A Dream Interpretation of Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”

Kuldip Pawa
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Professor F. Ribkoff
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In Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself transformed into an insect-like creature. The true nature or cause of this fairytale-like metamorphosis remains bewilderingly unresolved. So construed, the whole story certainly sounds whimsical or farfetched or, as some have argued, just plain absurd. Gregor’s transformation flouts all cannons of logic or rationality that we associate with our familiar experiential reality. Even stranger still is how Gregor doesn’t lament his fate nor question the unfairness of such an unmitigated tragedy. He passively accept this “misfortune” (125) with equanimity and with a “slight feeling of shame” (106). One would further have expected that his family would foster solicitude and be attentive to his suffering but instead they inexplicably compound his misfortune with an irrational hatred and for the most part forsake him. No one reacts with disbelief that such an unprecedented event, one would suppose, naturally warrants. The characters seem to inhabit a surreal, dream-like state in which they just drowsily accept this bizarre and improbable occurrence as normal. This has prompted some commentators on the text to offer the opinion that we’re meant to see Gregor’s transformation as a metaphor for some ordinary event. Others suggest that “Metamorphosis” is really a study of how we learn to accommodate absurd happenings. The story remains vague enough on this critical issue to encompass a diverse variety of such interpretative frameworks. Rather than viewing story’s details as merely more arabesque of an absurdist vision, I’d like in this paper to expand on my own personal take of the former possibility; that Kafka is trying, through Gregor’s metamorphosis, to jolt us into a realization of the bizarre quality of what goes unquestioned in our everyday lives, or at least in Gregor’s life. I’d like to work toward outlining this opinion which will form the central argument of this paper, by answering the following related question: What could Gregor be or have done to provoke such a cold, unrelenting animus that severely reduces or even erases his humanity?

Gregor works at a dead-end job as a traveling salesperson. He finds his work unfulfilling but he accepts it with a grudging acquiescence as necessary to repay his parents’ debt. Given that the story was written around the turn of the twentieth century, it doesn’t seem unreasonable to assume that this paternal debt is the repayment of a personal debt of obligation due to his parents for having invested their time and effort into his upbringing. He’s now confined by filial obligations. An extended amount of attention is also given to a photograph of Herr Samsa in a lieutenant’s uniform that hangs just outside Gregor’s room. There’s the implication here that Gregor ought, in the spirit of some outmoded conception of honor, to politely give up his claim to be an autonomous person, and in a soldierly fashion respect his place and capitulate to the authority structure of the patriarchal household. We’re told there was a time when this cultural reinforcement wasn’t necessary and Gregor had willingly and happily chosen to conform to the ideal of the dutiful son. He was once unreservedly proud to support his family on his earnings and accommodate their financial security, comfort, and idleness. But gradually his heroic sacrifice has become an obligatory requirement that goes unappreciated. He’s dimly conscious of how he’s now slavishly providing for his parents’ and sister’s needs. He’s become disaffected since and finds himself unable to commit himself unreluctantly and unthinkingly to his degrading job. He wistfully contemplates the ever distant day when he’ll “cut [himself] completely loose” (90). He’s deferring his life’s gratification to this remote future date. Gregor seems a meek and unassertive personality. So, while he inwardly demurs, outwardly he seems to lack the confidence to exert his personal will.

Although his job impinges on his own personal happiness he doesn’t seem to have articulated specifically what he would choose to do with his life if given the opportunity. His sense of fulfillment clearly differs from the conventional middle-class aspirations of his parents. But while the life of a banausic salesman may be incompatible with Gregor’s self-conception it’s uncertain what his personally chosen lifestyle would be. Perhaps once he’s broken free from his parents he’ll devote his time to the fretwork into which he pours himself in his leisure time. The amount of dedication and care he puts into his leisure time and effort into his upbringing. He’s now confined by filial obligations. An extended amount of attention is also given to a photograph of Herr Samsa in a lieutenant’s uniform that hangs just outside Gregor’s room. There’s the implication here that Gregor ought, in the spirit of some outmoded conception of honor, to politely give up his claim to be an autonomous person, and in a soldierly fashion respect his place and capitulate to the authority structure of the patriarchal household. We’re told there was a time when this cultural reinforcement wasn’t necessary and Gregor had willingly and happily chosen to conform to the ideal of the dutiful son. He was once unreservedly proud to support his family on his earnings and accommodate their financial security, comfort, and idleness. But gradually his heroic sacrifice has become an obligatory requirement that goes unappreciated. He’s dimly conscious of how he’s now slavishly providing for his parents’ and sister’s needs. He’s become disaffected since and finds himself unable to commit himself unreluctantly and unthinkingly to his degrading job. He wistfully contemplates the ever distant day when he’ll “cut [himself] completely loose” (90). He’s deferring his life’s gratification to this remote future date. Gregor seems a meek and unassertive personality. So, while he inwardly demurs, outwardly he seems to lack the confidence to exert his personal will.

