A Critical Analysis of Franz Kafka's Novella *The Metamorphosis*

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Several interpretations can be discovered when analyzing Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* through various methods of literary criticism. When approaching the novel from a philosophical perspective, it becomes clear that Gregor's failure to accept the reality that his individuality was to be found in his mind, not his body, is what ultimately resulted in his death. According to a Marxist perspective, Gregor's transformation from man to insect can be seen to represent his social role as a proletariat, which he had been fulfilling prior to his transformation as a nameless individual working beneath the oppressive reign of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, factors in Franz Kafka's personal life, such as his relationship with his father, inability to communicate, struggles with sexual repression and guilt, and familial trauma, had a significant impact on the formation of the novella.

Philosophical Criticism

Immediately after his transformation into a beetle, Gregor shows no signs of being struck by the horror of what has occurred to him. Rather, he is concerned by the fact that he may be unable to carry out certain material responsibilities, such as going to work. Yet, the reason Gregor reacts in this way is because he has a misplaced view of his identity, believing that his identity is based upon the physical actions he completes rather than the activity of his mind. Thus, the possibility of an existence without a human body seems impossible to him. This is what creates in Gregor a chilling sense of calm disbelief in the beginning of *The Metamorphosis*, as he lies in bed in his newly-transformed beetle body, for he believes that this must all be "nonsense" (*The Metamorphosis* 3). Initially, he tries to go back to bed, assuming that when he wakes up, his physical form will have returned. Even when he hears his own voice speaking like an animal, he believes "that the change in his voice was nothing more than the first sign of a bad cold, an occupational ailment of the traveling salesman"—of this he had "no doubt in the least" (*The Metamorphosis* 6).

Gregor becomes even calmer when his family recognizes that they are unable to understand him. For a man who believes his identity is to be found in his physicality, this moment is a relief for Gregor: not because his family cannot understand him, but because they recognize that there is a problem: "The others now believed that there was something the matter with him and were ready to help him" (*The Metamorphosis* 13). By this point, Gregor is no longer able to deny his altered state of being; yet, he holds onto the hope of some sort of recovery. By referring to his state as a "condition" and hoping for "marvelous, amazing feats from both the doctor and the locksmith," he denies the severity of his situation while clinging to the human identity that he used to possess (*The Metamorphosis* 11).

After he emerges from his bedroom, a feat finally achieved by unlocking the doorknob with his jaws, Gregor leans against his doorframe and launches into a page-long monologue directed toward his boss. This scene is horrifyingly comical. Gregor, a grotesque, towering, enlarged insect, stands on his hind legs with his head cocked, leaning calmly against a doorframe, an intelligent light in his beetle-like eyes while he opens his mouth and speaks utter gibberish. Clearly, Gregor still imagines that he possesses a human form. Gregor's subsequent speech also makes his reaction unique: he makes no reference to the fact that his family and boss are obviously terrified of him; nor does he express confusion or even reference the strange and terrifying events of the morning. He simply talks incessantly of his job, hoping through his eloquent phrasing to convince the manager to let him return to work. Gregor's strange reaction can be explained only because he believes that his identity is rooted in material forms. For Gregor, the removal of his human form and all subsequent human actions—such as working a job—would mean the removal of his identity. Thus, he clings to the idea that he is still a human, refusing to admit that his form has been changed.

But of course, Gregor cannot keep up this facade forever. Necessity eventually leads him to embrace his new form. This occurs first in small, logistical ways, such as when he is running away from his father and he realizes that running on all fours is much more efficient than walking around on two legs: "Gregor immediately fell down with a little cry on his numerous little legs . . . for the first time that morning he had a feeling of physical well being" (*The Metamorphosis* 17).

