

## CHAPTER 4

# Interpretive Criticism About *The Metamorphosis*

READINGS ON  
**THE METAMORPHOSIS**

## Revolt Against the Dehumanized World

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Perhaps the failing of some of the Kafka criticism is the attempt to clarify something that should remain a riddle. *Metamorphosis* has certainly had multiple interpretations, many of them prompted by the temptation to lay the corpus of Kafka's works neatly on the psychoanalyst's couch, thus viewing the story as an exercise in masochism or a session in therapy. However, it seems to me that if we look at the story from the viewpoint that it is not Gregor who is sick, but his environment, we will see the story as the reaction of a perceptive individual against a dehumanizing world of order, within which most people are enslaved. For instance, consider Gregor's thoughts as he hears the family lamenting the impossibility of moving to another apartment because of the problem of moving him in his transformed state:

Yet Gregor saw well enough that consideration for him was not the main difficulty preventing the removal, for they could easily have shifted him in some suitable box with a few air holes in it. What really kept them from moving into another flat was

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rather their own complete hopelessness and the belief that they had been singled out for misfortune such as had never happened to any of their relations or acquaintances. They fulfilled to the uttermost all that the world demands of poor people. The father fetched breakfast for the small clerks in the bank; the mother devoted her energies to making underwear for strangers; the sister trotted to and fro behind the counters at the behest of customers. But more than this they had not the strength to do.

Another indication of the dehumanized world is the father's wearing his bank messenger's uniform at home, where it "begins to look dirty despite all the loving care of the mother and sister to keep it clean." The world of order carried into the home destroys the possibility of true human love.

The riddle is Gregor's riddle—how to fulfill himself and simultaneously express his love and understanding among people who react unsympathetically, even violently, against his transformation, and who refuse to recognize his ability to understand them, because they can't understand him. Even more is the riddle Gregor's because he does not understand himself.

The story begins with Gregor's waking; it is a waking in more than one sense, and is therefore represented by his transformation to a giant beetle. Gregor's mind at first refuses to accept this condition even though he senses "it was no dream." He thinks, "What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense?" Then his thoughts turn to his job. It is obvious that he intensely dislikes his work as a travelling salesman ("The devil take it all"), but that on the other hand feels duty bound to continue working until he has saved enough money to pay back his parents' debt to the chief.

Other details of his thoughts, the spineless and stupid porter who checks on him and the insurance doctor who considers "all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers" emphasize the distrust and suspicion surrounding Gregor and his disgust at this state of affairs.

This disgust stems from Gregor's desire to establish I-thou relationships in a world of I-it or I-she or I-he relationships. (I-thou relationships are those of true human affection. I-it are those in which the I uses the person or object as a tool to reach his ends.) In general the people surrounding Gregor do not experience a warm love through a genuine communication, but see each other as objects that are useful or to be used. For instance, the chief clerk is sent to Gregor by the firm because

Gregor is not functioning as an object or tool of the firm. When Gregor's mother says that Gregor must be ill, the clerk answers, "I can't think of any other explanation, madam . . . I hope it's nothing serious. Although on the other hand I must say that we men of business—fortunately or unfortunately—very often simply have to ignore any slight indisposition, since business must be attended to."

Gregor's relationship to his family previous to his transformation had really become an I-it relationship (further emphasized by the fact that the father had money of his own salted away which he did not use to help pay back his own debt, a debt which kept Gregor in bondage to the firm). . . .

Gregor desires desperately to achieve a relation with a "special uprush of warm feeling" but fails to do so in a dehumanized world. It is ironical that his unconscious desire to be his true self destroys his relationship to the two people with whom he most nearly achieved this warm feeling—his mother and his sister.

