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### Modernism and the Dung Beetle

Central to one's deep understanding of a cultural movement is the exploration of its people – their beliefs, values, character, attitudes, and background. In a literary sense, Modernism is an ideology that marked Anglo-Saxon society's transition from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. Described by Bloom as "the sensation of the new" (38), the modernist movement broke conservative barriers in favor of a radical aesthetic toward "the ugly, the grotesque, and the bizarre to shake art loose from inherited restrictions" (39). As such, *The Metamorphosis* was a bold departure from conservative prose with agreeable themes to that of raw, emotional stories of isolation and the industrial age. This paper will demonstrate that Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the author himself were direct representations of literary Modernism and its theories of individualism, experimentation, absurdity, symbolism, and formalism (Sadullayeva 836-837).

Franz Kafka's personal life, environment, and background expressively influenced his approach to his modernist works, particularly that of *The Metamorphosis*. Born of Jewish and German descent in 1883, Kafka grew up in the center of the multi-cultural, multilingual center of Prague during the advent of the modernist movement. Many of his pieces, published posthumously, characterize the strained relationship with his father (termed "a big, ill-tempered domestic tyrant"), the loss of all five of his siblings (by childhood death or victims of concentration camps), his education and work as an attorney, the influence of his various "bread jobs," and an overall growing disdain for industrialized society (*A Short Biography of Kafka* 1).

In the throes of World War I, Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis* in 1912, inspired by a tortuous long-distance love affair (Kakutani 17). The protagonist, Gregor Samsa, a nuanced character of the author himself - is placed as a working-class man living in the heart of Prague – who then shockingly turns into a verminous bug overnight, giving a voice to "socially forbidden feelings and thoughts" (V 3483). As a result, Kafka earned a trademark for his unique writing style. Aptly named "Kafkaesque," his works were characterized by a sudden shift from real life to the surreal, "with aspects of reality that are deeply strange even while being wholly normal" (Troscianko 35). From this "Kafkaesque" approach, major themes in the novella emerged: alienation, self-sacrifice, and father-son antagonism (V 3482). These themes correlate with literary Modernism's primary ideals (individualism, experimentation, absurdity, symbolism, and formalism), as discussed below.

Gregor portrays Kafka's version of individualism in *Metamorphosis* - a person's lost identity within society – one that surrenders to commercial, industrial, and technological control. Further, the conversion of Gregor's body to a bug is a stark representation of his already established role in society, that of a mere "dung beetle," as coined by the former housekeeper of the Samsa family (Kafka 24). By referring to Gregor in this way, he is rejected, shunned, and vulnerable, further reducing his ability to self-actualize. In addition, by enduring his family's alienation, both in human and insect form, Gregor feels dehumanized and eventually reaches his lowest point. This mindset directly reflects individualism within the modernist movement, underscoring that one's work or career "[will no longer] be dictated by external needs or the commands of others; but chosen, partially at least, for its intrinsic pleasure" (V 3483).

If alienation and individualism were hallmarks of the modernist movement, writers highlighted this by defying language conventions. As such, novelists wrote from the new stream-

of-consciousness perspective, and poets abandoned rhyming conventions to convey the American people's growing stress, confusion, and mistrust in the world (Sadullayeva 837). Further, offering readers more than one theory on a particular scene, the concept of "experimentation " weaves through *The Metamorphosis* to foster free thought and open debate within the piece. Sweeney, in his analysis of *The Metamorphosis*, cites that this type of experimentation in writing, called "triparative structure," is taking each of the three sections of the work and "advanc[ing] a different and opposing philosophical theory about the nature of the self and the maintenance of personal identity" (Sweeney 23). To illustrate this structure within experimentation, in the first section of *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka addresses a dual concept of identity by relating Gregor's awareness of losing his human body and the permanence of his new insect frame. Sweeney states that in the second section of the piece, "behaviorist and materialist views" challenge Gregor's picture of himself, and in the last section, "both theories are countered by a social-constructionist theory of the self and personal identity" (Sweeney 23). Kafka presents this triparative structure in Gregor's repeated attempts to leave his bedroom, only to be forced back into it. For instance, as Gregor contemplates how he will get out of bed, he discovers that "with a stronger rocking, he maintained his equilibrium with difficulty" (12) yet contemplates that any momentum will cause him to hit his head when reaching the floor - "at all costs, he must not lose consciousness right now" (10). By sharing access to Gregor's thoughts, the reader sympathizes with the character and attempts to rationalize their behavior. Once the reader makes that connection, they can best empathize with the character's thoughts and feelings. The reader then connects their emotions to the character by osmosis. Thus, *The Metamorphosis* directly represents experimentation within literary Modernism through just one example of Kafka's writing style within the piece.

