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A Marxist and Psychoanalytical Criticism of *The Metamorphosis*

“When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka 1). And thus begins one of the most shocking, memorable, and disgusting tales of classic literature. *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka, is the story of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, who wakes up one morning in his parent’s home and finds himself unable to go to his hated job due to the fact that he has transformed into a gigantic bug. Due to this metamorphosis, his family must find out how to survive without him and he eventually dies alone in his room. This long-short story, as it has been categorized, may often leave a reader confused and looking beyond the story for a deeper meaning. The man sized cockroach, or dung beetle, is at the same time both fascinating and gross. The book itself becomes a sort of twisted pleasure to read and enjoy. On first read, many readers are confused by the structure of the narrative and the lack of events that keep the book moving along. The fact that the entire story is told from the perspective of a man size bug locked in his room causes many readers to become bored. As a teacher, I lead my senior class every year down the path of Kafka challenging them to look for a deeper meaning to the story than just the narrative of the bug. This often leads to some very interesting conversations about Kafka, existentialism, symbolism, and family relationships. This discussion, as I have learned in the last month, could go much further if different styles of critical theory were applied to *The Metamorphosis*. Literary criticism, according to Lois Tyson’s book *Critical Theory Today*, “tries to explain the literary work to us: its production, its meaning, its design, its beauty” (Tyson 6). On the other hand we have critical theory which “tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest” (6). Using the theories of Marxists and Psychoanalytical Criticism, I plan to find alternative ways to view Franz Kafka’s most famous work.

I chose to dissect *The Metamorphosis* from Psychoanalytic point of view first because of the complicated family relationships that exist in the story. Through this interpretation I plan to prove that Kafka, through the eyes of Gregor Samsa, was expressing the repressed hatred he had for his father and how, in turn, it caused him to write an extended suicide note to the world. The story of Gregor Samsa unwinds in the form of flashbacks throughout the novel. What we find out about him is that he was working at a job he hated as a traveling salesman to earn enough money to pay back his parents debt. In the meantime, his parents and sister have become lazy and useless. Gregor has had this job for five years and believes that it will take another five or six to pay off the debt. Readers often ask, "Why isn't the rest of the family working?" This is never fully explained in the story, but the assumption is that they have grown accustomed to being taken care of by Gregor. This presumptuous attitude is personified by Gregor’s father. “They had just gotten used to it, the family as well as Gregor, the money was received with

pleasure, but no special feeling of warmth went with it anymore” (Kafka 27). Once his father finds out that Gregor can no longer work, due to his unfortunate transformation, he becomes angry at the sight of him. On first seeing him the novel says, “With a hostile expression his father clenched his fist, as if to drive Gregor back into his room” (15). Two other times in the novel when Gregor is out of his room his father is the one to forcefully return him to his “prison.” The first time he uses a cane, a newspaper, and his large boots to scare him back into his room. The second time he bombards him with apples until one penetrates him and is the catalyst that leads to his eventual death. Both times he is treated violently due to the disgust his father carries for him. This disgust and hatred stems from the fact that Gregor is now useless to him. Before his transformation, his father used him for support but now he finds no reason for his existence. As the story progresses the family is forced to work and take care of themselves. This treatment of a son by his father was echoed in Kafka’s own life. In a letter written by Kafka, putting words in his father’s mouth, to himself he says, “You are unfit for life; but in order to be able to settle down in it comfortably, without worries and without self-reproaches, you prove that I have deprived you of all your fitness for life and put it into my pockets” (Kafka, Dearest 195). Many people who read *The Metamorphosis*, and know about Kafka’s life, comment on the similarities between Samsa and Kafka. In fact, many believe that Samsa, the Czech word for “I am alone,” is a cryptogram for Kafka. (Kafka 64)

Psychoanalytical Criticism would look at this complicated family relationship and question the events of Samsa and Kafka’s childhood. What caused the anger and hostility from father to son? Why does Kafka seem useless to his own father? Why is Samsa/Kafka’s reaction to his father’s rejection so passive? Psychoanalysts would answer most of these questions through the explanations of defense and regression. Defenses are, “the processes by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious” (Tyson 15). Regression is defined as, “the temporary return to a former psychological state, which is not just imagined but relived” (15). Samsa’s defenses are both literal and figurative. He refuses to support the family anymore and so he confines himself to his room. This act of rebellion against his father is the only freedom he is able grasp onto. His regression is typified by his metamorphosis, his escapes from the room, and his death. Ironically, through his metamorphosis and eventual death, Samsa finally finds true freedom from his father’s tyrannical rule over the house. Once he does die his family’s reaction is odd. They are relieved to have him gone and feel free of the burden of him. Through Gregor’s death the family is liberated. Many critics have seen this novel as an extended suicide note:

Suicide seems to Kafka, it is true, a “rejecting” of all responsibilities and hence a liberation, but at the same time a betrayal on all sides – a betrayal of the family and betrayal of writing. In the same way, it is true, the metamorphosis is a rejection of all responsibility, but it is, at the same time, a betrayal of the family. As Kafka’s suicide would rob him of the chance to test himself in both camps – of literature and of life – so the metamorphosis cheats Gregor of the rewards which a conscious retreat into inwardness could bring him. The

dominant element in both cases is bitterness and negative feeling toward the family, and guilt feelings toward it as well. (Sokel 86-88)

One could say that Kafka is filled with the fear of abandonment, betrayal, and low self-esteem. These anxieties, especially the fear of abandonment, have led him to be obsessed with death. According to Tyson, "Death is the ultimate abandonment: no matter how close we are to our loved ones, no matter how important we are in our communities, when we die we die alone" (22). When Gregor Samsa dies, he dies alone in his room after a total rejection by his family. "His conviction that he would have to disappear was, if possible, even firmer than his sister's... Then, without his consent, his head sank down to the floor, and from his nostrils streamed his last weak breath" (Kafka 54). Through a Psychoanalytical approach to *The Metamorphosis* one can clearly see that Franz Kafka was showing, through the life of Gregor Samsa, the hatred and contempt his father felt for him that caused him to have thoughts of suicide. Although Kafka never killed himself, his famous novel paints a picture of a man who feels that his family would be better off without him. This critical approach to the novel would lead one to investigate other forms of rejection that Kafka experienced in life as detailed by two of his books, *Letters to Felice*, a woman Kafka was engaged to twice but never married, and *Letters to his Father*, which details the oppressive life his father forced on him.

The second type of criticism I decided to apply to *The Metamorphosis* is Marxist Criticism. I feel that through a Marxist reading of the novel one can get a greater appreciation for the socioeconomic stress that was placed on Gregor Samsa's life due to his job. It is baffling to the first time reader of *The Metamorphosis* that after Gregor wakes up one morning changed into a monstrous vermin that he spends the next 3-5 pages discussing nothing except for his work. The idea of grasping his transformation is given hardly any thought, yet his hatred for his job and desire to still make it to work on time consumes him. Gregor has become a commodity to his family and his boss. According to Tyson, "I commodify human beings when I structure relations with them to promote my own advancement financially or socially" (Tyson 62). Through a Marxist reading of the novel, one can clearly see that the only escape from his hated job, and being a commodity, is for Gregor to change externally, internally, and to defy the system in which he lives.

The first and most obvious change for Gregor is his external change. It says in the first sentence of the novel that he was changed into a "monstrous vermin" (Kafka 1). Never has anyone been so affected by the "rat race" as Gregor. Some believe that his change is a result of his job. Others believe that his change is to protect him against his work. While still others hypothesize that Gregor never changes at all and that the metamorphosis is a symbol of the tuberculosis that Kafka caught and died of in his own life. In any case, Gregor's change gets him out of physically going to work. He can hardly get out of bed, how will he catch the train and make sales as a traveling salesman? The most obvious revolt against his job due to his physical transformation is when he scares the manager out of the house. If you hate your job and your boss, one of the benefits of being a giant cockroach has to be frightening your boss! This is a clear revolt against what Tyson labels as Classism, "an ideology that equates one's value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs" (Tyson 59). As Gregor is chasing his always

suspicious manager out of the house, one can almost hear the rebellion against classism beginning. Speaking of hatred of his job now would be a good time to list the reasons why. Through this list we can get a better picture of what a Marxist critic would call classist and capitalistic values. They are as follows: constantly being on the road, worrying of changing trains, eating bad food, new faces everyday, no relationships that last, getting up early, a boss who talks down from his desk to the employees, not being allowed to miss work due to sickness, and constantly being under suspicion. Gregor has to work at this job in order to pay off his parent's debts. He has had the job for five years and believes it will be six more before the debt is gone. This forced dedication to his work sounds more like slavery. In the story, according to Marxist Criticism, his boss and his family represent the privileged upper class of society and Gregor represents the working class. While Gregor works hard his family sits around the house, reads the paper, get fat, play the violin and have a cooking and cleaning woman serve them. His boss sits up high in the office to symbolically represent the upper class. In one of Gregor's fantasies he imagines knocking the boss off of his high horse. "If I didn't hold back for my parent's sake, I would have quit long ago, I would have marched up to the boss and spoken my piece from the bottom of my heart. He would have fallen off the desk!" (Kafka 4). This description of his family and boss would represent what Marxist believe to be the aristocracy, "they enjoy luxurious lifestyles, are least affected by economic recessions, and have a great deal of financial security" (Kafka 55). But since Gregor is enslaved to his job, he can only imagine these types of freedoms. His physical change into a bug is a representation of his place in society due to his job and his symbolic freedom from that job.

