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### Surrealism in *The Metamorphosis*

Surrealism in literature averts conventional elements of reality by going into a dream-like realm of fantasy that often evokes distressing or disturbing discomfort through dark language, imagery, and plot. In Franz Kafka's story *The Metamorphosis*, surrealism is demonstrated through the irrationality of the sequence of events in the novella, and also through the usage of dream-like diction and imagery. By using such a bizarre plot and also references to the unconscious mind and dreams, both of which are elements of surrealism, Kafka is able to critique capitalistic views of society that value people who work and provide for their family, and that disturbingly degrade those who don't.

The entire plot of *The Metamorphosis* demonstrates surrealism through its bizzarity and irrationality. The main character Gregor Samsa, who previously was a man working as a traveling salesman to provide for his family, wakes up one day mysteriously in the form of a "monstrous verminous bug." At first, Gregor tries to go back to sleep and forget anything happened, however he is unable to because his new body physically prevents him from rolling onto his side. After attempting to roll onto his side many times, Gregor says, "O God, what a demanding job I've chosen!" (4), and goes on about his stress over his work, instead of displaying any type of worry, concern or confusion as to how he has somehow changed from a human to an insect overnight. The lack of acknowledgement or display of concern over his physical transformation is entirely bizarre, and he never once in the story questions how this has

even happened to him. In fact, he even speculates if this has ever happened to one of his coworkers before, as if it were a normal thing. On top of that, his family never questions his transformation either, but instead focuses entirely on avoiding looking at Gregor due to his disturbing appearance. They ultimately accept this transformation, and direct their attention on how they are going to survive. Eventually his family treats him more of a burden than their own family member, and after Gregor's mother faints from looking at Gregor's terrifying appearance, his father "filled his pockets, and now, without for the moment taking accurate aim, was throwing apple after apple," (51), in attempt to kill Gregor. His mother even had to interfere and, "begged him to spare Gregor's life," (52). This is the first time that his family shows signs of completely neglecting him as one of their own and is treating him more like a gross bug than their own family. At the end of the story Gregor's sister, who cared for him the most out of all his family throughout his bughood, declares, "we must try to get rid of it," (68). Despite his sister showing more care to Gregor than anyone, she finally admits that life would be better without Gregor now that he is a bug, saying, "this animal plagues us," (69). Though Gregor has not spoken to his family, nor physically done anything except crawl around and hide under the couch, his lack of contribution and the state of his physical ugliness is enough for his own family members to decide that he must die. And in the end, after Gregor does in fact die, his family shows no remorse to Gregor, but instead decides to move into another apartment and focus entirely on his sister, noting that she "had blossomed recently... into a beautiful and voluptuous young woman," (77). His family's careless and remorseless response to him dying displays complete irrationality, and the fact that they suddenly value his sister so highly is almost disturbing. Ultimately, the bizarre sequence of events in the story creates a discomforting sense

of surrealism that proves through Gregor's family's reactions that he is only valued when he is able to provide for them.

Another way surrealism is demonstrated in the story is through usage of dream-like imagery and diction. The moment in which Gregor realizes for the first time that his body has changed into a bug is, "one morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams," (3). Gregor's transformation into a bug is the root of all of the problems he faces throughout the story, and it is no coincidence that the moment this transformation takes place is when he is having anxious dreams. It even states in the story after Gregor thinks to himself "what has happened to me?" that "It was no dream," (3). He even accepts the situation he is in as if he were in a dream, never really questioning the logical possibilities of this happening to him, but instead ultimately learning how to navigate his new life as a bug. It even seems dream-like how Gregor actually does appear physically, as it never describes in full detail how Gregor's new body appears. The few descriptions of Gregor's new body even somewhat contradict each other, as his body in the beginning of the story is domed to the point where he rocks in his bed and can't fully turn to his side (8), while later it describes his body as being "completely flat and dry," (73). These contradictions appear dream-like since typically in dreams not everything is consistent and many times there aren't clear visual descriptions of things. At the end of the story, it states in the last sentence that, "it was something of a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when at the end of their journey the daughter first lifted herself up and stretched her young body," (77). Even after their own son has died, Gregor's parents refer to their son turning into a bug and dying as a "journey" as if it were just a dream, and now focus on their daughter as the newfound most valued family member and refer to their new life as "new dreams and good intentions." The many references to dreams and dream-like imagery throughout the story add to

the disturbing nature of Gregor's fate and highlights their neglect of their son as to his family, this horrible fate of their son isn't accepted as reality, but more so as just a dream.

Kafka's use of surrealism in *The Metamorphosis*, demonstrated through bizarre sequence of events and through dream-like imagery, effectively critiques capitalistic society that rewards hard-working breadwinners and degrades degenerates. Before Gregor was turned into an insect, he had a clean record as a travelling salesman that never called into work sick and showed up on time every morning, and that provided a significant portion of income for his family. Throughout the story Gregor reflects on the times that his family rewarded and valued Gregor for his contributions, as in his current form as a monstrous creature, his family is repulsed to even look at him. The fact that his family treats him like a literal bug after he is no longer able to go to work and provide for his family is not only bizarre, but also is highlighting the capitalistic views that Kafka is critiquing. Gregor was highly valued by his family until he cannot provide for them, and they are focused on that and his disturbing appearance more so than the fact that he somehow mysteriously and impossibly changed from a human to an insect overnight. This disgust his family has towards his new insect appearance reflects society's disgust towards people who cannot provide for their family and work. Ultimately, Kafka's usage of surrealism effectively makes you question the values of capitalist society and makes Gregor's transformation all the more disturbing.