



2016-2017

Article

2017

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Recommended Citation

Stoops, Sydney (2017) "Analysis of the Metamorphosis," *The Mall*: Vol. 1 , Article 24.
Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol1/iss1/24>

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ANALYSIS OF *THE METAMORPHOSIS*

Sydney Stoops

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is an early twentieth century novella depicting the transition of a man, Gregor Samsa, from human to insect and the complications he faces in his new form. Not only does his transformation affect himself, but also the members of his family, specifically his father and sister. There are many examples of transformation in the story, both physical and behavioral, that are expressed in both symbolic and literal forms. Kafka's clever use of symbolism caters to the allegorical style of his work and successfully illustrates a theme of maturity and alienation.

The first transformation is a physical one. Gregor wakes up first thing in the morning and realizes that he has been transformed into a giant insect (Kafka 89). Gregor's immediate reaction seems somewhat understated and surprisingly rational. He is less worried about being a giant insect than he is about the issue of getting to work on time in order to provide for his family. Through Gregor's work driven anxiety the reader can make the connection that a steady income holds Gregor's importance to his family. This use of Gregor as a piggy bank creates the image of him as an object to the family. He is alienated from the customs of the lifestyle and household that he pays for and is rarely home to regain his place as a family member. The transformation of Gregor into an insect, specifically a creepy crawlly one, symbolizes these feelings of alienation.

The feelings of alienation, as well as an air of immaturity about the family, are confirmed by the reaction of Gregor's father when Gregor reveals himself in his insect form. As soon as Gregor opens his bedroom door his mother faints and Gregor's father, "knot[s] his fist with a fierce expression on his face as if meant to knock Gregor back into his room" (Kafka 100). Why did Gregor's father express anger towards his son rather than remorse? All Gregor is to his father is a source of income. The only reason Gregor works at a job he hates is to pay off debts for his father. All Gregor wants is to be accepted and appreciated by his father. His father gladly accepts the money and seems to appreciate it, but as soon as Gregor is unable to provide for the family he loses all appreciation for Gregor's hard work.

Because of Gregor's new inability to work, his father must find a way

to provide for the family; so he becomes a bank messenger. After some time, a clear physical transformation is seen in Gregor's father due to his new job. Gregor notices this change from his position on the floor, "Now he was standing there in fine shape; dressed in a smart blue uniform with gold buttons, such as bank messengers wear; his strong double chin bulged over the stiff high collar of his jacket; his onetime tangled white hair had been combed flat on either side of a shining and carefully exact parting" (Kafka 121). This description of Gregor's father gives him a sense of authority and fitness, qualities he lacked in the beginning of the story where he lounged on a chair all day and exhibited a round belly. After his appearance is noted, Gregor's father attempts to injure or even kill Gregor by throwing apples at him; one gets lodged in poor Gregor's back. This act of anger differs from the clenched fist of the father who didn't throw a punch when Gregor first revealed himself. This change in physical manner is representative of Mr. Samsa becoming the head of the family again. He has matured, regained his confidence and stature, and now assumes his paternal place in the household as breadwinner and leader.

Gregor's father is not alone in his recent maturing. Throughout the novella Grete transforms into a strong and confident young woman. In the early stages of Gregor's life as an insect, it is Grete's job to feed him and clean up after him. She does so out of respect and love for her brother and hopes that he will eventually return to his human state. Though as time goes on, she realizes that he is not getting better and he is becoming a potential threat to the family. She eventually stops cleaning his room and feeds him less and less. Grete's depleting affection for the bug, which she believes is no longer Gregor, reflects on her growing analytical and rational way of thinking. As children become adults, they focus on more important things in life, and right now the important thing in Grete's life is keeping her family afloat. Her maturing attitude is confirmed through her plea to discard Gregor: "I won't pronounce the name of my brother in front of this monster, and so all I say is: we have to try to get rid of it. We've done everything humanly possible to take care of it and to put up with it as far as humanly possible," (Kafka 133). Grete expresses a sizeable amount of control with her parents. Prior to Gregor's transformation, Grete was barely noticeable and simply did as she was told. Her newly gained confidence and wisdom eventually lead to Gregor's death and prosperity of her family.

Gregor's mental transformation and descent into complete alienation work in complete sync with the maturing of the other characters. The positive transformations personally affect Gregor's worsening condition. As Grete matures, she cares for Gregor less which causes him to become ill and eliminates most forms of human-insect interaction. When Gregor's father regains his fitness and dominance, Gregor ends up with an apple lodged in his back, thus weakening him further and forming an emotional detachment

between the father and son. All of these events cause Gregor to feel less human. When Kafka writes, "Gregor realized that after the lack of all direct human speech for the past two months together with the monotony of family life must have confused his mind," (116) it can be inferred that the shunning of Gregor has made him unfamiliar with the human feelings he used to possess. He soon enough loses the ability to communicate with humans and even enjoys crawling under the bed and on the walls and hanging from the ceiling. As his actions and thoughts become more insect-like, he loses his family's affections; he is no longer seen as a family member, the ultimate alienation.

Gregor attempts to fight this alienation by sneaking out of the room and peeking out of his door. This final act of resistance gets the family in trouble and creates the idea that Gregor must go; but instead of being killed or let loose, Gregor is found dead in his room, completely deteriorated, symbolizing his exhaustion with always trying to please his family. This, to me, is the biggest transformation in the entire novella. Gregor didn't fight his death; he accepted it because he knew it would benefit his family, a family that couldn't live with his burden any longer. This final acceptance is realized in Gregor's last thoughts before death, "The decision that he must disappear was one that he held even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible," (Kafka 135). The final stage of Gregor's physical transformation was death.

Because Gregor's maturity coincides with that of his family members, there must be a final stage of transformation for the family as well. After Gregor finally dies, his parents notice that Grete has grown into a socially acceptable young woman capable of marriage: "They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that I would soon be time to find a good husband for her," (Kafka 139). The end of Gregor's life marks the beginning of a new life for the rest of the family. In order for the maturity and prosperity of the family to occur, Gregor had to undergo complete alienation and retrogress into nothing.

Works Cited

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