The Metamorphosis Essay, Research Paper

The Metamorphosis

Kafka wrote “The Metamorphosis” in 1912, taking three weeks to compose

the story. While he had expressed earlier satisfaction with the work, he later

found it to be flawed, even calling the ending “unreadable.” But whatever his

own opinion may have been, the short story has become one of the most popularly

read and analyzed works of twentieth-century literature. Isolation and

alienation are at the heart of this surreal story of a man transformed overnight

into a kind of beetle. In contrast to much of Kafka’s fiction, “The

Metamorphosis” has not a sense of incompleteness. It is formally structured

into three Roman-numbered parts, with each section having its own climax. A

number of themes run through the story, but at the center are the familial

relationships fundamentally affected by the great change in the story’s

protagonist, Gregor Samsa (Lawson 27).

While the father-son relationship in the story appears to be a central

theme, the relationship between Gregor and his sister Grete is perhaps the most

unique. It is Grete, after all, with whom the metamorphosed Gregor has any

rapport, suggesting the Kafka intended to lend at least some significance to

their relationship. Grete’s significance is found in her changing relationship

with her brother. It is Grete’s changing actions, feelings, and speech toward

her brother, coupled with her accession to womanhood, that seem to parallel

Gregor’s own metamorphosis. This change represents her metamorphosis form

adolescence into adulthood but at the same time it marks the final demise of

Gregor. Thus a certain symmetry is to be found in “The Metamorphosis”: while

Gregor falls in the midst of despair, Grete ascends to a self-sufficient, sexual

woman.

It is Grete who initially tries conscientiously to do whatever she can

for Gregor. She attempts to find out what he eats, to make him feel comfortable,

and to anticipate his desires. Grete, in an act of goodwill and love toward

Gregor, “brought him a wide assortment of things, all spread out on old

newspaper: old, half-rotten vegetables; bones left over from the evening meal,

caked with congealed white sauce; some raisins and almonds; a piece of cheese,

which two days before Gregor had declared inedible; a plain slice of bread, a

slice of bread and butter, and one with butter and salt” (p. 24). Besides being

the only member of the family still willing to face Gregor daily, she is also

the family representative of Gregor, in a sense, to a mother who doesn’t

understand and a father who is hostile and opposing. The father is physically

violent toward his metamorphosed Gregor, pushing him through a door in Part I:

“…when from behind his father gave him a strong push which was literally a

deliverance and he flew far into the room, bleeding freely” (p. 20). Grete

appears to concentrate on protecting Gregor from this antagonistic father and an

indecisive mother. In Part II, when Grete leads her mother into Gregor’s room

for the first time, we see the strange way in which Grete has become both the

expert and the caretaker of Gregor’s affairs (Nabokov 271). She convinces her

mother that it is best to remove all of the furniture from his room. Kafka

attributes her actions partly to an adolescent zest: “Another factor which might

have been also the enthusiastic temperament of an adolescent girl, which seeks

to indulge itself on every opportunity and which now tempted Grete to exaggerate

the horror of her brother’s circumstances in order that she might do all the

more for him” (p. 34).

The change in Grete’s attitudes and actions toward Gregor probably fully

begin in Part II, during the scene where Gregor struggles over to the window and

leans against the panes to look outside. Grete, seemingly beginning to forget

the Gregor still has human feelings and sensitivities, rudely opens the window

and voices her disgust at the distasteful odor of his den. Moreover, she

doesn’t bother to hide her feelings when she sees him. One day, about a month

after Gregor’s metamorphosis, “when there was surely no reason for her to be

still startled at his appearance, she came a little earlier than usual and found

him gazing out of the window…she jumped back as if in alarm and banged the

door shut; a stranger might well have thought he had been lying in wait for her

there meaning to bite her” (p. 30). Against her mounting insensitivity is

Gregor’s poignant selflessness (Nabokov 270). In a marvelous display of feeling

and compassion for his sister and her feelings, he expends four hours of labor

to carry a sheet on his back to the couch to hide himself from her sight, thus

sparing her the disgust of looking at him.

