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EGL 309

The Metamorphosis of Grete Samsa

In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa is transformed into a large bug. This physical change causes the story to touch on what it means to be a part of a family that does not respect you, whether you are a human or not, and the isolation that comes with that. While the story does not end so happily for Gregor, the same cannot be said for his younger sister Grete. Over the course of the story's three acts, the reader sees Grete gain confidence in herself and go after what she wants at the expense of Gregor, the male figure in her life that she has heavily relied upon until now. Through the character of Grete, the narrative explores the femininity and autonomy of women in the early twentieth century. By the end of the novella, Grete has transformed from a sobbing girl, into a confident woman in control of her life.

In the first section of the story, Grete's whole existence relies on her brother Gregor. Grete's entire purpose is to either ask Gregor if he needs anything, or cry. This stems from that fact that Gregor is his family's only source of income, and therefore has control over what happens to them. When Grete begins to weep as Gregor is not leaving his room for work due to his transformation, he wonders, "Well, why was she crying? Because he wouldn't get up and let the chief clerk in, because he was in danger of losing his job, and because the chief would begin dunning his parents again for the old debts? Surely these were things one didn't need to worry about for the present. Gregor was still at home and not in the least thinking of deserting the family" (Kafka 96). But Grete doesn't know not to worry about this, and in this moment her

whole livelihood is at stake. She only knows her place in the world in relation to the men in her

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life, her brother and her father. The aforementioned lines show how little control Grete has in her life and where it is going. Gregor meanwhile, has never questioned his place in the family as he is the breadwinner. While on the surface Gregor has the most power within the family hierarchy, the first act also addresses the tiny bit of power that Grete has. Gregor mulls over how Grete would be of great help to him in convincing the clerk not to fire him. He thinks, “If only his sister had been there! She was intelligent . . . And no doubt the chief clerk, so partial to ladies, would have been guided by her; she would have shut the door of the flat and in the hall talked him out of his horror. But she was not there and Gregor would have to handle the situation himself” (Kafka 102). Gregor’s belief that the chief clerk would listen to Grete because he is “so partial to ladies,” expresses how many women at the beginning of the twentieth century were valued for their femininity above all else. It also depicts how women’s importance in society depended on how they pleased men. But within these lines Gregor also calls his sister “intelligent” and wants her to be there with him when he approaches the chief clerk. This shows that by the end of part one, Gregor’s own life is starting to rely upon Grete. These lines foreshadow how Grete acts later on, and conveys the potential that she has in becoming an active participant within her own life.

Grete slowly begins living up to that potential through her own metamorphosis in the first half of the second part of the novella. She is quick to seize authority over Gregor’s care, and it can be seen how truly intelligent and observant she is. It is said that Grete, “with fine tact, knowing that Gregor would not eat in her presence . . . withdrew quickly and even turned the key, to let him understand that he could take his ease as much as he liked” (Kafka 108). This expresses that not

only is Grete smart enough to pick up on the little details, but that she is a considerate person as well. The reader only discovers this characterization of Grete when her

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brother falls more and more into his bug ways. The discovery of Grete's personality is in stark contrast to the revelation that Gregor himself is not very aware of what the other people around him want. This can be seen with his parents, but especially Grete. Gregor is said to have "made his mind up firmly" about "a secret plan of his that she, who loved music, unlike himself, and could play movingly on the violin, should be sent next year to study at the Conservatorium" (Kafka 111). Gregor wants to overstep the little autonomy Grete has as he does not know if this is what she actually wants. He can't even pick up on the fact that his family has unnecessary expenses when they are apparently in debt. As seen before, Grete is observant and does understand what her family needs. This shows that Grete and Gregor have both tried to fit the mold of what the gender stereotypes were at the time; Gregor tried to be the man of the family while Grete played the role of the damsel in distress. But now that both characters are going through their own changes, it is evident that the roles have switched. Gregor is a prisoner in his own home who needs help, and Grete is effectively a warden who can give aid if she chooses to.

In the latter half of the second section, Grete fully embraces the power she has gained through the subjugation of Gregor. While Gregor previously struggled in his part as head of the house, Grete falls into it much more naturally. The text says, "For the first fortnight his parents could not bring themselves to the point of entering the room, and he often heard them expressing their appreciation of his sister's activities, whereas formerly they had frequently scolded her for being as they thought a somewhat useless daughter" (Kafka 114). These lines illustrate how thankful Mr. and Mrs. Samsa are to their daughter for doing a task they don't want to do, taking care of

Gregor. Yet, this is the exact opposite of how they reacted to Gregor who was working to pay off their debts for them. The disparity between the treatment of Grete and Gregor is blatantly exhibited when Mr.Samsa decides to reveal to his wife and daughter that he does have some

