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"To Animalise is Humane, to Humanise is Animal": Exploring Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* Through the Lens of Realism and Anti-Realism

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Abstract

Franz Kafka died at a relatively young age of forty but in his young writing career, his works exemplify the strange nature of the human spirit. It is difficult to pin down Kafka; whether he is a realist writer or a fantasist. His *The Metamorphosis* takes the most fantastic assumption of transforming a human being into a giant bug and then taking the thematic and the textual discourse in the most ordinary, casual and realistic manner. The text doesn't fail to depict the futile, horrifying and labyrinthine world of the first half of the 20th century. Mostly read as an allegorical text, *The Metamorphosis* in this paper, would be analyzed as not being just an allegory but also as a text that can be read as an anti-realist text. The protagonist, Gregor Samsa is actually the anti-hero of the text. He transforms overnight from being a family provider to being a family secret. The paper would highlight the various levels of "metamorphosis" that take place, not just of Gregor but also of his family members as they too change by the transformation of Gregor Samsa.

Keywords: Human spirit, Realism/Fantasy, Metamorphosis, Allegory, Anti-realism, Anti-hero.

Introduction

Franz Kafka is one of the most fascinating figures of the 20th century. He may not be the greatest writer, but he is quite possibly the most intriguing writer of his century. There are diverse opinions about his writing. Some critics opine that he is a realist writer, but there are others who think that he is a fantasist. He is considered by many

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to be a profoundly sacred writer; others think that he is a thoroughly secular writer (Hobson 8). Whatever be the case, the fact remains that Kafka's writing represents a kind of an anthropological viewpoint i.e., the things that he is describing are absolutely strange, beyond the pale.

Though there is strangeness in Kafka's works but when one reads Kafka one understands and notices that there is not much excitement or strange exhilaration or strange distress in his works. He can be thought of as a really unique topographer or cartographer. He applies the technique of de familiarization in his writing. He gives us maps and places where we live but he writes in such a way as if we have never seen ourselves or our places in that way. One can think of the term that the Germans use, that is *hier gesendet* (someone who came down here, or sent here from higher above) for Kafka.

Metamorphosis: In and Out

This paper deals with one of his most famous works, *The Metamorphosis*. Before even getting into it, the authors would like the readers to mull over with the idea of some of the implications of the notion of metamorphosis; why it is such a strange and powerful notion for us to deal with.

There is something terrifying about metamorphosis when applied to people. One has no problems applying it to butterflies and thinking of it as characteristic of certain phases of biological and botanical life. But what about applying it to human life? There are two inferences that the paper would like to make with regards to applying it to humans, although one would go further. One is that, in our dreams we get transformed, but in our waking states, we all maintain or seek to maintain some kind of fixity and sameness as we go through our daily lives in the day time.

However, none of us is capable of preventing terrible transformations that may happen every single night in our beds. In our dreams, there are a lot of times when we do things that have no relations, at least logically, with how we live our days. In other words, we can say that alteration is a fact of life if we are willing to consider our night, dreamy life. So, in some sense, the slippage of Kafka's work fits into the notion of our chameleon like oneiric, dream life that is part of it. That is the easy inference.

The harder conclusion is that over time we do alter, both physically and mentally. A lot of great novels, say for example, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* remarks that it is nothing short of a miracle to be able to wake up the same person, after dreaming things that is indescribable during our sleep. And all of us have had the experience that if you are awakened in the midst of a deep sleep then there is that horrible moment where you don't know where you are or who you are or what you are. And then gradually, mercifully the data comes back and we inscribe ourselves in the roles that we are used to.

So, to reiterate, we do alter, we do get metamorphosed. And surely all we have to do is to look at the range of human life between childhood and old age. Every single body that we know of, if it lives long enough, is going to change. It will change its size, it will change its posture, and it will change its angles (Robertson 46-49).

The Symbolic and the Literal

The Metamorphosis has a kind of grisly reality for all of us. The main character wakes up in the morning, transformed into giant beetle. That is staggering. Much of the criticism of the story is read allegorically or symbolically. Why is this person a bug? Well, it can be said that he has always been a bug. He has lived a stupid, bug-like life, so that is the reason he wakes up as a bug! He is something of a schlemiel and therefore the story could be read as just the way of literalizing what has always been the case.

Others would go further and they would say that this is a story about the existential anguish or *angst* of being a human being and in our worst nightmares we really appear to ourselves as insects and that is what it means to read it in that way.

And all of these symbolic interpretations have their credibility; this paper does not want to dispute that. However, this paper tries to present the novel idea that before one jumps to the symbolic arena of the story, it is worth attending to the literalism of it.