A look at this quote from *The Metamorphosis* reveals more on the subject of Gregor's identity:

> "What a quiet life the family has been leading," Gregor said to himself, and while he stared rigidly in front of him into the darkness, he felt very proud that he had been able to provide such a life in so nice an apartment for his parents and his sister. But what now if all the peace, the comfort, the contentment were to come to a horrible end? In order not to get involved in such thoughts, Gregor decided to keep moving, and he crawled up and down the room. (*The Metamorphosis* 22)

Prior to the metamorphosis, Gregor was fulfilled through physical actions. Trapped inside the body of a beetle, he finds himself unable to complete those actions, such as going to work and providing for his family, which he believes define his individuality. However, Gregor cannot acknowledge this inability, because to do so would be to deny his individuality and thus would invalidate his own existence. Therefore, he simply refuses to dwell on the reality that his physical form no longer exists and tries to distract himself with the only sort of action he is now capable of: crawling aimlessly around his room.

When Gregor's mother and sister begin to move the furniture out of his room, Gregor's humanity and his physicality come to a head:

> Had he really wanted to have his warm room, comfortably fitted with furniture that had always been in the family, changed into a cave, in which, of course, he would be able to crawl around unhampered in all directions but at the cost of simultaneously, rapidly, and totally forgetting his human past? (*The Metamorphosis* 33)

Up to this point, both Gregor's humanity and his physicality have been necessary for his survival. He faces a crisis when one is threatened at the

expense of the other. Eventually, humanity wins over. He tries to keep his mother and sister from carrying out the furniture: this results in a catastrophe. Gregor ends up outside of his room "tormented by self-reproaches and worry" so he begins to crawl over "everything, walls, furniture and ceiling" (*The Metamorphosis* 37). His father comes home and chases him back into the room, throwing an apple at him which lodges into his back and causes a serious wound (*The Metamorphosis*).

As the novella progresses, Gregor's reasons for living begin to dwindle. The only way he clings to his humanity is by imagining that he would once again be able to carry out the responsibilities he fulfilled as a man: "Sometimes he thought that the next time the door opened he would take charge of the family's affairs again, just as he had done in the old days" (*The Metamorphosis* 43).

Substance dualism is a philosophical theory that was formed around 427 BC by Plato, then made popular by Rene Descartes in the 1600s (Jaworski). Claiming that the individual is a purely mental being, substance dualism states that the properties which make that person a person are not connected to their physical forms—but are rather to be found in the mind (Jaworski 34). Thus there are "two distinct kinds of properties, mental and physical" (Jaworski 35). The only property that is required for one to exist is having thought or experience (Jaworski 34). "We are instead completely non-physical beings—beings with no properties that can be physically described" (Jaworski 36).

In a situation such as Gregor's, a Descartian substance dualist would have embraced the realization that his true self was to be found separately from his physical form. However, Gregor's ultimate downfall lies is the fact that he believes he must choose to be either beetle or man: that his transformation into beetle-form necessarily took away his humanity. His ties to the idea of his humanity are so strong that when they are broken, he cannot recover. He rationalizes his situation throughout most of the novella with several tracts of faulty thought: first, by convincing himself that the transformation did not actually occur, second, by convincing himself that a cure will come, and third, by convincing himself that he will still be able to carry out the human responsibilities that he used to fulfill.

However, these levels of self-deceit are eventually broken. Eventually, Gregor must come to terms with the reality that his physical form is no more. On the night that he emerges from his bedroom for the third time, Gregor finally admits to himself the physical chasm that exists between himself and the rest of humanity. As he watches and listens to the sounds of the boarders eating, he realizes "that you needed teeth to eat with and that even with the best make of toothless jaws you couldn't do a thing" (*The Metamorphosis* 47). By this point, he has abandoned many of the human-like habits that he

managed to cling to for quite some time in his beetle form, such as cleanliness & consideration for others. Gregor hears his sister's violin music and comes out into the room and hears his sister's violin music, and something within him is stirred. The violin music begins to awaken Gregor's spiritual and mental capacities: "He felt as if the way to the unknown nourishment he longed for were coming to light" (*The Metamorphosis* 49). Yet, recognizing that his physical form is no longer human but is animal, Gregor has begun to abandon many of the human-like habits that he managed to cling to for quite some time in his beetle form, such as cleanliness and consideration for others, and has taken on animal-like qualities. Thus, his appreciation for the music is animal-like: "He was determined to force himself on until he reached his sister . . . He would never again let her out of his room . . . he would be at all the doors of his room at the same time and hiss and spit at the aggressors" (*The Metamorphosis* 49).

