The Metamorphosis: The Theme Of Depression

When a reader picks up Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis for the first time, he or she may assume that the title refers to the transformation of Gregor Samsa from man to insect. However, what is truly changing is something beyond what is written on paper. Kafka's changing descriptions of Gregor's father and sister suggests that members of the Samsa family are changed. Although Gregor's transformation ultimately leads to his death, the change rejuvenates the family - it restores the father's health, allows him to lead the family, and gives Grete the chance to develop into a woman. Gregor’s clinical depression will be used as the principle of analysis and will describe the opportunities given as a result.

Everyone faces a different form of depression and some symptoms may be homologous with those who aren’t, however there are definitive symptoms that take place in a person who may be clinically depressed and they are present within Gregor. These symptoms include a low feeling, change in appetite, disturbance of sleep, and agitation. He is flooded with all of these feelings almost immediately after his metamorphosis of character. With his “new body” he couldn’t sleep how he preferred and didn’t even prefer to eat one of his favorite meals which included milk. What came with his isolationism from his family caused him to be alienated by these same people which tore him apart slowly, the more apparent their hate for him was. He only began to feel worse about himself and ultimately became very agitated by the thought of his family wishing upon his death for the betterment of their lives. However, his death does not remain in vain.

Before Gregor's transformation, his father is physically inept. At the beginning of Kafka's novel, the father is described as a 'healthy but an old man' (Kafka 27) who would 'lie wearily in bed when Gregor left for a business trip' (35). Once a businessman himself, the father has fallen on hard times. Instead of making money for the family, he is burdened by debt and bereft of energy. Indeed, when Gregor comes home, the father can only raise his arms to greet his son for he is 'not quite able to get up' (35). The father's physical weakness prevents him from helping his family during a crisis. When the head clerk comes to check on Gregor, the father can do little to assist - he knocks 'gently' on his son's door, whispers warnings, then goes 'back to his breakfast' (9). Gregor's mother is the one who tells the clerk her son is unwell instead (12). This incident was likely an embarrassment to the father - after all, women at this time were known for 'dressing nicely, sleeping late, helping with the housework [and] enjoying a few modest amusements' (27). Men were supposed to defend the family's honor.

Gregor's transformation gives the father an opportunity to regain his strength and masculinity. When Gregor becomes a 'monstrous vermin' (7), the father sees him as a threat and uses this to reassert his authority within the family. When Gregor emerges from his room for the first time, the father does not sit meekly while the women handle the situation. Instead, he drives 'Gregor back relentlessly, hissing like a savage' and gives his insect-son a 'terrific shove' (20) through the doorway. When the father displays his strength before the women, he proves that he can defend the family. Driving Gregor into his room helps restore the father's lost energy. Indeed, when Gregor sees his father next, he cannot believe how the man has changed. Now, the father 'held himself erect, dressed in a tight blue uniform with gold buttons, like that of a bank messenger; his double chin bulged over the high stuff collar of his jacket . . . from under his

busy eyebrows his alert black eyes flashed penetratingly' (35). Remembering the infirm, old man who could barely sit up, Gregor asks himself: 'And yet, and yet, could this indeed still be the father?' (35). The father, who has found his strength again, uses Gregor's next appearance to cement his position as Man of the House. He uses Gregor's brief encounter with the mother as grounds to attack. Gregor sees this instantly: 'The father had misinterpreted Gregor's all too brief statement and assumed Gregor was guilty of some kind of violence' (34). With the whole family watching again, the father attacks Gregor with apples, wounding the monster who threatens his house. After this deliberate show of power, the women become subservient to the father - the sister screams while the mother begs him to spare Gregor's life (36). The father now controls the Samsa household.

With his strength and masculinity restored, the father not only becomes a provider for the family again, but gains an identity of his own. Unlike previous years, where Gregor supplied the family's income, the father now works for the family's well being. He takes to his new position with zeal, sitting 'fully dressed in his chair, as if he were ever ready for duty and awaited . . . his superior's call' (38). With a renewed strength, the father can address problems which plague the family like the boarders. Far different from who he was at the beginning, the father tells the boarders, 'Leave my house at once!' (49) and they flee. Indeed, by the time Gregor dies, the man is referred to as 'Herr Samsa' (49) instead of just 'the father.' He has created a new identity for himself. Had Gregor not transformed, the father would have continued to lay moribund around the house, for like the rest of the family, he had grown used to his son providing everything (26).

Like Herr Samsa, Grete also undergoes a change. Before Gregor becomes an insect, her parents had 'had frequently been annoyed with her because she appeared to them to be a somewhat useless girl' (29). Grete's parents were likely right - their daughter lived a leisurely existence, her favorite activity 'above all playing the violin' (27). Without any responsibilities of her own -Gregor provided money for the Samsas - Grete could do little to contribute to the family's well being. Even after misfortune befalls her brother, Grete is still treated like a little girl by her parents. The mother tries to stop Grete from pushing heavy furniture, for fear that 'she might overexert herself' (30). Even Gregor describes his sister as 'frail,' (30) just 'still a child of seventeen' (27). Yet Grete, like her father, uses her brother's sudden metamorphosis to become a compassionate woman and a productive member of the family. Grete is the only one who cares for Gregor during the first few weeks of his new life because 'the parents could not bring themselves to enter his room' (29). She sets out his meals, determines what he likes to eat and offers to clear the room for him so he has more space. In addition, she supports Herr Samsa when he is physically weak. When her father starts to collapse after a hard day's work, Grete drops 'her pen to run after him and aid him further' (38). At the same time she cares for her family, Grete also helps them bring in money. She takes on a 'job as a salesgirl' and studies French with 'the hope of attaining a better position in the future' (37). With Gregor stuck in his room, Grete takes his place - useless no more.

But while Grete's position within the family improves, her relationship with Gregor deteriorates. Prior to morphing into an insect, Gregor had a close relationship with his sister (26) - he wanted to send her to the Conservatory so she could learn music. Indeed, Grete likely brings Gregor food because she has fond memories of her brother. But despite her compassion, Gregor does not seem to accept that his sister has grown up, mentally. He attributes her newfound determination to 'childish defiance and the self-confidence' as well as the 'romantic enthusiasm of girls her age that seeks expression at every opportunity' (31). But soon after dismissing

Grete's intentions, Gregor's animal instincts take over and his attitude becomes hostile. When Grete and her mother move furniture out of his room, Gregor finds himself overwhelmed by the noise - 'he could not stand the ruckus much longer' (32). Although Gregor once cared for his sister, he finds he would rather 'fly in Grete's face' (33) than give up a prized picture. His actions eventually cause Grete to give up all hope for her brother. She tells her parents she refuses 'to pronounce [her] brother's name in front of this monstrosity' and that they have to 'try and get rid of it' (46). Grete understands that the family cannot continue while Gregor is with them. Her words convince Gregor, now tired and broken that death is the best option for his family. With that, Gregor, always doing what is best for his family, passes away.

Gregor Samsa is very much a tragic character who started off in a terrible place and only progressed deeper into his despair. A character consumed by his own depression possibly derived from an unforgiven and unappreciative family who spoke his death into existence. However Gregor's man-to-insect conversion was the best thing that could happen to the Samsa family. Once dispirited and listless, they could now enjoy walks in the park and look forward to a new home (51). Although some may argue that Kafka's story is horrific, it merely illustrates that one must 'go through hell to get to heaven.' Gregor's situation, while tragic, makes the Samsa family stronger.