With a pervasive pessimism toward the American Dream, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* was an abstract, absurd, yet fitting representation of a rising mindset. Through literary Modernism, society began to shake its fists at the world. As such, filled with doubts about a place in society and the emerging modern nature of the world, let alone his family, Kafka and Gregor were one. Therefore, one could conclude that absurdism and *The Metamorphosis* are synonymous. Sadullayeva opines that given the senseless bloodshed of World War II and a growing capitalist culture, "for writers, the world was becoming more of an 'absurd' place every day" (837). The fact that the protagonist, Gregor, morphs into "a monstrous verminous bug" (3) overnight sets the tone of absurdism for the entire novel. Simon adds, "to be transformed into a giant bug and to remain calm is an absurdity [in and of itself]" (13).

Another situational example of absurdism in *Kafka's Metamorphosis* is Gregor's daydream of repairing his relationship with his sister, Grete. With a renewed love for music in his new "dung beetle" form, Gregor imagines that he would dive into Grete's violin playing as a way of relating to her, fantasizing that she "might still come with her violin into his room" and "his frightening appearance would, for the first time, become useful for him" (Kafka 81). Gregor further dreams that he will reveal his plan to send her to a conservatory, thereby "reclaiming his sense of self" (Sweeney 31). Yet, he realizes the fantasy of physically talking to Grete, even embracing her with a kiss, is not to be. Grete's statement to her parents is the evidence: "I will not utter my brother's name in front of this monster, and thus I say only that we must try to get rid of it" (Kafka 84). Grete will always view Gregor as repulsive, even the sight of him, thereby "highlight[ing] the absurdity of their establishing any personal relationship" (Sweeney 31). These examples represent the theme of absurdity in Modernism in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Inherent to Modernist authors, Kafka imbued animation and profound meaning to objects, places, people, and animals. Sadullayeva describes Modernist symbolism as "an imagined reality with multiple layers, many of them hidden..." (837). Although symbolism was not new, writers like Kafka left more to the imagination than their predecessors. For example, in *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor, the "dung beetle," versus Gregor, the man, can be open to multiple interpretations. However, Bloom writes, "the consensus is that Kafka seems to be pointing to the vermin which every man inherently embodies" and that the insect is Kafka's self-portrait, a despairing man of the human condition (60). Another example of the author's use of symbolism is evident in the confrontational scene between Gregor and his father. As voices escalate, we can infer that this exchange symbolizes Kafka's strained relationship with his father. Wielding the manager's cane and a rolled newspaper signify authority over Gregor and, ultimately, Kafka as he portrays the tumultuous relationship the two shared (78).

Yet another example of symbolism in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is Gregor's "picture which he had cut out of an illustrated magazine...set in a pretty gilt frame...of a woman with [nothing but] a fur hat and a fur boa" (3). A representation of everything that Gregor will not realize, he clings to the framed photo, even "press[ing] his body against it" as his mother and sister attempt to rearrange his room (Kafka 41). Asriningtyas and Mustofa suggest that the photo is "one of the first things [Gregor] observes in his [new] sight as an insect" and that it reminds him of his humanity, "beauty, romance, and glamour," and his waning desire for "true human connection" (269). Virtually every object or person in *The Metamorphosis* ties allegorically to another concept; therefore, these examples are no exception and prove that the piece wholly represents symbolism within Modernism.

Finally, with the deconstruction movement of literary conventions at the turn of the twentieth century, authors were redefining the strict stylistic writing of the past. Known as "formalism," writers concentrated on garnering more respect for their "craft" than its current reputation of a casual "flowering of creativity" (Sadalluyeva 837). This new ideology toward language and writing as an "expertise," not just a writer's reaction to external events, began feeding the Modernists' desire for originality and creativity. For example, the realistic description of Gregor's transformation, complex characteristics, and personality is evidence of this concept: "He lay on his armour-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections" (Kafka 3). For Modernist authors, formalism was a campaign to ensure a clear line of demarcation between writing craft and history by explaining the condition of aesthetic experience (Levinson 560). Lastly, formalist writers often related their work to political and social issues and the realities of each, challenging readers to ask who truly defines reality. Demonstrated through Kafka's character dynamics, Bloom writes that "*The Metamorphosis* is humanity's connection to the battle between the conscious and the unconscious within the world's new sociopolitical environment" (60).

As we have seen, the overarching literary themes of the Modernist movement are isolation, uncertainty, and disillusionment. Moreover, in *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor fails to understand that his mind, not his physical form, defined him, emphasizing individualism and its role within the story. Of note, due to the absurd nature of Gregor's transformation, in true "Kafkaesque" style, making the abstract seem real, *The Metamorphosis* was the twentieth century's foremost example of literary Modernism. Troscianko supports that Kafka was often described as "an Autor der Klassischenhe or the author of classical Modernism, and *The Metamorphosis* his proof" (6). Finally, Kafka brought new meaning to symbolism and realism

with literary images of beauty like Grete and her violin to author-inspired symbols of fractured relationships between father and son to a single representation of the Modernist movement itself in Gregor, the "dung beetle."

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