The sight of Gregor drives out the boarders out of the house and startles his family into a frenzy. At their wits' end, Gregor's family stands around and ponders what to do, recognizing that "things can't go on like this" (*The Metamorphosis* 51). Gregor's sister refuses to pronounce the name of her brother in front of "this monster" (*The Metamorphosis* 51). Then, in a final blow to Gregor's humanity:

> "It has to go," cried his sister. "That's the only answer, Father. You just have to try to get rid of the idea that it's Gregor. Believing it for so long, that is our real misfortune. But how can it be Gregor?" (*The Metamorphosis* 52)

At these words, Gregor turns his body slowly around and crawls painfully back to his room (*The Metamorphosis*). There is no longer any pretense that a cure will come, or that he will be able to care for his family the way he did before. Gregor realizes that his physical form is utterly useless to his family. Back in his room: "He soon made the discovery that he could no longer move at all" (*The Metamorphosis* 53). With this, Gregor no longer has any reason to live. "His conviction that he would have to disappear was, if possible even firmer than his sister's" (*The Metamorphosis* 54). He sits in a state of "empty and peaceful reflection" until his body finally gives out, and "without his consent, his head sank down to the floor, and from his nostrils streamed his last weak breath" (*The Metamorphosis* 54). Gregor dies like an animal, with no control over his body and with an emptiness of mind. His inability to recognize the separation of his mind and body and allow his identity to be based in his mind, where it truly belonged, resulted in Gregor's loss of humanity and eventual death.

Marxist Criticism

When *The Metamorphosis* is examined from a Marxist perspective, Gregor's transformation from man to insect can be seen to represent what occurs in a capitalist society when a member of the lower class loses his ability to work. Additionally, an examination of the novella reveals Gregor to be a representation of the opposite of the Marxist ideal; instead of rising up to oppose the class structures which envelop him, Gregor's physical form actually transforms to embody the societal bondage that he endured for so many years. Eventually, in a final act of surrender to the capitalist system, Gregor dies, because without the ability to work, he is no longer useful to society.

Marxist theory asserts that "all history is the history of class struggles" (Mayo 93). Marxism is based on the political and social theories of Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels (Holmes). According to Marx, the driving force of history is class relationships: namely, the relationships between the two social classes known as the bourgeoisie (the ruling class) and the proletariat (the working class) (Holmes). Marxism states that tension between these two classes under the reign of capitalism is inevitable. In a capitalist society, where goods are owned and distributed privately, the only thing the proletariat possesses is his/her ability to work; thus, "the worker is alienated because he has no control over the labor or product which he produces" ("All About Philosophy"). Karl Marx believed that tensions between these two classes would eventually build to the point of a socialist revolution, where the working class proletariat overthrows the ruling class bourgeoisie in order to establish a reign of socialism, in which wealth is distributed equally among all (Holmes).

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor stands at the center of the story, representing the working-class proletariat. Prior to the time the story begins, Gregor worked at a grueling job that he personally despised and that he would have quit long ago if it had not been necessary for him to work to pay off his parents' debt (*The Metamorphosis* 4). Gregor's manager represents the capitalist bourgeoisie. His physical proximity to his employees ensures that they view him as superior. In Gregor's words: "It is funny, too, the way he sits on the desk and talks down from the heights to the employees, especially when they have to come right up close on account of the boss's being hard of hearing" (*The Metamorphosis* 4). Even though Gregor was a model employee—he had not been sick one time during his five years at the firm—his boss shows up at his house on the one day that Gregor does not show up for work on time, informing Gregor that he is simply an expendable piece in the bureaucracy (*The Metamorphosis* 5, 11). "I am about to lose even the slightest desire to stick up for you in any way at all," he says, "And your job is not the most

secure" (*The Metamorphosis* 11). Once he sees Gregor's beetle form, he flees the scene and is never seen again. Gregor's only function in his life is as a worker. Without a human form, this function can no longer be fulfilled; thus, the manager no longer has any reason for a relationship with Gregor.

