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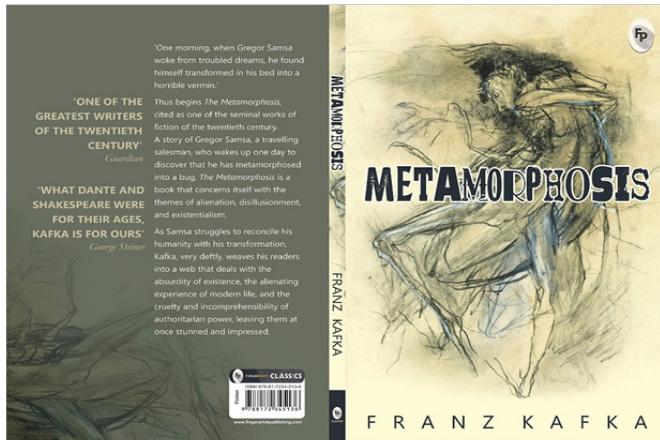
Book Review

โดย สุทิวัส สร้อยทอง

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(Translator)

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Introduction

The Metamorphosis is a three-part novella written by Franz Kafka and published in 1915. It has been called one of the seminal works of fiction of the 20th century as well as a classic absurdist fiction book. It starts with one of the most iconic opening lines in literature: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."

Summary

In part one, Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman awakens one morning to discover he has turned into an insect-like creature. Gregor lay on his armour-like back and his many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

"What's happened to me? He thought. It wasn't a dream [...] how about I sleep a little bit longer forget all this nonsense [...]"

Kafka, F. (1915), p. 1
He starts to reflect on his strenuous travelling career.

"The curse of Travelling [...] bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know anyone or become friendly with them. It can all go to hell!"

Kafka, F. (1915), p. 1

We get the first glimpse of Gregor's feeling of alienation, a central motif in the book. Gregor's friendships as a travelling salesman are only casual and never intimate since he must always be travelling, he never goes out in the evening but stays at home. This suggests that he already lives predominantly in isolation, before his transformation. Gregor thinks about leaving his job but has to work as hard as he can to pay off his parents' debts. However, with a transformation, his alienation is intensified, creating a psychological distance between his mind and his body, and those around him. Gregor refers to this as his "imprisonment". He is a human trapped in a non-body. While reflecting on himself, he looks over the alarm clock and finds out that he has overslept and is late for work. He is startled and thinks about taking the next train to work, but is unable to get out of bed.

His mother knocks on his door, and as Gregor tries to speak, his words appear incomprehensible. The family suspects that he may be ill, so they beg him to unlock the door. Gregor finds that his office manager has appeared to inquire why he hasn't shown up to work. But all they can hear is his incomprehensible noises. Gregor tries to drag himself across the floor, and with much effort finally opens the door with his mouth, injuring himself. He delivers a long speech asking the office manager to put in a good word for him at work. However, the office manager is horrified and flees, Gregor's family is petrified as well, and his father drives him back into his room under the threat of violence, slamming the door shut.

The contrast between the extraordinary situation of Gregor's transformation and the ordinary terms Kafka uses to describe it creates the sense of an irrational and absurd world.

Gregor embodies this absurdist tone from the start, being preoccupied with ordinary concerns such as being late for work, instead of his sudden transformation into a monstrous vermin.

In part two, Gregor wakes up to find that someone has put a bowl of milk and bread in the room. Once one of his favourite foods, he finds that he cannot stand the taste of milk now. The next morning his sister Grete comes in and replace the food with rotten food scraps, which Gregor happily eats. This begins a routine in which his sister feeds him and cleans up while he hides under the couch, afraid that his appearance will frighten her. Gregor spends his time listening through the wall to his family talking. With his unexpected incapacitation, the family is deprived of financial instability. The motif of money plays a major role throughout the novella.

"Their business misfortune had reduced the family to a state of despair. Gregor's only concern at that time had been to arrange things so that they could all forget about it as quickly as possible [...] they took the money with gratitude and he was glad to provide it, although there was no longer much warm affection given in return."

