

The Metamorphosis

A Vermin's Hunger for Humanity

Franz Kafka

The Familiar → Kafka has a tendency to juxtapose the familiar with the dark, mysterious, and fearsome. In the case of this novella, Gregory wakes up as a monstrous-sized dung beetle within the comfort of his own bed; “madness disguised as normality, normality disguised as madness” as Gerald William stated. The description of his room (i.e., the desk, the woman in fur, the window) is explicit in detail and history, likely to build that sense of familiarity with the readers. Gregory's room is supposed to be a part of a ‘safe’ and ‘repeated routine’, yet over time, it becomes less of a place to live and more of a means for him to serve out his term of imprisonment. I'm not entirely positive on what the deeper message is here. Maybe, Kafka is trying to communicate that just because we think we know someone or something, doesn't mean our relations to these people and objects can't change at any given moment – it's all a matter of perspective. Consider Gregory's sister, Grete, too, for example: their tight bond turned sour as she began to grow tired of caring for him. Still though, these connections don't go unmissed – that's likely why Gregory still clings to his old furniture: that just because things may change, doesn't mean that history automatically loses its purpose and meaning. Furthermore, it shouldn't be assumed that the change is inherently negative either: Gregory's misfortune brings the once divided Samsa family together, pouring their future hopes into the now fully-grown daughter.

The Responsibility → A major element of this novel is self-sacrifice. Gregory works for no other reason than to provide for his family, saying “[His] sole concern had been to do everything in his power to make the family forget as quickly as possible the business disaster which had plunged everyone into a state of total despair... he had begun to work with special ardor... astonished and delighted family... the money was received with thanks and given with pleasure.”. In giving up his own comforts for that of his families, Gregory never really formed a solid sense of personal identity, and thus could never decide what he personally wanted for himself free from the desires of everyone else around him. Why is the nobility of an action so often determined by how much we give of ourselves?

The Isolation → Gregory was a vermin long before his physical transformation. When the story began, there was no reason as to why he had changed physical form, but socially incompetent and outcast by society, his human life was the explanation: he

had no friends, no lover, and his relationship to his family was primarily an act of financial service. Still though, Gregory clings to his past. He first tries to keep the picture of the woman in the fur coat, and in the end, attempts to connect with his sister's violin performance – a last ditch effort to connect with his humanity before he surrenders and recedes back into his room, thereby completing the metamorphosis. Ultimately, Gregory was killed by misunderstanding – both of himself, and by those around him. The apple lodged in his back thrown by his Father is representative of the first sign of this loss of hope, of not being able to turn back.

Incomplete Thoughts

The Labels → Only two characters were named through the entire course of this story: Gregory and Grete. A focus on their metamorphosis? Inverse relationship?

The Illness → What if Gregory was never a bug, but turning mad. Think of “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The book was written through the lens of the character with the illness, so it was hard to identify what was real and what was fake. Kafka wrote this novella at a time when he was sick, so maybe writing Gregory was a literary manifestation of his fears? Just like Jane was, Gilman believed that the mental health of women would never be diagnosed as more than a ‘slight fever’ or ‘seasonal change in temperament’.

The Freudian Framework → Applicable, though Kafka wasn't a fan of psychology – he was just interested in Freud's thoughts.

Ultimately, Gregory's hunger is not for his food, but his humanity. That's why nothing could ever satiate his appetite – nothing could.