Capitalism, by its very nature, demands for workers to provide for their families. Up until the moment of his transformation, Gregor fulfills this role for his family: the well-being of himself and his family depends solely upon his job (*The Metamorphosis* 17). Thus, when he loses his ability to work, he no longer has a role to play in his family. He survives by continually convincing himself that he will be able to return to his job and once again uphold the responsibilities of the financial provider. However, when his ability to provide for his family is removed, those relationships begin to disintegrate. Gregor's father is the first to reject him. He actively drives him back to the room when Gregor first emerges, inflicting upon him the first of several wounds. The tearing away of family bonds was predicted by Marx: "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation into a mere money relation" (Marx 771).

When he was a human, Gregor represented nothing more than a small piece in the machine of capitalism. He operated "in a similar way to an ant or termite worker, playing a specific, limited role for the benefit of society" (Fenlon). Thus, *the metamorphosis* of his body was not a revolt but rather a physical representation of the role that he was already playing in society. In a sense, Gregor's body simply takes on the form he has already embodied in society. In this way, Gregor represents the opposite of the Marxist ideal. He works for years at a job that he dislikes and where he is treated unfairly; yet, he never questions whether he ought to be working this job, or whether his manager is a good man or if he is being treated fairly (*The Metamorphosis*). He simply goes to work every day, no matter what, and even when he is transformed into a giant beetle he still makes every possible attempt to fulfill his responsibility to society. When he can no longer fulfill his role as a worker, Gregor copes by pretending that he will be able to return to his job: "Sometimes he thought that the next time the door opened he would take charge of the family's affairs again, just as he had done in the old days" (*The Metamorphosis* 43). But finally, there comes a point when Gregor is not only not fulfilling his societal role as a worker, but he is actively working against his family's attempts at financial survival; as Grete says: "As things are, this animal persecutes us, drives the roomers away" (*The Metamorphosis* 52). By this point, Gregor has no reason to live anymore. Without the ability to work, he is no longer useful to society; thus he dies in a final act of surrender to the capitalist system.

Biographical Criticism

Multiple elements in Franz Kafka's personal life, when examined closely, correspond with and account for certain aspects of *The Metamorphosis*, including the strained relationship between Gregor and his father, emphasis upon physicality in the novella, lack of sexual symbolism, and emphasis on communication. Furthermore, an examination of Kafka's childhood and family dynamics justifies the fact that *The Metamorphosis* ends with familial rejection and Gregor's death; it also explains the fact that Kafka never reflected positively on the way that he chose to end the story.

First, a short summary of the significant factors of Kafka's life is in order. Likely the most significant component to leave a mark upon his life and subsequently his writing was Kafka's troubled relationship with his father, Hermann Kafka. Hermann was an oppressive and overbearing man who had a difficult childhood himself (Robertson 6). A domineering man by nature, Hermann continually criticized his children: "Kafka, by his own account, felt overwhelmed by his father" (Robertson 7). As a child, Franz was timid, and his father's brutal personality crushed his fearful spirit. Later, he would write: "I cannot believe that a kindly word, a quiet taking by the hand, a friendly look, could not have got me to do anything that was wanted of me" (*Letter to My Father* 3). Instead, Hermann treated Franz with rough sarcasm, strict and often unfair authoritative disciplinarian measures, and overbearing loudness. His father's intellectual confidence bred in him insecurity. His father's physical brawn bred in him a shyness about his body. His father's strong views on marriage and sexuality bred in him feelings of sexual inadequacy and shame (Robertson).

This oppressive father figure appears in *The Metamorphosis* in the form of Gregor's own father, who is the first to reject Gregor in his beetle form. Kafka describes his father as a man of "heavy sarcasm" and "forever beating his hands together" (Robertson 6, Brod 6). The mannerisms of Gregor's father are similar. He tells Gregor to open the door for the manager, sarcastically adding that "he [the manager] will certainly be so kind as to excuse the disorder of the room" (*The Metamorphosis* 10). He orders his wife about: "'Anna! Anna!' the father called through the foyer into the kitchen, clapping his hands, 'get a locksmith right away!'" (*The Metamorphosis* 13).