Kafka, F. (1915), p. 18

Gregor finds out that his father had secretly stored away savings and is happy to hear that. The main priority of the family is to find employment. Gregor begins to behave more and more like an insect, preferring darker spaces and enjoying crawling on the walls and ceiling, suggesting that our physical lives shape and direct our mental lives. Discovering his new pastime, his mother and sister decide to remove some of the furniture to give him more space. However, Gregor grows anxious as he hears his mother worry that they might be doing him a disservice by stripping the room of his possessions. He panics at the

thought of losing all the remnants of his human life and clings to a particularly loved portrait on the wall, as he is emotionally attached to it. His mother loses consciousness at the sight of Gregor clinging to the image to protect it, and his sister rushes to help her. Gregor runs out of the room as well, however, his father returns home from work and believes that Gregor tried to attack his mother. He angrily hurls apples at him, one of which is lodged in his back and severely wounds him. There is a big disconnect between mind and body. Gregor tries to reconcile his human emotions and history with the physical urges of his new body. The details show that he still feels connected with his human past and considers himself a part of the family. One of the central themes that dominate this part is if Gregor is still human and if so, to what degree. Towards the end, his sister starts to think of him as a mere insect who is a chore and an inconvenience. The father does not indicate that he regards Gregor as the same, and is particularly hostile against him. Only the mother calls him her “unfortunate son”, implying that she believes Gregor to be fundamentally the same despite his appearance.

In part three, Gregor suffers from his injuries for several weeks and barely eats food. The family focus on earning money, replacing their regular maid with a cheaper charwoman, and taking in three lodgers into their apartment to earn some money. The main thing holding the family back from moving out to a cheaper apartment has to do with:

“Their total despair, and the thought that they had been struck with a misfortune unlike anything experienced by anyone else they knew or were related to.”

Kafka, F. (1915), p. 18

Gregor is increasingly alienated and neglected by his family and his room becomes used for storage. One day, his door is left open and he can hear his sister’s violin-playing in the living room and crawls out of his room. He is entranced by the violin.

“Is he an animal if music could captivate him so? It seemed to him that he was being shown the way to the unknown nourishment he had been yearning for.”

Kafka, F. (1915), p. 18

One of the lodgers spots Gregor and cries out. They all immediately complain about the apartments’ unhygienic conditions and cancel their tenancy, without paying any money. Grete concludes that Gregor is a burden on the family and tell her parents that they must get rid of “it”, or they’ll all be ruined. His father, repeats “if he could just understand us”. This indicates that there is still hope that Gregor’s mind remains intact. However, Grete soon convinces her parents that nothing of Gregor exists in the insect and that the real Gregor would’ve understood them and left on his own accord, letting them carry their lives and remember him with respect.

“He thought back of his family with emotion and love [...] he felt that he must go away even more strongly than his sister [...] He watched as it slowly began to get light everywhere outside [...] and his last breath flowed weakly from his nostrils.”

Kafka, F. (1915), p. 38

The family gathers around the corpse and Gregor’s sister notices how skinny Gregor had become, suggesting that there is still sympathy involved. The family kicked out the lodgers and fire the charwomen, who had disposed of Gregor’s body without their consent. After briefly crying together, they finally feel a sense of relief. They

took a day off from their work and take the tram to the countryside, the “warm sunshine” creates a marked contrast from the confining image of the family’s small apartment. This creates a sense of hope for the future, reaching its climax in the final lines of the story. Grete has grown up into a pretty young woman, suggesting that her metamorphosis is complete. They think about finding her a husband that can sustain the family. This suggests that a new chapter in her life is beginning. The story concludes with Gregor’s sister stretching, an act that suggests emerging after a long period of confinement, as if from a cocoon.

Conclusion

Metamorphosis is a story of self-disgust, about the treachery of family and the terrifying of arbitrary power. The book embodies an absurdist tone with ordinary daily concerns (such as being

late for work) even after Gregor Samsa’s extraordinary transformation into a monstrous vermin. It is an allegory of modern society’s alienation and angst. The story mostly takes place in a single confined room. The cause of Gregor’s transformation is never revealed, and Kafka himself has never explained.

Kafka not only shows us an insight into what kind of a relationship he had with his father in the novella but also gives us an interpretation of a young man that ultimately sacrifices every part of himself for the well being of others. From his commitment to a horrible job to the relinquishing of his human life, and his death to free his family of his monstrous state. All done in suffering and sacrifice while unwavering his commitment to his family and his love for his sister. Kafka’s use of imagery, setting, and symbolism, bring life into this story and makes us truly consider the bigger picture of what is happening in Gregor’s life.