On this particular morning Gregor lies half-awake in bed ruminating on possible life plans and contemplating the merits of resignation and rebellion. He’s helplessly floundering, completely prostrated by his personal dilemma; he’s a supine insect struggling to regain a solid footing. The fog outside his window further alludes to an inner vagueness and uncertainty. In the face of these conflicting pulls and pressures Gregor’s attempting to puzzle over his own desires, to clarify his identity, and to decide which commitments matter. By his own account, he’s “so tormented by conscience as to be driven out of his mind and incapable of leaving his bed” (95). Should he meekly defer to the wishes of others or audaciously try to assert his own?

It seems there’s another, indeterminate, buried self within Gregor struggling to surface. He’s no longer able to ignore the neurotic twinges that plague him, for it says that contact with one of his uncontrollable new limbs sends a cold shiver through him. I’m led to believe that Gregor can no longer conform to the wishes of others and suppress his initiative. He experiences himself as driven by the
mysterious workings of some psychological mechanisms that defies explicit articulation. It doesn’t seem that Gregor so much chooses his reshaping as relinquish control to some repressed inner dictate, for he assures himself as “not in the least thinking of deserting the family” (96). This compulsion corresponds to Freud’s hypothesis of a destructive drive within us which we try constantly to control or conceal. This would explain his apparent divided loyalties and the prevailing feelings of helplessness before what life thrusts upon him. He’s been having “uneasy dreams” and this reshaping of himself is likely the nightmare that haunts him (89). It’s a dream from which he can’t awake. But this freakish mutation is also a form of wish fulfillment. The psychological manifestation of his repressed resentment and rebellion has taken bodily shape. I would argue further that the separation between the real and the unreal has been blurred because Gregor still resides somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness.

It seems we’re now peering into a vista at Gregor’s subjective reality. It’s a surreal world in which the placid veneer of the Samsa family’s everyday relations is stripped away and the psychological drama that lies beneath is exposed for us to examine. In this oneiric space we find a radically insincere world of detached and impersonal strangers. In Gregor’s thought-world he feels dehumanized, abused, and exploited by his family. They seem to parasitically use him as if their relationship with him were a non-reciprocal financial transaction. He’s now come into a subconscious awareness of this subdued horror that lies beneath his quotidian existence. But Gregor seems unable to draw these sorts of apparently obvious conclusions. For example, unbeknownst to Gregor, Herr Samsa had some of his son’s income tucked away. It’s money that Gregor could have used toward the hated debt which could have been retired sooner, freeing him of his onerous liabilities. But he doesn’t seem to mind his father’s treachery, even commending him for what appears to Gregor as sagacity. This further suggests that the story is occurring at a subconscious level; Gregor seems to be attempting to convey to his conscious what he subliminally suspects to be true.