As Grete’s behavior begins to change, Grete begins to slide closer and

closer to his demise. At the end of Part II, Gregor’s father has completed his

rise to power. Initially weak and enfeebled, the father is now “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 become combed flat on either side of

a shining and carefully exact parting” (p. 38). It is at this point that the

father begins to pelt Gregor with small red apples, one of them embedding in his

flesh at great pain: “Gregor wanted to drag himself forward, as if this

startling incredible pain could be left behind him” (p. 39). Of course, Gregor

finds he cannot leave the pain behind him, and begins his slide towards death.

Gregor’s reaction to the violin playing episode is the climax and symbol

of Grete’s metamorphosis and Gregor’s demise (Lawson 33). The boarders are

extremely interested in hearing her play an impromptu recital. She begins to

play the violin, and Gregor, his transformation into beetlehood nearly complete,

finds himself drawn to the music, putting aside any human feelings of

consideration for others: “He felt as if the way were opening before him to the

unknown nourishment he craved…He felt hardly any surprise at his growing lack

of consideration of others” (p. 48). So inconsiderate and oblivious is he to

others, that he begins a dangerous trek towards the living room: “And in spite

of his condition, no shame deterred him from advancing a little over the

spotless floor of the living room” (p. 49). Initially, nobody is aware of him,

but soon the middle lodger sees him and becomes inflamed. He announces to Grete

and the mother ? spitting on the floor no less ? that he can no longer live

there due to the disgusting conditions.

Here Grete’s betrayal of her brother is final and absolute. Grete, in

this scene, reaches the plateau of her metamorphosis into an enemy of Gregor,

and is left only to change physically and advance in her womanhood. While she

tries to salvage the situation by hastily making the boarders’ beds, the violin

clangs to the floor, symbolizing her rejection of Gregor and her rapport with

him (Lawson 33). At this point she dissociates the name of her brother from the

insect when addressing her parents: “We must try to get rid of it. It will be

the death of both of you, I can see that coming” (p. 51). And later, “It has to

go” (p. 52). Gregor is no longer “he,” but “it.” She sees the complete

disappearance of Gregor the human and the complete rise of the beetle. “How

can this be Gregor? If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that

human beings can’t live with such a creature, and he’d have gone away on his own

accord” (p. 52). Grete condemns Gregor to death when she urgently locks him

into his own room, crying “At last” (p. 53) to her parents as she turns the key

in the lock. Even in death, Gregor retains tender feelings for his family: “He

thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must

disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister” (p. 55).

Grete’s betrayal was just one more emotional trauma Gregor had to face.

Gregor’s death stands in contrast to the final image of “The

Metamorphosis”. Grete has now undergone her transformation into womanhood. She

wakes up to find her body has bloomed in the wake of Gregor’s disappearance

(Thiher 44). Kafka’s endings begs no questions: “It struck both Mr. and Mrs.

Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughters

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” (p.

58). Grete has emerged from her adolescence into her young adult role in the

real world (Lawson 34). Thus, her parents tacitly agree that “it would soon be

time to find a good husband for her” (p. 58).

Grete’s metamorphosis into womanhood can be contrasted with the mother’s

lack of a similar transformation. She remains less antagonistic than the father,

sometimes more insightful than the sister, but altogether unsure of herself and

eager to please and indulge her husband. In many ways, she stands as a

caricature of a housewife and promises to remain that way even if the Samsas are

fewer in number and forever changed (Lawson 35).

There is a final irony to note in the contrast between Gregor’s demise

and Grete’s awakening. While Grete has developed into an animal whose sexual

passage into womanhood needs no language to express its fulfillment, Gregor was

the animal whose condition begs the words to explain it. Kafka begins “The

Metamorphosis” by remarking that Gregor’s transformation is “no dream” whereas

Grete’s accession to female sexuality is described as the family’s “new dreams.”

Possibly this is Kafka’s ultimate irony ? that nightmares express lost human

reality better than dreams do of animal satisfactions (Thiher 44). Grete

Samsa’s changing actions, feelings, and speech toward her brother, coupled with

her accession to womanhood, parallel Gregor’s own metamorphosis.

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