Physically, Hermann Kafka was a large, well-built man while Franz was tiny and frail. In a letter to his father, Franz Kafka confesses:

> I was, after all, weighed down by your mere physical presence... There was I, skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad... I felt a miserable specimen, and what's more, not only in your eyes but in the eyes of the whole world, for you were for me the measure of all things. (*Letter to My Father* 4)

By transforming Gregor into an insect that crawls about on all fours, Kafka represents the physical gap that he felt in his own life between himself and Hermann. When Gregor emerges from his room for the second time, he staggers at the sight of his Father's physical presence: "Now, however, he [Father] was holding himself very erect...he lifted his feet unusually high off the floor, and Gregor staggered at the gigantic size of the soles of his boots" (*The Metamorphosis* 38). Additionally, Kafka stresses the physical difference between Gregor and his father: "Of course Gregor had to admit that he would not be able to keep up even this running for long, for whenever his father took one step, Gregor had to execute countless movements" (*The Metamorphosis* 38-39).

Kafka's father punished him severely for the tiniest offenses, causing him to admit that he was often dominated by a constant "feeling of being nothing" (Letter to My Father 3). This feeling of nothingness is depicted in *The Metamorphosis* through the character of Gregor, specifically in the portrayal of his beetle form. When Grete informs her father that Gregor has broken out of his bedroom for the second time in the book, Gregor overhears the conversation:

> "I knew it," his father said. "I kept telling you, but you women don't want to listen." It was clear to Gregor that his father had put the worst interpretation on Grete's all-too-brief announcement and assumed that Gregor was guilty of some outrage. (*The Metamorphosis* 37)

In an attempt to calm his father, Gregor flattens his body against the door of his room, literally making himself as small as possible, in order to let his father know that he will go back in without a fight. Gregor's beetle-form, flattening himself against a door, represents the child Kafka and his relationship with his father. His good intentions are unobserved and he knows that "his father considered only the strictest treatment called for in dealing with him" (*The Metamorphosis* 38). Eventually, Gregor is chased back into the room, defeated once again by his father.

Another aspect of his personal life which found its way into Kafka's writing was sex: or rather, the lack of it. As a child, Kafka had no way of communicating about his sexual desires. Due to his father's overbearing influence, Kafka dealt with conflicting feelings of confusion and shame: "It was you who pushed me down into this filth—just as though I were predestined to it with a few frank words" (Letter to My Father 22). Later he would recall an instance where he attempted to have a conversation with his parents about sex. He reproached them in a "stupidly boastful, superior, proud, detached . . . cold . . . and stammering manner" for having left him uninstructed and forc-

ing him to seek out schoolmates to explain those matters to him instead (*Letter to My Father* 22). His parents said little and the conversation ended awkwardly, and Kafka's outward sense of shame was so hurt that "with arrogant impudence" that he cut the conversation short and never brought it up again (*Letter to My Father* 22).

The effect of this sexual shame and repression in Kafka's life is evident in *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor, though a grown man, is not a sexually mature man. He still thinks like a child, viewing sex as an action that belongs to his parents. There is a notable vacancy of any real female relationships in the story. Other than his mother, sister, and the family servant, Gregor's only female interaction consists of a picture of "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 Metamorphosis* 3). Outside of this picture, which Gregor has framed and hung in his bedroom, sexual symbolism is restricted to his parents. His mother sews lingerie: "His mother, bent low under the light, sewed delicate lingerie for a clothing store" (*The Metamorphosis* 40). At his second emerging from the bedroom, he watched his mother's petticoats slide off as she embraces his father, "in complete union with him," begging for Gregor's life (*The Metamorphosis* 39). Unable to fully develop sexually himself, Kafka created a character who displayed similar sexual inhibitions and immaturity.

Additionally, Hermann Kafka cut off the realm of communication between himself and his son. "At a very early stage you forbade me to speak," Kafka would later write (Letter to My Father 26). He could neither think nor speak in the presence of his father, who would not allow a word of contradiction to be uttered in his presence. This caused the young Kafka to lose confidence in his own behavior, becoming "wavering, doubtful" (Letter to My Father 25). Because Hermann Kafka constantly reminded his son of his own worthlessness, Franz eventually began to believe his father (Letter to My Father).

