

THE WAYS OF LOOKING AT A HIDEOUS INSECTION FRANZ KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS

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Abstract:

The Metamorphosis (German: Die Verwandlung), one of the seminal works of 20th Century was first published in 1915. Many consider it to be the finest short story of the century unsurpassed in theme or form. The transformation of the central character into a large insect is the central aspect of the story. Kafka offers no explanation for this sudden transformation and merely chronicles its effects. Various theories have been suggested to explain this transformation, with some critics question the authenticity of the transformation itself. Writer for one didn't propose any straight forward explanation to it leaving it for the readers to speculate. This article isolates the central situation of the transformation of a man into an insect and interprets it in relation to the universal human conditions.

Key Words: *Metamorphosis, unsurpassed, transformation, chronicle.*

Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman is the hero of The Metamorphosis. Gregor doesn't enjoy his job; in fact he hates the underpaying suppressing profession. He was left with no choice as his father owed a huge debt to his current boss. He accepted the job and worked round the clock travelling to pay of the huge debt. Furthermore he was happy that his hard work enabled him to provide for his family comprising his father, mother and sister, Grete. He was the sole bread-winner of the family who succeeded in providing them with a fairly comfortable life. He even dreamt of saving enough to have his musically talented sister to study violin at conservatory. Gregor Samsa comes across as a man completely devoted to the cause of his family. Though he hates his work, he is ready to sacrifice his own pleasures for the comfort of his family. The transformation of Gregor into a huge hideous insect is completed within the first sentence of the story.

'As Gregor Samza awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect'

The insect is variously described by the critics as 'a huge beetle', 'cockroach and a giant slug. No clear cut description of the insect is given in the text. Kafka himself was much against depicting the insect in the front cover; he thought it would kill the story. In fact as per clues inside the story the insect would be an etymological impossibility, though the descriptions are as realistic as it can get. The first edition cover of The Metamorphosis depicts a man, unsettled he sure seems but certainly not an insect. The absence of clear instruction by author himself gives us liberty to speculate on the nature of transformation that Gregor underwent. Freudian, Marxian, religious and existentialist interpretations all have been proposed. It would be safe to assume that there is no one explanation to the transformation of Gregor, all explanations are plausible. Kafka doesn't offer any reason for this metamorphosis; he merely states it in an indifferent way like a magical realist writer. But somehow that fantastical element is not what makes the story memorable. It acts as a space where readers can speculate on the nature of metamorphosis, deeper meanings embedded in it. A shrewd reader would find that the transformation was nothing but gradual; his thankless job and fruitless life had been preparing his psyche into this transformation. His physical body might have responded to this mental degeneration dramatically. While the metamorphosis was completed in the first sentence itself, the events that lead to this change were set in motion much before. Franz Kafka wrote

literature of quest about a dark brooding world. He raised questions and never bothered to answer them. In fact he is notorious for leaving manuscripts unfinished. In a Kafkean world there are no easy answers, like a modern day Socrates he created doubts and questions in us and invited our own interpretations.

The alarm clock is symbolic of the punctuality his job demands. It doesn't take his company much time to send their chief clerk to call upon Gregor when he misses his regular 7 am train. Like in 'The Trial' the unseen authority works through its agents to monitor the life of ordinary human beings. The transformation here could be the trick of mind to escape harsh realities. This escapism doesn't solve any problems in real life, though it shields human mind from accepting unacceptable conditions. In this reading metamorphosis into a giant insect is an escapist dream come true for Gregor.

Gregor is depicted as pathetically devoted to his family. He devotes himself so completely to his family that he rarely thinks about his own comforts. Even when he finds himself transformed into a giant insect in the morning, his first thought is to find a way to report to the work. He hangs on to a job he despises tolerating all humiliations because he knows it lets him take care of his family's debt and its prospects. Even after he becomes an insect he nurtures love to his family though unable to express them. His physical outlook changes completely but his mental landscape remains the same; therein lies the misfortune of this change of events. In one level his family and his company takes advantage of the sincerity Gregor has. If Gregor had been a nobody in the company no one would have bothered to check on him when he is late for the train. But they send the chief clerk of the company to inspect. We can also deduce that it is the first time ever Gregor missed his train to work. He is surely an asset for the institution that he works. Blinded with sincerity and unsure of himself he succumbs to the pressures he is subjected to and fails to identify his merits. The same happens in his relation to family. He is the sole bread winner of his family who works hard to erase the debt his father has accumulated. Still it is arguable whether he received the respect and stance he deserved within his family. We can trace the beginning of his degeneration into the lack of his self-respect.