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money left over from before he went broke. It is disclosed that Gregor, “had been of the opinion that nothing at all was left over from his father’s business, at least his father had never said anything to the contrary, and of course he had not asked him recently” (Kafka 110). It is clear that Mr.Samsa values Grete more than Gregor. He very readily tells her the family’s financial situation which Gregor, who was working to eventually pay the debts off, never knew about. Grete now has this newfound knowledge and the praise of her parents, which changes how she views herself. This is glimpsed when Grete insists upon furniture being removed from Gregor’s room. It is said, “This determination was not, of course, merely the outcome of childish recalcitrance and of the self-confidence she had recently developed so unexpectedly and at such cost” (Kafka 117). This self-confidence that Grete has found within herself presents why she no longer needs to depend on Gregor anymore. Gregor may call this change in Grete childish, but it shows how much she has grown from the first page of the novella. While Gregor has been shrinking from humanity, Grete is interacting with it more and taking control of it, starting with their parents. In the paragraph after the previous lines mentioned, Gregor calls his sister and mother “two women” (Kafka 118). This is the first time in the entire story that Gregor has referred to his sister as a woman, and not a child or adolescent. This is a significant moment in the narrative because Gregor recognizes Grete’s transformation in addition to his own.

The final section of the novella portrays Grete as a strong, confident woman who not only takes her fate into her own hands, but Gregor’s fate as well. We learn early on in this part of the story

that Grete, “had taken as a salesgirl, was learning shorthand and French in the evenings on the chance of bettering herself” (Kafka 122). This displays Grete getting a life outside of her home, and family. She is choosing what she wants to do with her life, despite Gregor wanting her to go to school to study music. There is emphasis put on the fact that she is picking up new

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hobbies for *herself*, and not doing it for the sake of someone else. Gregor still wants Grete to do something for *him*, and that is to play the violin. The text says that Gregor, “was determined to push forward till he reached his sister, to pull at her skirt and so let her know that she was to come into his room with her violin, for no one here appreciated her playing . . . his sister should come with no constraint, she should stay with him of her own free will” (Kafka 131). Gregor plans on physically dragging his sister to his room to play her violin for his personal enjoyment, and he actually convinces himself that she will want to do this of her own volition. This point is proven false when Gregor thinks to himself that she will come with no constraint; this a strange thought to have if you believe a person will do something of their own liberty. It becomes clear soon after this that Grete does not want to have anything to do with Gregor. She comes up with the idea that the bug must finally be done away with. She tells her parents, “I won’t utter my brother’s name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it. We’ve tried to look after it and to put up with it as far as is humanly possible, and I don’t think anyone could reproach us in the slightest” (Kafka 133). This is a key moment in Grete’s character development as she becomes an active participant in the narrative. Her suggestion, which later becomes a reality, indicates how she is no longer standing on the sidelines while other people make the decisions. Soon after this, Gregor thinks to himself, “The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible”

(Kafka 135). Gregor decides to die so he can fulfill his sister's wish. Grete is no longer asking what she can do for him, Gregor is doing something for her. Grete's metamorphosis leads to the final scene in the novella where she and her parents take a train to the country. The story ends with Grete stretching out "her young body" (Kafka 139). This final scene of Grete's youthful body and her having so many bright things implied to be ahead of her, parallels the opening

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scene with Gregor waking up as a bug, and losing any hope of breaking free into his own life. Grete Samsa finally takes control of her sense of self and defines her femininity the way she wants to.

Grete defies gender stereotypes of the twentieth century by exhibiting her femininity in a way that was considered more masculine, and in doing so becomes the true protagonist of the novella. Grete is shown to display characteristics similar to her father, while Gregor is closer to their mother in personality. Gregor's father is shown to be a very angry person which can be seen when he "knotted his fist with a fierce expression on his face as if he meant to knock Gregor back into his room" (Kafka 100). This scene is later mirrored when Grete gets annoyed at Gregor and "beat upon the table with her small fists" (Kafka 126). Grete and Mr.Samsa have more domineering personalities; this is in contrast to Gregor and Mrs.Samsa who are shown to be more passive and submissive characters. Grete grows into a woman who is more assertive than her male counterpart. This goes against stereotypical gender dynamics of the time as Grete would be considered more "masculine," and Gregor more "feminine." There has been much discussion in academic circles about how much power female characters in Kafka's stories have. In her article, "Of Women's Potentiality to Be 'Sexually Exploitative and Debauched,'" independent researcher Marria Qibtia Sikandar Nagra writes about the innate power that women come into in

many works written by Kafka. She writes, “Kafka’s female characters are conscious of their sexuality and emotive ability to infuse stability or instability in men’s lives, thereby governing the intimate affairs of the heart, if not the affairs of the state, courts or governance” (Qibtia Sikandar Nagra 2018). This is exactly what Grete does over the course of the novella. She becomes conscious of how to utilize her womanhood in a man’s world and places herself at

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the center of a narrative that was not originally about her. The story is a calling for other women to do the same thing as Grete, but in their own lives.

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Works Cited

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Qibtia Sikandar Nagra, Marria. “Of Women’s Potentiality to Be ‘Sexually Exploitative and Debauched.’” *Medium.com* , 30 Sept. 2018,

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