

Life of a Small Family in an Absurd World in *The Metamorphosis*

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The Metamorphosis written by Franz Kafka describes an absurd story about a traveling salesman—Gregor, who became deformed under the great physical and mental pressure and the changes of life within his family before and after his metamorphosis. In order to survive in an absurd world, he worked very hard and took the responsibility to support the whole family. But he was deserted by his family after the metamorphosis and died in loneliness and despair at the end just because his family wanted to survive in the society without heavy burden. The only link between family members is money in an alienated world.

Keywords: absurd, Gregor, *The Metamorphosis*, survive

Introduction

Franz Kafka was a culturally influential German-language author of short stories and novels. Contemporary critics and academics regard Kafka as one of the best writers of the 20th century. The term “Kafkaesque” has become part of the English language. In his brief four decades alive, he created a body of work that had influenced almost everything written since, not even James Joyce had such an impact. *The Metamorphosis* is probably the best-known story written by him. This elusive story, which chronicles the transformation of Gregor Samsa from a human being into an enormous insect, is renowned for its ability to inspire diverse, sometimes mutually exclusive interpretations.

Critical interest in the novel has been considerable since its first appearance. In addition to the attention critics have placed on thematic analysis of *The Metamorphosis*, several critics have observed its sustained realism, which contrasts with the initially fantastic occurrence of Gregor’s transformation into an insect. Many critics have also offered psychoanalytical interpretations of *The Metamorphosis*, seeing in the work a dramatization of particularly modern neuroses. For its technical excellence, as well as for the nightmarish and fascinating nature of the metamorphosis itself, Kafka’s story has elicited a vast amount of interest, and its various problematic features continue to challenge its readers.

An Absurd World

In *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka wanted to represent the absurdity of the condition of human life, the sense of alienation of human existence. Already from the first lines of the short story, the reader becomes aware of the grotesque absurd reality which is experienced by the protagonist, Gregor Samsa: “When Gregor Samsa

woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka, 1972, p. 3). By creating this unusual metamorphosis which intermingles with ordinary life and people, Kafka aimed at representing the absurdity of the human existence, but also a deep sense of alienation. Gregor Samsa feels detached and alienated from his life, his job, and his family and the result is the refusal to be liked by the other ones. Unfortunately, instead of finding a positive way out, he turns into a repulsive useless enormous bug.

The process of metamorphosis creates monsters, this is what Kafka seems to suggest, and there is no possible solution but death. As a matter of fact, the short-story ends with Gregor’s death, thrown away by the family, who after his transformation was unable to accept him and understand the reasons of his anguish and sufferings. The total lack of pity of the family members contributes to create the vision of a grotesque, absurd, inhuman world. Realizing the absurdity and the alienation, Kafka’s heroes, Gregor, may feel an urgent desire to escape, to change completely their status, to be removed by their sense of paralysis. Kafka’s pessimism, however, does not provide a happy and successful solution. So, the point in Kafka’s short story is the allegorical and absurd representation of his pessimistic vision of the world.

The Way of Survival Before the Metamorphosis

At the beginning of *The Metamorphosis*, without giving any reasons, Kafka described like this: “When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (1972, p. 3). Obviously, the story began in an absurd situation. But we reader all know that it is of nonsense. Nobody would become a vermin after the sleep. But it makes us wondered why such a man got the metamorphosis. And we can analysis the metamorphosis from two aspects.

The Relationship Within His Company

He worked in the job he did not like to earn money to support his family. For many times he wanted to quit his work but each time he said to himself, “Besides, I have to provide for my parents and my sister” (1972, p. 15). But sometimes he complained:

What a grueling job I’ve picked! Day in, day out—on the road. The upset of doing business is much worse than the actual business in the home office, and, besides, I’ve got the torture of traveling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable food at all hours, constantly seeing new faces, no relationships that last or get more intimate. (1972, pp. 3-4)

Because his father went bankrupt, he had to work to pay off the debts and to earn the bread for the whole family. He did not like the job at all and wanted to get rid of the job as soon as possible. To work is the only way to survive for him and his family.

The Relationship With His Family

At the beginning of story, Gregor Samsa, the protagonist, appears as a young and energetic man. He applies himself with great earnestness to his grinding work as a traveling salesman, not only because he wants to support his parents and pay off the debts that they incurred, but because he dreams of sending his sister, Grete, to a conservatory where she can learn to play violin professionally. His devotion to his family demonstrates just how thoughtful and compassionate Gregor is. We can see that Gregor lived under great pressure, but with great satisfaction at the same time. And his family lives with a good conscience on the proceeds. It is a harmonious relationship, although on the surface.

