

this presentness of experience is conveyed through the past tense, the narrative preterite, with which both stories open and continue. And, from the beginning of each story, this past tense proclaims that we are to read events that make up a completed whole, that is told, as it were, in retrospect. Because of this, the story can be articulated in its structure, have its phases that lead to its outcome. Thus a double process takes place in the reader. On the one hand he is immersed in the experience of the main character, cut off from an alternative source and alternative evaluations; but on the other hand he is directed by the structure of the story, which is cunningly devised both to provide an intense participation in the character's experience but also to establish it as forming a whole with a peculiar coherence. In this way the Kafka narrator provides therefore not only for experience but also for understanding; for understanding is the *raison d'être* of story-telling, even if the understanding implied is not what we usually expect by the term. . . . 'The whole seems meaningless, it is true, but is in its peculiar way complete.' The 'meaning' Kafka refers to here is not any allegorical message, but more simply the use or function of the various parts of the figure, their relationship to one another, their coherence. . . . The reader is at first troubled to grasp the psychological coherence of the various parts, the connection of event and mental response, of purpose and behavior, of words and thoughts. But the story structure, its completeness, forces us to seek this coherence, to discover relationships between thoughts and situations, the coherence of this apparent incoherence, to accept in fact a coherence that is startlingly different from that which the conventional story has lived by.

Gregor Samsa Is a Parasite

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Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis," written during the months of November and December 1912 and published in 1915, undoubtedly remains the best known of the author's compositions and has generated a considerable amount of critical attention. The most striking element in the text is Gregor Samsa's bizarre transformation, a metamorphosis of man into insect involving one of the most innovative uses of metaphor in modern literature. . . .

ON PARASITES AND METAPHORS

Kafka's language, his imagery and metaphors, is an artful catalogue of symptoms, condensations (*Verdichtungen*) of psychic trauma, pairings of arrested signifiers that feed off other signifieds and off the body of public discourse. Kafka the parasite artist exploited the symptoms of Kafka the man, nourished his art with the blood of his life and that of others, above all of his father and of women. One thinks of the diary entry of September 12, 1917 when Kafka first learned that he had tuberculosis; his illness became for him a symbol of his inner

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spirital illness, of his relationships to Felice Bauer and to his father. Like a parasite—the primary etymology of which, *parasitos* or “beside the grain,” suggests a guest at a meal, especially a professional dinner guest who never returns an invitation—the writer lived alongside his host, taking the food of his art but never or rarely giving anything in return. Kafka, we know, did not publish much of his work during his lifetime, and at his death he wanted the rest destroyed. For various reasons, he did not want to share what he had taken.

As J. Hillis Miller indicates in his essay on deconstructionist readings of literature, the word parasite is particularly rich in etymological associations that imply paradox and the simultaneity of opposites. The word is itself a shifting play of signifiers that seem to evoke and cancel each other. The parasitical implies the paradoxical because by seeking its food, the parasite ultimately destroys its host and often thereby itself. The word suggests a relationship of proximity and distance, similarity and difference and contains further associations of both guest and host, alien invader and friendly presence, sacrificial victim and sacrificing master, a benevolent or malevolent ghost. The parasite is the alien Other within the self. Kafka's texts portray the parasite that lives off others, literally in works such as “The Metamorphosis” and “Jackals and Arabs,” and even the early story “Wedding Preparations in the Country.” . . .

The most obvious image of the parasite in Kafka's works is, of course, in “The Metamorphosis,” the best known of his texts. Although Kafka did not use the sign “Parasit” but instead the term “Ungeziefer” in reference to his character, the words are equivalent and the conceptual associations are the same. The Greek prefix “para-” suggests, among other meanings, the notion of incorrectly resembling something else as well as wrongfully or harmfully existing beside. This is as good a description as any of Gregor Samsa, the insect parasite that incorrectly resembles a human being and that wrongfully and harmfully lives next to his family. With the consciousness of a man and the body of a vermin, he is grotesque, a monstrosity that threatens the well-being of all. His metamorphosis becomes, as Gunther Anders and Walter Sokel suggest, a literal enactment of metaphor. If Freud's first patients were afflicted with the metaphoric symptoms of hysterical paralysis or physical arrest . . . as the result of sexual trauma or psychological arrest . . . then Gregor's physical transformation too is an out-

ward metaphoric symptom/sign of an internal conflict that cannot find direct expression. . . .

