

Existentialism in the metamorphosis



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The *Metamorphosis*, a short story written by Franz Kafka, begins with Gregor Samsa waking up as a “monstrous vermin bug” (Kafka, 1915, p. 3) without any explanation, which ends up changing his life, job and family relationships. Kafka uses existentialism through Gregor’s transformation and his struggles with being an insect. Before his metamorphosis, Gregor worked as a traveling salesman. His father, even though he in good health, had not been working for the past five years, therefore, could not be counted on for very much for financial matters, which is why he was satisfied with the work Gregor was doing for the household. Neither his sister nor his mother worked, because, one was too young to work and the other suffered from asthma (p. 37). Therefore, Gregor is constantly exploited by his family (along with his unnamed boss) and is continuously alienated in various aspects of his life. In this story, Gregor represents the working class, and his father and the manager he works for, represent the bourgeoisie. This essay argues, that the dehumanizing and capitalist system of the society in which the protagonist lives in, brings him to an existential state, which can have both positive and negative effects on him and his life.

When talking about his job, Gregor describes it with words such as “demanding” and “stressing”, and also says, that: “in addition to that, I have to deal with the problems of traveling, the worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly changing human relationships which never come from the heart” (p. 4). His discontent with his daily labor is evident, but from the way he sees it, he has no option other than to continue working, because he thinks that it is his only mean of survival, even if it

gives him no reward other than a pitiful paycheck. His economic needs are practically the only thing that keeps him going to work every day.

As mentioned before, Gregor's father has no problem with exploiting his son's physical and economic labor and his support towards the whole family with his travelling salesman salary. Nevertheless, Gregor experiences a possible existential crisis when he starts to think about his human desire, that he could work for his own benefit or just keep satisfying the capital demands that alienate him from his life and labor by forcing him to work for someone else. He even mentions, that " If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would've quit ages ago" (p. 5). Before the metamorphosis, he basically worked hard for his family to pay off bills, without leaving time for himself, which consequently led to his loss of identity and individuality. Here, Kafka shows the dangers of working for others, without considering one's own needs. This is where the impersonal and dehumanizing structure of class relations becomes even more noticeable.

The author makes this evident, when he makes that Gregor, at the moment of waking up, even though he realizes that there is something unusual going on with his body, the first thing that he actually worries about is his work. He makes it his life priority. "' Good God,' he thought. It was half past six, (...). Could the alarm have failed to ring? One saw from the bed that it was properly set for four o'clock. Certainly, it had rung" (p. 5). Gregor even prioritized it over his own health. Whatever was happening around him, it did not matter, he had to go to work, that was what he was programmed to do now: " The next train left at seven o'clock. To catch that one, he would have to go in a mad rush. (...) And even if he caught the train, there was no

avoiding a blow up with the boss,” (p. 5). “ Well then, what if he reported in sick? But that would be extremely embarrassing and suspicious, because during his five years’ service Gregor hadn’t been sick even once” (p. 6). In the story, after he notices Gregor is a few hours late, Gregor’s manager asks him if he is trying to neglect his “ commercial duties” and then adds: “ Your productivity has also been very unsatisfactory recently” (p. 15). Even though, according to his boss, Gregor is failing at his job, he still goes every day, while ignoring his human need for rest and social interaction.

The conflict that arises from Gregor’s metamorphosis is that it leaves him unable to work. It is important to notice that the author does not explain the details when describing the insect that Gregor transforms into, rather its description is very vague, given that the focus is mostly on how Gregor’s value as a person diminishes because he cannot work any longer. From a Marxist and capitalist view, Gregor represents the proletariat, valued only for his ability to work. Therefore, since he is no longer a laborer, he is no longer valuable for his manager or even for his family. To the bourgeoisie, what matters the most from a person, is their labor. Hence, since that was the only thing he had to offer them, Gregor was now worthless. This situation exposes the lack of humanity in relationships caused by capitalism. He is unable to do anything useful as the insect he is now and becomes a burden to his family, which is something he notices.

This unusual state of being forced Gregor into an existential crisis, as he realized that his existence does not mean anything to anyone else. He questions his existence; thus, his metamorphosis has a lot more meaning than just being a biological transformation. This is what existentialism is

about: questioning one's existence and the choice one can make that affects their future. This existential point of view is applicable to the other family members, too. After Gregor had turned into a bug, the members of his family start working tirelessly, because they needed to do so in order to be able to pay their bills. They had the choice not to work, but they would have had to deal with the consequences, such as becoming and being part of an even lower class with lower standards. The social circumstances they were under is what led them to make this decision.