Gregor's efforts to connect with his family prove to be disastrous. Though his preferences change inside the hide of the insect his basic human nature to give and receive love remain. He detest milk, the one drink he loved as a human being and prefers to have all the furniture removed so that he can move freely through the floor and crawl on the wall. To that much we can assume his animalistic instincts have taken over. Gregor retains all old memories and bondings. He loses his ability to connect with other humans by and by. Even his mother can't stand the sight of him. She insists to see her son and when she does, faints. Gregor wants to help but succeeds only in startling his sister Grete. Gregor's father with whom he had a difficult relation pelts him with apples to drive him away. The scene is humorous as well as pathetic. It is said that Kafka had a problematic relationship with his father. In this reading the transformation denotes Kafka's own transformation. As he grows intellectually he is no more able to connect to his family. However hard he tries his family cannot understand him. Communication is the basis of human society. It is not just a social tool but a basic need of all human beings. When a human being is devoid of vistas to connect with others he is faced with an identity crisis. Normally we associate identity with the sum of memories thoughts and impressions upon mind; Metamorphosis makes us question this notion. Kafka argues that identity is created by social interactions depending upon our ability to communicate. When the communication channels are cut we land on an identity crisis. The central character of Gregor Samsa is particularly a self-less man. He identifies himself as a son to his parents a brother to his sister and a low level employee of his institution. In short his identity is determined by his interactions with society. He doesn't have an inner life which gives him an identity on the spiritual level. When Gregor is cut off from his family and social life he is left without an identity.

In more than one instance Kafka seem to be criticising the values of middle class society. They work for big companies under tyrants and for dependents round the clock in a thankless job. There is always a new assignment which provides no time for rest and leisure. Caught up in this rat race they forget

to live, losing touch with the humane aspect of their life. Gregor Samza tries to conform to the various roles the society has cut out for him and when he can no longer perform he is pushed out of the system. No one cares for him. The same person who has worked hard for the wellbeing of the family is left to rot in his room. No one can bear to look at him. His father is particularly intolerant of him. Only his sister Grete has some concern for her brother. She provides him with food, though Gregor has to hide whenever Grete comes in with the tray. By and by her enthusiasm also wanes. Though she still leaves food for him, doesn't make sure that Gregor has eaten it. Kafka, the ardent pessimist he is, rejects the notion of unconditional love. There is no such thing as unconditional love he argues. Even the most sacred of relationships comes at a price. A relation exists only when you can connect with the other party. When one transforms, the bond no longer holds, commitment might hold it a bit longer, but ultimately such a relation is doomed.

The music of Grete's is a motif developed through the story. Grete is passionate about her violin, and in a life devoid of luxuries Gregor's dream is to send her to the conservatory to learn violin professionally. Music played by Grete for the benefit of the lodgers' touches the heart of the hideous insect that Gregor became. Music doesn't bring about an inner transformation in him. Poor Gregor thinks that he can bridge with his kid sister again by showing appreciation of her music. It is often said that music connects people. But here Gregor's efforts to connect with his sister again through music prove futile. He is eager to show how touched he is, and his efforts have disastrous consequences. Lodgers leave without paying their dues and family finally decides that they should give up the notion that the insect is their son. They argue among themselves that if it had indeed been Gregor, it would have been more sensitive and considerate to their plight. It would have surely left them saving them from the painful ordeal. The only thing that connected Gregor to this world even after his transformation was his connection with his family. With them denouncing him, the final string is also broken relieving him from his miserable existence as a non-entity.

The story is sometimes praised for its symmetrical three part structure. There are many critics who rate it as the finest short story of 20th Century. The First part of the story deals with Gregor's relation with respect to his profession with an emphasis on how his profession helps him to serve his family. The second part deals with his relation with respect to the family and final part with himself. These three part structure enables the writer to explore the three layers which contribute to our identity. For him identity is not static; it expresses itself in exchanges with oneself, family and society. How we perceive ourselves is a lot depended on how we interact with our surroundings. When such an outlet which enables us to interact cease to exist we are no better than a vermin.

The final question regarding the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa is whether it is an extension of his life before. Many argue that a good section of humanity is living like vermin that they may as well wake up one day to see themselves transformed into vermin. There is a lot riding for this argument. Gregor is a front line employee of his company. He works hard, earns little as respect or money. He is held under the shadow of the debt his father had accumulated while his boss breathes down his neck as he go about doing his job. The work pressure is much and the authorities treat him like a non-entity. The same is true about his relation with family. Gregor spends his days and nights thinking about the family. He is the ultimate family-man. He is self-sacrificing to the extent that he seems oblivious to how his family is taking him for granted. They can love healthy and hardworking Gregor who supports the family, but their love is put to real test when their son becomes a hideous insect who can no longer attend to their needs. The pathetic nature of the characterisation along with his vulnerability attributes an 'insect which can be quashed' aspect to the personality of Gregor, still there are various places where Gregor rises above average human being. We attribute a senseless, survive at any cost attitude to vermin. Gregor on the other hand provides for his family and is immensely proud about itches even nurtures the secret dream of providing for the violin classes of Grete. He is optimistic and his unwavering love for the family guides him through the trying situations. Considering the story like this it would be a mistake to identify the life of Gregor as an insect a

mere extension of his earlier life.

Conclusion

The central aspect of *The Metamorphosis* is the transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect overnight and how it turns his world upside down. The writer neither provides one direct answer for this metamorphosis nor advocates such a simplistic answer. The scope of the story is such that we can have numerous reasons for such a transformation and everything fits. But the clean symbolism or one-to-one allegorical correspondence that so many search for in this novella is in the end elusive. Therein lies the charm of this story.

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