As further proof that Gregor’s metamorphosis is not meant as his literal taking on of insect form one could note that Frau Samsa is anxious to retrieve a doctor to examine Gregor but this idea is completely forgotten after they discover his transformation. From this one can reasonably infer that what Gregor suffers from is not a medical condition. Thirdly, Gregor imagines “that something like what had happened to him today might some day happen to the chief clerk; one really could not deny that it was possible” (75). So, we can assume that this sudden change can strike anyone. Fourthly, if you’ll forgive me for resorting to little bit of extra-textual information, Kafka himself refused to allow a depiction of the insect on the cover illustration of the published story (Karl 467). And, he only obliquely refers to Gregor as a bug, avoiding explicit detail of any particular visual imagery. References to Gregor’s insect deformity are then ostensibly meant to serve a metaphorical function. Fifthly, Frau Samsa is reluctant to move out the furniture in Gregor’s room, holding out the hope that her son may yet recover. Gregor himself believes that he may again take on his former life as a human. His condition then isn’t necessarily final or irreversible. Sixthly, Gregor repeatedly notes that there’s nothing physically wrong with him. It seems a conspicuous inconsistency to perceive that he has a few extra appendages and yet assert that a medical diagnosis of his condition as being in perfect health “would not be far wrong” (70). Whence one may conjecture that what Gregor suffers from is a psychological abnormality and not the literally physical disfigurement of having contracted the anatomy of a human-sized insect. Finally, Gregor reminds himself that, “in all likelihood [his words] would again be unintelligible,” indicating that he has a good understanding of his condition (102). All this reasoning of the adumbrated details places Gregor’s transformation squarely within the realm of the possible, even ordinary, a bit rare perhaps, but not an unheard of phenomena.

There are even suggestions that Gregor planned or at least welcomes this remaking of his identity. The text mentions that Gregor had a “slight presentiment” (97) the night before and that he’s now unable to “decide” to leave his bed (91). Along these lines one could also note that Gregor becomes aware of his new social persona before anyone else. He presupposes that his dismissal from his job happened to him today might some day happen to the chief clerk; one really could not deny that it was possible (75). So, we can assume that this sudden change can strike anyone. Fourthly, if you’ll forgive me for resorting to little bit of extra-textual information, Kafka himself refused to allow a depiction of the insect on the cover illustration of the published story (Karl 467). And, he only obliquely refers to Gregor as a bug, avoiding explicit detail of any particular visual imagery. References to Gregor’s insect deformity are then ostensibly meant to serve a metaphorical function. Fifthly, Frau Samsa is reluctant to move out the furniture in Gregor’s room, holding out the hope that her son may yet recover. Gregor himself believes that he may again take on his former life as a human. His condition then isn’t necessarily final or irreversible. Sixthly, Gregor repeatedly notes that there’s nothing physically wrong with him. It seems a conspicuous inconsistency to perceive that he has a few extra appendages and yet assert that a medical diagnosis of his condition as being in perfect health “would not be far wrong” (70). Whence one may conjecture that what Gregor suffers from is a psychological abnormality and not the literally physical disfigurement of having contracted the anatomy of a human-sized insect. Finally, Gregor reminds himself that, “in all likelihood [his words] would again be unintelligible,” indicating that he has a good understanding of his condition (102). All this reasoning of the adumbrated details places Gregor’s transformation squarely within the realm of the possible, even ordinary, a bit rare perhaps, but not an unheard of phenomena.

Now, this might seem a bit of a stretch but as a possible transformation that meets all the criteria I submit for the reader’s approval, as the premise of this paper’s main argument, that what makes Gregor so loathsome is his compulsion to pursue an unconventional life plan as an artist. He becomes his own artistic creation. The dark, ugly, morbid, tragic core of Gregor’s innermost self, the subject of his art, assumes bodily form in the shape of an enormous bug. His hideous deformity, according to this opinion, is the outward manifestation of his psychological sickness.

The chief clerk exhorts Gregor to stop degrading himself—“making a disgraceful exhibition” of himself (97)—and to continue to make good on his mundane social obligations. There are debts and
obligations that have to be honored if one is to hold one's head high in the world. There's also the hint here that Gregor's defrauding him—and by implication, his family—in some vague way. Hyperbole aside, if this innocent little bit of perceived malingering is fraught with such enormous consequence and shows so serious a dereliction on Gregor's part, one can imagine the kind of stigma such a society would impose upon an assertively independent individual who intransigently refused his/her prescriptive role. It would certainly count as an audacious affront to conventional wisdom and be an act of the highest ingratitude and disobedience. One gets a sense of the noxious implications they hold in store should Gregor act on his malcontent. I would suggest that this is the sinister potential within Gregor. It's also what he secretly desires.

