Metamorphosis 3 Essay, Research Paper

Metamorphosis

According to Webster s New College Dictionary, a metamorphosis is defined to be a marked alteration in appearance, condition, character, or function. Franz Kafka s Metamorphosis could not have a more appropriate title than it dons now. Virtually every round character in this extraordinarily poetic story takes on at least one, sometimes several transformations throughout the course of the writing. Every member of the family is changed in some aspect: physical appearance, temperament, lifestyle, and role in the group. Indeed, even the state of the group, or family is altered. These transformations are due to an inner dissatisfaction with the current situation.

The opening line of the story, As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect, reveals the primary and most basic metamorphosis of this piece of literature. Kafka attempts to show the reader Samsa s discontentment with what his feels is the lack of control in his life by spontaneous transformation of a human being into an insect. Humans are at the top of the food chain in the world, and thus are in complete control. In contrast, insects have almost no control over their own destiny because they are small, unintelligent creatures that can be squashed between a human s thumb and forefinger or destroyed under the sole of a stepping shoe.

The first instance of lack of control over his life he encounters deals with the exploitation of his labor. Samsa appears to be a very young man who has been thrown into the role of the breadwinner for the family since his father s business defaulted. He has been working in order to support his family and the lifestyle they have come to embrace. The family lives in an apartment that is more than they need; one that has a concierge and servants to clean and cook. This fact would not seem strange unless you remember that a young man, who seems too young for the responsibility, is the lone source of income for the family. He has been working for years to repay the debt that has been borrowed from his boss. In addition to all that, he finds that his father has been stashing away part of his income discreetly into what has turned out to be a substantial savings. Considering these aspects it would be hard to argue that Gregor s labor has been exploited. The author uses this scenario to show how Gregor has adopted the conventional capitalist mentality of modern man. Samsa is frustrated by his totally commercial existence. And yet does nothing about it, other than try to escape by thinking along purely commercial lines. He hates the job and he vows that once he has sufficient money he will quit: what an exhausting job I ve picked on! The Devil take it all! (312). Thinking of his job and his boss, Samsa contemplates, If I didn t have to hold my hand because of my parents, I d have given notice along time ago, I d have told him exactly what I think of him. That would knock him endways from his desk! (312). This quote represents Gregor s real persona, his underlying self.

The insect is Gregor s underlying self. It refuses to be further subjected to the miserable life he has led in his concern for money. Finally, this persona has manifested itself into Gregor s life. It will not be chased away easily by sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense. The apparent delusion turns out to be a terrifying reality. The insect represents all the dimensions of Gregor s existence in his mind, but were not apparent in his everyday physical life.

The most obvious dimension of the insect s representation is that of loneliness and isolation. While his family and everyone around him were shaped in the form of human beings, Gregor, alone, is an insect. Not only is Gregor s appearance unusual, so is his speech, or more correctly, his eventual lack of speech. Nina Straus points out in her criticism that Kafka includes Gregor s loss of oral communication abilities in order to bring attention to the point that it is also dehumanizing because language can describe the human as nonhuman (Straus, 127). What she means by this is that although human thought is active and has a life of its own, it can be represented in a system of rules that is static and unchanging and therefore not alive. These are merely a metaphor for Gregor s feelings of loneliness while he was the lone source of income in his family. Since he had worked hard enough to obtain the position of travelling salesperson, Gregor earned enough money that he was able to meet the expenses of the whole household and did so. They had simply gotten used to it, both the family and Gregor (326). This quotation already gives the reader a sense of the separation between Gregor and his family. As the line continues, however, the reader becomes much more aware of Samsa s emotions concerning the matter: the money was gratefully accepted and gladly given, but there was no uprush of warm feeling (326).

While in his isolation, Gregor realizes the terrible insight that even the most beautiful relationships between individuals are based on delusions. No one knows what he or anybody else really is. Gregor s parents, for instance, have no idea of their son s serious conflict, much less of the extent of his sacrifice for them. On the other hand, Gregor is mistaken about his family. He has believed it was his duty to help them pay their debts and secure a financially carefree life, and he has done this by selling his soul to his company. The truth is that his father had far more money than Gregor knows about and that he is not nearly as sick and he has led Gregor to believe.

