



Research Paper

Kafka and the Metamorphosis of the Human Body

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ABSTRACT: This paper endeavours to portray through the novella, *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Kafka's complex understanding of the issues regarding body, its implications and disabilities, and the vehement political battle for supremacy, of which it is the prime site. It also links the idea of disability with capitalism and its consequent, modernism, of which Kafka is a chief exponent. Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis into a vermin, this paper argues, has multiple unavoidable repercussions which has been posed in terms of body as well as mind, and the ever-widening chasm between the two, which pushes Gregor to his ultimate predicament.

KEYWORDS: Kafka, Metamorphosis, body, sexuality, capitalism, modernism,

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I. INTRODUCTION

"One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug" (TM, p. 1) —the beginning of Kafka's most popular story *The Metamorphosis* is characteristically puzzling by its seemingly illogical construction. Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis into a vermin at once triggers certain questions that cannot be very easily answered. Gregor's body transforms but mentally Gregor remains a human: is therefore 'himself' synonymous with only body or also his mind? What does it mean for a man to transformed overnight into an insect? Which aspects does this transformation refer to of the lives of Gregor and his family? And, can this transformation be posed as an existential question which is put through the body of Gregor Samsa?

Moments after Gregor's awareness of his transformation, however, he wishes to dismiss it as a mere bad feeling: "Why don't I keep sleeping for a little while longer and forget all this foolishness." (TM, pp. 3-4) Nevertheless, he is unable to sleep again for his body has transformed inexplicably to provide him any comfort with familiar human feelings. His thought now begins to wander—he thinks about his job: "Oh God" he thought, "what a demanding job I've chosen! Day in, day out on the road. The stresses of trade are much..., temporary and constantly changing human relationships which never come from the heart. To hell with it all!" (TM, p. 4) Some forty years later, one of Kafka's greatest admirers, Albert Camus writes of the Sisyphean struggle of innumerable Gregors almost in similar terms. He says in 'The Myth of Sisyphus': "It happens that the stage-sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meals, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement." (Camus, p. 4) Gregor poses this question through his bodily transformation—he becomes the 'why'.

Gregor's loneliness, which is the attribute of his travelling job, is reiterated when he feels 'a slight itching on the top of his abdomen' (TM, p. 4), the spot which he finds "was entirely covered with small white spots (he did not know what to make of them)." This, along with the framed picture of a woman covered in fur that hangs in his room shows the absence of normal sexuality in Gregor's life, unlike the other salesman, those "who live like harem women." (TM, p. 4) Gregor instead worries about his being late for his train. At this point comes the first instance of the many self-reproaches that Gregor is to offer himself throughout the story: "He was the boss's minion, without backbone or intelligence." (TM, p. 6) This also provides us with a view on the oppressive nature of Gregor's job—it creates a deep chasm between his body and his mind, through which Gregor falls to his metamorphosis.

In the meantime Gregor's mother calls in—the moment of Gregor's first connection with the world of his metamorphosed body also initiates his alienation from his job, family and at the end his very identity. The rest of the story unfolds this alienation in a grey, grim, characteristically nightmarish way. At this stage we only

get the early premonitions: “That the change in his voice was nothing other than the onset of a real chill, an occupational illness of commercial travelers, of that he had not the slightest doubt.” (TM, p. 8) The estrangement between Gregor’s bodily parts and his mind has just set in.

The first thing Gregor fears after waking up is getting late for his work. Surely Gregor’s job remained a constant source of unease in his life—a major bone of contention, and in the course of his metamorphosis, the job is the first thing he loses. It is initially the only thought that kept him preoccupied and drastically affected his social life: “The young man has nothing in his head except business.” (TM, p. 12) He had accepted the drudgery for the sake of his parents and feels that his parents share with him a parasitic relation where Gregor’s spirit is constantly drained, until the day he finds himself hopelessly disabled, and the entire equation is turned upside down.

