

The Metamorphosis Is an Allegorical Beast Fable

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Author and Kafka scholar Nalini Natarajan of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras discusses *The Metamorphosis* in light of traditional beast fables. In beast fables, metamorphosis is a common technique for depicting a character's altered mental state in metaphorical form. Despite the fact that it allows individuals an opportunity to observe the secrets of everyday life, metamorphosis is feared, reflecting human anxieties about the body, such as uneasiness about sexuality, ugliness, or weakness. Sometimes what one learns through metamorphosis, however, is no more revealing than everyday life; what Gregor discovers through his transformation, for example, is that his life as a salesman parallels the discomfort, isolation, and powerlessness he feels as a bug.

The meanings of metamorphosis and the ways animals are used to examine human anxieties regarding identity, worth, and isolation problematize the very notion of the human, exposing humanity as an uncertain rather than transcendent category.

Metamorphosis can illuminate the limits of the beast fable as a genre. In traditional beast fables all over the world, the boundary maintained between narrative and 'moralitas' corresponds to a separation between animal and human. While animals populate the narrative, the moral clearly refers to the human world. Animals can represent human interactions and wisdom only because the allegorical component of the tale insures an ontological, essential separation between human and beast . . .

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THE BODY

Metamorphosis raises crucial questions about the body and language. The idea of metamorphosis is an ancient one, occurring in myths and fables all over the world. In the broadest sense, any metamorphosis becomes a useful method to depict change of state. . . . It appears that the beast's body gives the individual who has been metamorphosed a chance to "suffer the turns of fate under an animal's skin." Also, the animal can observe the secrets of everyday life because humans are unaware of their presence.

At the same time, the fear of metamorphosis reflects human anxieties about the body: fears of sexuality, ugliness, weakness. Metamorphosis in fairy tales is linked to human powerlessness: witches' curses result in metamorphoses. While voluntary metamorphosis (as in Greek myths) is a measure of the divine, lack of power over the process is a measure of the human. Sometimes, metamorphoses accompany battles between parties. Thus, in a folktale from *The Arabian Nights*, two of the adversaries become, in succession, lions, scorpions, snakes, eagles; each metamorphosis is aimed at gaining greater power. In the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, the hero Rama is tricked by a demon turned deer, Maricha. The subtext of metamorphosis, thus, can be seen as the anxiety accompanying human vulnerability.

METAMORPHOSIS AND LANGUAGE

The power of language to construct, even transform, reality is very relevant here. The point has been made that fables have affinities with proverbs, many of which are often condensed fables. One way of looking at literary metamorphosis is as a fictional representation of metaphor. . . . That is, when we say that someone "monkeys around," we are speaking metaphorically, but when we inscribe this transformation in literal terms, we have a tale of metamorphosis. . . .

This concern with language and the body informs the following reading of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1948) . . . Kafka's well known story describes the slow decline and death of a harassed salesman who turns into a giant insect. . . .

Many of the descriptions in Kafka's tale relate the ugliness of the insect body and the pain and discomfort it produces. Gregor's insecthood is graphically described: his hard, armour plated back and the stiff, arched segments of his "dome-like brown belly" cause him discomfort:

However violently he forced himself toward his right side he always toiled on to his back again. He tried it at least a hundred times shutting his eyes to keep from seeing his struggling legs.

Yet nothing could be more descriptive of the pain of animality than the passage describing Gregor's death "with the rotting apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, all covered with dust" . . .

HUMAN AND INSECT ARE ONE

The point of contact between human and beast is vulnerability; discomfort of the body is crucial to the metamorphoses. In Kafka's tale, Gregor's account of his life as a salesman parallels the discomfort, the irregularity, the isolation and the powerlessness that drain his body as an insect. . . .

The underlying implication of Kafka's narrative is that after all, there is not that much difference between human and insect; the text negotiates the relationship between a real insect and a metaphoric one when similar states of mind connect

human and animal: thus, the exhaustion, futility, loneliness that characterize Gregor's life before he becomes an insect are strangely familiar. The conversation among Gregor (attempting to disguise his metamorphosis), his parents, and the salesman proves as strenuous and frustrating as Gregor's strenuous efforts to adapt to his insecthood. Similarly, Gregor's attempt to support his family, to provide opportunities for his sister, seem futilely counter-productive, since they only engendered laziness in the family. So, too, do his pathetic attempts to move as an insect.

The text's suggestion of the identity of experience between human and insect is partly responsible for the fact that there is no surprise at the thing that has befallen Samsa. Thus, Gregor is angry with the chief clerk for not understanding his predicament: "what had happened to him today might someday happen to the chief clerk; one really could not deny that it was possible."

DOUBLE POSSIBILITY OF INTERPRETATION IN KAFKA

It is a mistake to try to interpret everything in Kafka in detail, for in his work, symbols are always in general and resist a word-for-word rendering.

The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings. This is what the author wanted. But it would be wrong to try to interpret everything in Kafka in detail. A symbol is always in general and, however precise its translation, an artist can restore to it only its movement: there is no word-for-word rendering. Moreover, nothing is harder to understand than a symbolic work. A symbol always transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing. In this regard, the surest means of getting hold of it is not to provoke it, to begin the work without a preconceived attitude and not to look for its hidden currents. For Kafka in particular it is fair to agree to his rules, to approach the drama through its externals and the novel through its form.

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