The second way in which Gregor changes, is internally. In the beginning of the book, Gregor is focused on his job first, his family second, and himself last. After his change and the subsequent frightened manager, Gregor no longer thinks about his job. As the book develops he has less and less consideration for his parents and they begin to take over his role. The parents, as a representation of the upper class, become the working class and Gregor, who is waited upon, switches positions and symbolically becomes the upper class. His dad gets a job at the bank as a messenger, his mom sews lingerie for a department store, and his sister works as a salesgirl. All of these jobs represent a lower-class position in the world. They are forced to fire their cook, get a cheaper and quite dominant cleaning lady, and rent a room out to three boarders who treat them like servants. The Marxist viewpoint is quite clear. To be free one must work. To be waited upon is the equivalent to becoming a monstrous vermin. It is ironic that through Gregor's transformation he changes into what he used to hate – a vermin who sucks the life out of his host. This praise of the working man and obvious criticism of capitalism and the upper class is a distinct Marxist belief. According to Tyson, Marxists believe that an, "analysis of human events and productions focuses on relationships among socioeconomic classes, both within a society and among societies, and it explains all human activities in terms of the distribution and dynamics of economic power" (Tyson 54). Furthermore, the only way to be free of the vermin of society is to let them die alone. When Gregor dies, his father says, "now we can thank God!" (Kafka 55). This relief from the oppression of the symbolic upper class is reason enough for gratitude to the most high.

The third way in which Gregor changes, is his complete defiance of the system in which he lives in. He rejects his responsibilities, he takes advantage of his family, and he becomes the symbolic anti-Christ. Due in large part to his new found characteristics, Gregor no longer has to work, clean up after himself, or choose his own food. His family suffers monetarily in trying to fend for themselves and lower themselves in society due to their new jobs. But the most important factor is that Gregor rages against the system by becoming the symbolic anti-Christ. The mockery, or critique of organized religion is what makes this third transformation so evidently Marxist. The story of Gregor Samsa is the reverse story of the Christ. In the beginning of the story he is their savior. They rely on him for everything and he takes care of their every need. This would correlate well with the idea that Marx stated when he said that, "Religion is the opiate of the masses" (Tyson 59). His family is calm and passive when they are taken care of. It is only when they lose this salvation that they become alive and hard to manage. They are forced to make decisions without the guidance of their god. They then realize that they no longer need to follow, but can live their own lives and symbolically kill god when Gregor's father throws apples at him. The apple is an archetype for sin and the fact that the sin is the beginning of the end for Gregor reminds us of Christ on the cross. "But the very next one that came flying after it literally forced its way into Gregor's back; Gregor tried to drag himself away, as if the stinging, unbelievable pain might disappear with a change of place; but he felt nailed to the spot and stretched out his body in complete confusion of all his senses" (Kafka 39). To compare a religion's savior to a cockroach is quite an obvious way of criticizing organized religion. From that point on in the novel, the attitude towards Gregor, Gregor's view of life, and the details of the story change in a negative direction. When Gregor is finally rejected by every last member of his family he goes into his room and dies alone. When he dies though, something strange happens. "He remained in this state of empty and peaceful reflection until the clock tower struck three in the morning. He still saw that outside the window everything was beginning to grow light. Then, without his consent, his head sank down to the floor, and from his nostrils streamed his last breath" (Kafka 54). This is the conclusion of the comparison between Samsa and Christ. When Christ died it was three in the afternoon and it got dark out, when Gregor dies it is three in the morning and it grows light out. This reversal of the details furthers the anti-Christ qualities of Kafka's monstrous vermin. If the comparison is taken further, from a Marxist point of view, Gregor's family, who could be likened to Christians, are represented as ungrateful, selfish, and often disregard the sacrifice of their savior completely. This reversal of the Christ story, the comparison of Christ's death to a cockroach being killed, and depiction of religious followers all add to Gregor and Kafka's defiance of the system they live in. It is possible that Kafka was so fed up with the system in his own life that separated rich from poor, upper class from lower, and the "haves" and the "have-nots", that he decided to write a novel that takes dead aim at organized religion, people in power, and the disadvantages of a capitalistic society. Only through the transformed eyes of Gregor Samsa can a reader really see the world in a new way and view the socioeconomic oppression that was dictating the events of his life. Franz Kafka suggests through *The Metamorphosis* that the common man must take life into his own hands or someday he will be consumed by the system he lives in.

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