By supplanting Gregor’s mind into a monstrous vermin, Kafka dramatizes the time honoured conventional duality of body and mind—which is central to the western culture. The mind is the disembodied site of reason and body is the manifest vehicle of feelings and sensations. The body needs to be disciplined and subordinated by the mind and feeling should be subject to reason and property. Mind’s authority over body is embodied by clothes—which is the externalization of mind itself, be it stiff collars or girdled petticoats and corsets that guarded female chastity. In the discarded novel, ‘Wedding Preparations in the Country’ Kafka writes: “And besides I can’t do it the way I always did as a child when dangerous matters were involved. I don’t even have to go to the country myself, it isn’t necessary. I’ll send only my clothed body.... As I lie in bed I assume the shape of a big beetle, a stag beetle or a June beetle I think. The form of a big beetle, yes. Then I would pretend it were a matter of hibernating and I would press my little legs against my bulging body....” (Kafka, 78) The duality is also emphasized by Nietzsche who had been a steady influence upon the contemporary younger generation including Kafka: “I am body and soul”—so speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children?” (Nietzsche)

Gregor’s transformation into an insect directly expresses Kafka’s ambivalent attitude towards the concept of body in general. The slow but steady metamorphosis of Gregor’s mind into a parasite and his own failure to curb the effects of his transformation, convey to which extent Gregor is alienated from his own body and identity. Gregor is obsessed with his job and even at the wake of his induced disability, he still believes he would be able to catch the 7 o’clock train. His condemnation of himself as a man without ‘backbone’ conveniently fits as now he has become an estranged invertebrate.

As Gregor struggles out of his bed, we witness minutely detailed description of the human-vermin with all its grotesqueness. Gregor’s getting up and opening the door seem like of an utterly disabled person who has to experience his body in a completely different way to do the tasks that were hitherto, merely straightforward. His new form also makes him susceptible to more pain—and causes him, a heightened sensibility. Not only does he hurt head while getting up, while opening the key with his toothless jaws, a brown liquid (equivalent to blood, maybe) oozes out causing him terrible agony. Critics like Stanley Corngold relates this heightened sensibility with artistry. In the essay ‘The Metamorphosis of the Metaphor, Corngold quotes Gunther Ander’s hypothesis: “Because Gregor Samsa wants to live as an artist [i.e. aLuftmensch—one who lives on air, lofty and free-floating], in the eyes of the highly respectable, hard-working world he is a ‘nasty bug’: and so in The Metamorphosis he wakes up as a beetle whose ideal of happiness is to be sticking to the ceiling.” (Corngold, p. 5) Such relation between art and body is characteristically Kafkaesque, as Walter Sokel writes, “Language says, ‘To feel it with your own body when it wants to express the reality of experience. This is the basis of Kafka’s In the Penal Colony, in which the criminal’s punishment is not communicated to him by word of mouth, but is instead scratched into his body with a needle.” (Sokel, p. 47) Corngold finds a relation between Ander’s hypothesis and Walter Sokel’s view on Kafka; in ‘Writer in Extremis’ Sokel writes: “The character Gregor Samsa has been transformed into a metaphor that states his essential self, and this metaphor in turn is treated like actual fact. Samsa doesn’t call himself a cockroach; instead he wakes up to find himself one.” (Sokel, p. 47) Sokel writes elsewhere, “The traveling salesman Gregor Samsa, in Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’, “is like a cockroach” because of his abject behaviour and parasitic wishes. However Kafka drops the word ‘like’ and has the metaphor become reality when Gregor Samsa wakes up finding himself turned into a giant vermin. With this metamorphosis carried out by thought when it forms metaphor; for metaphor is always “metamorphosis”. Kafka transforms metaphor back into his fictional reality: and this counter-metamorphosis becomes the starting point of the tale.” (Sokel, p. 36)

Gregor’s meeting with the world post-metamorphosis is also described in bodily terms—Gregor’s emergence from the room for the first time at once frightens the chief clerk who put his hands on his mouth. Kafka often portrays people and characters through gestures and body-language but as to their intention behind it, he provides no clue. In his stories, people are translucent, opaque substance that requires interpretation. This aspect of Kafka which often borders on the Dickensian humour is transformed in ‘The Metamorphosis’ as a grueling description of the reality of the other people. The other people can only be understood by their bodily self-expressions.

