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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 but does exhibit a similar situation that could befall 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 of this novella by helping him through his new transformed life. She assumes the role almost immediately as Gregor's caregiver by tending to his food needs and the cleaning duties of his room. She went and left a dish full of milk and bread for him to eat (Kafka 106). This kind thought could have been motivated by the thinking that Gregor was still a human being stuck in a cockroach body; thus it made sense that he would enjoy his previous favourite food when he was in human form. In this context, we can interpret the bread and milk as a symbol for the sympathy that the family feels for Gregor's situation. On the one hand, the family is irritated that he had become a cockroach, and the other they partially understand that this wasn't his choice. The family's situation can

be seen clearly in the words of the Chief Clerk, “you’re neglecting your official duties” (96) as Gregor was previously the bread winner for the family helping his father and family out of debt. The actions of his sister at the beginning do reveal that they are indeed concerned at some level. After it became apparent to his sister that he had not drunk any of the milk and bread, she went and took the effort to prepare an alternative meal. This meal consisted primarily of garbage (109). The garbage, while heralded as exactly what was needed by Gregor, can be symbolized as the family’s loss of interest in his struggle, and thereby lack of compassion. This transition utilizing the highlighted symbolism can be seen as a foreshadowing for how his relationship with his sister and family develops. 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 blur the embarrassment of the whole thing” (115). Rowe does suggest, however, that if Grete had “demonstrated in her demeanor and actions that she still believed there was a human being underneath the insect” (Rowe 277), it may have reduced the stress on Gregor. Just the simple act of “[w]itnessing” his struggle, as the only person that even seems to watch his progress is the charwoman. It is clear however that the charwoman’s presence annoys Gregor as after a period of her visiting him, he made to attack her (Kafka 132). Grete’s role in the household began to take a larger piece of the family unit as she filled the role of the leader in the family, she became less inclined to maintain the work that she had once done to keep Gregor’s room clean.

As the permanent nature of Gregor’s condition sets in with the family, the care from his sister deteriorates and begins to instigate a negative reaction in Gregor. This deterioration as described by Rowe as “Moral exhaustion,” which describes the “loss, however temporary, of one’s normal caring and empathetic attitudes and reactions to the ill person” and poses as the main “threat to the patients humanity” (Rowe 275, 275, 275). This transition was in part due to his sister 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. Her lack of remarks on him “[having] a good appetite today” or how the food had “hardly been touched” (111, 111) were noticed by Gregor. 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 however 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). If we take a step back however, Cantrell suggests that it may be hard to see exactly that Gregor is still Gregor, given that from the families perspective, he is just “a gigantic insect who is incapable of work” (Cantrell 581). This seems to come back to the idea of “Memory” as suggested by Rowe. His family never really saw much of him prior to his transformation, and as a result, they have very little to work with in order to justify their efforts (Rowe 277). Even the simple act of him crawling on a wall within view of his mother resulted in another fainting spell, and stirred his sister to exclaim ““Ooh, Gregor!” [...] brandishing her fist and glowering at him” (Kafka 122) as if his mother’s fainting was his fault directly. These actions led up to his depression that eventually resulted in his death.

Up to Gregor’s demise, there were periods of neglect from his family. At the point when Gregor’s sister suggests to move the furniture out of his room, Cantrell notes that Grete is “virtually nameless” and only being referred to as “Gregor’s sister” (Cantrell 584, 584). At this point, Grete has already established some power in the family, and we are faced with some obvious imagery such as after Gregor came to her when she was playing the violin and sat with her hand placed on her fathers neck (Kafka 140). She even became confident enough in her new role to suggest that “[w]e must try and get rid of [Gregor]” (138). Grete had become tired of dealing with the troubles of her brother. Her attempt to rationalize this decision comes from her justification that they had already done “as much as humanly possible to try and look after it and tolerate it” and that “[y]ou just have to put it from your mind any thought that it’s Gregor” (138, 139). Her parents seem resistant to the idea that they should get rid of Gregor however. Her father then turns to Grete for what they should do with him (139). Their primary issue was that they thought that Gregor could not understand them, and as a result, they couldn’t come “to some sort of settlement with him” (139). This

highlights the communication barrier that was established after the metamorphosis. The “fear of shame, habit of secrecy” (Cantrell 585) that surrounds the family prevents them from seeking help from someone outside the family, leaving Gregor in the sole hands of his family. Eventually, Gregor decided that he was indeed causing too much trouble for his family. Motivated by the fact that “[h]is conviction that he needed to disappear was, if anything, still firmer than his sister’s” (Kafka 141), Gregor died of self-inflicted starvation.

What we can determine from the flow of the plot-line leading up to Gregor’s suicide and his sisters involvement was that his family played a heavy role in motivating his decision. Her good nature showed through with her care of Gregor. Human nature stepped in however with the recognition that their misfortunes were of greater need of their attention than it was to give sympathy to Gregor. Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” explores the role of the family unit in times of familial instability. It can be concluded that the family unit plays an important role in dealing with illness.

Works Cited

Cantrell, Carol H. "The "Metamorphosis": Kafka's Study of a Family." *Modern Fiction Studies* 23.4 (Winter 1977). Last updated - 2013-02-24: 578. Web.

This article focuses on the family structure that is changing within the novella. Their relationships are explored which yields an interesting contrast to my own interpretations of these happenings.

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. Web.

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.