They become angry, because they see Gregor's transformation as a selfish act. Grete takes on the responsibility of caring for his brother in his bug state by feeding him, cleaning his room and even moving his furniture, because "she had also actually observed that Gregor needed a great deal of room to creep about" (p. 44). However, Gregor's mother refuses to see him, except for one time when she comes into his room, showing how much pain she feels for losing her only son. On the other hand, Gregor's father seems more annoyed and angered at the fact that he had to get a job again as a consequence of not having his son as a tool for making money anymore, than he is of losing a son. "The father, (...) in his stubbornness, which had gripped him since he had become a servant, he insisted always on staying even longer by the table" (pp. 54, 55). He demonstrates his frustration towards his son by attacking him: "It was an apple; immediately a second one flew after it. Gregor stood still in fright. Further flight was useless, for his father had decided to bombard him. (...) without for the moment taking accurate aim, [he] was throwing apple after apple" (p. 51).

Animals cannot choose their role in the world, but humans can. They can decide what their own place in society is with the decisions they make. Their role in society is shaped by their choices. However, in this case, these were influenced by capitalism. Initially, Gregor chooses society over himself, which transformed him into the working robot that he was, but after physical transformation, he finds himself forced to reassert his focus to himself, and society abandons him as a consequence of this:

' My dear parents,' said the sister banging her hand on the table by way of an introduction, ' things cannot go on any longer in this way. Maybe if you don't understand that, well, I do. I will not utter my brother's name in front of this monster, and thus I say only that we must try to get rid of it . (p. 68)

Grete became so indifferent to her brother that she even calls him an “ it”, as if he was an object.

Once again, we can see the dehumanization of an individual as a consequence of the capitalist system. It does not matter how much Gregor's family might have loved him when he was able to work, because now, they could not love him knowing that he is a liability. The financial situation of the family is definitely more important to them, than any emotional attachment to Gregor.

The metamorphosis Gregor experiences is both an internal and external transformation of the things that alienate him from himself and from his labour power. Gregor begins to take control of his own fate. He realizes he is the one in control of whatever happens to him. First, he chooses to avoid contact with his family, because “ he was in no mood to worry about his

family”, not anymore, since “ he was filled with sheer anger over the wretched care he was getting”. (p. 57) The protagonist began to look for things to do that would keep him entertained as the bug he was now. He was finally starting to gain his individuality back and get to know himself better. After realizing that he could not turn back to his human shape anymore, he lost hope of belonging to the capitalist and working class that he used to be part of. Now, crawling around his room, up to the ceiling, hanging from there or even hanging from wall to wall, is what gave him a feeling of happiness and fulfilment. “ For diversion he acquired the habit of crawling back and forth across the walls and ceiling. He was especially fond of hanging from the ceiling” (p. 41).

It is a little incoherent that Gregor, when he was in his human form, lived almost like an insect, when he was not one. Or at least he was treated like one. He, nor the people who were supposed to care about him, did not think of his own good, of what he actually wanted to do with his life, of what made him truly happy. He only lived to please and keep others satisfied and comfortable. Gregor’s goal or purpose throughout the story has been to try to help and do what is best for his family. Once again, this is born out of the capitalist society in which he lives. Also, it is ironic how, when Gregor becomes a real insect, that is when he feels more like a human than what he has ever felt before throughout his whole life. Only then, it is possible for him to be able to experience his existence and question ‘ the why’ of it, and look for its essence through free will and choice. He becomes self-conscious. Now that he realizes what he really is, he chooses and allows himself to die. “ He remained in this state of empty and peaceful reflection until the tower clock

struck three o'clock in the morning. (...) Then without willing it, his head sank all the way down, and from his nostrils flowed out weakly out his last breath" (p. 71). This was his way of liberating himself from the demands that society was imposing on him. When his family found out that he was dead, instead of being sad about the news, they showed relief, especially Gregor's father, who said: "' Well, now we can give thanks to God.' He crossed himself, and the three women followed his example" (p. 73). It is easy to get to the conclusion that his father was relieved that his son was not going to be a burden anymore. An economic one, specifically.

The Metamorphosis , even if unrealistic (because no human could ever turn into a bug), represents the reality that a person from the working-class experiences from being abandoned by the people in his life, after he or she is no longer able to gain an income and provide for them. Analyzing it from a Marxist perspective, it shows the social issues between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. When it comes to a capitalistic society, it is all about making money and profits. This will always come first, it will always precede the rights or wellness of the worker, which as in Gregor's Samsa case, can end in death. The story raises the existential view and the importance of individuality and free will. Only when acquiring those, will one have completely responsibility of his life choices. As individuals, we should be able to find a balance between the value we have for society and the value for we have for our self. We must reject when demands are tried to be imposed upon us, especially economic ones, because this will not allow us to become the person that we desire to be. The standards that the capitalist system has on society dehumanizes its individuals and treats them as if they were

objects. It disorients people and confuses them. Individuals should be free to explore in order to find the meaning of life and the meaning of his own self.

References

- Kafka, F. (1915). *The Metamorphosis*. Retrieved June 2019, from planetebook. com: [https://www. planetebook. com/free-ebooks/the-metamorphosis. pdf](https://www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/the-metamorphosis.pdf)