

CHAPTER 3

The Psychology of *The Metamorphosis*

Conscious, Preconscious, and Unconscious in *The Metamorphosis*

Jean Jofen

Kafka scholar Jean Jofen, Ph.D., of Baruch College in New York, interprets *The Metamorphosis* on its conscious, preconscious, and unconscious levels. Kafka is conscious of portraying Gregor Samsa's father with a mixture of both power, weakness, and absurdity, to overcome the struggles with his own father and the demands of the capitalistic establishment within his society. On a preconscious level, Jofen explains, various symbols of sickness throughout the work suggest Kafka's fear of dying from tuberculosis, even though Kafka wrote the novella eight years before he actually contracted the disease. Finally, Jofen argues, Kafka's unconscious is revealed in the story through symbols Kafka himself does not understand. Gregor's mother's sexy garments and the surrogate role of the sister suggest an oedipal complex in the story, an unhealthy love for the mother, which may explain the theme of guilt and the need for punishment that runs through much of Kafka's work.

To understand *Metamorphosis*, we need to realize that Kafka does not identify "the abnormal" with "the bad." In a letter to his sister Ottila, he writes on Dec. 28, 1916: "The abnormal is not the worst, for we consider as normal (e.g. the World War) ."

In this paper, I will interpret *Metamorphosis* on three levels: the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious. The first level includes Kafka's relationship to his father and to his family, as well as his attitude to political, social and religious issues. The second level comprises the fear of an approaching illness and eventual death from tuberculosis. The third level

READINGS ON
THE METAMORPHOSIS

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describes the unconscious desires arising from Kafka's deep love for his mother (sister), with the concomitant fear and hatred of the father.

Kafka's relationship to his father is symbolized by the ruthless executioner in *The Penal Colony*. The connection between the father and the court is not accidental since Kafka's father was "Expert at the K.K. Country and Criminal Court." It is the father who wears the uniform in the home even when he sleeps.

Nevertheless, it has been noted by Kafka scholars such as Walter Sokel and Ingeborg Heuel, that the father figures in Kafka's work show a shocking double face, namely: "a mixture of authority, power and dignity on the one hand and senility, weakness and absurdity on the other hand." This outward show of strength combined with inner weakness is manifest in the father's original position vis à vis the lodgers and his relationship to his superiors on the job to whom he must listen (bringing them coffee and lunch), and is evidenced when all three members of the family have to write detailed letters of apology to their superiors even in a case of an absence because of a death in the family.

The portrayal of the father as weak is a futile attempt on Kafka's part to overcome his strong father. In his *Letter to my Father*, Kafka admits: "I have already indicated, that in my writing and other related matters, I have made slight attempts to be independent and to escape with only the smallest success; that these attempts will hardly ever be successful is indicated to me by many things."

Yet, in his work, Kafka accuses his father of complete neglect of the child. The authority figure (the chief clerk) in *Metamorphosis* is hard of hearing. Neither the father nor anyone else can understand what Gregor Samsa is saying. The father drives him away not with words but with a hissing noise. There is no verbal communication between them. . . .

In order to gain approval, the son feels called upon to perform superhuman feats (*The Hunger Artist*, *The Trapeze Artist*), but even these do not gain him any recognition. In real life, seeking approval from his father, Kafka began working the day after he finished his internship as lawyer and on his first job he had to work 8-10 hours daily, which gave him no time to write. This is reflected in *Metamorphosis*.

If a son sees a father as such a powerful figure, he must view himself as very small in relation to him. Much of the mis-

understanding in the interpretation of *Metamorphosis* comes from the fact that the first sentence has been wrongly translated: "Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt." (As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed, in his bed, into a gigantic insect.) The German word 'ungeheuer' does not only mean 'gigantic.' It can be translated as 'monstrous,' 'shocking' and 'frightful'. None of the translations imply large size. As a matter of fact, the internal evidence supports the small size of the animal: a) it fits under the opening of a couch, b) it can be pushed away by a newspaper, c) it is small enough to creep on the ceiling and wall, d) its entire body covers a small picture on the wall, e) when it looks up it sees the soles of the father's shoes, f) it has to creep up on a chair to look out of the window and even then cannot see the opposite wall, g) in death, it is so small that it cannot even be distinguished from a small heap of dirt.

That Gregor Samsa sees himself not larger than a mouse can even be inferred from his identification with Josephine in *Josephine and the Mice Folk*. A mouse loves cheese; Gregor Samsa rejects the milk and likes cheese best of all foods. In the story 'In the Synagogue,' the animal which attaches itself to the curtain of the women's section also seems to be of a small size.

