
Mental Illness Portrayed In The Metamorphosis

The *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, translated by Stanley Corngold, is a novella about a man named Gregor Samsa who goes through a metamorphosis. He wakes up as a monstrous vermin and as a result, he is unable to continue working for his family, who are all depending on him to provide for them. His family has to learn how to adapt to his new form, and they must find ways to continue supporting the family. Gregor's inability to work, support his family, and to communicate with his family causes tension between him and his family which causes isolation, abuse, and death. Franz Kafka utilizes symbolism to characterize Gregor as mentally ill.

Franz Kafka is able to use Gregor's family to symbolize Gregor's mental illness. Franz Kafka is able to show this through Gregor. Gregor, being the provider of his family, has no time to settle down and relax. He is clearly overworked, which is the cause of his mental illness. Gregor's condition is a direct result of his financial and emotional burdens caused by his family. Gregor struggles to support his family, finance all their needs, and pay the debt that was brought upon by his father's actions. Since Gregor gives little to no thought on his present metamorphosis even considering it a normal part of his life, he becomes a person who can become so overwhelmed with his life that he simply finds a way to escape from his responsibilities. For Gregor's family; however, he becomes a burden, a burden who can no longer take care of himself or their small family and must now be taken care of as an invalid. Franz Kafka was able to use Gregor's family as a symbol to portray how rough Gregor's life had become where he felt inadequate and isolated. Gregor was such a burden upon the family that his family was accepting of his death and they all found some peace within themselves when Gregor passed. "To spend this day resting and going for a walk; they not only deserve a break in their work but absolutely needed one." (54). Gregor's death lifted this huge burden off of Gregor's family because they grew tired caring for him. He was useless to them and they just became tiresome. "...became more livelier and livelier... she had blossomed into a good-looking shapely girl... they thought it would soon be time, too, find her a good husband." (55) Gregor's sister, Grete, becomes livelier after Gregor dies because such a burden was lifted off of her shoulders after this whole situation with Gregor, Grete was ready to move on and forget about her brother. Towards the end of Gregor's life, he reflected on how he could have done more things for his family before his metamorphosis. Due to Gregor being isolated and feeling inadequate to his family, he felt guilty for everything he didn't do instead of feeling great about the things he did for his family.

Franz Kafka utilizes diction to portray that Gregor has a mental illness. Gregor's family is so horrified by his appearance that they can't even look at him. They find themselves locking him in his room and calling him a vermin. Franz Kafka was able to give vermin a double meaning. Vermin insinuates something parasitic and aggressive, something that would live off of human beings; however, this as well connotes something defenseless and something easy to step on. Kafka gave this word a double meaning to show the different points of view in Gregor's appearance. Gregor's family sees him as this aggressive creature, Gregor's size reiterates this aspect of him being aggressive and parasitic. What's ironic about the demeanor gave to Gregor by his family is that he does not acquire the will to be aggressive. Kafka himself never reveals what type of insect Gregor has transformed into, neither does he disclose the size and form of Gregor's body. Grete struggles more than anybody else in the family because she's the only

one truly caring for him and eventually breaks down from the burden of having Gregor with them. "Things can't go on like this. Maybe you don't realize it, but I do. I won't pronounce the name of my brother in front of this monster, and so all I say is: we have to try to get rid of it. We've done everything humanly possible to take care of it and put up with it; I don't think anyone can blame us in the least." (48) Gregor is no longer a brother, provider, or a friend like he used to be, and everyday Gregor is falling further and further into his new accustomed life.

Franz Kafka uses the symbolism of doors and food to show that Gregor was emotionally and mentally ill. Gregor, without intentionally planning on it, has isolated himself from his family in more ways than one. "Complimented himself instead on the precaution he had adopted from business trips, is locking all the doors during the night, even at home." (6) Locking the door, and considering it a prudent habit, even though he is at home, a place where he should, without doubt, feel safe and secure. This defines his emotional suffering on a deeper level. In such a case, Gregor is in a position where he cannot trust anyone even his own family. Doors can symbolize opportunity or imprisonment, but when the door is locked this symbolizes Gregor's feeling of there's no way out of the situation he is in involving his family debt and being the only provider. Gregor's metamorphosis can also be seen as another form of emotional escape from the dangers and stress that he perceives within his reality. Without even realizing it, Gregor has virtually removed himself from life to hiding and be cared for in his miserable existence. Franz Kafka uses the doors by showing that Gregor is also uncomfortable in his own home. Franz Kafka does this by using the locked doors as symbolism while also being able to show that Gregor is suffering on a deeper level. Whether it was Gregor's emotional instability or Gregor feeling unmotivated, his family put him in a place where he felt unsafe emotionally causing him to suffer. Along with the doors, causing suffering in Gregor, food was used to symbolize how Gregor's family feels about Gregor. Grete, the closest family member to Gregor has the responsibility of feeding Gregor for most of the novella. Grete at first leaves milk and bread which used to be Gregor's favorite food before he transitioned. Grete leaves this to show her empathy after Gregor's metamorphosis, even though it used to be Gregor's favorite foods he doesn't finish the meal. Grete experiments with different foods to see what he wants and likes. Grete takes great care in finding foods for Gregor to eat and make sure he is comfortable. The more this goes on Grete loses interest in what he wants to eat and whether he likes it or not. As this goes on she is finding Gregor as a burden even more and a waste of time. When the boarders come to stay at Samsa's house Gregor is starving and is being left unfed while the borders are able to eat as much as they want. Gregor, of course, feels some resentment towards this and this signifies that the family's feelings about feeding Gregor have changed.

Franz Kafka uses symbolism to characterize Gregor as mentally ill. Gregor's character was portrayed as having a difficult time believing and trusting others. Gregor's family was selfish and they did not want anything to do with him after he transitioned. Gregor had a difficult life trying to keep up with all of the struggles that came with his everyday life. Whether it was his responsibilities at work or the stress of feeling unsafe at home. This caused him to mentally remove himself from the situation and go through his own metamorphosis causing him to become a tremendous burden upon his family. Franz Kafka was also able to use diction to ironically define who Gregor was as a vermin. However, these all tie together to show that Gregor was truly mentally ill and did not go physically go through a metamorphosis but mentally and emotionally.

Work Cited:

1. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988.