At this point, Gregor is standing on his own multitudinous feet, as his family looks on, transfixed in mesmerized horror. Even if Gregor does, from his vantage point, honestly feel coerced into obeying the incomprehensible dictates of some subconscious drive, in his family's eyes, there is nonetheless an undercurrent of blame placed upon him for his transformation. To them, it's a perverse willfulness that tests their irritability and patience to the breaking point. In fact, they react with such an intense, personal vexation and impulsive hatred that one is lead to believe that Gregor is somehow blameworthy for this redefinition of his social image by their cultural standards. Irrespective of Gregor's perception of events, for the rest of the family his nonconformity clearly has a willful, defiant, and disloyal quality. This sort of strong reproachful quality of their antipathy has unmistakable implications of guilt. Gregor intuitively acknowledges his shame for this unspecified transgression and casually accepts the abrogation of his freedoms without question or protest. This refusal on Gregor's part to make some kind of defense is an implied admission of guilt to the unspecified charges of moral turpitude carrying the suggestion that he merits their imposed punishment. He accepts being condemned to exile within his own body. This seems the ultimate form of rejection and abandonment. He's now alienated even from himself.

This perceived social deviancy brings shame and is threatening to the family's bourgeois respectability. He's now so irreconcilably estranged from society's value system as to be reduced to an insect-like nonentity. This social perception of his new identity, their visceral disgust, is symbolic of society's betrayed expectations. It would seem that Gregor's former life of conformity to the conduct others expected of him had constituted his dignity and identity. Gregor has internalized these subtle and deeply ingrained social values and alters his body image to accommodate the aura of social disapproval that now hovers over him.

Grete still looks beautiful to Herr and Frau Samsa, from this perspective, only because her self-image still accords with their needs. Her blossoming young body may yet come into its own perverse maturation should she attempt to assert an identity that differs from their expectations.

By invocation of my premise, Gregor is now a non-conformist, a non-contributing member of society. His interests are diametrically opposed to those of his family and, by implication, of the larger community of respectable people. Being an artist also means incurring the hatred of his family who bears a grudge against him for over his dependency. His family is unable to brook daily contact with this nonproductive person who further taunts them with his quirkiness, unorthodoxy, and insuperable difference. His very physical presence is a mockery of everything they hold dear and becomes unbearable. Gregor acknowledges this shame and resents being a burden on others but he's unable to move out and spare them the added expense of his maintenance, for he says, "the decision that he must disappear was one that he held...strongly" (135). Without his financial help they must now confront the financial exigencies of a family of modest means. Gregor's no longer able to meet his family's socially instilled expectation of the only son to take on the role as breadwinner and to comfort them in their old age. He clearly sympathizes with his family's plight and wants to spare them from his personal embarrassment but feels that his reincarnation is outside his control. He feels a frustrated and impotent failure by their standards and is unable to overcome these feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy.

But it should also be noted that Gregor isn't personally ashamed of his artifice, only it's social perception. He's unapologetically willing to face the world and sincerely entertains the possibility that society may come to accept his transfiguration, for it says, "he was eager to find out what the others, after all their insistence, would say" and that "if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset" (98). Of course, to the social community, the fruits of his unacceptable life plan continually give offence. Whatever he does now is a pain to his family and brings disgrace upon himself.

In keeping with my thesis, his offensiveness could be emblematic of the artist's need to push boundaries, to provoke a reaction, to brashly challenge traditional assumptions, to cultivate shamefully bold tastes, to arouse controversy, and to assert oneself as different from the common crowd. Gregor must now also confront the daunting problem of making himself understood. As an artist he's unable to convey his message in ordinary, direct language. He can understand other people's speech, just as before, but they no longer comprehend him; he's trying to transmit insights in a cryptic, roundabout, and
labyrinthine way. Perhaps, he’s trying to relate a personal anguish that remains beyond everyday communication. And, his intentions are constantly misinterpreted.

