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Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* to Borges "The Babylon Lottery:" Struggles of Society due to
Capitalism – Revised

"All history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development," Friedrich Engels, a German philosopher from the 19th century said. Throughout all of world history, there are two main groups in society: those who are struggling and being taken advantage of and those who are not. The lower class gets exploited by the wealthy because there is no choice; the economy is a system made by the wealthy for the wealthy. Engels believed the class struggle "will continue until the foundations of class struggle and of class domination – private property and anarchic social production – disappear. The interests of the proletariat demand the destruction of these foundations, and therefore the conscious class struggle of the organized workers must be directed against them. And every class struggle is a political struggle," (Lenin). Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges both wrote stories that align with the beliefs Engels had regarding the destructive nature of capitalism, and the importance of the working-class taking advantage of the little power they have.

In Franz Kafka's story, *The Metamorphosis*, the reader gets a glimpse into what a capitalist system will do to a person, and the results are less than desirable. Jorge Luis Borges' story, "The Babylon Lottery," has a similar theme. In both of these stories, there is neglect of the poor by the rich, and there is a power struggle. These stories show the struggle people face in a

capitalist system. A person's life is no longer their own; they live to work. Bosses will take advantage of their employees; a person becomes no more than a cog in a machine, and eventually, the people of the lower class will either revolt or die miserable. The lower class ends up working for bosses that have no compassion, and then are left with limited choices. In a capitalist system, workers face many negative consequences such as losing their sense of individuality, a power imbalance (the wealthy have the control that the lower-class does not), and in the end, the system is a burden to all as they fear failure, as seen in *The Metamorphosis* and "The Babylon Lottery."

Capitalism steals the sense of individuality from a worker as they become a small piece to a big machine. This results in the lower-class having no choice but to prioritize the job over themselves in order to keep it because they cannot afford to lose it. In Kafka's story, *The Metamorphosis*, the main character, Gregor Samsa, wakes up as a literal giant bug at the beginning. Gregor begins to worry because he cannot get up out of bed and is already late for work. In a case like this, one would not expect work to be the first thing on someone's mind, but in a society that revolves around work, money and greed, it is. Gregor does not want to chance upsetting the boss and losing his job because he is the sole money maker in his family. Gregor is struggling trying to figure out a way to solve the problem, not wanting to "stay in bed uselessly," (Kafka 9). Gregor does not see the value in taking care of himself or prioritizing his needs because he sees himself as nothing more than an employee. He worries that even if he were able to catch another train to work, he would still get in trouble with the boss for being late. He knows he cannot rely on the firm's errand boy, who probably reported him, to cover for him as Gregor describes him as "the boss's minion, without backbone or intelligence" (Kafka 7). Gregor cannot trust the coworker to cover for him because in many work place settings people will spill

information like that to bosses to prove that one person is disposable and disloyal to the company and make themselves look like a more desirable asset. This point still holds true today despite this story being published in 1915. Kafka illustrates how in a capitalist society one will put their job in front of their health and wellbeing, and he does so comically. The “bug” can be any form of sickness or hinderance, but the dramatization of this shows just how ridiculous he finds it that people are willing, or have no choice but to sacrifice their wellbeing for a paycheck.

In Borges’ story, “The Babylon Lottery,” there is the same sense of lost individuality. The people of Babylonia end up completely relying on faith in the lottery to determine who they are, what they do, and where they will go in life. They do not determine anything for themselves by making their own decisions. They go along with whatever is determined for them by the lottery that is run by the Company. When people started complaining about problems with the lottery, the Company quickly responded by saying that “to accept errors is not to contradict fate but merely to corroborate it” (Borges 69) which put an end to public unease. Nobody even questioned it, even though the Company was run in secret and they did not know anything real about who was behind it. This is similar to how employees must follow strict corporate guidelines that are set by people most employees never even meet, but to question it means to risk losing the job. For example, many employees are given restrictions regarding their appearance including hotels in Myrtle Beach. In some of these hotels, employees can be reprimanded for something as simple as a nail polish that is glittery or not a neutral color. However, it is a rule from corporate and not to be questioned by employees. Restrictions regarding appearances, especially for something as simple as nail polish, are a huge contribution to the lost sense of individuality in the work place. It is another way a corporation can put control over employees, dehumanizing them in a way.

