

# *The Metamorphosis: A Tale of Two Metamorphoses?*

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**Abstract:** Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a novella which depicts alienation of a modern man in the most dreadful manner. It starts with the transformation of Gregor Samsa, the protagonist, into a bug and the author depicts the story of his gradual separation from his family and his consequent death in a very moving way. We get a detailed description of the gradual encroachment of an insectile character on his human character. However, the transformation takes place very abruptly at the beginning of the story and we are not offered an adequate account of Gregor's mental metamorphosis, except for some of his reflections on his past, which must have led to the physical metamorphosis. Interestingly enough, along with the description of Gregor's coming in terms with his new insect body, we are given a very significant and elaborate depiction of the mental change of Gregor's sister Grete. We may apparently think that she steadily develops into an adult and assumes a new individual identity. Nevertheless, the continuous loss of her innocence and tenderness of mind is a remarkable feature of her mental development. And there are scopes to argue that actually it is with the rendition of her mental decadence that Kafka has substituted the account of Gregor's mental change which he has gone through prior to his physical transformation. And, the novella ends with a very strong indication that Grete is also heading towards the miserable fate as Gregor did. This paper discusses these two transformations as complementary to each other by showing parallels of the situations that set off the process of change in these two victims of capitalist society, and by emphasizing the fate of an alienated modern man represented by these two siblings.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a sad story about a man's miserable experience of being transformed into an insect. We feel pity for Gregor Samsa, the protagonist, for the most unusual misfortune he is struck with, which gradually leads to his tragic death. Kafka renders the story of Gregor's physical metamorphosis, that is, his transformation into a "monstrous vermin," that ultimately results into the total loss of his human self, with minute details. Besides the gradual unfolding screen of the after-effects of Gregor's physical change on his family and his new self, which is half human and half insect, the development in Grete's character is another noteworthy aspect of the story. The way Grete Samsa, Gregor's beloved sister, develops rapidly throughout the novella offers us a clear idea about how a person in the modern times goes

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through a psychological metamorphosis losing all tender human feelings in the clutches of a capitalist society. In fact, I want to argue that Grete's mental transformation is complementary to Gregor's physical metamorphosis. Thus, Grete's psychological metamorphosis is a significant aspect of the story, without which our understanding of the nature of Gregor's metamorphosis will remain incomplete.

The reason I am arguing that Gregor's physical transformation and Grete's mental change are complementary is because there are very strong similarities between the situations which set off the process of their transformation; and while going through it both of them have to forgo their tenderness of mind and embrace a very materialistic perspective of life. First, Gregor was bound to take up the whole economic responsibility of the family because his father seemed so much shattered after his business disaster that Gregor, being a grown up son, did not want him to go through any further trouble worrying for the maintenance of the family. Since his mother was very ill and his sister was still a child, he took up the sole responsibility of running the family as well as paying off his father's debt. Similarly, after Gregor's metamorphosis, the family's most pathetic misfortune that 'none of their relatives and acquaintances had ever been hit' (Kafka, 31) with, Grete turns into an adult almost overnight taking the most difficult responsibility which her parents are unable to take up, namely the responsibility of handling Gregor. She has to take care of her parents also. In addition to that, she starts supporting the family economically by her small income that she earns as a sales girl. Second, both of them are victims of situation which makes them prioritize family responsibility over any other considerations for their own comfort and liking. In doing so, they have to sacrifice a lot. Both of them have to repress their soaring spirit free from the materialistic pursuit because of the pressure of family responsibility. Stanley Corngold has argued, "Gregor Samsa wants to live as an artist" (Corngold, 81), and we come to know from Gregor's mother's account that he is very good at woodwork. But he ends up living a miserable life as a traveling salesman. Similarly, Grete sacrifices her love for music and becomes a sales girl. Third, though they give in to their miserable fate, we see them still clinging to the least hope of freeing themselves. So, even after his metamorphosis Gregor daydreams that he will one day quit this grueling job and free himself after paying off his parents' debt even though it will take another five or six years. In the same way, Grete also has not forsaken her violin. We see her playing it even in a very depressing situation after the family has taken in three roomers to meet up the expenses of keeping the big flat and is constantly anxious about keeping them pleased. But finally they cannot sustain their dreams and have to surrender to capitalism which strips humans of their humanity. The result is alienation, "a characteristic feature of modern capitalism and of the commodity fetishism whose devaluation of the human world is proportional to its overvaluation of



