

UNIVERSAL ISOLATION

Feelings of seclusion and isolation possess universal implications. All people experience some rejection or estrangement in some form in their lifetime. Families often, whether intentionally or unintentionally, contribute to such feelings. Kafka uses distortion of reality and dehumanization of his main character in his story, *The Metamorphosis*, in order to emphasize a theme of alienation and rejection.

In the first few sentences of his story, Kafka asks the reader to suspend reality and accept a large distortion through his turning of Gregor Samsa into a dung beetle. Gregor's transformation into an insect acts as a metaphor for his human life. His family treats him like a worthless insect; they force him to support them through working a very demanding job as a commercial traveler. Because he serves only one purpose of supporting them, Gregor's family solely recognizes him as long as he fulfills that purpose. Kafka claims that "they had simply got used to it [provisions given by Gregor], both the family and Gregor; the money was gratefully accepted and gladly given, but there was no special uprush of warm feeling."¹ Although Gregor's family acts grateful for his support, they do not truly appreciate him and simply tolerate his existence as long as he serves the function they desire of him. As soon as Gregor transforms into an insect and his family realizes they have lost their sole provider, Gregor changes in their eyes to a repulsive entity which only further alienates him. By allowing Gregor to transform into a worthless insect, Kafka portrays how others truly view his human existence.

Not only does the distortion of reality convey a sense of alienation, but the Samsas' actions and attitudes toward Gregor further emphasize Kafka's theme of rejection and isolation. Although Grete previously maintained a rather close relationship

¹ Kafka, Franz. The Metamorphosis. (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1971). p. 111

with Gregor, once he adopts the form of a dung beetle, Grete's feelings toward him slowly change. Immediately after Gregor's metamorphosis she caters to his needs and takes care of him; but as time progresses and Gregor maintains his beetle form, Grete's consideration for him dwindles. Her neglect adds to his feelings of seclusion and rejection from the only family member who showed concern for him. When offering Gregor food, in order "to find out what he liked she brought him a whole selection of food, all set out on an old newspaper."² Of the entire family, Grete serves as the only member to show any kind of affection toward Gregor in his dung beetle form. She tries to find food that appeals to him after he did not eat the first food she gave him. Grete continues to feed Gregor twice in a day when his parents are asleep and even keeps them away from him. Grete only contributes to his alienation through her declaration and pride of functioning as his sole caretaker and prevents others from seeing him.

Grete also dehumanizes Gregor through the removal of his furniture. She eliminates his last connection to reality and the outside world by taking his furniture out of his room. Upon the realization that the removal of the furniture eliminates his last connection to reality, Gregor thinks that "nothing should be taken out of his room; everything must stay as it was; he could not dispense with the good influence of the furniture on his state of mind; and even if the furniture did hamper him in his senseless crawling around and around, that was no drawback but a great advantage."³ Gregor recognizes that these last few pieces of furniture function as his sole connection to reality. His sister erases his memories through the removal of his furniture and no longer views

² Kafka, p. 107

³ Kafka, p. 117

him as her brother, but as a repulsive insect with no human quality; she ultimately rejects him and ignores his humanity.

Kafka dehumanizes Gregor and portrays a sense of rejection through the actions and attitude of Gregor's father. When Gregor first appears before his family and the chief clerk as a giant insect, they meet him with repulsion and rejection. Mr. Samsa no longer sees the creature as his son and wastes no time in dehumanizing him:

he seized in his right hand the walking stick that the chief clerk had left behind on a chair, together with a hat and great coat, snatched in his left hand a large newspaper from the table, and began stamping his feet and flourishing the stick and the newspaper to drive Gregor back into his room. No entreaty of Gregor's availed, indeed no entreaty was even understood, however humbly he bent his head; his father only stamped on the floor the more loudly.⁴

Mr. Samsa treats Gregor like an animal, a worthless dog, as he tries to herd him back into his room, away from any human interaction. Since Gregor no longer looks human, his father resists contact with his son and prevents him from interacting with anyone else. Gregor has transformed from a human, no matter how ill respected, into a worthless insect, isolated and kept away from reality and the outside world.

