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Incapacity of the Moment: An Analysis of Inability and Transformation in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*

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Abstract

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is too long to be a short story and again shorter for a novel. Like the form of novella, the story also dwindle between choices: whether to accept the transformed life or to keep on living the same life that Gregor can no longer stand a moment. The novella is a process – a transformation along with its many problems and the incapacity of actually going for what is needed the most. The need perhaps is very ambiguous, considering the need of Gregor's family and the need of Gregor's, something which he only realized but could not have the means to fulfil.

Keywords

Transformation; Guilt; Need; Incapacity; Franz Kafka; *Metamorphosis*.



“As Gregor Samsa awoke from unsettling dreams one morning, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka 7). Thus begins Franz Kafka’s one of the most famous novellas. The story was written in the year 1912. Now by this time readers are very much surprised at what they have just read, but surprisingly enough not Gregor. He thought this as a nonsense from which he thought he could get out by merely sleeping it off. Gregor then thought what prospect his present condition could bring to him. The first option which comes to his mind is quitting the job. But does he really have an option? He had to first pay off the debt which his parents owe to his boss. He is living a borrowed life. Now Gregor can no longer work for his boss despite how much he needs to. And at the same time he totally despised the job. Is Gregor sick then? However, the health insurance doctor thinks that employees like Gregor are none but healthy and work-shy people. In fact Kafka too did not outrightly deny the statement; he merely asked the question as to how far the readers can go wrong in this case. Much time has been spent but Gregor has not got out of his present state as he wishes to. He has been summoned quite a number of times by his family members, to which he only answered with a voice which is not quite of his own. It is as if something is tampering with his voice. His mother seriously thinks he is sick. But what is he sick for he does not necessarily mull over. Instead, and interestingly enough, he still believes he can continue with the job. He does not acknowledge the gravity of the situation or the rationality of it for that matter: as he simply cannot continue his work.

The head clerk has come to interrogate about why Gregor is late today, why he has not boarded the earlier train. In his profession it appears that even the slightest mistake is strictly followed by his superiors, and failing which awaits Gregor a serious consequence. The gravity of the situation is stressed upon the very presence of the head clerk at Gregor’s house. He could not have sent anyone but himself. He wants Gregor to remind that he works for him and he is the authority. Now the authority has come to authorize in his house. But this power dynamics gets turned on its head when Gregor confronts the head

clerk. The authority which came to intimidate Gregor got intimidated. But the incapacity of the situation is that Gregor cannot see the edge he has over authority. The head clerk judged Gregor's intension and retreated when he came out of the room in order to make aware the authority of his situation. Gregor thought he did not intend to terrorize him. But that's exactly what he did. In his entire outward monstrosity he did exactly what he had always wanted to do:

But with Gregor's first words the head clerk had already turned away and with gaping lips simply looked back over his twitching shoulder at Gregor. And during Gregor's speech he did not stand still for a moment but crept step-by-step to the door, his eyes never leaving Gregor, as if obeying some secret injunction to leave the room. (Kafka 18)

Gregor's action now is not in the realm of intelligibility. The head clerk is not the only one who failed to understand him. When Mr. Samsa returned home one evening to hear the news that earlier in the day Gregor scared off his mother, as a result she fainted and now is unconscious; he became mad at Gregor in terror and started bombarding him with apples. Mr. Samsa did not care to value the whole situation. He reached to the conclusion that it is Gregor who caused violence. However, Gregor's father somehow thinks that this act of violence on the part of Gregor is expected of him. Now it shows that Mr. Samsa does no longer consider Gregor as a human being. To him Gregor is just another creature who is capable of "unspeakable" act of violence at times, and thus should be got rid of as soon as possible. Stanley Corngold defined *ungeheures ungeziefer* as "monstrous vermin", meaning unclean animal not suited for sacrifice; whereas Willa and Edwin Muir transformed Gregor into "gigantic insect". However Kafka regarded the thing to be an insect but denied Ottomar Starke, the illustrator of the first edition, to have it depicted. He said "The insect itself cannot be depicted. It cannot even be shown from a distance" (Jason Baker 178).

On another note, the apple incident takes our attention back to the mythic dimension of the origin of guilt committed by Adam and Eve. However, the same

guilt Gregor had borne ever since he was born. Only this time his father made it all the more burdensome by lodging the apple into his back. The guilt he had been carrying for so long has taken the form of a cancer in the shape of an apple.

Family expectations, the debt that Mr. Samsa owed to the boss – these are enough to make one’s life burdensome, which Gregor’s life was before the transformation. And after it he himself was too much for him to bear. To his family he is now an old invalid. There have been some changes in the Samsa household recently. An old charwoman has been appointed to take care of Gregor and his room since no member of his family could hardly manage time for Gregor, not even his sister who until recently had taken care of it. Old invalid things in the house now get dumped in Gregor’s room. So there is a lot of space now and that is why the family has come to the decision to let one room of the house to three gentleman boarders. They thought it would be beneficial for their financial condition too. Amid all these new arrangements Gregor is left alone. There is none for him except that he now has to share his room with other useless things in the house. It is not that Gregor is disgusted with the change, although he did not have much choice in the matter, at least he gets to see a varied things other than the same floor and the same ceiling. Gregor could not remember the last time he ate something. He has found his amusement in those useless things which the charwoman hurls into his room. He lost his appetite for food which he sees those three boarders eat everyday but he is hungry and is approaching to his death because he could not find anything worth eating: “I am hungry enough”, said Gregor to himself mournfully, “but not for these things. How these boarders stuff themselves and here I am starving to death” (Kafka 42).

