Being Gregor Samsa
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Franz Kafka's short story The Metamorphosis was written in 1915, while Europe was engaged in World War One and two years before the Russian revolution. In the story, we find that Gregor Samsa, a dedicated, hard worker, has found himself changed into a giant insect, an oversized bug. He experiences many obvious difficulties, from being unfit for work, to being unable to communicate with his family, to simply figuring out what kind of food he likes.

There are no reasons given for Gregor's sudden mutation. We are told that it was no dream, but that is all (Kafka 3). So if we are to attempt a comprehension of Gregor's situation, we must look outside the text for another way with which to read the story. The main concern from Gregor's point of view was his work. Much of the text deals explicitly with his relationship to his job and the pressures of economically supporting his family. To look into The Metamorphosis, we must use a critical method that places a person's job and finances in the forefront of its analysis. Marxism posits the idea that the character of human beings will be shaped by circumstances inherent in their work (Tinder 53). From this Marxist vantage point, we can begin to see how the sad metamorphosis had afflicted Gregor Samsa.

Marx said in 1859 that it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (par. 6). What he is saying is that people are not defined by how they think of themselves, but that how others view them will define how they see themselves. In the case of Gregor Samsa, he views himself as a loyal, dedicated worker, someone trustworthy, dependable, and good (Kafka 7). However, he is viewed by his manager at work as something of a lout, someone who upon missing the early train, must be checked up on and brought in (7). He is seen by his parents as a way out of debt, a workhorse that can fix their financial woes, even though it will take years. Gregor's social being, the way he is seen by family and co-workers, is little more than that of a functioning little worker, a drone, an insect. It is little wonder he wakes up in the predicament he finds himself in.

Throughout the text there are many other nuggets of Marxist ideas. They serve to show just how the Samsa family is held down by Gregor's manager and how the family is held in the chokehold of capitalism in general. The sum of all these critiques of capitalism sets the bleak stage of despair that allows the reader to accept a character that is simply a six foot cockroach, to understand him and even empathize with him.

From the beginning, we get the sense that Gregor does not consider himself someone very special or unique. "Samsa was a traveling salesman," the story says (Kafka 3). Not a person, a human, or something brightened by that divine spark, but merely a traveling salesman. Nothing more. Gregor (though not even Gregor, just Samsa) has completely become his job; the two are inseparable and life is unimaginable for him without his work. Immediately upon realizing he has turned into the bug, the first thing Gregor does is complain about his job, "What a grueling job I've picked! Day in, day out-on the road... the torture of traveling, worrying about trains, eating miserable food..." (Kafka 3, 4). Gregor hates his business, obviously, yet feels compelled to keep working. We learn that Gregor has not "picked" his job, as he says, but that he is working to pay off family debts owed to his boss. This situation puts leverage on Gregor and forces him to the workplace, a place he hates and has no use for. He is forced to give up his existence (and eventually his being) for the pursuit of making money.

Gregor also has a hostile and deep resentment of his manager. Upon learning of his situation, the second thing Gregor thinks about is telling of the boss. "If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would have quit long ago. I would have marched up to the boss and spoken my piece from the bottom of my heart. He would have fallen off the desk!" (Kafka 4) Gregor is keenly aware that he is beholden to the boss. The boss represents the bourgeois and Gregor the proletariat. Since the proletariat makes up the overwhelming majority, it is assumed the reader is among them. So as readers we are given to feeling sympathy for Gregor and his job situation. In a capitalist society, almost everyone has debts and so is economically pressed into labor to pay off the debts. Though we
may not all be as dramatic as Gregor, his situation is one we can relate to. The upper class can dangle the carrot in front of the worker’s head. They simply have to make sure the system is built so that there is no opportunity for the worker to ever get the carrot. We can see in Gregor’s case one of the critiques of capitalism. Gregor represents all the workers, those who foot all the legwork of a company and see virtually no reward. Yet the workers can all see the boss, the one behind the desk who makes all the money. Once the worker is so completely crushed, as Gregor is, by the system, they begin to even feel like they owe their boss, that they must work harder for him/her.

Even while Gregor wishes to quit his job and tell off his boss, his attitudes change when the manager comes around to his home. Gregor immediately begins to cower and grovel. He makes excuses for himself. He begs and pleads, “Perhaps you haven’t seen the last orders I sent in. Anyway, I’m still on the road with the eight o’clock train . . . Don’t let me keep you, sir . . . give my respects to the head of the firm” (Kafka 10). He has committed no crime, yet Gregor feels it necessary to defend himself. He acts as though he is guilty for something horrendous when all he did was oversleep a bit. Gregor has so much pressure that he feels guilty when he cannot give himself entirely over to his job. He is so betrayed by his work ethic that when he recovers even a shred of his own hopes and goals, he is made to feel guilty. He is taught that his own happiness is not as important as the bottom line.

The major thematic critique of capitalism throughout The Metamorphosis is the loss of humanity through strenuous and dispassionate work. In Gregor, we have a symbol for all the workers that wake up one morning, after years of hard work, and realize they hate their jobs and what they have become. The economics of Gregor’s life forced him to labor selflessly for years. His standing in society was thereby reduced. No one took him seriously, and no one saw his human value anymore. What they saw was a bug, something dirty, something that could be stepped on and forgotten, and something they didn’t care for. But by looking at Gregor from the Marxist viewpoint we can see so much more in him. What we see especially are the words his boss uses to smash him down and squash his spirit. “[Y]ou neglect . . . your duties to the firm in a really shocking manner . . . I’m amazed, amazed. I thought I knew you to be a quiet, reasonable person, and now suddenly you seem to want to start strutting about, flaunting strange whims” (Kafka 9). We see how his parents bear down on him and depend on him to work off their debts and we especially see how Gregor represents the seed of anger directed towards the class system. That Gregor died so pitifully in the end is a testament to the strength of the system that destroyed him. Gregor was unable to break himself of its rules and its oppression and finally succumbs to its pressure. He hated his job, and yet had become it. He now despised what he was. No longer his own master, his life was not his own. His last moment of life does not even belong to him, as we learn that “without his consent, his head sank down to the floor, and from his nostrils streamed his last weak breath” (Kafka 39).

Works Cited

