

A metamorphosis in and out of gender roles

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Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* reinforces the oppression of women in the household by highlighting the transformation of Grete, Gregor's sister, from a passive domestic caretaker (her proper female role) to a more masculine, controlling one, who breaks out of her assigned role and essentially becomes the villain of the story. Once Grete becomes more dominant, Kafka shifts his portrayal of her into a negative one, reinforcing the societal trend of disapproving of anyone, especially a woman, who steps out of their gender role. *The Metamorphosis* also reinforces the assigned male gender role, by representing Gregor as a person defined only by his ability to work and make money. By writing Gregor in this way, Kafka emphasizes the separate spheres of gender, creating an even greater effect when Grete breaks out of her assigned domestic female sphere. When Gregor transforms into a bug, his first concern is his inability to work and earn money, as he had previously singlehandedly supported his family's upper middle-class lifestyle.

Gregor is proud of this position of power: " he felt great pride for the fact that he had been able to provide such a life for his parents and sister in such a fine flat. But what if all the quiet, the comfort, the contentment were now to end in horror?" (89). Naturally, Gregor's transformation threatens his dominant role as the ' breadwinner' of the family, his assigned role as a man. The rest of his family, especially his sister, Grete, is dependent on him: " Gregor had earned so much money that he was able to meet the expenses of the whole household and ..

. it was a secret plan of his that [his sister], who loved music, should be sent next year to study at the Conservatorium, despite the great expense that would entail" (95). His sister is expected to wait around for Gregor to raise

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enough money for her to pursue the arts, leaving her future fully dependent on his ability to earn money. Gregor's transformation changes this dynamic and gives Grete an opportunity to gain dominance in the household. As an insect, Gregor needs someone to feed and take care of him. Gregor's sister assumes this role without having to be told, since caretaking is the obligation of young women.

Her unspoken job is to make Gregor's life as blissful as possible, regardless of the burden on her: " Gregor was wildly curious to know what she would bring ... what she actually did next, in the goodness of her heart, he could never have guessed at. To find out what he liked she brought him a whole selection of food, all set out on an old newspaper" (91).

He goes on to describe the various foods that Grete had painstakingly gathered so that Gregor could have an enjoyable meal. Grete's actions are described as out of " the goodness of her heart", clearly showing Gregor's pride in his good, proper and domestic caretaker and Kafka's approval of a woman so obliging in her domestic role. Grete's parents also regard Grete's domesticity as a positive thing, as Gregor overhears: " he often heard [his parents] expressing their appreciation of his sister's activities, whereas formerly they had frequently scolded her for being as they thought a somewhat useless daughter" (99). Prior to her caretaker role, Grete was not encouraged to go to school or to work, since those were jobs for her brother only. Once she has an opportunity to be of use to her family and society, by being domestic, she jumps into this role. Only then is she considered " useful.

” Eventually, as Gregor becomes less and less human, he becomes less and less relevant and Grete becomes more and more dominant in the family dynamic. Gregor feels ashamed whenever he hears his family talking about money, for he feels helpless without power: “ whenever the need for earning money was mentioned, Gregor let go his hold on the door and threw himself down on the cool leather sofa beside it, he felt so hot with shame and grief” (97). By not working, Gregor loses all dominance he had, since the ability to earn money is the source of power for men in a capitalist patriarchal society. Grete, on the other hand, starts holding more agency over Gregor: “ his sister ...

had grown accustomed, and not without reason, to consider herself an expert in Gregor’s affairs” (103). Gregor used to control Grete and her future, with money for her violin school, but once Grete becomes “ an expert” on Gregor and his future, their roles reverse. Grete starts losing her feminine domestic tendencies with power, which turns her into a cruel villain in Kafka’s eyes, shown by his negative portrayal of her: “ His sister no longer took thought to bring him what might especially please him, but in the mornings and at noon before she went to business hurriedly pushed into his room with her foot any food that was available, and in the evening cleared it out again with one sweep of the broom ... could not have been more hastily done.

” (114) Because his sister no longer prioritizes what Gregor wants or what would “ especially please him”, this makes her a rebel of her gender role, and, therefore, a ‘ bad woman’. Grete is also described as being sick of her domestic role: “ the sister, exhausted by her daily work, had grown tired of

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looking after Gregor as she did formerly” (115-6). Because Grete doesn't want her assigned feminine role, she becomes villainous. Specifically, Grete is the one to wish for Gregor's death, ultimately betraying Gregor: “' My dear parents,' said his sister, slapping her hand on the table by way of introduction, ' things can't go on like this. Perhaps you don't realize that, but I do.

... we must try to get rid of it” (124). This blatant cold-hearted betrayal emphasizes the way Kafka sees Grete once she breaks out of her domestic, feminine role to become more dominant, aggressive and controlling.

By being the one to wish for Gregor's death, Kafka shows the reader how patriarchal society views women who break free of their oppressive roles, and become powerful outside the domestic sphere. The agency that she assumes, combined with Gregor's shame of losing his power, transforms Grete into the bad guy (or girl) of the story because she threatens the male patriarchal system. However, Grete's female dominance is not ultimately a victory for her, since she returns to a typically feminine role once Gregor dies and her parents decide she is to be married: “ While they were thus conversing, it struck both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter's increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure. They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her.

" (132) The " vivacity" that Grete shows by having control over Gregor and her parents, only serves to convince her parents that Grete needs a husband to control and tame her. This is not the product of Grete having sexist parents, but rather a patriarchal society that believes the end goal for women is to marry a " good husband" who can ' own' them. The story ends with Grete's rebellion against the patriarchy being undermined by an entrance right back into her binary role as a domestic woman and future wife. Franz Kafka writes the characters of Gregor and Grete to emphasize a larger power dynamic between males and females within their assigned roles. His book emphasizes not only the oppression that women face, but the difficulties in breaking out of this oppression. Grete cannot pay for her own education, get a job or do anything else that would set her free, and when she does manage to take control, she gets put right back where she started with the prospect of marriage.

Due to the satirical and fantastical nature of the story, possible that Kafka intended the reader to take note of the ridiculousness of patriarchal society. The abrupt ending of marrying off Grete is very difficult to not question and seems to come out of nowhere. Using the characters of both Grete and Gregor, Kafka's story emphasizes gender stereotypes by exaggerating and using a sort of a black humor to force the reader to notice these disparities and think twice about societies that reinforce oppressive gender roles.