This story is presented as absolute realism. And that is Kafka's hallmark. It is an utterly flat narrative. It is a deadpan description of situations that are unimaginable to us. So, imagine if you wake up one morning with six legs and a strange body, then what would your immediate response be? This is what the response of Gregor Samsa is: he is going to be late to work, how can he get his tiny, thin legs to get him off the bed and how is he going to open that door when he (or it) does not even have hands but only teeth?

Questions of that order are what appear in the story. And everybody who reads the story wonders that those are not the correct and realistic questions to ask. The normal response or the normal questions would be: How did he ever end up in this condition in the first place? What kind of world is this in which he can be transformed from a human being into a giant insect and on top of that to think not about his transformed body but about getting ready for work? Those are the questions that are scrupulously off limits in this narrative.

Now why would Kafka do that? What is the purpose of doing it that way? Here's what he says in the first line of the story:

> As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes. (Kafka 114)

He presents the case in such a manner where the people's routines blind them to their conditions (Bloom 198-199). There is no growth and development of the character. Bildungsroman is a joke in Kafka's world. Kafka expects us not to question about what happens to him materially. The question is how he is going to resolve this and what he is going to do.

> His immediate intention was to getup quietly without being disturbed, to put on his clothes and above all eat his breakfast, and only then consider what else was to be done, since in bed, he was well aware, his meditations would come to no sensible conclusion. He remembered that often enough in bed he had felt small aches and pains, probably caused by awkward postures, which had proved purely imaginary once he got up, and he looked forward eagerly to seeing this morning's delusions gradually fall away. That the change in his voice was nothing but the precursor of a severe chill, a standing ailment of commercial travelers, he had not the least possible doubt. (Kafka 117)

The sub textual analysis is self-evident that there is no problem in dealing with this situation. The life, present in the text, has the idea that we can deal with this situation and the way we can deal with this is by *not* dealing with this. The irony is that we are expected to behave in such a manner that we are going to treat today just like yesterday, have a few more legs and have a couple of slight differences that come in, no problem. Kafka is, in fact, telling us that human life has become so messy that one does not even have the time to look at or to care for oneself.

Anti-Realism

Kafka is characterized by a kind of strange and weird notation that is most associated with him. It is the German word *angst*; in French it is *angoisse* and in English it is *anguish*, and it is affiliated with existential malaise. However, there is no *angst* in this story. This is a deadpan, flat, matter of fact story.

In narration, the writer's greatest trump card is when he or she gives us a blank character. The readers fill in the blanks and produce as many interpretations as possible. And that, of course, is what is going to happen with this character. Gregor Samsa is a far more compelling figure because of this inscrutable, terribly limited reaction to his condition. What the authors are trying to imply is that when one is transformed into a giant insect then being shocked ought to be the normal response of any individual; but Gregor is not shocked and what is even harder to accept is the fact that the text does not react in a shocking way either. It presents things and Gregor's transformation like a dry narrative, as if nothing strange happened.

There is a kind of corporeal realism in Kafka and it is through the result of a long tradition of point of view narrative. In this story, we have the point of view of a bug. The narrative shows what it is like to be a bug and the authors intend to keep it that way and not to turn Gregor and his life into a kind of symbol, which have been done in the past. For example, this is how a bug would open the door:

> Then he set himself to turning the key in the lock with his mouth. It seemed, unhappily, that he hadn't really any teeth – what could he grip the key with? – but on the other hand his jaws were certainly very strong; with their help he did manage to set the key in motion, heedless of the fact that he was undoubtedly damaging them somewhere, since a brown fluid issued from his mouth, flowed over the key, and dripped on the floor. (Kafka 124)

This is scrupulous as if Kafka were a photographer. He is not going to let the readers off the hook. If you are a bug and you have to do certain things then it has to be narrated in such a fashion only. The text goes on:

> Hardly was he down when he experienced for the first time this morning a sense of physical comfort; his legs had firm ground under them; they were completely obedient, as he noted with joy; they even strove to carry him forward in whatever direction he chose; and he was inclined to believe that a final relief from all his sufferings was at hand. (Kafka 127-128)

When he sees the chief clerk who has come to get him, he starts to snap his jaws together – "instead he could not resist snapping his jaws together at the sight of the streaming coffee" (Kafka 128). Kafka, here shows his animal-like reactions. He hasn't changed *inwardly*. He has changed a lot, outwardly though.