things" (David Macey, 7), of which Gregor's situation can be considered an epitome. And it could be deduced from the parallels between Grete's situation and that of Gregor that a similar fate is also awaiting her. The novella starts with Gregor's physical metamorphosis and ends with Grete's mental metamorphosis, both combined together show the complete metamorphosis of a human being.

Prior to and after his metamorphosis, Gregor's life has been the sum of two things - family responsibility and his job. He was the sole provider of his family. He was so selfless and so dedicated towards the wellbeing of his family that he had been doing it for the last five years without any complaint. From the description of his thoughts just after he discovers himself as a bug it becomes very clear that his first priority is his job. So, we find him concerned only about how to catch the next train, and thus save his job so that he can sustain the family. We even see Gregor inquisitive enough about the navigation of his new body that he cannot control at the beginning just because he wants to get rid of bed in order to catch the next train. Then forgetting all his intention of not letting his family know what has actually happened to him, he desperately defends himself against the charges the office manager has brought against him and even tries to stop the manager from going away from his house. When the manager in his fears is running away from his flat, he is occupied with the thought: "The manager must be detained, calmed down, convinced, and finally won over; Gregor's and his family's future depended on it" (Kafka, 13). At his plight we do not see Gregor giving a thought about what will happen to him now that he has turned into a bug. Responsibilities towards his family dictates his thought making him forget about his own self for which he has not had enough time for the last five years, that is, ever since he got the job of a stock clerk. Thus we can say that his mental metamorphosis has taken place long ago, ever since he has ceased to have any concern towards his own needs as a human being such as love, friendship, socialization- in a nutshell, any kind of human relationship which gives meaning to a human life. Being alienated from his own family, colleagues and society as a whole, Gregor was in fact not leading a human life. As Gregor himself laments about the kind of job he has taken up:

What a grueling job I've picked! Day in, day out- on the road! The upset of doing business is much worse than the actual business in the home office, and besides, I've got the trouble of traveling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable food at all hours, constantly seeing new faces, no relationships that last or get more intimate. (3-4)<sup>1</sup>

So we can say that since he had not been leading a real human life, he was not that shocked at the transformation of his human body, because he had already been turned into an insect mentally a long back. Thus it could be said that the novella starts with Gregor's physical metamorphosis which was preceded by a prior metamorphosis - a mental one - of which we do not get an elaborate account at the beginning.

The only thing that ties Gregor with his parents after his father's business disaster is money. The way Gregor's parents expect him to serve for the family reminds us of what Marx said in *The Communist Manifesto* that "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (Vincent B. Leitch, 771). From Gregor's recollection of the past, we come to know how he started to work with special ardor and had risen from stock clerk to traveling salesman almost overnight. His success on the job enabled him to earn a lot of money which he gave to his astonished and delighted family. Here Gregor also remembers that his family soon got used to receiving the money.

. . .the money was received with thanks and given with pleasure, but no special feeling of warmth went with it any more. (20)

This means that his parents took for granted that Gregor would do so for ever. Again, Gregor is surprised to know, though he also appreciates his father's foresight, after his metamorphosis that in spite of all their misfortunes, a bit of capital "a very little bit, certainly, was still intact from the old days" (Kafka, 21), of which he had had no idea so far. He also learns that the money that he gave to his family every month had never been completely used up and has accumulated into a tidy principal. His parents' hiding these facts about money shows they have become extremely selfish which made them indifferent towards Gregor's hardship and self sacrifice. Gregor cannot help mention after discovering all this that if he had been given back this unused money, he could have got rid of his job much earlier. Gregor is simply a moneymaking machine to his parents. He is valued by them as long as he can serve them, but when he turns into a bug he becomes a burden to them. The fact that Gregor has now become a trouble for the family is manifested in Gregor's father's attitude towards him right after his metamorphosis. The final declaration of Grete that they have to get rid of 'it' gives expression to the fact that Gregor no longer has any right to be cared for by his family because he cannot provide for them any more.

