with his girlfriend Dora. In the midst of the anti-Semitic riots of 1920 Berlin, he said that "the best course is to leave a place where one is hated" (Strickland, 2). Indeed, his own three sisters all died in concentration camps, a fate that might also have awaited Kafka had he lived rather than dying of TB in 1924.

Although only a secular Jew, Kafka was nevertheless attracted to Yiddish theatre. The *Metamorphosis* has many parallels to a classic work of Yiddish theater called *The Savage* written by Gordin. The son Lemekh in this tale is "defective" like Gregor Samsa. Outcasts who horrify, both characters are animal like creatures in decline. The central metaphor of *The Metamorphosis* corresponds to Lemekh's position in his own family. As the housekeeper states, 'they kill him if he comes in here, so he lies in his own room, days on end, with his eyes open, and stares, like an animal, waiting to be sacrificed' (Beck, 54).

Beck continues to state that the Oedipal conflict and the larger theme of incest is present in both works because the sons' love for their mothers and sisters become confused with sexual desire. They become dizzy when they see their parents embrace. When Zelde touches Lemekh, he gets hot.

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Similarly, Gregor wants to save the picture of the lady in furs, crawling up the glass which soothed his hot body.

Crawling shows his acceptance of his animal state- hiding when others enter, fainting- which intensifies the action and shows strong emotion. Lemekh in his iron jacket and Gregor in his armor plated hard back are both imprisoned, and spiritually limited. Gordin's play warns of the beast in every man hiding beneath his human façade. Kafka's work also seems to be pointing to the vermin which every man inherently embodies (Beck, 56).

Other groups besides the Jews also embraced Kafka. Psychoanalytic Freudianism and Existentialism saw reflections of their philosophies in his works. The Freudians saw every range from dreamlike qualities and Oedipal conflicts to symbolic odds and ids. Kafka's feelings for his own father reads like a transparent Oedipal story. Many critics were of the opinion that never before had Freud ruled so supremely over a story as he did *The Metamorphosis* (Eggenschwiler, 72).

Existentialism took Kafka to be one of their own . Because he created characters who struggle with hopelessness and absurdity, many in the movement saw him as an icon, while others in the group were disillusioned with the western status quo of the 50s and the 60s. They distorted Kafka by exploiting the heavy atmosphere of his stories, using them as the basis for the need of a more liberal society with less state intervention and more truth for the individual. The existentialists abused truth by portraying a psychotic Kafka, victim of their same angst. The humor and mischief that was so dear to the surrealists that he loved is lost with that existentialist label (Artile, 7).

One of the most obvious themes of *The Metamorphosis* concerns society's treatment of those who are different and the loneliness of being cut off; the desperate and unrealistic hope that isolation brings ("Kafka," 3).

In his pain and rejection Gregor Samsa was far from being everyman. And most readers will not be prepared to accept him as a universal symbol. Nevertheless, it is hard to avoid the condition in *The Metamorphosis* that Kafka was demonstrating; at least at that time; his own despairing, tragicomic vision of the human condition (Beck, 57).

Kafka's value will always lie in the inexplicable that it contains. Final understanding will probably remain an impossibility. The various mid-century groups that took him as their hero never saw the complete picture of his artistic merits or original thought. Although many of his stories are inscrutable and baffling, Kafka himself looked upon his writing and the creativity he produced as a means of redemption (Artile, 7).

Thus his work transcends all the various interpretations that have been forced upon it and stands on its own merits, remaining an important part of the Western canon; work that is timeless.

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