

Allusions to Christ in The Metamorphosis

Suzanne Wolkenfeld

Suzanne Wolkenfeld is Assistant Professor of English at Fordham University. Wolkenfeld discusses the allusions to Christ that appear in *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor is both a seeker and giver of salvation. He makes the self-sacrificing commitment to help send his sister to college to study music, he longs for spiritual sustenance, and he dies by a kind of crucifixion under the weight of his family's persecution and neglect. Unlike Christ, however, Gregor does not rise upward toward divine salvation but sinks further downward to the level of an animal.

The profound resonance of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" derives from the multiplicity of the meanings of Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect. This symbolic multivalency resembles that of the dream image in which a variety of often incongruous meanings are condensed. The bizarre event that the story depicts is, in fact, presented as a dream come true, a realization of the unconscious feelings that trouble Gregor Samsa's sleep. Gregor's metamorphosis emerges as an externalization of his abject insect-like existence as a commercial traveler; as a regression into a primitive state motivated by his desire to escape the burden of tedious responsibility and the painfulness of the human condition; as a manifest sign of his alienation from himself and others. These patterns of meaning have been generally acknowledged and amply documented. The purpose of this note is to explore yet another meaning suggested by allusions to the Christ story. This Christian symbolism, which has probably gone unnoticed because it is sparsely sketched, is an essential element of the ironic pathos that pervades the final section of the work. Moreover, it provides another il-

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lustration of Kafka's tendency to project psychological drama into a theological perspective.

In the first two chapters of "The Metamorphosis," Kafka sets up certain parallels between Gregor and Christ that are later developed as an ironic parody. Gregor finds relief from his sterile servitude as a commercial traveler in doing fretwork. As a carpenter of sorts, he shadows Christ. A more substantial resemblance is established by Gregor's plan to culminate his self-sacrificing commitment to his family with a gift for his sister. On Christmas Day he will announce his decision to send her to the Conservatorium to study music. Gregor's Christmas announcement takes on the coloring of a redemptive act as Kafka proceeds to associate music with salvation.

Gregor is presented not only as a potential savior but also as a seeker of salvation. His longing for a more sustaining mode of life is reflected in his gradual loss of interest in any of the food offered him. Gregor points to the difference between his spiritual yearnings and the desires of people satisfied with the stuff of this life when he witnesses the lodgers enjoying their dinner: "I'm hungry enough," said Gregor sadly to himself, 'but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here I am dying of starvation!'"

Gregor's spiritual quest culminates in a scene in which music and food fuse into an image of salvation. Lured from his room by the sound of his sister's violin, he is mystically transported by the music and glimpses the salvation he has been seeking: "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved." Gregor's search for salvation is a failure. Cruelly rebuffed by the family, he returns to his room and resolves to die and thus rid them of their burden.

GREGOR'S CRUCIFIXION

The description of Gregor's death, though rooted in the family drama, is pervaded by crucifixion imagery:

The rotting apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, all covered with soft dust, already hardly troubled him. He thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible. In this state of vacant and peaceful meditation he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning. The first broadening of light in the world outside the window entered his consciousness once more. Then his head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last faint flicker of his breath.

The pain of the "rotten apple" and "soft dust," representative of his family's persecution and neglect, recede before a new spirit of forgiveness and love. As the apple and dust are emblematic of man's fallen state, Gregor's magnanimity is suggestive of Christ's ushering in the new dispensation. Gregor dies at the end of March at three o'clock, the time of the crucifixion, and his last gesture echoes the gospel description of Christ's death: "He bowed down his head and died."

The pathos of Gregor's "crucifixion" is both intensified and undercut by ironic inflections. The subtle reminders of Gregor's primitive insect nature as he dies undermines his resemblance to Christ. Gregor's state of "vacant and peaceful meditation" suggests not spiritual exaltation but the mindless vacancy of an animal. His dying gesture reminds us of the mechanical instinct that has replaced human will. He does not "bow" his head like Christ; it sinks to the floor "of its own accord."

Other discrepancies serve to further deflate the spiritual implications of the Christ parallel. Gregor dies not at three P.M., the hour of Christ's death, but at three A.M. No miraculous eclipse of the sun accompanies his death, but rather the natural rising of the sun. Instead of a spirit departing from his body, a flicker of breath leaves his nostrils. The death throes of a gigantic insect constitute a grotesque burlesque of Christ's crucifixion.

Kafka develops the consequences of Gregor's sacrifice in the same ironic mode. The family casts off its feelings of guilt as Mr. Samsa persuades the others to "let bygones be bygones." And with a spirit of revitalization, they set out to the country. But we have no sense of uplift at the new life Gregor's death has brought them. The family remains to us commonplace and unsympathetic.

Christ, like Gregor, undergoes a metamorphosis. As a mingling of the divine and the human, he represents the possibility of transcendence for man. Gregor's metamorphosis refutes this possibility. In his quest for salvation, Gregor does not rise upward toward the divine but sinks downward to an animal level. He is a martyr but his suffering is not redemptive. Through the ironic parallel of Gregor to Christ, Kafka points to the tragic discrepancy between the spiritual aspirations and animal limitations of man's nature.

CHAPTER 2

Themes in *The Metamorphosis*