

Ben Cacak

Dr. Kandy Robertson

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### Mental Illness in *Metamorphosis*

*The Metamorphosis*, written by Franz Kafka, is a German-language writer known for other works including novellas, short stories, and novels. The metamorphosis of Gregor is interpretable for many things that may arise in a person's life, including disability, a revelation that may be difficult for family members to accept, or mental illness. Gregor's metamorphosis as an allegory for mental illness works as Gregor seems to experience the signs and symptoms of depression and social anxiety while his creator, Franz Kafka, suffered from the same conditions. Depression can be described as a chronic sadness or loss of interest, and social anxiety can be defined as nervousness, fear, and apprehension associated with social situations. Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, can be read as a reflection of Kafka's own mental illness as the main protagonist of the novella, Gregor Samsa, exhibits many symptoms that indicate that he suffers from depression and social anxiety.

A few common symptoms of depression, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, are low appetite, weight loss, isolation, decreased energy, fatigue, and oversleeping. Gregor experiences these symptoms through the course of his final months after his transition into an insect. During his first night living as an insect, Gregor's sister, Grete, offers Gregor a bowl of milk and bread:

There stood a bowl filled with sweet milk in which little pieces of white bread were floating... [E]ven though milk had always been his favorite drink, which is no doubt why his sister had brought him some, now it didn't taste good to him at all., indeed it was almost with revulsion that he turned away from the bowl and crept back to the center of the room. (Kafka 410)

Gregor rejects the bowl of bread and milk that Grete offers him, indicating his lack of interest in eating; his loss of appetite. Throughout the rest of the novella, the amount of food that Gregor eats does not increase, and he gradually becomes rather thin as a result of his fasting. This is perhaps more evident in the Royal Opera House's interpretation of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* featuring Edward Watson as the principal performer. At the beginning of the ballet when Gregor comes home from his long day at work, Gregor eats dinner with his family, but only eats two bites of it. His appetite is diminished, and his mother knows something is wrong as she has a look of concern on her face. By the third day of his routine on display for the audience in the ballet, he only takes one bite of his food. At this time, he goes to bed only to metamorphose into an insect.

Gregor also experiences a decreased amount of energy, and a loss of interest in life after his metamorphosis into an insect. After waking up to find himself in his new body, seemingly perplexed at the sight of his thin long legs and bulbous abdomen, he talks himself into going back to sleep, saying "[W]hat if I just go back to sleep for a little while and forget all of this foolishness" (Kafka 400). This scene drags on for a while as Gregor contemplates getting up, asking himself for more time as he passes each self-set deadline to get up out of bed. This can also serve as Gregor losing interest in his own life. Gregor does not want to get up and enjoy his

life; he would rather lie in bed. This is seen in the theatrical adaptation as well. By the third day of Gregor's daily routine, Grete has to push Gregor for him to sit down and watch her dances in the evening as he only takes one bite of his dinner, indicating his loss of appetite is increasing. Each day, Gregor participates in his dreary routine, each time being slower and with less enthusiasm than the previous, until the night he metamorphoses.

It is worthy to note that Gregor had locked himself in his room, saying it is a habit he picked up from being a traveling salesman. Gregor is isolating himself from the rest of the family. Gregor's isolation from the family indicates that he has social anxiety as well. This is further supported by his wish to leave his current line of work. Gregor says in his internal monologue:

“Good lord,” he thought, “what an exhausting profession I’ve chosen, Day in and day out on the road. Work like this is far more unsettling than business conducted at home, and then I have the agony of traveling itself to contend with: worrying about train connections, the irregular, unpalatable meals, and the human intercourse that is always changing. (Kafka 400)

Gregor is the type of person who would rather be at home, reading the newspaper than out with friends. Avoiding situations where there will be more people, or avoiding others, in general, is a common symptom of social anxiety (“Social Anxiety”). Gregor experiencing the need to lock himself away from other people is representative of his anxious tendencies.

Gregor is rather unsatisfied with his life. He is caught saying “If I didn’t have to hold back for my parents’ sake, I’d have given notice long ago--I’d have marched right up to him and given him my piece of my mind. He’d have fallen right off his desk!” (Kafka 400). Gregor

dislikes his job, but only stays as he has to help pay off his father's debts that were acquired by his failed business, and so that his sister and asthmatic mother do not have to work. The life of a traveling salesperson is not designed for Gregor, and he wishes to get out of it. Gregor's family also plays a role in the stresses of his life. It is expected of Gregor that he gets up and goes to work every morning. The first time that he does not get up to go to work in five years, all of them are knocking on his door, asking if he is okay, asking him to get up out of bed. They expect him to be the sole provider of the family. When he fails to do this in his insect-like state, Gregor's father banishes Gregor back into his room while making aggressive hissing noises (Kafka 409-410). Later in the novella, Gregor's father throws an apple at Gregor out of anger, which is lodged in his back and rots there, leading to his death (421). This behavior is abusive. Gregor has internalized these abusive expectations of his family and is made to feel bad, both physically and emotionally that he can no longer fulfill them. These are all factors that may explain the reason why Gregor becomes depressed. Stressful and unsatisfying jobs can take a toll on one's mental health, and abusive family members will only add to the harm.

*The Metamorphosis* can be seen as a reflection of Kafka's own life as he himself suffered from anxiety and depression. According to Dr. Cyrus Abbasian, a psychiatrist based in London claims there is a general consensus that Franz Kafka suffered from social anxiety and depression throughout the entirety of his life (Abbasian). In Felisati and Sperati's article, "Franz Kafka" they claim that Kafka considered committing suicide in 1912, the year that he wrote *The Metamorphosis*. They write: "[Kafka] was continuously dissatisfied with himself and his life, due to a constant sense of fault" (Felisati and Sperati). In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor is always in a constant state of being at fault for what happened to him and to his family as a result.

Gregor's family's expectations of him that he can no longer fulfill, and the sense of fault that follows lead to Gregor's death in Kafka's original writing, and his suicide in the theatrical adaptation put on by the Royal Opera House.

There are arguments that oppose the idea of mental illness in *The Metamorphosis* as an important element of the text. Famous writer within the academic community, Vladimir Nabokov, argues that there are only three themes one needs to know in order to understand *The Metamorphosis* in his lecture on the novella: the number three as a symbol, the opening and closing of doors, and the ups and the downs of the Samsa family. While there may be some overlap between the isolation that depression and social anxiety bring on, and the opening and closing of doors, the possibility of the mental illness as a predominant theme is in no way not essential for understanding the reading. Whether it be the idea that Gregor commits suicide in the theatrical interpretation as at the end of the ballet, Gregor jumps out of the window, or Gregor's symptoms that are found in patients of depression and social anxiety, there is a definite connection between Gregor's sudden metamorphosis into another species, which can be read as mental illness, and Kafka's own mental wellbeing.

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