So, the text as the paper has argued, insists that we see it as a realistic or an anti-realistic kind of an account. It is realist in the sense of the narrative discourse. Kafka does not make this story sound strange, weird or fantastic. What makes this text as anti-realist is because of the irony of it. By not making this story sound strange, weird or fantastic, Kafka is playing with the narrative discourse, as in, instead of presenting things in one way, he presents it by de familiarizing the subject, and that is why we see even the most commonest of things in a new light.

Dismantling the Human Identity

What Kafka is doing in this story is that he is dismantling, what we think of as the human. This project of dealing with the human begins with the Oedipus. What is the answer to the riddle of the sphinx? The answer is Man. The riddle is: what is it that is on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night? Man is the answer; when a child is born, it crawls with its four hands and feet, when he grows in age, he/she walks with two feet and during the old age the person takes the help of a stick or another person to stand and to walk. Kafka is the answer to the riddle also. The answer is man, because it is not a fixed category. It is, for Kafka, in a state of flux. It is also a zone that you could exit from. And in story after story Kafka's people, if that is the right term to use, or better still to use creatures, exit the human zone.

At one point the family gets understandably exasperated by this creature and they ponder over the idea as to how they can go on living with this huge monster in the house. They start questioning the identity of Gregor, is he still that same old son? Is he still that same good old brother? Gregor's sister says to the parents:

> You must just try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we've believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble. But how can it 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. (Kafka 158)

It has been stated that when Gregor tries to speak, he just utters strange noises that no one else can understand and as the paper has given a clear sense in the quotes from the text that materially and realistically, or rather anti-realistically, this case has been made, that he is an insect, he is no longer a human being and that he is now a monster.

How can one still maintain the notion or the fiction that this is still a human being? He cannot communicate with them orally. He looks certainly not like a human and he is messing up their lives. He no longer brings them the money because he was the breadwinner before; so now they have to rent out rooms to the boarders who will give them the much needed money. The story pokes us to ask the question as to what or who constitutes the human identity.

So, what Greta says makes a whole lot of sense. One has got to stop thinking that he is Gregor, that he is a human being. And that is really a part of what the story is about, about how you exit from the human. The pathos of the story, the tragedy of the story, the anti-realism of the story is that it is narrated in such a way that for us, he is human.

The family can't understand him but everything we read is about his experience. We know that he still thinks, feels, gets hurt, and becomes happy. We still give him the emotional needs that he seeks. We know that he is still the same good boy that he was at the beginning. The narrative perspective presents him both as monstrous for his own world and deeply human for us. They cannot understand his voice, they can only see him. We, who are just looking at print on a page, can't see him. We all have to visualize as readers what he looks like. But we can understand his voice which they can't. We see via him, we read his voice and through him, for us he remains human, and he never quite leaves the human. (Rolleston 106-107)

The *Other* Metamorphoses

His family members, who see him and who are near his ugly vicinity, believe that he has exited the human. And this is rigorously carried out. They have removed all of his belongings from the room. He has become more and more of a *thing*.

And so, the father, who, prior to Gregor's change or metamorphosis, had been retired, now becomes active again and goes back to work. We also discover that he has been putting a little money aside for himself that the son had never known about. The downfall of the son is corresponded with the rise of the father. This man is not at all decrepit as Gregor had thought.

> And yet, and yet, could that be his father? The man who used to lie wearily sunk in bed whenever Gregor set out on a business journey; who welcomed him back of an evening lying in a long chair in a dressing gown; who could not really rise to his feet but only lifted his arms in greeting, and on the rare occasions when he did go out with his family, on one or two Sundays a year and on highest holidays, walked between Gregor and his mother, who were slow walkers anyhow, even more slowly than they did, muffled in his old greatcoat, shuffling laboriously forward with the help of his crook-handled stick which he set down most cautiously at every step and, whenever he wanted to say anything, nearly always came to a full stop and gathered his escort around him? Now he was standing there in fine shape; dressed in a smart blue uniform with gold buttons, such as bank messengers wear…(Kafka 145)

In one of the most important scenes when the father was throwing apples again and again at his son, Gregor who was getting ready to pass out from the damage done to him looks and this is the way it has been described what he sees:

> With his last conscious look he saw the door of his room being torn open and his mother rushing out ahead of his screaming sister, in her under bodice, for her daughter had loosened her clothing to let her breathe more freely and recover from her swoon, he saw his mother rushing toward his father, leaving one after another behind her on the floor her loosened petticoats, stumbling over her petticoats straight to his father and embracing him, in complete union with him — but here Gregor's sight began to fail — with her hands clasped around his father's neck as she begged for her son's life. (Kafka 147)

It is a very pathetic notation; she is begging that her son be spared. But she cannot miss that the two of them are bound together and united and the paper suggests that it is part of the causality of the story. That is, the monstrousness of the son, the son being removed from the equation of human, has its ripple effects on every other relationships in the house. Though the text is read as the metamorphosis of Gregor, but actually this metamorphosis is not just confined to one member of the family. The fact is that the entire family, all the members get metamorphosed by the metamorphosis of Gregor. He becomes literal monster while others become symbolic monsters, in their own right to Gregor.