#### THE RIDDLE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

How do we interpret Gregor's transformation? First, we note that in the beginning Gregor does not consciously will the change, and in fact tries to deny it to himself. Second, Gregor is puzzled about his change, and is constantly questioning himself about it (for instance, when he notes that his wounds heal more rapidly, he asks "Am I less sensitive now?"). Third, Gregor yearns passionately for association with the family; he presses his body against the door to catch snatches of family conversation. Fourth, Gregor has always shown almost perverse consideration for the firm and for other members of his family at the expense of his own desires, and immediately after the transformation continues to do so. Fifth, that Gregor, upon waking, is "unusually hungry." And last, Gregor's transformation is a continuing process, initially a retrogression into the natural state of an insect, but later a gradual movement toward self-assertion at the expense of the comfort of others.

The riddle is Gregor's riddle because he is the only one in the story who acknowledges it. It is the riddle of man's existence in his yearning for freedom and self-fulfillment and in the knowledge of his enslavement to the established order.

Let us assume, then, the hypothesis that Gregor's transformation represents a cluster of feelings at the center of which is Gregor's ambivalence—a yearning for freedom from the es-

tablished order which he does not understand and which he cannot trace back to its original causes, and the feeling that he is as vile as an insect because he does not want to belong to the established order, even though he desires I-thou relationships with individuals in that established order and feels that it is his duty to his family to work within that order. The beetle also represents Gregor's revolt and the established order's revulsion at such a revolt.

So we note that after Gregor's transformation he is "unusually hungry." This hunger theme is developed in much the same way as it is in "The Hunger Artist"—neither Gregor nor the hunger artist knows what food will satisfy his hunger, although Gregor gets a glimpse.

Gregor is repulsed by fresh food and eats the decayed foods which are natural to some insects. However, after Gregor defied his mother and sister and was bombarded with apples by his father, his feelings of hunger for love come to his mind and he thinks how they are neglecting him. . . .

After a description of the sister's increasing neglect of Gregor's room, her quarrel with her mother, and the antics of the charwoman, we learn that "Gregor was hardly eating anything. . . . At first he thought it was chagrin over the state of his room that prevented him from eating, yet he soon got used to the various changes in his room."

The next reference to hunger occurs when Gregor watches the lodgers eating.

When they were alone again, they ate their food in almost complete silence. It seemed remarkable to Gregor that among the various noises coming from the table he could always distinguish the sound of their masticating teeth, as if this were a sign to Gregor that one needed teeth in order to eat, and that with toothless jaws even of the finest make one could do nothing. "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."

So it was naturally not food at all that Gregor needed, but an unknown nourishment that he perceives but faintly when he hears his sister play the violin.

Gregor's sister was playing so beautifully. Her face leaned sideways, intently and sadly her eyes followed the notes of music. Gregor crawled a little farther forward and lowered his head to the ground so that it might be possible for his eyes to meet hers. 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.

How are we to intellectualize the music as a symbol? Or should we? We remember that Gregor before his transformation did not care for music himself, but was determined to send his sister to the conservatory, even against his parents' wishes. Now he seems to be the only one who truly appreciates Grete's playing, and he is annoyed at the indifference of the lodgers.

#### A RETURN TO ORDER

His long day-dream that immediately follows deals with an I-thou relationship with his sister. Gregor thinks that for the first time his frightful appearance will become useful to him "for he would protect his sister and appreciate her music as it should be appreciated."

It is important here to note that when Gregor saw and heard his sister play, he *followed his impulse* to enter the living room. "He felt hardly any surprise at his growing lack of consideration for the others; there had been a time when he prided himself on being considerate." Thus, Gregor begins to follow his true impulse toward self-fulfillment in an existential reality which denies the world of mechanized and empty, but functional public order.

However, the world of order cannot tolerate this monstrosity, and Gregor cannot live in an atmosphere of complete rejection. His sister pronounces sentence. "He must go. . . . If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can't live with such a creature and he'd have gone away of his own accord."

It is interesting that Gregor on then returning to his room is astonished at the distance and wonders how he could have crawled so far into the living room without noticing it. The reader knows the reason—he had been receiving the unknown nourishment that he craved.

Just as "The Hunger Artist" ends with the image of the painter with its strong physical existence, unaware of the cage, so *Metamorphosis* concludes with the death of the spiritual and the triumph of the unquestioning physical existence in the established order. At the end of the family's journey into the country, Grete "sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body."