

How might Kafka's *Metamorphosis* be read as a study of identity?

The term identity is an ambiguous one. Especially when contextualised within such a deeply profound text such as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, there is a wide spectrum of perspectives in this theme of identity alone that we are able to delve into. The term has numerous definitions. The top three dictionary definitions for 'identity' as per Oxford dictionary is "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is", "The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is" and finally "serving to establish who the holder, owner, or wearer is by bearing their name and often other details such as a signature or photograph"¹. Despite these being quite broad and generic definitions of the term, it is interesting to see that undertones of some of these definitions are central to our perception of *Metamorphosis*, and the intended effect/meaning of Kafka's writing.

The focalised narrative of 'er lebte rede' is in itself indicative of the prevalence of identity within the text. We as readers are told the story through a third person narrative concurrent with a first person perspective. We are isolated and morally polarised by Kafka in such a way that we can both sympathise with characters and emotionlessly disregard them at the same time – we can, as the aforementioned definitions suggest, "determine who or what a person or thing is" (third person narrative), whilst at the same time be "what a person or thing is" (first person perspective). The theme of identity, and Kafka's commentary around it reveals Gregor's egotistic nature:

¹ (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/identity>

“On the wall directly opposite hung a photograph of Gregor from his army days in a lieutenant's uniform, his hand on his sword, a carefree smile on his lips, demanding respect for his bearing and rank.”

We are told of a human Gregor, before his transformation. The description of the photograph makes us believe that the uniform is intrinsically the reason behind why he feels so powerful and imperturbable. He is blinded by this false sense of patriotic achievement and being the breadwinner of the family, which seems tragically bleak when he wakes up to see himself literally as a bug, “bearing and rank” no longer seem to be apart of his reality.

Kafka's Metamorphosis can be read as a study of identity. Although at first Gregor appears to be psychologically unchanged after his metamorphosis, his identity changes as the narrative progresses and we start witness his new physical desires and tendencies; “...the warm room, so cozily appointed with heirlooms, transformed into a lair, where he might, of course, be able to creep, unimpeded, in any direction” insinuates just how his new physical inclinations are evolving with his environment around him – it is no longer his bedroom but rather, his “lair”.

These changes come to fruition as he familiarises himself to his new form and learns how to be at ease. For example, he prefers compressing, eerie spaces like the underneath of his sofa, and is at ease just staying fixed in the corners of the room rather than his bed. He seems paranoid as the slightest noises, even when Grete enters his room to tidy up. It comes to a point where he considers ceasing contact with all humans in the hope of being left alone. Even after his wishes to not be seen by any

family members, his intention to provide for them financially remains ever present. He is self-critical upon hearing their financial burden and how they must sell their valuables to make money. Better yet, towards the latter stages of the narrative, Gregor dreams about telling Grete of his intention to pay for her to attend the violin event. It is clear that he continues to love his sister and still has a duty of care towards her. Despite his physical manifestation he is mentally and emotionally unchanged. It is this incompatibility between Gregor's haunting emotions and desires from his life as a human being with the burdens and limitations that come with his new body that makes him feel severely conflicted.

The picture in Gregor's room of a woman wrapped in fur as if she were turning into an animalistic creature herself reflects his own metamorphosis. It is emblematic of the human identity that he himself had. When Grete tries to remove the photo from his room Gregor "hurriedly crawled up on it and pressed himself upon the glass" as if he were "pressing" the only connection to his humanity. The glass frame of the picture is a barrier that signifies his humanity is out reach for him. When his sister and his mother continue to clear out his room, the only connection to his previous identity that remains is his sister playing the violin. Gregor attains a deeper seated gratification from hearing his sister play as an insect as apposed to when he used to hear it as a human. Perhaps Gregor regains his true identity by becoming an insect.

As Gregor wakes up one day to witness that he is now a huge bug, Kafka instigates to us as readers the relationship between physical integrity and character through which way he depicts the weaknesses of one's consciousness as the principle for one's own identity. If, for arguments sake, neither the consciousness nor the physical body poses

a genuine condition for coming under the umbrella of identity and being, then what is there for a person to understand himself as 'himself' within the context of time and space? Doesn't this make identity seem like it is some sort of illusion?

The philosopher David Hume looks to his perception of self from the illusion theory in order to come to grips with such questions. Our personal identity is constantly changing according to theorists of personal identity, who take the idea of illusion into account - stating that "there is no self that persists through time and space", and that "to think that we persist through time is an illusion"².

Kafka himself states "writing is a form of prayer." The irrational and the horrible are never introduced for the sake of literary effect; they are introduced to express a depth of reality, almost as moral tokens for us to take from them what we wish. Kafka's writing works in the same way as meditation, to insinuate his personal and spiritual enlightenment. As N.P. Straus states: "Written in a period when his letters to Felice were most self-exposing and agonised, Metamorphosis engaged Kafka in deep self-scrutiny regarding his gender and sexual identity"³. This is perhaps reason as to why Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is so absurd – the story allegorically channels the inner struggles of Kafka's own self/sexual identity. Gregor's job as a nomadic salesman confined by his desire to provide for the family could be said to mirror Kafka's feeling of being enslaved by his sexuality. He felt "uneasy" and "disgusted" at the

² The Problem of Personal Identity. (n.d.). Retrieved November 22, 2015, from <http://www.merabsarpa.com/philosophy/the-problem-of-personal-identity>

³ Straus, N. P. (1989). Transforming Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis". *Signs*, 651-667.

prospect of sex even though he wasn't a virgin, even going as far as to view it as a "form of punishment"⁴.

