

The Ins and Outs of Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis"

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My first encounter with “Metamorphosis” was as a first-year college student. Challenged by my professor to come up with a reading, I thought something like, “No-brainer. I get it. This is about a guy with such self-esteem problems, caused by his exploitative and neglectful family, that he turns outwardly into a cockroach, which is already his inner state.” A few years later, when I had occasion to read the story again, I thought, “Duh, how could I have been so stupid? This is about a guy who is so odious that he morphs into the repulsive vermin he really is. He dominates and controls everyone around him by his fake meekness and passive aggression, locking his whole family into a claustrophobic paralysis.” Needless to say, over the years, as I have read and reread Franz Kafka's great story, I have revised my readings of it over and over. Now, after 40 years or so, I have accepted that I am not going to “solve” or “resolve” this amazing tale.

The big word “incommensurable” comes to mind in relation to “Metamorphosis.” Incommensurable means oxymoronic, paradoxical, disjunct, self-contradictory, incapable of being solved or resolved. As one reads “Metamorphosis,” everything seems clear, lucid, even transparent. Even though the events of the story are nightmarish and weird, readers can follow Gregor's and the family members' thoughts and behaviors. Events seem to unfold with perfect clarity once the reader accepts the central premise—Gregor has awakened one morning as a giant insect. There are no tricky plays on language, fancy metaphors or time lapses. The story is a straightforward description of an odd occurrence and its consequences.

Except it isn't.

Kafka's tale is, in fact, incommensurable. The components don't add up. There are odd bits and pieces jutting out all over the place that cannot be fit into any coherent description of what is going on, of the plot. As our translator, Michael Hoffman, says, Kafka's writing has the quality of “inexhaustible intractability.” There is, he says, an “over-plus of meaning”; “we practically *know* there is something more going on in a story, something probably to do with sex or violence or families or metaphysics, but we're damned if we know what it is” (x). The text's resistance to univocal meaning, its incommensurability, accounts for some of the anxiety often encountered in reading this story, especially for the first time. It works—that is, it reads through as if logically—but it doesn't really work. It won't settle down and let itself be interpreted once and for all, or *at all*.

The title itself, for instance, provides difficulties. Of course “metamorphosis” must refer to Gregor's awful transformation. In the original German the title includes the article “die,” meaning “the”: “The Metamorphosis,” suggesting a singularity. But what about the family's transformation in the wake of Gregor's? People who were dependent and passive suddenly have jobs, connections to the outside world, new interests and concerns. The father, in his stained uniform, presents an entirely different physical appearance than he had at the beginning of the tale. Or what about the end of the story in which we finally see the family outside the apartment and the parents suddenly seem to have a relationship with one another? And, finally, how is the reader to understand Grete's post-pubescent metamorphosis, as it were, from caterpillar into butterfly at the very end of the story?

Even spatially, the story is unsettling. What is the floor plan of the apartment in which it all takes place? Gregor's room itself, so carefully and repetitiously described, is odd, incommensurable, doesn't add up. The wall opposite Gregor's bed faces the street with a featureless hospi-

tal constituting the view, but that dreary view itself fades in and out depending on Gregor's health and the weather, which is usually rainy or foggy. Why a hospital? What kind? Why is no one from it consulted about Gregor? It is difficult to picture that street with people, yet surely many people come and go at a hospital. Gregor's room itself has three doors: one behind his head, and two others to his left and right. Why? The only door Gregor uses is the one that leads into the living/dining room. At the outset of the tale, though, Gregor's mother contacts him via “a cautious knock on the door behind him,” that is, the door behind the head of the bed, a weird place for a door. A few lines later, Gregor's father knocks on “the door at the side of the room” while his sister “laments softly” from behind “the door on the other side of the room” (90). Gregor rejoices that he locks “every door at night, even at home”(91). What kind of a room is this? Three doors, all locked, with an impenetrable fog visible through the window. And inside, a very big insect, struggling to “restore the natural order of things” (92). Is this room in the middle of the apartment? Are there rooms on all sides of it? Or hallways? Does it matter who is behind what door? Invited by the oddness of the topography, the reader may look for symbolic meanings—room as representation, say, of Gregor's inner state. Is he the center of the family, yet unavailable to them? Or is he, on the other hand, an outcast, the life of the family going on all around him, himself excluded? Does he have no privacy? Or does he have too much? Does he lock his family members out even though they long to communicate? Or does he exclude them because they make too many demands on him? The narrative voice describing this room is so reasonable and understated that it is possible to read without immediately noticing that Gregor is not the only uncanny, incommensurable element in the story.

The first page of the tale describes the room as “a normal human room, if always a little on the small side” (87). As we live through the story with Gregor, however, the room seems to

grow and shrink like something from *Alice in Wonderland*. If it is small, how does it contain all the furniture we learn about at various points? A desk. A wardrobe. A couch big enough to hide Gregor. Later on, all kinds of odds and ends from the rest of the apartment. Enough room for Gregor to get out of Grete's and his mother's way when they come in at various times. Enough room for the enormous insect Gregor to crawl freely all over the floors and walls and ceilings. The room, and the apartment don't add up. The geography is irrational, incommensurable.

Additionally, the whole tale is filled with doors opening and closing, shutting people in or out, allowing glimpses of this and that person or event. Getting out is hard for Gregor, but getting back in is even harder. Being inside is isolating and lonely; being outside is dangerous and fraught. Why is Gregor's door left open after the event of the violin when it has remained so firmly shut before? Has Gregor locked the others out? Has he been locked in?

Although most of the details of the room are vague, the most thoroughly specified item in it is the picture of a lady clipped from a magazine. Wearing “a fur hat and a stole, sitting bolt upright,” she holds “in the direction of the onlooker a heavy fur muff into which she had thrust the whole of her forearm” (87). The picture's “attractive gilt frame,” the reader learns much later, is actually Gregor's handiwork, built during quiet evenings at home before his transformation. Later, when his mother and Grete are removing furniture from his room, it is the one object Gregor defends actively and fiercely. Since it is clearly important to Gregor and is described so fully in a story that often withholds description, probably it's important in some way. Is the woman naked other than the hat, stole and muff? Does her upright position indicate eagerness or some other emotion? Is “heavy fur muff” sexually allusive? Is she metamorphosing into a furry animal? Does Gregor see her as inviting him to metamorphose? He cut the picture out recently;

is it foreshadowing of his own process? Does the picture in its elaborate, handmade frame signify that Gregor appreciates art? Or does it indicate that he has bad taste and admires trashy pictures from magazines?

These are samples of the “inexhaustible intractability” cited by the translator as central to Kafka's writing. There are endless questions without clear answers, accompanied by a sense that if one could only read carefully enough, a meaning, an answer would emerge. I have never “solved” “Metamorphosis,” but perhaps you will. Gregor is confined in his room despite its many doors and windows. He can see almost nothing beyond his room. But you, new young reader, have much more perspective, can see further, are not locked into stubborn, limiting and disabling patterns of existence.

Or are you?