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The Role of the Family Unit in Dealing with Change in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"

A critical analysis of Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" yields an interesting story of a family and their struggles dealing with an affliction to the eldest son, Gregor. Gregor's transformation into a cockroach is not necessarily a disease, this does result in a similar situation that could result to anyone suffering from any type of mental or physical illness (Rowe 267). The Samsa family has to make a choice between Gregor, who increasingly becomes a burden on the family, and their own well being. Following his transformation, Gregor changes from being the bread winner in the family to a burden on the family and becomes increasingly isolated as a result of this change. Familial interaction is important to one's health, which can be illustrated by Gregor's sister Grete. Grete changes from being his loving sister, to his caregiver, and finally replacing him as the head of the family. I will explore the struggle of Gregor's sister Grete and her transformation as she struggles with Gregor's condition and resulting becomes isolation. This raises a critical issue regarding the role the family unit plays in the change and recovery of someone who is suffering as Gregor has. The exploration of Grete's transformation and her interaction with Gregor illustrates the transition that Gregor makes into his isolation, depression, and finally death.

Grete's perspective of her brother and role in the family changes quite drastically throughout "The Metamorphosis." Grete shows her good nature towards Gregor at the beginning by helping him through his new transformed life. Grete assumes the role almost immediately as Gregor's caregiver, tending to his food and the cleanliness of his room. After the initial discovery that Gregor had transformed and things had calmed down a bit Grete left a dish full of milk and bread for him to eat. This idea could be motivated by the thinking that as the cockroach was still Gregor to some level that he would enjoy his previous favourite food. In this context, we can interpret the bread and milk as a symbol for the sympathy that the family feels for Gregor's condition. After it became apparent that Gregor did not like the food that he once did as a human, she went and took the effort to prepare an alternative meal for him which consisted primarily

of garbage. The garbage, while heralded as exactly what was needed by Gregor, could be symbolized as the family's loss of interest in his struggle. This transition can be seen as a foreshadowing as to how his relationship with his sister develops as she becomes the head of the household. As this transition occurs with Grete, it became more and more of a task for her to maintain the same level of care that Gregor had grown to expect. This was in part with Grete having to start to work to make up for the fact that Gregor was no longer bringing in any income, leaving "his sister, exhausted by office work, [and] no longer had it in her to care for Gregor as she had done earlier" (Kafka 131). She never even talked about Gregor as she once did, even the simple lack of remarks on him "[having] a good appetite today" or how the food had "hardly been touched" (111, 111) were noticed by Gregor. There were lots of opportunities at the start for Grete to complain about her predicament, but for the most part she kept her cool. She seemed alright with the idea that every time that Gregor needed to be cared for, he was out of direct view. His sister seemed to want to make it more comfortable for Gregor by cleaning the room and helping him out, and "for her part, [Grete] clearly sought to bluer the embarrassment of the whole thing" (115). It was clear that she was embarrassed of Gregor, and his appearance. The more that she realized that Gregor was no longer the same person (or species), he began to frighten her just by the sight of him. When she caught him unawares, she became frightened enough to "[leap] back and [lock] the door" (116). As mentioned in Rowe's discussion on negative feelings, the caregiver should "keep those negative feelings from provoking acts of cruelty or neglect" (Rowe 265) which in this case, is exactly what Grete is doing. Her attitude towards Gregor continued to change over time as the foreshadowing suggests and it becomes clear that she is not as concerned with him as she once was. His sister was "[n]o longer bothering to think what might please Gregor, his sister [...] now hurriedly shoved some food or other into Gregor's room with her foot" (Kafka 130).

Works Cited

Kafka, Franz. "The Metamorphosis." *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. Michael Hofmann.

Toronto: Penguin Books, 2007. 85–146. Print.

Rowe, Michael. "Metamorphosis: Defending the Human." *Literature and Medicine* 21.2 (2002): 264–280.

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This article focuses on the humanity aspect of Gregor, and the view that his family has of him as a result. This will be an focus point to compare his before and after the transformation that will become relevant when discussing the importance of the issue raised.