Starting out as a man who the reader perceives to be quite old, sickly, and unable to work, Gregor s father, whose name is never revealed through the course of the novella, undergoes major transformations. These changes are a result of one of the major themes throughout the story, shame. Straus states, Shame comes from seeing oneself through another s eyes (Straus, 131). The elder Samsa apparently felt an unbearable amount of shame when he looked at himself through his own son s eyes. He had become so used to his dependency on his son s care that he had turned into a big, old baby. He is not gainfully employed, and worse yet, he spent inordinate amounts of his time ridiculously. For example, Gregor s father spent hours at the breakfast table: The breakfast dishes were laid out lavishly, for breakfast was the most important meal of the day to Gregor s father, who lingered it out for hours over various newspapers (319). It sounds ludicrous to even imagine spending hours over breakfast, especially while one s son is out laboring to support the family. Due to Gregor s incapacity and his own perceived shame Gregor s father becomes more active and he finds a job as a messenger at the bank.

The most extensive metamorphosis, outside of Gregor s, is that of Grete. Grete is described, in the beginning, as a young carefree teenager with very little responsibility. Kafka writes, she who was still a child of seventeen and whose life hitherto had been so pleasant, consisting as it did in dressing herself nicely, sleeping long, helping in the housekeeping, going out to a few modest entertainments (327). Gregor is closer to Grete than he is with anybody in this work. Kafka writes, with his sister alone had he remained intimate (326). Ironically, in the end, it is Grete s remarks that lead to Gregor s rapid deterioration and eventual death. My dear parents, things can t go on like this we must try to get rid of it, Grete declared (340). It is through their intimate relationship that the sexual themes of this story are revealed. Specifically, the first sexual theme is that women desire to be male and men desire to be women.

Initially, Gregor is preoccupied with typical male attitudes. In dealing with work, he was going to make it to the office in any condition. It does not matter to him that he had taken the shape of an insect. He expected his sister to attend to him like a proper younger sister should to her older brother. He wants her to find out his likes and dislikes and to bring for him an adequate selection of food. When she starts to neglect his feeding and regular cleaning, Gregor becomes hostile. He begins to whine in a stereotypically female fashion: but not only did she retreat, she jumped back as if in alarm and banged the door shut; a stranger might well have thought that he had been lying in wait for her there meaning to bite her (328). As for Grete, she begins to gain, from Gregor, some the deference that is usually reserved only for males. She decides what Gregor will eat. Gregor must hid under the sofa so as to hide himself from her. In this way she has grown to be more male.

Gregor has a warped and misguided sense of sexuality and sexual urges. In the second paragraph of the story, Kafka describes a picture of a woman on Gregor s wall, it showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which her whole forearm had vanished! (312). The last part of the quote is obviously a metaphor for the male penis penetrating into a vagina. Later in the novella, while Grete and her mother are removing items from the room, Gregor uses his body to prevent them from taking the picture. Kafka writes that Gregor was struck by the picture of the lady muffled in so much fur and quickly crawled up to it and pressed himself to the glass This picture at least, was going to be removed by nobody (331). This picture represents his last contact with a female sexual object and in that way it is understandable that he should guard the picture with his own body.

In another way, Gregor showed his weird sense of sexuality. He seemed to have an incestual longing for his sister. While Grete is playing the violin for the lodgers Gregor has various thoughts for his sister that sound as though they could imply sexual overtones. He would push forward, instead of crawl towards her and pull at her skirt (339). Gregor would never let her out of his room, at least, not so long as he lived (339). He wanted to raise himself to her shoulder and kiss her on the neck (339).

It is easy to see that Kafka had some troubling times in his life through this long, as it were, short story. It is also easy to see that he, and this work of literature, is among the greatest artistic achievements of this century. The uncanny blend of classic disillusionment of people through social institutions and use of transformation to spotlight these feelings of discontentment and shame make this story one that should be required reading for all.

326