The Way of Survival After the Metamorphosis

Gregor—Human Nature With Vermin Body

“When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka, 1972, p. 3). This transformation becomes only the first impulse, which causes a lot of changes in his internal and external world. After physical change, transformation passes to higher level and changes mental structures of Gregor. So caring to his family, he becomes surprisingly indifferent to their opinion. “It hardly surprised him that he was showing so little consideration for the others; once such consideration had been his greatest pride” (p. 45). After the metamorphosis, the most urgent thing for Gregor was not that why he turned into a vermin or how about his own physical condition, but about his grinding work and indifferent boss. He would lose his job if he was late for his work. And that meant that he could no longer support his family. And when Gregory did not let anyone into his room, he thought that family was worried about his condition. But in reality, his family were just worried that Gregor would lose his job as he himself did. How ridiculous the situation is!

Metamorphosis turns him into insect and this event reveals real attitude to him. His family, so loving and caring, very soon becomes indifferent to a bug, which cannot earn money to support them. Gregor, who dedicated his life to his parents and sister, was simply used by them. Since the metamorphosis had become an unchangeable fact, the attitude of his family toward him changed subsequently. At first, the family members still cared about him. His sister often fed him with food and would spend time finding what food he liked, but the heavy burden of the family made her busy and have no time to notice her vermin brother. And as time went by, she could not put up with his abnormal shape and disgusting smell. As a vermin, his habits and tastes could not being understood by his sister, which increased their estrangement. Under this circumstances, she asked to move the furniture out of Gregor’s room, which made Gregor very anxious. So, he decided to stop them in a gentle way. But to his surprise, his appearance caused a disturbance. His mother was scared to faint with outstretched arms across the couch and did not stir. His father filled his pockets from the fruit bowl and pitched one apple after another to bombard him. The wound caused by the apple became a fatal one.

His Parents and Sister—Human Shape With Beastliness

After Gregor’s metamorphosis, everyone in the Samsa family experienced changes brought on. Since Gregor’s physical change rendered him no longer able to work, the family’s financial situation changed. Both his parents and sister began to shoulder the responsibility of supporting the family. Turning into a bug, Gregor caused a lack of harmony among the family members. In order to cut the family cost, they made room for three tenants. The whole family flattered them constantly. Before going into the kitchen, his father came into this room and, bowing once, cap in hand, made a turn around the table. And his mother and sister always watched anxiously to see whether their tenants were satisfied with their food. And his sister was so pleased to play violin for the rude and vulgar tenants. It forms a distinct comparison between their warmth to the strangers and their indifference to their family. We have to admit that life is not easy for them either. On the one hand, they had to take care of the deformed Gregor; on the other hand, they had to survive. But their beastly heart to Gregor has completely maked us confused, whether Gregor has become deformed or his family have become out of their shape.

The Death of Gregor

At the end of the novel, we knew that Gregor died, but the first one to find his dead body was the maid. After they got the news, they didn't feel sad for Gregor's death. They thanked God. And the weather seemed like to celebrate it for them. "There was already some mildness mixed in with the fresh air. After all, it was already the end of March" (Kafka, 1972, p. 52). Next, they drove away the tenants and the clumsy maid as they could afford better maid now. "They also decided to spend this day resting and going for a walk" (p. 54). While they were talking in the vein, it occurred almost simultaneously to Mr. and Mrs. Samsa that their daughter had blossomed into a good-looking, shapely girl, and it is time for them to find her a good husband. The life was not influenced by the death of Gregor at all. Metamorphosis only shapes out the problems, which have existed before. After close look, we understand that each character of the story lives in the vacuum and it's only codependence, which keeps them together and makes them communicate with each other. Easiness with which relatives forgot about Gregor shows their true feelings to him. Grete, his sister, who plays little role in the family before the accident, grows in the eyes of her parents as soon as they realize that they can get profit from her successful marriage. What an absurd world! The happiness of the family was brought first because of Gregor's work, and at the end because of his death. The fragile link between the family members shocked us.

Conclusion

What an absurd world! The happiness of the family was brought first because of Gregor's work, and at the end because of his death. Kafka has a strong sense of fatalism. The protagonists in his works are always nobody. They live under the great pressure and often feel isolated and helpless. Although they have done some resistance, the result is often negative. Just like Gregor, in order to escape from the alienated world, he turned into a vermin in the dream. But life was difficult for him even though he was still in human shape. So, the miserable result seemed to be destined. As a human, Gregor struggled to support the family. Life was hard for the poor man and his small family. But he felt proud of his achievement and regarded it as a confirmation of his own existence. After his metamorphosis, he tried his best to get the forgiveness of his family. He tried to communicate with his families. Even though his family felt disgusting about himself, he still cherished the beautiful memories of his earlier days with his parents and sister. But his family deserted him. He died in loneliness and despair. His parents and sister even did not shed a drop of tear for his death, but went on an outing happily. We cannot say who is wrong or right. Because all of them are just common people who struggled to survive in an absurd world. This is the real life of a small family at that time. Although the result was not so encouraging, Gregor's procedure of fighting in the indifferent and absurd world is meaningful. His resistance to the society and the indifferent relationship between people has been noticed by our readers. It encouraged the followers to fight against the desperate society and seek for hope in life.

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