It is not Gregor alone that transforms bodily: the other Samsas also transform from inactive parasites to active earners. The next time Gregor meets his father, he is a bank messenger in uniform—advancing towards Gregor with ‘with a squeak of his polished boots’(TM, p. 12), suggesting the reader that he may squash Gregor under his feet like a real insect. But instead he attacks Gregor by dislodging apples at him, one of which sticks to his back causing him “unexpected and incredible pain” (TM, p. 52) and eventually becomes a site of a festering wound that hastens Gregor’s death. Another character that transforms significantly during the story is Gregor’s sister Grete. Initially she represents the vanities of the female sex but by the end of the story turns out an independent being that replaces Gregor, full of confidence and self-awareness. “The body’s potential for violence is closely linked, here and elsewhere in Kafka to sexuality.” Gregor’s miserable job has reduced his sexual life to a pin up that hangs on the wall next to his bed, displaying ‘a picture of a woman with a fur hat and a fur boa.’ (TM, p. 3) The conspicuous sexuality of the image, emphasized by a hint of sexual intercourse in the backdrop, have us all guess meaningfully at Gregor’s ‘anxious dreams’, and suggests the mass of little white spots which he was unable to interpret covering his belly as a consequence of nocturnal emission.

Kafka portrays the gendered body, not in the usually banal concept of male and female sexuality, but emphasizes on the cultural codes that suggest male and female sexuality in bodily terms. As for active sexuality, it remains limited to with Gregor’s parents and hinted at through his sister, but Gregor remains excluded of it, as he is excluded of the site of social connection, represented by the use of newspapers in the story. Gregor’s father reads the newspaper aloud, uses it at times to drive Gregor back to his room, and later in the story the boarders catch hold of the newspaper as a sign of authority around the house. Just before Gregor loses his consciousness, wounded by the apple which Gregor’s father hurled at him, he almost experiences a primal moment in his consciousness: “...she (Gregor’s mother) hurled herself onto his father and, throwing her arms around him, in complete union with him—but at this moment Gregor’s powers of sight gave way—as her hands reached to the back of his father’s head and she begged him to spare Gregor’s life.” (TM, p. 52)

Gregor significantly loses his sight at the moment which prevents him to witness which he should not—an act of parental coition. Gregor’s own sexuality however reemerges in the context of Grete’s playing of violin for the boarders. Gregor’s fantasy almost borders incest, in which he thinks of keeping Grete locked with him in his room permanently and kissing on her neck. Under the pressure of this unconscious desire he loses all control over his language. Bodily desires reduce Gregor’s mind to incoherence, and his alienation from his human identity is complete at this stage, as he himself contemplates: “Was he an animal that music seized him so?” (TM, p. 64)

In some way, however, Gregor’s transformation is also liberating to him—it frees him from the tyrannical demands of his job. Confined to his room, walking up and down the ceiling, Gregor really enjoys himself—his ideal of happiness is such living liberated from the bonds that keep men tied to the family and work. Again, Gregor’s disability in a way is compensated by the accumulated abilities of his family members. The story in a way also describes the transformation in the family to keep it integrated as a constituent unit of the modern capitalist society, from which Gregor is gradually excluded. His existence itself is denied by Grete at the end of the story which suggests his alienation from the general human purpose. Gregor’s death finally reiterates the sense of absurdity and hopelessness his situation entails. Though Kafka himself did not like the ending, he probably felt that Gregor’s ultimate liberation shall only come through a peaceful death of his metamorphosed, ailing body.

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