After Gregor's metamorphosis, it is very clear that Grete is the only member of the family who really cares for Gregor without any expectation or benefit. She is full of concern and sympathy for her brother and tries to comfort him as much as is humanly possible in such a situation. And we see that the only reciprocal mental bond Gregor has retained still to the present is that with Grete. So, in his plight to stop the manager from going away, he laments that his sister is not there, because he is sure that "she would have shut the front door and in the foyer talked him out of his scare" (Kafka, 13). After the fact of Gregor's transformation is revealed to his family, it is Grete, the most sensitive member of the family, who dares enter his room on her free will to have a look at her dear brother, because she was not present in the scene when Gregor opened the door and came out of his room in the morning. Though she becomes very frightened at



Gregor's sight and slams the door shut, she immediately opens the door again to show "as if she felt sorry for her behavior" (Kafka, 17). Her concern for Gregor's feeling shows she is still very attached to her brother and treats him actually as a human being, not as a bug. She also takes the responsibility of feeding Gregor, because it seems his parents are so preoccupied with their own troubles that it probably does not occur to them that Gregor must have food even though he has turned into a bug. So, in the evening Grete puts in his room "a bowl filled with fresh milk, in which small slices of bread were floating" (Kafka, 16), because milk used to be Gregor's favourite drink.

Grete's concern for Gregor's needs and comfort after his metamorphosis is a significant aspect of the novella, which highlights her untainted humane attributes. Early in the morning when she enters Gregor's room, Gregor wonders whether she will notice that he has left the milk standing, which indicates that he expects her to do so. And we find that she notices it at once as expected by Gregor.

She carries the bowl out and brings him a wide assortment of things, all spread out on an old newspaper: old, half-rotten vegetables; bones left over from the evening meal, caked with congealed white sauce; some raisins and almonds; a piece of cheese, which Gregor had declared inedible; a plain slice of bread, a slice of bread and butter, and one with butter and salt. (18)

From this wide variety Gregor is able to choose food which now satisfies his insectile appetite. She chooses food items for Gregor having in mind that his appetite has now changed along with his physical transformation. She is also alert enough to leave Gregor alone in the room so that he can eat comfortably according to his choice without being bothered by anyone. At this point she understands Gregor's feeling perfectly. She leaves the room because she understands Gregor will not eat in front of her. From then she starts serving him food twice every day. At this stage she is also concerned about whether Gregor is eating properly or not. Her response is mentioned in the text as "sighs and appeals to the saints" (Kafka, 19) as she doesn't speak to Gregor directly. Because she as well as her parents does not expect that Gregor could understand anymore what they say. She is seen to be happy when Gregor eats properly and she is sad when she finds he has left everything. She also does not fail to notice that Gregor's armchair is standing by the window, which makes her understand that Gregor wants to look out of the window. So, she pushes the chair back to the same place each time she finishes cleaning his room. Not only that, from that time onward she also leaves the inside casement of the window open.

However, the description of how lovingly and delicately Grete treats her brother during their first encounter after Gregor's metamorphosis also contains signs that a process of change, though she is unaware of it, has already started in her mind.