Tragedy of Sacrifice

The mother, begging for the life of the son, can also be read as a reverse oedipal drama; instead of the son killing the father, it will be the father essentially overpowering to kill the son (Spur 178-191). Kafka is absolutely drawn to the story of sacrificial stories of sons. One can say that he is repeating the Abraham and Isaac story over and over again (Benjamin 129). Take for instance the story of "The Judgment", it is about a father who also starts out on his back and appears to be at the end of his line. And then when the son wants to get married to become a freely functioning adult he is condemned by the father to death and then jumps off the bridge. There is no explanation given, it just happens like that.

We know that Franz Kafka himself, in a very famous document called *The Letter to the Father*, wrote how much tension and hatred and warfare there was between himself and his own real father, Hermann Kafka. Kafka-the father was a large, imposing man, very self-confident man and the son always felt that he could never possibly measure up against him. (Kafka 7-8)

The last scenes of this story is of the sister Gretta, as the family is going on an outing now since they have gotten rid of this monster, this dead beetle, which has been swept out with the garbage. Earlier he was their support system now he became the garbage system. And as the family walks out finally for the first time in the spring, they can get some fresh air and they are cleared of this terrible family drama of tragedy. They have some money left. And then the daughter stretches herself like a good grown up girl and they look at her and they realize that she is nubile and it will be soon that she will be married and then life would go on.

One of the most fascinating features of the story is that he does not just die because he becomes a bug, we would think that would be the end. That is not the only reason he dies, he dies really and literally out of starvation. That he cannot find food that he will be willing to eat. To phrase it that way is to paraphrase one of Kafka's equally important and famous stories called "The Hunger Artist" which is about a person who is a professional faster. He fasts in circus where he is one of the leading acts and people come from far and wide to watch him fast. But soon people get bored by his act. They come instead to see acrobats and animals. And so because of that he just sits there in his cage and he fasts continually. And at the end of the story he is dying and his keeper comes to him and the guy is getting ready to die and he bends over to him and tells him that why on earth didn't he eat? And the answer is:

> "Because," said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and speaking, with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer's ear, so that no syllable might be lost, "because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." These were his last words, but in his dimming eyes remained the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he was still continuing to fast. (Kafka 309)

There is a sense in which the material conditions of life which are all we have are not enough, that there must be something else. And in this story, we have that something else, which is not material, which is purely spiritual (Bloom 28). One of the most moving moments of the story is when the sister begins to play music for the boarders just to entertain them. And when she is doing that, Gregor hears that and it has been told that he has been saving his money in order to send her to the conservatory and he listens to this music and he is moved by it.

> And yet Gregor's sister was playing so beautifully. Her face leaned sideways, intently and sadly her eyes followed the notes of music. Gregor crawled a little farther forward and lowered his head to the ground so that it might be possible for his eyes to meet hers. Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved. (Kafka 155)

It is as if the music is the kind of nourishment that would keep him alive and what the paper is trying to get at with that remark is that Kafka's work is an exit from the human. But it is also an exit from the exclusively material conditions that inform human, biological life. It is a kind of mad, desperate need for something else. His characters are always leaving, going out. He dies, seeking something finer than what he has. (Corn gold Internet)

Conclusion

Kafka lives as a writer with the sacrificial logic. The paper has put it that way because Kafka himself refuses all human relations. The paper is almost saying Kafka himself exits the human; he himself becomes exclusively the writer, he himself in his engagement with the woman Fraulean Burstner, saw her very few times, but had voluminous correspondence with her. Kafka himself derives life and blood, almost

vampirishly from writing: writing to the fiancée is all he needs (Deleuze et al. 591-608). He does not need to be married to her. This is a sense in which writing is the life, the finer, spiritual life that the flesh cannot yield.

Kafka's story is about losing oneself where one does not know what you are or who you are or where you are. There is confusion all around, not just at the outside but also at the inside and this confusion is also marked with the tinge of tragedy. The readers are not only dissatisfied with what happens in the end, as there is no poetic justice delivered in his story, but they also feel a sense of fear and discomfort because Kafka challenges our sanity and identity.

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