Along with the loss of their individuality in this system, there is an extreme power imbalance. In Gregor's situation, he is being exploited by the employer, but he cannot afford to lose the job, so he struggles to find a solution that will allow him to go to work and keep it. He gets the idea to call in sick but decides it would be too "embarrassing and suspicious" because he has not been sick once his entire five years working at the company (Kafka 7). In a capitalist system, employers seem to expect that employees never need a personal day off. Gregor worries that, "The boss would certainly come with the doctor from the health insurance company and would reproach his parents for their lazy son and cut short all objections with the insurance doctor's comments; for him everyone was completely healthy but really lazy about work," (Kafka 7). Even though he has never called out for a day before, Gregor still fears that his boss would just think him lazy. Even while in this state, Gregor is still prioritizing his job instead of being worried about his health or body. He fears that he will look suspicious and lazy for not appearing at work, even if he had called. It is simply not realistic to expect people to never need a day off from work, however, people do worry when they need to call out of work because many bosses will see their workers as an easily replaceable object.

Many people in a capitalist society today still worry about the consequences of needing time off. Gregor ended up being quickly replaced at his job despite being hardworking and loyal to the company the whole time he was there; the employer was not concerned about his employee's health, he was only concerned about keeping up his profit. Employees are often times looked at as objects, and dehumanized by their employers: they are expected to be almost machine-like. Even today, employers, in places such as restaurants, will prohibit time-off requests, or refuse to allow employees to have weekends or holidays off, or will reprimand their employees for calling out for a sick day.

In “The Babylon Lottery,” a power imbalance was quickly apparent when the poor originally cannot even afford to participate in the lottery. The lower-classes saw the unfair treatment they were being given in that, and decided not to tolerate it which led to a revolt. There was blood shed as the “people of Babylon imposed their will at last, over the opposition of the rich” (Borges 67). The lower-classes eventually were fed up with the power the wealthy had over them, and pushed for change. A society that uses a capitalist system will have upper and lower-classes inevitably, but there have been many points in history that prove eventually the lower-classes grow tired of being mistreated by the wealthy, the French Revolution, for example. In this story, the revolution leads to equality and tickets become free for all allowing everyone can participate. Today, there is a “revolution” going on related to labor movements in the United States. Many employees have gone on strike, and many businesses are suffering from being under-staffed. The working-class is pushing for a shorter work week, less hours, and better pay. This movement seems to have been launched forward due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While many were unemployed due to shutdowns, federal benefits were provided to help those in need. Now, since reopening, businesses have had a difficult time hiring staff, which is likely related to people realizing how much of their life they were sacrificing for little pay in return. People were able to make ends meet better with unemployment benefits than they were working for their money. With this being the case, why would people want to return to work? Their hard work will need to be rewarded with a livable wage.

In “The Babylon Lottery,” people are looking for a way for fate to take over their lives. For them, decision making is a burden; they worry they will make the wrong decisions and do not want to be responsible for whatever may happen. A Babylonian “reverses the judgments of fate, he hands his life over to them, he places his hopes, his panic terror in them, but it never

occurs to him to investigate their labyrinthian laws” (Borges 69). People trust in the system without question, even though they do not know the people behind the Company. People use the system as a scapegoat, and in this sense, the burden is their lack of individuality caused by a system that rules over their lives. This is reflected in the real world as people give their lives to their jobs without question. Americans have lived like this for decades without wondering why they are sacrificing their happiness for their employers; they have “handed over their lives” as a Babylonian would to the Company. For many, this is likely due to fear of what would happen if they tried to stand up for themselves, or made certain demands, such as flexible hours and good pay.

Capitalism is the root of many problems in our society which Kafka and Borges are able to wonderfully illustrate. Capitalism is the cause of lost individuality, a huge power imbalance between social classes, and creates a burden among all as they have to fear failing and making mistakes. Employees are forced to give so much of themselves to employers that do not care about them as they have no choice; they live to work. It is the only way for them to survive in a society that uses this system. Stepping outside of the worlds of Kafka and Borges and into reality, workers face these problems daily. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, society was able to see the true root of capitalism clearly: greed. Most people lost their jobs when executive orders were given to shut down all non-essential businesses, leaving people with no source of income, and having to rely on federal unemployment benefits. Those benefits could take weeks to be approved, however, there was no nationwide bill freeze. Since the lower-classes are the ones that are applying for these benefits, many struggled to keep up with bills as they waited for unemployment money to come through. Companies that were allowed to stay open made many cuts, and layoffs because of a decline in business. Those with essential jobs who had concerns

for their health could not quit because they would not be eligible for federal benefits, therefore, would be stuck without income during the pandemic and would still be responsible for paying their bills. Many people from lower-classes also would not be able to afford healthcare if they were to get sick with this deadly virus. Even during a pandemic, workers who were considered essential were forced to prioritize work over their lives, health and safety, and lower-classes had to struggle to make ends meet while the wealthy did not have to worry. This led to a sort of revolution in the United States which is the current labor movement many working-class Americans are participating in. The system in place is all Americans know, but it is a burden which Kafka and Borges warn people against; showing that it can only end in death, or destruction.

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