There are indications at this point that she has started isolating herself from Gregor. When she takes away the bowl of milk from Gregor's room, she does so "not with her bare hands, of course, but with a rag" (Kafka, 17). Using a rag to carry the bowl suggests that she has started treating Gregor as an insect, though unconsciously. Again, the quickness of her changing attitude towards Gregor can be traced from the fact that at first she is treating him as a human, so she serves him food in a bowl, a piece of crockery used by humans, but when she brings him food for the second time she serves them on an old newspaper, a typical way of treating insects. This swift change of her mind might result from the fact that before serving Gregor the bowl of milk she had not seen Gregor's insect form. So he was still a human to her. After she saw him, his insectile existence became a reality for her though it does not affect her care for him for the time being. Again, after Gregor has finished eating, she sweeps up with a broom "not only his leavings, but even the foods which Gregor had left completely untouched- as if they too were no longer usable" (Kafka, 18). It is no wonder that a human being will never think of eating from the leftover of an insect, even if it has not touched the item.

The first sign of a conscious change in Grete's psyche is found when she deliberately lies to her father while reporting to him that Gregor has broken out. Gregor comes out of his room in the second part of the novella as a consequence of Grete's attempt to remove some of the furniture of his room. When she decides to evacuate Gregor's room, her intention is to make enough room for him to crawl on an altogether wider scale. But as her mother objects to her plan saying that by doing that they will actually be showing Gregor that they have given up all hope of his getting better, she insists on removing all the furniture except the couch. At this point her stubbornness is described as partly 'childish defiance', partly 'self-confidence' and partly 'romantic enthusiasm of girls her age'. Whatever the case is, she is showing her authority which she has acquired recently over Gregor's affairs since she is now considered as a "well-qualified expert" on these matters. As Gregor's mother faints when she catches a sight of his gigantic body on the flowered wallpaper, he comes out of his room following his sister in order to help her nurse their mother, forgetting that he actually cannot help her or at least she does not expect him to help her. After he realizes that he cannot do anything, he begins to crawl over everything which as Kevin W. Sweeney has put it, is "an insect's instinctive response to a frightening situation" (Stanley Corngold, 40), and finally in desperation he falls down onto the middle of the big table. He remains there until his father comes home. Although it could be argued that it is not possible for Grete to understand her brother's intention of coming out, it can easily be deduced that in reporting to her father about how Gregor came out of his room, she deliberately hides facts in order to save herself from being rebuked. Because she knows her father will not approve of what she intended to do. As a result of her report Gregor's father



becomes very hostile towards him and starts throwing apples at him in a way that Gregor feels that "his father was determined to bombard him" (Kafka, 28) to drive him back to his room. Gregor becomes seriously injured during this incident and suffers over a month from the wound on his back.

In the rest of the story after Gregor's being injured Grete's mental degeneration is very rapid and her lack of concern and warmth for Gregor becomes very explicit. She very soon gets a job of a sales girl and starts to support the family economically. She becomes too busy to look after Gregor's needs. Still now she serves Gregor's food, but does it in a most indecent way- "before running to business morning and afternoon, [she] hurriedly shoved any old food into Gregor's room with her foot" (Kafka, 32). Because of her negligence in cleaning Gregor's room, it starts getting dirty, but she does not allow anyone else to clean it either. Her psychological metamorphosis becomes complete as she announces after Gregor offends the roomers by coming out of his room to the living room while his sister is playing her violin, that things cannot go on like this and that they have to get rid of "it." Totally carried away by her frustration at the depressing situation, she declares to her father –

You just have to try to get rid of the idea that it's Gregor. Believing it for so long, that is our real misfortune. But how can it be Gregor? If it were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that it isn't possible for human beings to live with such a creature, and he would have gone away of his own free will. Then we wouldn't have a brother, but we'd be able to go on living and honor his memory. (38)

These harsh words have such a strong impact on Gregor that he dies that very night losing his last reason for living. Being treated by his beloved sister so harshly, Gregor no longer wants to live. He was already very ill and weak because of the wound on his back and because of starving for so long. But her words hammer the last nail on his coffin. With the utterance of these words she finally negates any kind of mental bond with Gregor altogether and denies any responsibility towards him.