Gregor's change in appetite and loss of human communication display his dehumanization which ultimately leads to his isolation. Previous to his transformation, Gregor possessed no problem or issues with his appetite. He feels excited at the sight of food after his metamorphosis, especially at the sight of milk and bread. Although Grete believes Gregor would like the food, "he did not like the milk either, although milk had

⁴ Kafka, p. 103

been his favorite drink.”⁵ Gregor no longer desires human food or food he found desirable in his previous life. Kafka dehumanizes Gregor through changing his food selection and desires; this only further separates him from his family and the human race, leading him to a place of isolation. Not only does Gregor’s appetite shift from human to animal-like, but his voice and vocal communication skills decline to that of a bug also. He tries to speak and explain his tardiness to the chief clerk and his parents but “the words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before, perhaps because his ear had grown accustomed to the sound of them.”⁶ Gregor no longer possesses the ability to communicate in human terms, and his family makes no attempt to understand him. Try as he may, he no longer possesses a connection through communication with his family. His family pushes him away with their lack of consideration and concern and simply tries to deal with him by locking him in a room cut off from all relations and interactions. They left him alone to wander in pointless circles in isolation like the worthless insect they always viewed him as.

The Samsas dehumanize Gregor on multiple occasions and force him into seclusion because they no longer view him as useful family member. Instead of peacefully and humanely attempting to drive him back into his room after an escape, Mr. Samsa treats him like a complete animal and worthless insect and throws apples in order to force Gregor into his room. Gregor watches as fruit flew from his father’s hands and grazed him: “He [Mr. Samsa] had filled his pockets with fruit from the dish on the sideboard and was now shying apple after apple, without taking particularly good aim for

⁵ Kafka, p. 105

⁶ Kafka, p. 99

the moment.”⁷ Mr. Samsa forces Gregor back into seclusion in a violent way, the way in which one would squash a pesky bug. Gregor no longer exists as a human, only as the worthless beetle his family always treated him like, but that Gregor previously refused to accept and acknowledge.

Near the end of the story Gregor’s family feels threatened by his existence and Grete lectures her parents and claims that Gregor does not exist in this insect form: ““You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we’ve believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble.””⁸ Because Gregor interrupts Grete’s violin playing for the lodgers, whom the Samsas show more concern for than their own son, he pushes her past the brink of her patience. She no longer wants to deal with the giant inconvenience of Gregor and further dehumanizes him with her bold statement that the creature living in her brother’s room cannot possibly contain even the spirit of Gregor because it possesses no concern or regard for the family. Essentially, the Samsas see Gregor as dead, so when he actually does die, they show no concern or care, simply relief. Once the charwoman informs the Samsas of their son’s death, a sense of relief echoes through their home. The first thought to enter his parents’ minds after Gregor’s death, a desire to take a walk, emphasizes their sense of relief and disregard. The charwoman tries to inform the family how she disposed of Gregor’s body, but “Mrs. Samsa and Grete bent over their letters again, as if preoccupied; Mr. Samsa, who perceived that she was eager to begin describing it all in detail, stopped her with a decisive hand.”⁹ The Samsa family dehumanizes Gregor to the point where they no longer care what misfortunes befell their

⁷ Kafka, p. 122

⁸ Kafka, p. 134

⁹ Kafka, p. 138

son. They display no concern for his death and carry on in their daily lives, anew without the menacing, worthless dung beetle.

Kafka dehumanizes his main character through the actions of his family and distorts reality as a way to show a consistent theme of seclusion, isolation and rejection. Gregor's family disregards his life both in human and insect form. They reject his humanity and ultimately isolate him from reality and the outside world by locking him away in a secluded room. Isolation affects people greatly. It only adds to thoughts and feelings of loneliness and depression experienced at one point by all people. Through his story, Kafka allows others to see that a little Gregor Samsa exists in everyone.