The only way someone with such a small ego can get back at a father who is perceived as all-powerful is to embarrass him. This is exactly what Gregor does. He shows himself always when the father is present. He inconveniences the family by scaring away the cook and appears in front of the chief clerk and in front of the lodgers. Nevertheless, his small size makes him powerless. By giving himself the name Samsa, which is reminiscent of the biblical Samson, who was made powerless by a woman, but prayed for strength which was ultimately granted to him, Gregor assumes a degree of strength which he does not possess in reality.

Thus, on the conscious level, we see the struggle with the all-powerful father, which can be translated into a political stance of fighting the "Establishment." This Kafka did by his criticism of the functioning of the capitalistic system. Kafka embraced socialism and became a member in the "Klub mladých" (Club of the Young). *Metamorphosis* shows that the system has no use for a person who can no longer perform at

full capacity and by exaggerating the point that even though an employee has performed extraordinarily well all his life, if he were to come late or not show up for work, he would immediately lose his job. It also magnifies the relationship between the employee and his job by having the chief clerk appear in the employee's house, almost by intuition, even before the employee has been late for one hour, and accusing him of pretending to be ill.

THE PRECONSCIOUS

In the preconscious, the author is only dimly aware of the problem; this will be shown by clearly defined symbols. I aim to show that the preconscious thought in *Metamorphosis* is Kafka's fear of becoming sick and dying of tuberculosis. We know that Kafka first contracted tuberculosis in 1921 and that *Metamorphosis* was written in 1913. Why should this fear of sickness, with its accompanying symbol system, appear as early as 1913? In August 1911, Kafka spent a week in the 'Sanatorium Erlenbach' near Zurich, and in July 1912, he spent 3 weeks in a sanatorium in the Hartz mountains. Only after 1912, does the word 'Angst' (anxiety) begin to appear in his diary. What are the indications of this anxiety in *Metamorphosis*?

Gregor's direct indictment of the father is that he caused his sickness by letting him assume the whole responsibility for the family. Symbolically, it is expressed by the father throwing the apples against his back:

He was already beginning to feel breathless, just as in his former life his lungs had not been very dependable . . . suddenly something lightly flung landed close beside him and rolled before him. It was an apple; a second apple followed immediately . . . an apple thrown without much force grazed Gregor's back and glanced off harmlessly. But another following immediately landed right on his back and sank in. Gregor wanted to drag himself forward, as if this startling, incredible pain could be left behind him . . . the apple went on sticking in his flesh as a visible reminder, since no one ventured to remove it. . . . The rotting apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, all covered with soft dust, already hardly troubled him. . . .

When the father pushes him back into the room, he is also afraid that the stick in the father's hand might hit him in the back and so he moves backwards without turning around, which causes his movements to slow down and annoy his father tremendously. When he finally reaches his room, he

starts bleeding profusely. . . .

The other conscious symbol of sickness which we find in *Metamorphosis* is the hospital which cannot yet be seen by him. Gregor's refusal to have the furniture removed from his room shows his determination not to turn it into a bare hospital room. Kafka writes in his letter of July 1922 to Max Brod: "This causes a terrible fear of death, which must not necessarily express itself as fear of death but can also appear as fear of any change." The mother and sister want to remove everything but the sofa, but he fights them off with all his strength. The alarm clock ticks away the time. . . .

The isolation and especially the fear of contamination, which people who come in contact with those suffering from tuberculosis exhibit, is shown by the fact that the sister opens the window wide as soon as she enters the room and that she only touches the food with a broom "never with her hands" whether Gregor has touched it or not. He is given a bowl exclusively for his own use. Even when he is dead, the housekeeper pushes the body only with a stick so that she should not be contaminated.

Other symptoms of tuberculosis are alluded to by the animal that had an 'armor-plated back' and a cough which did not sound human. A tuberculosis patient has difficulty in breathing. Thus, one of the reasons for his suspension from the ceiling and wall (which occurs also in *The Trapeze Artist*) might be the desire to breathe easier and get purer air. It is possible that Kafka went to see doctors many years before the onset of the illness. The reference to the company doctor in *Metamorphosis*, who considers all sick people to be malingerers, as well as the father's attitude, which is almost identical, leads me to believe that the illness, though feared by him, was diagnosed late. The boarders might represent three doctors who are simply amused by him but not alerted to the sickness. He writes in a letter: "This afternoon I fed goats . . . especially Dr. W., the doctor who treats me, is strongly represented among them. The group of experts which consisted of three Jewish doctors, which I fed this evening, was so satisfied with me, that it hardly permitted itself to be driven away in the evening to be milked."