If we are to understand the cause of Gregor's metamorphosis and Grete's indicated upcoming metamorphosis, we have to look closely at the society and time they live in. They are the members of the working class of a modern society where "workers are bereft of their full humanity and are thought of as 'hands' or 'the labour force', so that, for instance, the effects of industrial closures are calculated in purely economic terms. People, in a word, become things" (Peter Barry, 157). Gregor, while planning for catching the next train, worries about being reported to the boss of his not catching the morning train and mentions the messenger boy who had been waiting at the five-o'clock train to monitor whether Gregor is doing his job accordingly or not. Here he calls the boy 'a tool of the boss, without brains or backbone" (Kafka, 5). Gregor's own situation is no better.

If we see Gregor's record with the firm we find that he had not been sick even once during his five years of service. It is hard to believe that a person does not fall ill even for once during such a long period of time. The message we get from here is that it is not that he did not fall ill but that he could not afford to be ill and neglect his duties to the firm. Gregor mentions that in the past he sometimes felt 'some kind of slight pain' (Kafka, 6) but he had to ignore it and get to work. We clearly understand why he had to do so. Because if he did not go to work, the boss would come with the health-insurance doctor who would undoubtedly establish that he is absolutely fine, but afraid to work. And when the manager himself arrives in his house, Gregor is upset at the thought that he has to work for a firm where at the slightest omission they immediately suspect the worst. In his desperate attempt to save himself from the allegations his boss brings against him, he says –

A man might find for a moment that he was unable to work, but that's exactly the right time to remember his past accomplishments and to consider that later on, when the obstacle has been removed, he's bound to work all the harder and more efficiently. (13)

But unfortunately the society he lives in does not have an industry or organization which looks at such situations so sympathetically. Rather, it blames or fires workers if they cannot perform as is desired of them, as Marx has argued in *The Critique of Capitalism*:

The capitalist discharges him whenever he thinks fit, as soon as he no longer gets any profit out of him, or not the anticipated profit. But the worker, whose sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labour, cannot leave the whole class of purchasers, that is, the capitalist class, without renouncing his existence. He belongs not to this or that capitalist but to the capitalist class, and moreover, it is his business to dispose of himself, that is, to find a purchaser within this capitalist class. (Robert C. Tucker, 205)

And so the manager does not pay any heed to what Gregor says. In fact, he even does not understand a word of Gregor's long speech which is no more intelligible by any humans and he runs away in fear. After that there is no mention of Gregor's firm in the text. Because his 'labour power' has completely been exhausted, the firm does not need him anymore and will recruit a new 'hand'. Then he is gradually rejected by all the members of his family and meets his tragic end.

Grete's new role in the family also foreshadows Gregor's terrible fate. She is getting busier day by day as we see that besides her job she is now learning "shorthand and French in the evenings in order to get a better position some time in the future" (Kafka, 30). It is understandable how much time she gets for herself and her family after spending the whole day on the job and the evening in attaining new skills. In this lifestyle she loses her softer feelings and gradually



becomes mechanical, which is directly mentioned in the scene where we see her wiping off her tears with mechanical movements of her hand while she stresses the family's need of getting rid of Greogor. Thus, it is easily deducible that she will also become alienated from her surroundings very soon. The most interesting thing to notice towards the end of the novella is that her physical features have been highlighted once the mental degeneration is complete. Gregor notices that she has started to keep her neck bare without a ribbon or collar ever since she has started going out for work. And at the end while the family is taking a tour to the open country on the outskirts of the city, Grete is seen to stretch her young body. The reference to her 'body' could be read as an indication that now is the starting point of her physical degeneration. Thus it is possible to read *The Metamorphosis* as a story of two metamorphoses in which one (Gregor's) has been elaborated and the other (Grete's) has only been indicated. And as a whole, it is a tale of the terrible fate of the modern man in the era of capitalism.

### Notes

1. Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition of the text and the pages are cited in the parentheses.

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A Tagore painting