Gregor also half-heartedly welcomes this release from the onerous responsibilities of his former cares. He no longer has to suffer intrusive invasions of his privacy, a privacy ideally suited to further his personal pursuits. He’s now free to enjoy the leisure of the inner imaginative world of his craft; he comes to master his insect abilities, crawling up walls and suspending himself from the ceiling. When his mother and sister start moving furniture out of his room he “earnestly [looks] forward to having his room emptied of furnishing” (116). He momentarily feels comfortable with his demotion and relishes the opportunity to extend further his new perverse liberation until he realizes that no one will come visit him in a vacant room. Gregor’s tendency to withdraw more and more from the wider world around him has now left him badly riven by the divergent desires of furthering his freedoms and orienting himself toward somehow returning to the human world. His ostracism does have its compensations. Within his personal sphere he’s governed solely by his personally determined choices, secure from the control and intrusion of others. But irrespective of the happiness he may derive from it, his entrapment is now enforced. This is the captivity of freedom from outside concerns. It’s a more expansive freedom but in an even further confining space. But as Gregor retreats deeper into himself, he becomes unconcerned with other people’s reactions. He hardens himself to injury, forming a callous shell as a means of self-protection from the thoughtless, insensitive, and demeaning things people say, the sort of things the charwoman says when she calls him “a dung beetle” (127).

Early on, there are a few hints that Gregor is dissatisfied with his narrowed perspective on the world, the view through a door that’s infrequently left ajar. He’s constantly striving to gain admission into the lives of other people. Perhaps this is symbolic of the artist’s need for such familiarity as subject matter for his artistic endeavors. He strains to overhear the family gossip, to catch them off-guard, to eavesdrop on scraps of their conversation, to snatch at inadvertent clues of what goes on in the outside world in a furtive, leering, and surreptitious manner. But Gregor was always denied entrance into the larger outside community even before his solitary confinement. He never did feel like a full-fledged member of his family. He recalls to mind how as a traveler he would imagine the family conversations he was unable to attend. Further, as a commercial traveler always on the move he couldn’t retain connections with anyone and so acquaintances he met along the way remained strangers; this I take to mean that there was some psychological blockage preventing him from a sense of belonging to the larger social community. His interpersonal separation, loneliness, alienation, and isolation seem to have been preexisting and his metamorphosis merely completes this exile in extremis by giving it a concrete form.

The window seems to have once offered Gregor freedom from the suffocating atmosphere of his confining enclosure. But as he adjusts to his new life, the external view looks like a desert wasteland. He looses interest in the family conversations too. With his failing eyesight his world recedes further inward and narrows the scope of his artistic vision. Perhaps his obtunded life is now out of focus and his attempts at setting a focal point leaves only further confusion and anomie.

It’s difficult to get a sense of how Gregor genuinely feels about his new life from the matter-of-fact manner in which the story’s developments are presented. But I take the fact that there are no indications of discontent at the external world becoming increasingly opaque to mean that he accepts his ever-narrowing range of vision. I have other reasons to suspect this. For we’re told: “Gregor often spent whole evenings gazing at the many greasy spots” on Herr Samsa’s uniform (123). Perhaps the soiled uniform is symbolic of traditionalism’s attenuated authority. Or perhaps, witnessed through the magnifying prism of his distorted perspective, Gregor gains a heightened awareness of the banality, emptiness, and meaninglessness of the external view and loses interest in the rest of the world. He’s also thankful to have lost all his other allegiances that exceed the confines of his self-contained world, for he says of the chief, the chief clerk, the sycophantic porter, his other co-workers, and all the other various people who “were one and all unapproachable and he was glad when they vanished” (125). Eventually, he seems content to be hemmed in by narrow confines of the dreary inner world for it says, “Gregor reconciled himself quite easily to the shutting of the door” (128).

