Isolation and Alienation in The Metamorphosis

Though it may not be reflected by the prestige of his work, Franz Kafka had very little faith in his ability to write. Revered today for his stellar contributions to literature, such as The Metamorphosis and The Trial, Kafka ironically believed himself incapable of producing anything of worth. This sense of inadequacy was deeply imbued within Kafka’s psyche, based upon a multitude of factors in his familial and social lives. Prague’s absurd bureaucratic network, an absurd relationship with his father, and unstable physical health all contributed to his fragmented view of others and himself. Kafka’s own experiences of alienation soaked through him and into his writing, embodied specifically by Gregor Samsa in The Metamorphosis, who becomes ostracized socially, physically, and psychologically from his way of life.

Kafka’s childhood serves as the genesis for much of the disdain that he came to feel toward the world around him. His father, Hermann Kafka, lived a difficult life as a youth, rising from his relatively low social class through determination and hard work. His own life experiences, centered around the principles of practicality and rationality, prevented him from appreciating his son’s natural inclination towards “useless” crafts, such as creative writing. Gregor’s father in The Metamorphosis exemplifies many of the unpleasant aspects of Kafka’s own father, with the *strain* on the relationship between father and son being the primary focus of their co-existence. Like Kafka, Grevor strove to please or help his father, having taken on financial responsibility for the family after his father’s business failed. He is, however, still disappointing to the family he serves so willingly, allowing himself to be exploited financially following their spell of misfortune. The family’s laziness and lack of gratitude contrast directly with Gregor’s own impeccable work ethic and desire to contribute to his family’s well being. Even within their own families, Gregor and Kafka exist as outcasts.

As if life wasn’t hard enough beforehand, Gregor’s isolation manifests itself physically when he becomes transformed into a colossal insect. This does not change his personality at first, but slowly peels away his humanity, replacing his natural tendencies with insect-like ones. He finds that “the fresh foods... he did not care for; he couldn’t even stand their smell” (Kafka 23,) and finds pleasure in scuttling around his room, or hiding beneath his sofa. These activities, while inhuman, provide Gregor’s only solace from the endless disappointment his family exhibits toward him. His loss of speech creates the greatest amount of separation from his family after his change in form, as he becomes unable to interact with them beyond simple gestures of movement. Communication between the two parties becomes nearly impossible. As a result, Gregor spends most of his time locked up in his bedroom, never daring to leave should he provoke disgust, or even an attack, from one of his family members. His room is, at the same time, a prison maintained by his family for his sinful appearance, and a sanctuary from their irrepressible judgement. His transformation offers him brief respite from the pressures of the world, such as his taxing job, but costs Gregor his humanity. Kafka own feelings of isolation were likely present as he was weaving the woeful tale of Gregor; he often wrote alone at night, working as an insurance agent during the day, and lost many nights of sleep to his fervid spells of writing. He did not share his work, and he did not share himself when he was working.

Kafka’s psyche had endured many an assault by the time he wrote The Metamorphosis, most of which were led by his father. He worried incessantly about everything that he did, having little self-confidence and respect for himself, despite generally succeeding or even performing outstandingly. This is mirrored in The Metamorphosis, where Gregor’s impressive work ethic, loyalty to his career, and performance are *still* seen as inadequate by his supervisor, who is ready to hastily punish Gregor at his first absence. Gregor himself is not even particularly concerned with his metamorphosis at first, worried far more about not having a good excuse for being late to work. Gregor’s mindset has become so focused on satisfying the needs and wants of others, or trying to, that he does not even heed the horrific condition that assails him. The need to do well at work superseded the importance of family bonds, actually creating division among them. The alienation Gregor feels mentally is not entirely interpersonal; as he copes with his monstrous transformation he slowly loses touch with his rational or “human” mentality, becoming more and more susceptible to the beastly desires that accompany his new shape.

Along with Kafka’s internal struggles, and trouble with his family, was a feeling of displacement within society as a whole. Being a Jew in a land of Czechs, which was occupied by Germany, denied him the ability to identify with a specific society or culture. Even Kafka’s own *bar mitzvah* meant nothing to him; he regarded the exercise as ritualistic waste of time, devoid of any true purpose or meaning. In addition to this he moved several times as a youth, not settling down until he attended a preparatory gymnasium at the age of ten. Little context was offered for Kafka’s studies, as the gymnasium he attended merely taught memorization and recitation, never discussing or analyzing beyond what sat on the surface level. This trend would continue into his adult life, where Kafka felt that the city around him was deprived of a sense of meaning, seeing people as minute cogs within a colossal system of production. This mechanistic bureaucracy that ran the city around Kafka served as model for the workstyle that Gregor endured. His incredibly demanding job prevented him from forming anything but surface level relationships, both with friends and romantic interests, and even then he was still despised by his superiors and family.

The Metamorphosis serves as a demented mirror to Kafka’s own difficult reality. Gregor, like Kafka, tries to discover meaning and purpose amongst the absurd events that plague him, and goes to his grave realizing that only his death can bring peace to those around him. The similarities between the two underscore the point that Kafka felt similarly about himself, feeling of extremely little ability or worth in this world. Only because of his good friend, Max Brod, was his work published posthumously, despite Kafka having requested him to destroy it. Had Kafka known just how widespread his influence would one day come to be, he may have gone to rest a little easier.