**The Bizarre Short Stories of Franz Kafka**

Franz Kafka has a definite affinity for portraying the bizarre in his short stories. For me, perhaps the most noticeable aspect of Kafka’s strange tales is the fact that, as I read them, they grow more toward ordinary status once I start to explore them and become enveloped by the story. More likely, my perception of “ordinary” is stretched and challenged. Kafka has a particularly enviable talent for feeding the reader just about anything, including the impossible, as easily as if they were coated with sugar and dipped in chocolate. Or mixed into a questionable but palatable concoction of vodka and something.

*As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.*

I think one of the most eyebrow-raising first lines of any short story I’ve ever read is: “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.” Taken from “The Metamorphosis,” this line is baffling, humorous, and annoying all at the same time. One doesn’t know what to think given this strange line, aside from “I want to read further!” Prior to my first reading, I believed that the story was going to be humorous. What else could it possibly be? I was very interested to discover how this guy was going to convince me that this was a literary work of value based on this proposition.

“The Metamorphosis” turned out to be, in my opinion, decidedly un-funny. It was a dark dive into the main character Gregor’s somewhat dismal life with his entirely uninspired family. It explored his dissatisfaction with his own existence while revealing the greediness and ungratefulness of his parents and sister (whom, notably, he had supported up until his unfortunate transformation to bugness).

Despite the unlikely premise, there wasn’t a second when I didn’t believe Kafka was telling me the truth. There is a necessary suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader (shocking!) considering human beings do not change into big bugs as a matter of course, at least that I know of. But it seems to flow effortlessly because Kafka is so convincing in his style and language — it’s not a struggle to let go. I got so caught up in the story that I practically forgot that Gregor had once been human. The family’s reaction to him was probably similar to one that I might have if one of my family members was changed into a creepy crawly. But I found myself outraged at the deplorable lack of support on their part (his father in particular). I was utterly appalled when they rejoiced at his death.

Kafka uses this technique, the *human-thought-process-in-a-nonhuman-creature* (for lack of a better term), in several other stories as well, and equally as effectively. In “A Report to an Academy,” it is a formerly wild ape who is addressing an audience at an academy. He describes his “conversion” over to human ways from apedom, which had been necessary simply because freedom was no longer an option for him. It was very easy to forget that it was an ape talking — it could have been any previously “primitive” or less-than-European human who was “civilized” and praised for it. In “Investigations of a Dog,” Kafka peers into the mind of a dog who is “no longer a member of the canine community,” and has very articulate human thoughts. Of course, it seems perfectly natural that this dog should have articulate human thoughts. Kafka convinces us. Then there is “The New Advocate,” in which Alexander the Great’s battle charger, Bucephalus, has taken up law, simply because it is the practical thing to do considering there is no more Alexander. Of course.

There are numerous other Kafka stories which do not utilize the animal/bug motif, but are equally bizarre (“The Judgment,” “A Country Doctor,” “A Common Confusion,” “The Hunter Gracchus,” etc. Kafka is a truly creative and engaging master storyteller, and I love digging into his works for the imaginative and visionary experience he provides!