David Hume writes in his book 'A Treatise on Human Nature' about his own sense of being. He uses the elements of physical sense and acuity (cold, heat, shade, light, hatred, love and pain and pleasure) to argue that you can never find yourself without perception, and that you can never "observe anything but the perception"⁵.

Metamorphosis can therefore be read as a study of identity as the title statement infers; the desire Gregor has for his identity is hopeless due to the mere fact that his identity was non-existent to begin with. He finds his humanity when it is too late. Only when his sister plays the violin does he come to a realisation about his love for his family. This realised love, along with his autonomy, is the final component he desires to ascertain his identity.

But even then, the argument still remains as to whether Gregor still has any sense of an identity – "Look at that old dung beetle!" and "Come over here for a minute, you old dung beetle!" are ways in which the cleaning woman calls him. Up until now, besides Grete, it is noticeable in which way no one refers to Gregor by name, even his own family members. Gregor does seem frustrated at the cleaning woman for her ignorance in labelling him a 'dung beetle', but he can sense that she has no bad intent. Names are incumbent to our being as humans. It is what essentially gives us an identity. You do not have to be human to be given a name; pets and animals for

⁴ Sparknotes.com., (2015). *SparkNotes: The Metamorphosis: Context*. Retrieved 21 November 2015, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/metamorph/context.html>

⁵ Hume, D. (1938). *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*, 1740. CUP Archive.

instance are given names for the reason that it leaves them with their own unique distinctiveness. Gregor is stripped of even that, he is sub-human and sub-animal even.

Gregor's parents by the latter stages of the novel also seem to succumb to a change in identity, but this is a blow to Gregor rather than them. They no longer are referred to as "his father" or "his mother" in the text as they were previously; "The couple Mr. and Mrs. Samsa sat up in their marriage bed and had a struggle overcoming their shock at the cleaning woman before they could finally grasp her message". This change of tone signifies the deteriorating position of Gregor, and his fading identity. Due to the fact Gregor's perspective is the one we have been established to from the offset of the novel, in his parents being demoted to being called by their formal names, we get the impression that the real Gregor is no longer with us.

Indeed, a crushed link to humanity is an accurate consequence of a life centralised on fallacy and deceit, for a beneficial life should centre around faith and reality. Gregor spent each day caught up in worldly illusions such as his work. He thought that his only purpose was to provide for his family, as without him they would not survive:

"What a gruelling job... I've got the torture of traveling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable food at all hours, constantly seeing new faces, no relationships that last or that get more intimate... That's all I'd have to try with my boss; I'd be fired on the spot... If I didn't hold back for my parents sake, I would have quit long ago". This credence is tragically invalid and it begs the wider question of whether progress and moves towards a social mobility is actually a good thing. It seems in Gregor's case especially that his obsession with progress drives him from civilised to

barbary. Gregor spends a large proportion of his life being the provider but it all seems as if it has gone to waste as his identity fades upon his metamorphosis. The way in which Grete states “it has to go” is evident of this fading of identity. Gregor’s influence on her is no more. Grete’s use of the phrase “it” dehumanises Gregor as a alien creature rather than a blood brother. It is this knowledge of being a burden which forces Gregor to his own death.

Metamorphosis can alternatively be interpreted as a social commentary of Germany transcending from a rural to industrial state. Urbanisation led to a change in identity in which way the European countries liberated their Jewish inhabitants throughout the 19th century. This meant newfound opportunities for European Jews in getting better jobs, homes, prospects and basic civil rights. Perhaps these Jewish settlers are a microcosm for a separate identity in itself – like Gregor, these are creatures crawling around like an ‘infestation’, caught in a vicious circle of not being able to comprehend their own identity. Further support for this claim comes from Omer Bartov’s argument that “the efforts of assimilates Jewish communities to retain some features of their specific identity and some links to their co-regionalists across national borders made them into a symbol of the ‘insider as outsider’”⁶.

Arguably, the most important result of Gregor’s metamorphosis is not his form as an insect, but rather his loss of communication and language; without any means of verbally being able to communicate with those around him, Gregor eludes the power to show who he is, and consequently loses control of his identity. Like when we

⁶ Bartov, O. (1998). Defining enemies, making victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust. *American Historical Review*, 771-816.

witness how opposed he was to having things moved out of his room as if they were inherently some way apart of his identity, it is clear to see that the power of communication or a lack thereof, is most detrimental to his identity.

The argument of this essay is that *Metamorphosis* can be read as a study of identity. It is clear to any reader of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* that the theme of identity can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. I will argue that Kafka's understanding of identity in the context of this novel, revolves around the intrinsic questioning of what identity is. Identity is ambiguous. It poses many social, moral and philosophical questions and issues for us to explore. I hold identity in this novel as being a dissimilation of self – not only in the literal sense in which way Gregor changes from human to bug, but also the dissimilation of ones being. Gregor's very reality; being confined to his room (only to have all the physical objects that make the room his taken away), losing the power of communication, of belonging, of being a conducive part of society results in his loss of identity. As mentioned before, perhaps it could be argued that the small marvels such as Gregor being taken aback (whilst in the form of a bug) by his sister playing the violin is telling enough of a connection to his previous identity. Gregor becoming a bug could be perceived rather as an improvement, betterment to his previous identity, but this view seems too optimistic to be true.

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