Perhaps, for Gregor life looked clearer and less problematic through the lens provided by his vocation as a traveling salesperson. But in his life as a traveler he was continually confused, disoriented, and discomforted in unfamiliar surroundings. He worried about making (train) connections in confronting the complications inherent in real life. Perhaps this is why he spent his spare time reading railway timetables. It was a freedom exacted at the cost of confusion. Maybe the hustle and bustle of his daily routine, these obscuring details of life, is what gave his existence purpose and meaning and furnished a self-understanding, or at least kept his mind distracted from seeing the emptiness. Perhaps his imprisonment is then really a desire to locate some specific referent, an inner center, from which he can view in perspective the shifting world about him, something a life of constant traveling can’t accommodate. In this vein, one could note than in agitation Gregor resorts to movement and activity.
As a traveler, however, Gregor wasn’t entirely a free agent. He was subject to chance influences; he could easily become the victim of malicious rumors. So, the choice—which is not to suggest that Gregor can truly exercise his options—seems to be between the deterministic but confusing boundless open spaces of the outside world or the walled-in independence within the static and stable perimeters of his present living quarters. Early on, Gregor peers out his window, which signifies the freedom of the outside world, and clearly saw “a section of the endlessly long, dark gray building. . .punctuated by its row of regular windows” (100). Perhaps Gregor isn’t now peering into the void by looking beyond his hermetically sealed life. The best reading seems to be that his personal world which once appeared harmonious?) blur. This could signify that his life of traveling was an orderly existence of obligatory uniformity, fitting into a disciplined and regimented ideological framework, progressing toward an obscured but predefined direction. Whereas now, he may be physically stuck in a rut but his fate is governed—within his personal sphere—by his own individual, idiosyncratic, and ad hoc tastes. He clearly comes to enjoy his life as a bug, for it says, “he had been too absorbed of late in his new recreation of crawling over the ceiling to take the same interest as before in what was happening elsewhere in the flat” (120). The constant reminders of the quick passage of time that insistently assailed Gregor before his metamorphosis can be seen as another forms of structure that undergirded Gregor’s workaday life. Gregor, the insect, now lives in a state of timelessness, which is reflected in the hazy chronology. In one respect Gregor is, in accepting this chaotic view, willing to see life realistically as a bewildering mess with all its paradox, complexities, and ambiguities. In another respect, by not accepting his life of vertiginous travels with all its intractable cause and effect relationships he’s retreating from complexity. So, that doesn’t seem a very useful distinction. Viewed from a different angle, perhaps his present state offers safety and security, although this too doesn’t seem plausible since he’s now subject to the whims and caprice of a hostile family. His present dependence only highlights his family’s dominance and makes him even further reliant on and subordinate to the master of the household. His present “incapacity” exposes a humiliating vulnerability and leaves him at the mercy and charity of his attendants (101). Perhaps Gregor is simply unable to envision himself taking the reigns of power and exercising domestic authority.

Gregor’s compulsion to pursue his own interests is like his strange desire for “the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame...[showing] a lady, with a fur cap...” (89). The repeated associations of the picture with fur suggest barbarity. Perhaps Gregor has abjured the orderly, civilized sensibilities of human society to embrace, according to the prevailing tastes, an uncouth and unrefined existence. We’re also told that the picture is removed from a wider context, the magazine, within which it belongs. As such, it could be a metaphor for the artist's winnowing process of dismembering reality into manageable proportions that can be fitted into a stylistic schema, his fretworked gilt picture frame. It seems pertinent here to also note that on the table, above which hangs this picture, sit Gregor’s cloth samples relating to his job as a salesman, implying that Gregor himself was once integrated into a larger social fabric. The fact that Gregor has disentangled and fragmented himself from interconnectedness with a larger whole suggests that he views himself as distinct and complete within himself. This is also what makes him such an ugly oddity; he’s an amputated digit of the body social.

Karl suggests that the picture of the lady in fur, which is clearly a cherished possession for Gregor, holding some intensely personal meaning, is some sort of masturbatory fantasy. Perhaps, we’re to understand Gregor’s insect existence as something akin to this other solitary vice. It too is a shameful indulgence replete with strong feelings of guilt. Further, it drives a rift between him and his family and precipitates the confrontation with his father.

The tension in the Samsa household finally snaps over Gregor’s desire for the picture and Herr Samsa assails Gregor with a barrage of apples. But this is more than a father punishing an errant son for his misbehavior. The elder Samsa is lent a certain divine-like authority by the associations with the biblical story of the Fall. Perhaps, we’re to see this as Gregor being cast out of Earthly Paradise for his truculent insubordination to Fatherly authority. The embedded apple is a burning sore, a deep grief, a baleful shame. Gregor is ashamed of his disobedience of the virtues of filial piety and for having brashly challenged the established order.

