

Franz Kafka

METAMORPHOSIS



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Few 20th century novelists can have been subjected to quite as much dissection and analysis as Franz Kafka. Nor can many have bestowed such a powerful and pervasive version of reality through their writing; so much so that the term Kafkaesque is now commonly used to describe situations or environments in modern society.

Being a Czech Jew trapped approximately between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany (both temporally and geographically) it is perhaps not surprising he was obsessed with state control and persecution of individuals. All three of his novels, *The Trial*, *The Castle* and *Amerika* reflect this and, perhaps, foreshadow what was about to happen in a world that became even more nightmarish than even Kafka's universe. The novella *Metamorphosis*, arguably his most famous work, looks at a more microcosmic example of alienation and rejection.

All of Kafka's writings are hugely allegorical devising elaborate metaphors for authority, society and the human condition. In *Metamorphosis* the metaphor is for illness and difference when the story's protagonist awakes one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. How his life and relationships change and how people react to him over a period of time is a parable of human callousness and indifference and could be seen as a chilling precursor to the Holocaust and Stalin's terror. Being a Jew himself Kafka would already have known something of anti-Semitism and discrimination, even hatred. The Russians had been persecuting the Jews with their pogroms for centuries; the German attempt at genocide was about to start and, perhaps Kafka had a foreboding of the way the world was

heading and the tragic and pivotal role that Jews would, unwillingly, play.

Metamorphosis stands as a fascinating exploration of difference, cruelty and, ultimately, inertia. Nazi Germany gave it an unlooked for and terrible manifestation in the real world where the stuff of horror and twisted fantasy became sickening reality for many, while others denied or passed by on the other side of the street.

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KAFKA, THE METAMORPHOSIS

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In one of the most famous first sentences in all of literature, Franz Kafka confronts us with the premise, or “thesis” even, of *The Metamorphosis*:

When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.

From this point onwards, any reader who is not brain-dead will be on the lookout for clues as to the true meaning of this statement. How are we to take this? What does it “mean” that the protagonist has woken up as an insect? Is it a dream? (We’re told no after a few more lines.) A delusion? A wish-fulfilment fantasy? Is it metaphoric? A manifestation of how he feels for some reason or a set of reasons? A dehumanizing regression? In any case, how is this opening statement and its implications a good introduction into 20th-century arts and literature?

The rest of the first paragraph offers material of interest to those taxonomically inclined to determine what type of

insect Gregor has become.

The second paragraph begins with the noticeably passive, "What's happened to me?" -- a question we're apt to take in a larger sense once we've learned more about Gregor's life. Among the potentially relevant details is the fact that Gregor considers his room -- his surroundings -- "a little on the small side". The "fabric samples" tell us what kind of traveling salesman he is; and, because the description is so vivid, we wonder what the significance is of this item:

the picture which he had recently cut out of a glossy magazine and lodged in a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady done up in a fur hat and a fur boa, sitting upright and raising up against the viewer a heavy fur muff in which her whole forearm had disappeared.

The image of wealth and high fashion stands in sharp contrast to the Samsa apartment we'll be introduced to soon. The woman is wrapped in the skin of something she isn't, but this is considered beauty and wealth. Insects are a sign of poverty. Freudian psychoanalytic critics have their own interpretation of this image.

The weather is "overcast", so dreary at least and perhaps oppressive. Gregor tries to get back to sleep, his hope of "forgetting all this nonsense" suggesting escapism, but his insect form prevents him from attaining a comfortable position. "He must have tried it a hundred times, closing his eyes so as not to have to see his squirming legs"; Gregor is reluctant truly to see himself.