Communication is a central theme in *The Metamorphosis*. When Gregor realizes that his transformation has removed his ability to communicate, his initial response is surprising:

> Gregor had become much calmer. It was true that they no longer understood his words, though they had seemed clear enough to him, clearer than before, probably because his ear had grown accustomed to them. But still, the others now believed that there was something the matter with him and were ready to help him. The assurance and confidence with which the first measures had been taken did him good. 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. (*The Metamorphosis* 13)

To be transformed into a giant bug and to remain calm is an absurdity. However, Kafka spent his entire life being misunderstood by his family and passively abused by his father: "I cannot recall your ever having abused me directly and in downright abusive terms. Nor was that necessary; you had so many other methods..." (*Letter to My Father* 7). By personifying the intangible abuse that he endured in the form of the physical body of an insect, Kafka, through the optimistic eyes of Gregor, allows himself the hope of a cure.

Kafka's familial difficulties were not restricted simply to his relationship with his father. He confided in his diary vacillating feelings of hatred for his family members "as if I were indissolubly bound to these repulsive things... the bond is still attached to my feet, preventing them from walking" (*Dearest Father* 96-97). Yet, in spite of his hatred for his father and often his family, he could never fully escape from their bonds. In a letter to his father, Kafka confesses that the reason he never married was his father. To marry would have been to finally break free of the tyranny that Kafka's father had always exerted over him, to put himself on equal ground and to change forever the dynamics of a relationship which had always been that of oppressor/oppressed, and he could not bring himself to escape. This lack of an ability to achieve independence shapes Kafka's writing:

> I have already indicated that in my writing, and in everything connected with it, I have made some attempts at independence, attempts at escape, with the very smallest of success; they will scarcely lead any farther; much confirms this for me (*Letter to My Father* 25).

This final section of *The Metamorphosis* represents volatile dynamics of Kafka's family life. Kafka was so disconnected from his family that often simply looking at their clothing would cause him to vomit (Dearest Father). "I have been betrayed by them" he confessed in his diaries, "but I cannot defy the laws of nature without going mad—hence more hatred and nothing but hatred" (*Dearest Father* 97). The ending of *The Metamorphosis* represents the way that Kafka felt toward his family. At the end of novella, Gregor's family stands around, pondering how to manage this terrible situation regarding their son and brother. "If he could understand us," they sigh, in a terrible irony—for Gregor is listening to their every word, understanding perfectly but unable to communicate anything in return—"then maybe we could come to an agreement with him. But the way things are—" (*The Metamorphosis* 52). Without ever considering the possibility that their brother could understand them, without ever making an attempt to communicate with him or giving him a chance to prove himself, Gregor's family decides that there is no other way. "It has to go," Gregor's sister cries (*The Metamorphosis* 52). With this,

Gregor turns around and slowly treks into his room. Even now, his family does not recognize his humanity. They watch him crawl back into his room and then his sister, who was loyal to him for the longest, jumps up to bolt the door behind him in a final blow of betrayal (*The Metamorphosis*).

We know from Kafka's diaries that his feelings toward his family were constantly changing. Looking at anything related to his family would literally cause in him feelings of intense illness—yet, at other times, he would remember that these were the people from whom he was descended and thus though he had been betrayed by them, he owed them his loyalty (*Dearest Father* 96-97). This is likely the reason that Kafka later expressed great dislike for *The Metamorphosis*, declaring it to have an "unreadable ending" (112). Because his feelings toward his family vacillated so constantly, he was unable to reconcile the fact that the story so clearly represented their betrayal.

Conclusion

To further understand *The Metamorphosis*, it would be advantageous and worthwhile to apply other forms of criticism. Using dialogic criticism to analyze the restriction that Gregor's form has upon his ability to speak with others may yield the conclusion that Gregor's incapability to communicate causes a disruption to the modes of discourse within the novel. A feminist approach could be used to examine the transformation of Grete's character throughout the novella and the subsequent change of power within the family that occurs. A Freudian analysis would be constructive in order to examine the possible Oedipal connotations in the novella, such as Gregor's desire for his mother and envy of his father and the father's envy of the son. The application of philosophical, Marxist, and biographical criticism, which have been specifically highlighted in this paper, reveal a variety of meanings that further illuminate the meaning behind Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*.

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