The Samsa house is relatively new to sharing room with boarders. They have never done it and would probably not have done if Gregor’s sudden transformation had not happened. So they sometimes overworked to please theirs boarders. One such instance is when Gregor’s sister Grete played violin to amuse them. But it appears that they are not quite entertained; not because she

did not play well but, as it may be the case, they are not simply interested in it. But they enjoyed seeing Gregor who could no longer resist himself after listening to the sound of violin. He had always wanted to send Grete to the Conservatory, just could not say it in time. If only Grete could understand what he really wanted, why he has come to their presence, despite knowing the fact that anyone can hardly tolerate him now. Gregor made the last gasping effort to let the family know that he is not the beast that everyone is making him out to be. He is not a vermin as long as the taste for music lives in him. Kafka asks the same question too:

Was he a beast if music could move him so? He felt as though the path to his unknown hungers was being cleared. He was grimly determined to reach the sister and tug on her skirt to suggest that she take her violin and come into his room, for no one here was as worthy of her playing as he would be. (Kafka 44)

When Gregor died his body becomes completely flat, which makes one to indulge into thinking that perhaps this time his thin legs could carry his body without much effort – something earlier was not possible. He almost strikes a balance between his body and his thin legs, but only after death. Interestingly enough the entire story is about this: paying the debt his father owed, taking his sister to violin lesson, and more importantly quitting the tedious job. But all these remain undone. Gregor escaped into a subhuman form in order to be relieved of his responsibilities, which were oppressive for him. The cry for freedom had always been held back by his obligation to his family and also dependence on it. But Kafka realized that there is no place for Gregor on the face of this earth. And this calm recognition of the fact we find Gregor to acknowledge when he breathed his last breath. There are some facts in life that requires reconciliation: one such being the sense of being out of place, feeling unwanted. There is not much that Gregor could have done. In a letter to his fiancée Felice Bauer, Kafka too admits the same: “I, who for the most part have been a

dependent creature, have an infinite yearning for independence and freedom in all things” (Kafka 166-167).

The entire story may appear like an accident, an unfortunate event happened to poor Gregor. But what happens when Freud tells us that accidents are the mere consequences of a suppressed desire of guilt. Accidents are our own doings. It is a punishment which people subject themselves unconsciously. Kafka read Freud, he was very much aware of Freud’s works. He even mentioned him in one of diary entry. It is difficult to say if Freudian theory influenced his writing. But surely, thought of Freud hovered in his head while he wrote. The guilt in Gregor was overwhelming. He might not be aware of how dangerous it could be when it manifests itself. However it did manifest, in a way Gregor could only imagine in his dream. That is why he wanted to go to sleep again thinking that his transformation is merely a bad dream. But it was not to be. His dream became his nightmares and nightmares became his reality – something he felt coming for some time. The ending of the story is quite uncommon. The very fact that it has a proper ending unlike most of his works makes it all the more scrutinizing. It surely is his longest work which had been finished – a fact Kafka disapproved the most. Having an ending seemed an imperfection to him. Kafka once wrote after finishing the story to Felice: “only the ending as it is today does not make me feel glad, it could have better, there is no doubt” (Gray 91).

The story however ends optimistically with Grete stretching her young body to confirm the dream and intentions of finding a husband for her in near future. At the beginning of the story Gregor’s parents can dream, something readers did not see them having at the beginning of the story. The story has come to a full circle; well almost when we realize that Gregor’s death has brought new circumstances in which they will feel much alive with new hope and aspiration.

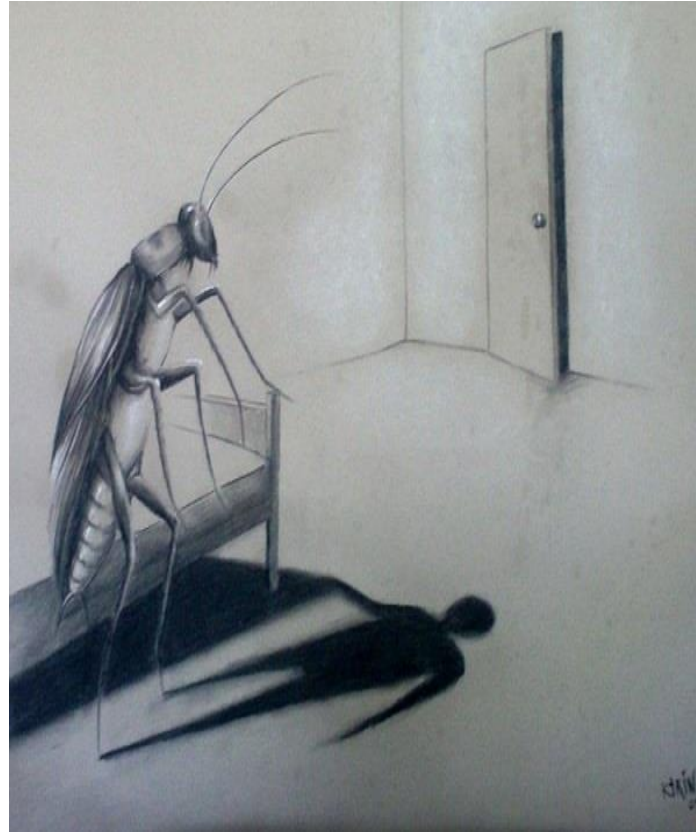


Fig. 1

Transformation of Gregor Samsa

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