To further add to the many sinuous ironies one could, however, note that instead of being a final banishment Gregor gains readmission into the human community; Herr Samsa is overcome by qualms of conscience and feels something like pity for his son. Gregor’s punishment then is his inability to separate himself completely from the social world. Seen this way, the distractions of home and family are a festering wound and he writhes in agony from the slow torture. He’s incapable of being assimilated into the cultural pattern and unable to divorce himself completely from the outside world.
Gregor goes hungry, not from the neglect of his attendants, but by choice. Perhaps, Gregor’s self-imposed starvation is a wish to abstain from incurring any further debts in society’s debt/credit system of obligations. Perhaps Gregor’s monastic existence, asceticism, abnegation, and fasting are a means for him to demonstrate his commitment to ply his art for the sake of his own self-satisfaction. Not unlike other Kafkan protagonists, Gregor seems to suffer some peculiar orientation of mind whereby he accepts languishing and withering away out of a self-serving need to renounce all worldly concerns and devote himself unreservedly to his art. Karl offers Kafka’s personal philosophy on a possible explanation: Kafka “suggests that since the world is already inside the individual, waiting to be unmasked, as Kafka puts it, there is no need to” seek it exogenously (Karl 581). So, liberated from the corrupting influences of society Gregor can then supposedly assume an attitude of detachment and objectivity and deduce by a priori reasoning an introspective self-understanding of some universal experience. Gregor then, by this reasoning, knowingly imposes enclosures upon his mind, enclosures within which his thoughts can be examined and circumscribed. The creative drive normally associated with the artistic process has been subverted into a self-destructive drive, though it would be a mistake to assume that Kafka or Gregor see this in a negative light. Gregor’s hunger then, by this account, stifles his attainment of self-sufficiency. I personally choose to see his stubborn insistence to hold his appetite in abeyance as a metaphor for an aesthete’s refusal to accept anything less than artistic perfection.

Gregor contemplates sneaking into the pantry to help himself to the provisions and remarks that this would merely be claiming his due. But it’s not a bodily hunger he cares to sate. It’s a longing for something incurably elusive, something that defies precise definition. He hungrily longing after this diffuse and intangible sustenance to fill his emptiness and gave meaning to his existence. I think the important thing to note here is that the nourishment he craves lies outside his self-contained world.

Perhaps Gregor feels that he’s being cheated out of publicity and recognition to which he feels entitled. He perhaps then isn’t suffering rigorous and privations merely out of some need for personal satisfaction. He tries to draw his sister’s attention to the accumulated dust and filth so that she will perhaps feel pity and care to rectify matters; he’s desirous of public notice and sympathy. But the audience remains indifferent. In one of the few other instances of his expressed affections, we’re told that he’s “filled with rage at the way [his family] were neglecting him” (125). His room becomes a repository of the family’s discarded refuse, which could, along with the aforementioned filth, signify their neglect and callous unconcern for his suffering. If you accept this opinion, however, that Gregor is desperate for attention, then this would lead one to believe that he would have been flattered by the family fight over who should be allowed to attend to his needs. Instead, it’s just more bothersome noise. Gregor also says that he’d “rather starve than draw [Grete’s] attention to” his dislike for the food she provides (107). Although there are hints to the contrary, Gregor does, for the most part, seem dependant upon public acceptance to affirm his achievements. Further evidence of Gregor’s desire to not be reliant upon others can be divined from his thought that Grete’s “ministrations… oppressed him” (113). From all this I conclude that Gregor wants the public’s obeisance so that he can display his self-sacrifice but it seems he doesn’t want the sympathetic audience to take measures to better his condition.

Gregor hears his sister playing the violin and he’s drawn to her as if she were the source of some great creation, a materialized aperçu. The music is something aesthetically captivating and he seeks to possess something of its essence. This is the inspiration that he’s hungered for so long. For this he’s willing to brave the adversity of public opinion. He shamelessly emerges from his exile and intrudes himself on the public stage, a place he has no right to be. He even thought that he disliked music but he now realizes that he had denied himself the pleasure or perhaps he didn’t have an appreciation for what true art really is.

He tries to charm beauty. But alas, he deludes himself into thinking that he has a receptive audience. Perhaps, he thought he could hold the crowd captive by his own repulsiveness as if he were some sort of circus-show freak. It’s a painfully embarrassing performance. Though his distorted perception this innocent beauty now becomes something smutty and filthy; his desire has incestuous overtones. Perhaps due to the vicissitudes though which he undergoes his vision of reality has become so skewed that he’s unable to discern his own wretchedness. He’s now a monster of perversion that pollutes whatever he touches. He’s an unmannerly pest intruding himself on society’s well-mannered dinner party to parade his uncongenial and coarse sensibilities, deluding himself all the while as attempting to capture artistic beauty. The paying public is clearly uncomfortable at having to view the ugliness of such a sight. His psychological sickness is not something for decent people. It’s not something that should be given a theatrical setting.