His tuberculosis was the reason which Kafka gave his fiancée when he broke their engagement.

Symbols of sickness abound in *Metamorphosis* and, in particular, symbols of death from tuberculosis. That Gregor dies of hunger is the most obvious. The housekeeper who

enters the home at the onset of the sickness looks like death: ". . . a gigantic bony charwoman with white hair flying round her head. . . ." It is the housekeeper who reports his death and buries him. This figure might also have its traces in one of the early memories reported by Kafka: He recalls that the housekeeper took him to school every morning and threatened to tell the teacher how badly he had behaved at home. She never made good her threat but it hung over him his whole life. Of course, after his death, with life beginning anew, the housekeeper (death) is dismissed. Tuberculosis slowly consumes the entire body. This has a bearing on the tremendous anger which Gregor has against those who are able to eat with appetite, such as the boarders. . . .

This interpretation is the hardest, since it reaches deepest into Kafka. The unconscious is revealed in symbols which are not understood by Kafka himself. Basically, it is Kafka's love for the mother. This is reflected in *Metamorphosis* where the mother appears every time either in a nightgown or underwear: "He saw his mother rushing towards his father, leaving one after another behind her, on the floor, her loosened petticoats. . . . Mr. Samsa throwing a blanket over his shoulders, Mrs. Samsa in nothing but her nightgown, in this array they entered Gregor's room."

The sister, in the novel, is a mother surrogate, and when Gregor is rejected by her, he decides to die. The squabble between the mother and sister as to who should clean his room also indicates the feeling that neither of them wants to do it. The only one who did not recoil from him was the charwoman (death).

How does the oedipal love appear? I believe that the mother was unconsciously associated by him with "LAW." Kafka had the Jewish concept of law which was "the Torah." The Torah is the holiest scroll of law kept behind a gate in the Synagogue. In his unconscious, he identifies the mother with this holy object. In this sense, we understand the story, "Before the Law." In *The Trial* the gatekeeper is the father who never will permit him to reach the law. This role of the father as gatekeeper is shown also by the uniform of a porter worn in *Metamorphosis*. Kafka studied Jurisprudence which he never practiced. . . .

In *Metamorphosis*, it is the picture of the woman in furs (a mother figure) which he protects with his whole body from being removed from his room. He is separated from the woman by the cold glass, just as the animal in the synagogue

is separated from the woman by a curtain to which it clings all its life. We are told that Gregor spent many hours making the frame for this picture. The picture showed . . . "a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which her whole forearm had vanished. . . ."

Throughout the novels, we find the love for the mother as Goddess and harlot: forbidden as Goddess but attainable as harlot. In his own life, Kafka fell in love with the forbidden. Milena (a married woman and not Jewish) and a Swiss girl (also not Jewish). In *The Castle*, Kafka is attracted to Frieda who once belonged to Klammm (father figure)—the owner of the castle—, Mother is castle; 'Schloss' in German also means 'lock'—thus forbidden to the son. Klammm lives in 'Herrenhof.' This was also the name of a coffeehouse in Vienna visited by the literati which was commonly called "Hurenhof" (House of Prostitution). . . .

Throughout Kafka's novels runs a terrible guilt, and a need for punishment. He writes in his diary in 1911: "The happiness consisted in this, that the punishment came, and I welcomed it freely, convinced and happily."

When Kafka learns that he has t.b., he writes to Max Brod: "I search all the time for a reason for my illness since I did not simply contract it myself." Why did the father throw apples at the son? Some critics have connected the apples with the forbidden fruit—the apple in Paradise which represents again the forbidden. In his *Parables and Paradoxes* he speaks of 'Paradise': "We were fashioned to live in Paradise, and Paradise was destined to serve us. . . . We were expelled from Paradise, but Paradise was not destroyed. In a sense our expulsion from Paradise was a stroke of luck, for had we not been expelled, Paradise would have had to be destroyed." If we interpret 'Paradise' as 'The Mother' we again see the Oedipus complex.

The constant references to hunger and fasting are also connected with Jewish mysticism and reflect Chassidic tales which show the expiation of guilt through asceticism. The hunger artist fasted forty days as did Christ when tempted by the Devil. Kafka is atoning for some guilt of which he never becomes fully conscious. Yet, all the atonement does not free him from guilt, symbolized by "Schmutz" (dirt). Both Gregor and the hunger artist die in a pile of dirt. Kafka wrote to Milena: "I am dirty, Milena, extremely dirty, that is why I carry on so much about cleanliness."