Most of his ruminations concern his job: "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". One could take

his cliché job complaints as an avoidance mechanism, perhaps, but we also learn that he tolerates his crappy job only because his parents are in debt to his employer, and paying it off “will probably take another five or six years” of breadwinning. “He was a tool of the boss, without brains or backbone”. Gregor should have caught the five o’clock train but he seems to have slept through the alarm and is considerably late now. Gregor frets about making the seven o’clock train but he’ll “have to hurry like a madman, and the line of samples wasn’t packed yet” - really an issue at this point? Interesting is the extent to which Gregor operates in denial of his insect state. “In fact, Gregor felt fine, with the exception of his drowsiness”. When his mother calls to him about catching the next train,

Gregor was shocked to hear his own voice answering, unmistakably his own voice, true, but in which, as if from below, an insistent distressed chirping intruded, which left the clarity of his words intact only for a moment really, before so badly garbling them as they carried that no one could be sure if he had heard right.

Both his parents call to him in friendly concerned harassment, and responding is difficult for him: he “made an effort, by meticulous pronunciation and by inserting long pauses between individual words, to eliminate everything from his voice that might betray him”. Because Kafka had tuberculosis, these descriptions of Gregor’s failing voice are interesting. His sister wants to see him, but fortunately, he thinks, he has taken a “precaution he had adopted from his business trips, of locking all the doors during the night even at home”. He tells himself that the insect form is “imaginary,” and “he was eager to see how today’s fantasy would gradually fade away”. Gregor tries to get out of bed but finds “he could not control” his many constantly moving

legs. "'Just don't stay in bed being useless,' Gregor said to himself".

His biggest misgiving came from his concern about the loud crash that was bound to occur and would probably create, if not terror, at least anxiety behind all the doors.

Yet we soon find out the room is carpeted! So what a misery of constant monitoring from his family. After 7:00 the doorbell rings and Gregor knows immediately that the prying manager from the office has come to check up on him.

Why was only Gregor condemned to work for a firm where at the slightest omission they immediately suspected the worst? Were all employees louts without exception, wasn't there a single loyal, dedicated worker among them who, when he had not fully utilized a few hours of the morning for the firm, was driven half-mad by pangs of conscience and was actually unable to get out of bed?

Gregor manages to fall to the floor. His sister and father inform him that the manager is waiting for him. The manager and his mother also call to him. He hears his father telling the manager there must be something wrong with Gregor since he is always so focused on his work "that he never goes out nights". Gregor of course cannot let anyone into his room, considering what he calls euphemistically his "condition". The manager begins officiously chiding Gregor, hinting that his tardiness could be taken as a questionable matter of "cash payments recently entrusted to [him]". Gregor blurts out at length an anxious plea for patience and tries to prop himself up so as to open the door. "'Did you understand a word?' the manager was asking his parents. 'He isn't trying to make fools of us, is he?... That was the voice of an animal'". Gregor's mother starts panicking,

calling for his sister to fetch a doctor, and his father calls for a locksmith. "It was true that they no longer understood his words", but Gregor is encouraged by this show of attention:

He felt integrated into human society once again and hoped for marvelous, amazing feats from both the doctor and the locksmith, without really distinguishing sharply between them.

Exuding yicky insect substances, Gregor is able to turn the key in the lock with his jaws. The manager lets out a startled "Oh" and Gregor's mother seems nonplussed. "With a hostile expression his father clenched his fist, as if to drive Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly around the living room" Gregor remains at the doorway.

In the meantime it had grown much lighter; across the street one could see clearly a section of the endless, grayish-black building opposite -- it was a hospital -- with its regular windows starkly piercing the façade.

It's an interesting architectural feature that a hospital, an institution representing health care, faces opposite the Samsa apartment. Its visibility -- its accessibility -- will later fade. We learn that Gregor's father "would prolong [breakfast] for hours while reading various newspapers", and that a photo of Gregor "from his army days, in a lieutenant's uniform,... a carefree smile on his lips, demanding respect for his bearing and his rank" hangs on the wall. Gregor tries to address the manager, proving here that he is not shirking his work responsibilities.

A man might find for a moment that he was unable to work, but that's exactly the right time to remember his past accomplishments and to consider that later on, when the