The idea of a parasite implies by definition that of a host (and with host that of both guest and ghost), and in the figure of Gregor all of these associations are active. He is a traveling salesman, more often a guest within his own family and like a guest in a strange hotel, he locks his door at night (as did Kafka in his parents' apartment): “He felt thankful for the prudent habit he had acquired in traveling of locking all doors during the night, even at home.” The locked door also suggests that he is an alien presence, an invading host or army within the friendly territory of his family, something from which they must be protected. Although Gregor initially serves as the provider-host of his parents and sister, he becomes (again paradoxically) the ghost that haunts his family, the guest/ghost that must be locked away. There is a repressed violence and aggression towards his family in Gregor that must be contained. He is the ultimate supernatural ghost parasite—the vampire—who begins to drain his family of its strength. As there is in the sexualized feeding of the vampire, there is, as we shall see, a strong erotic component in the parasitic image in Kafka.

Curiously, Gregor is not the typical guest implied in the word parasite—one who eats the host's food but never returns any—because he does not even partake of his family's provisions, at least the material ones. After his transformation, his sister Grete begins to bring him the rotten leftovers of the others' meal but later he cannot even eat these. The issue of food and hunger is central to “The Metamorphosis” (and other Kafka texts as well) as it is to the parasite, and we might well look here for insight into Gregor's parasitical nature. Gregor's appetite makes him long for the unknown food (“die unbekannte Nahrung”) and it is ultimately a psychic sustenance that he seeks. We find an indication of what this food is near the end of the story when the sister plays the violin for the renters. Gregor is drawn to the music and feels that this is the unknown nourishment that he has been seeking: “He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved.” We know that Kafka was himself drawn to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* in which music and art are central concepts. Music is the most perfect art form because it replicates the Will (the undifferentiated life force) most closely. . . .

THE PARASITE VAMPIRE

The scene with the music is linked to Gregor's erotic phantasy with his sister, whom he will lock away in his room so that he alone may possess her. Since the parasite seeks to merge with its host in the sexualized act of feeding and yet in so doing destroys itself (or at the very least its life-sustaining source of food), it serves as a perfect representation of the erotic death that motivates Gregor and, we presume, his author: Kafka the paradoxical parasite who existed in paragraphs and parables as a means of displacing himself (the "para-" prefix again meaning "beside" or "next to"). It is not food or money that Gregor seeks from his family, but, like a vampire, he wants the blood of their psychic-erotic energy. The image of the parasite is one of aggressive sexuality; it achieves union with the host through the act of destroying it: a vampire *Liebestod*. The parasite incorporates the union of eros and thanatos in a single signifier; it is both the eater and the eaten. The sexualized vampire parasite is quite obvious in Gregor's phantasy with his sister/host Grete in which he, the insect, falls upon her neck in a grotesque attempt at union: "and Gregor would then raise himself to her shoulder and kiss her on the neck, which, now that she went to business, she kept free of any ribbon or collar". Women are the primary hosts in Kafka's stories and it is Grete who—in another paradoxical reversal of terms—ultimately rejects Gregor from the family. She becomes the doctor who diagnoses the family's illness as its parasite son. In the well-known passage at the end of the second section, it is clear that he also seeks erotic union with the mother/host, though as with the sister, this too is thwarted.

Before his transformation, Gregor was the host who supported his parasitical family, especially his father, who spent his days dozing in his chair while his son worked his impossible job as a salesman. This situation is, of course, reversed as Gregor becomes the parasite and the family his unwilling host. Such reversals of terms are, we remember, characteristic of the word parasite and its etymology; the guest suddenly becomes the invader, the sacrificial victim the one who performs the sacrifice. Gregor is now transformed into the host/victim (the German "Ungeziefer" from the Hebrew suggesting this) and Kafka seems to intend the religious associations of the word host for, in Gregor's eventual sacrifice, the family is re-deemed. The parasite vampire who exploits becomes the Christ figure who saves. . . .

In nature the parasite-host relationship is one of power and struggle as the host organism attempts to reject the invader, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. This is certainly the case with the father/host who battles with the son/parasite. The father (and the chief clerk) represent the forces of the body/society—its immunity—that confront the alien interloper and the sickness it carries with the standards of health and well-being. The figure of the father and the "vital" truths of marriage/family/bourgeois profession that he symbolizes for Kafka rise against the son and condemn him . . . for the parasite aggression he unconsciously directs towards the family. When Gregor, with insect jaws snapping, approaches his mother, it is the father who preserves the immunity of the others against the disease of the son.