In the end, he can attain neither beauty nor please the fickle crowd’s tastes. But there are suggestions that these customers’ tastes aren’t fickle at all but rather that they have discriminating tastes with a clear sense of what they like. Perhaps the lodgers are right and Grete’s violin-playing is simply bad. Gregor is then a devotee of some screwy aesthetic sensibility that no one else shares. Perhaps
these three bearded men should be seen as the three wise men come to pay their tidings of hate to this martyr of degenerate art. There are also numerous associations of these men (notice that there’s one leader and two blind followers) with order and precision, suggesting that Gregor doesn’t or shouldn’t care to satisfy their already crystallized, conventional, and simpleminded definitions of what’s presentable; they’re connoisseurs of banal formalism. As such, I suggest that these men’s snobbish distaste isn’t a serious concern to Gregor. Gregor may have felt some sense of moral superiority to this vulgar crowd in making his sacrifices, consoling himself as having beauty on his side. But Grete who once rallied to his support now abandons him; his creative inspiration again eludes grasp. After his critical reception Gregor accepts his own irrelevance and shamefacedly withdraws back into the darkness of obscurity. As personification of his art, he’s now outfitted his usefulness and so he’s simply discarded as just more forgettable pulp trash. His life is of no meaningful consequence to anyone.

The assessment—by application of my quack dream interpretive psychoanalysis—is that Gregor Samsa is fundamentally an insecure artist, unsure of his own abilities. The subject seems to believe that his art may have personal import but that it’s irrelevant to their needs and concerns of society at large. Further, should he act on his desire to pursue such a life, he believes, he’ll be doomed to frustration, defeat, and despair. He’ll become threefold the victim of his own impetuous longings, for letting his health deteriorate, for becoming the object of intense hatred and opprobrium, and for being unable to seduce the goal of all his affections and sacrifices. In his perception, he’s condemned to be an aesthete who’ll remain unsated in his hunger for artistic perfection. This obsessive fixation on his artistic vision, by the fact that it’s been deflected onto his sister, may indicate that he perceives it as the product of a perverted aesthetic sensibility. It appears unlikely that the subject will chose such a transformation (i.e. into an artist) in real life, at least not to the neglect of his other social obligations. This conclusion is based on, first, the fact that he intuitively casts the vision of his rebellion in such grimly unpleasant imagery. Second, he still seems to want to hold the consoling belief that his family will mourn his passing. Although, the fact that they do so or not is left in doubt, it still seems he desires the comforting sedative of self-pity to feel that his family’s relationship with him isn’t defined solely by crass financial considerations and that they’ll still be touched by the doleful personal loss. Third, in this seditious fantasy he expresses surprise before dying that his “feeble little legs” could have supported his insect body which suggests a doubt that he can, in his waking existence, practically assert his independence (135). Fourth, the subject experiences a tormenting horror and pressing anxiety at the mere thought of being unable to meet his entrusted responsibilities. It’s therefore my own personal judgement that the hideous creature, the fruit of his protest, will be stillborn. Since the insect of his nightmare dies at three o’clock, in all likelihood Gregor will make the four o’clock wake-up alarm and be at work at the appointed time, as he has been for the previous five years. There are, however, reasons to be concerned that, if Gregor’s self-conception is too inextricably tied up in his verminous vision of himself, he may be, through wishing the creature’s demise, also be subconsciously wishing for his own termination. Or, in Freudian terms, his death instinct or thanatos may now outweigh his desire for life, eros. In Gregor’s perception of reality, it appears that he views his (how much of “him” is “Gregor” and how much the creature, I’ll leave the reader to decide) absence as more conducive to the world’s sense of happiness, wellbeing, and normalcy. He seems to see himself as a barrier to comity. The atmosphere pervading after his expiration is infused with a warm spring glow that furnishes blissful harmony, as opposed to the bitterly divisive conditions of strife and discord that predominated in his presence. As well, there is resolution of his personal confusion; his parents are able to take time off from the stresses and cares of work, something he was unable to do and they ride on a tram which, running on a predetermined track, frees them from fears of missing connections.

Sources:


