

Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka

Aim

Read Metamorphosis in some detail.

Place Kafka in World Literature.

The Story

Novella, 1915.

Three parts

ungeheures Ungeziefer
Monstrous Vermin

Part I

About him waking up, getting late for work, thinking about work, the clerk comes, Samsa opens the door, and clerk runs, father chases Samsa back.

Part II

Grete gives him food, cleans room. Parents talk about their financial situation, mother wants to see him, his thought process dim, Grete takes furniture away, Grete screams at him, father throws apples at him, permanent injury.

Part III

The three lodgers, Samsa dies, lodgers kicked out, family takes a trip, Grete as a young woman.

The Story

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.”

Franz Kafka
(1883-1924)

Born in Prague, Kingdom of Bohemia, Austria-Hungary. German-speaking Jewish family.

“Such poets as Rilke or such novelists as Thomas Mann are dwarfs or plaster saints in comparison to him.” -Vladimir Nabokov

Twentieth century Modernism; existentialism, bureaucracy, alienation.

Kafkaesque.

Worked as an insurance claims adjustor

Kafka's sexuality.

Self-image

Influence of his father.

**Themes:
Specific and
General**

Biographic- Father, Professional life, Sexuality, Religious, His Diaries and Letters

Feminist- Grete

Textual- Literalisation of Metaphor, Samsa, Tradition

Psychoanalytic- Double, Reality-Fantasy, Return of the Repressed

Marxist- Anarcho-communist, anti-statist, anti-militarist, “Remember Kropotkin”.

Modernity- Professionalism, Alienation, Inter-generational Struggles, Bureaucracy, systems of arbitrary power.

Existence

Identity- Destroying one identity to build another, Struggle-Identity

Minor literature- Deleuze and Guattari

Tradition- Event, as described by Slavoj Zizek

Funniness of Kafka- David Foster Wallace

**Themes:
Specific**

Biographic

- ~Father- Letter to Father, called Kafka 'vermin', rebellion against father/filial loyalty.
- ~Professional life- Insurance clerk, alienation.
- ~Sexuality- Inadequacy with reference to father, Apple as Sin.
- ~Religious- Jewish Folklore, Mysticism, Samson saving the chosen people, Samsara.
- ~His Diaries and Letters, Manuscript revisions

Feminist

- ~Greta- Metamorphosis of Grete, sub-text of the work.

Textual

- ~Literalisation of Metaphor- Stanley Corngold.
- ~Symbolism- Three, Apple, Sleep
- ~Tradition- Urban Grotesque (E.T.A. Hoffman, Nikolai Gogol, Dostoevsky, Flaubert)

Psychoanalytic

- ~Double
- ~Reality-Fantasy
- ~Return of the Repressed (nightmarish).

Class Critique

- ~Samsa as economic provider, power relations (his need for autonomy). Job-Humanity

Themes: General

Modernity, Existence and Human Identity

Bureaucracy- The iron cage, rationalisation of social life. Lose of identity, autonomy, specialisation. (Cf. Poseidon)

Alienation- Bureaucracy and use of humans for specific ends. Adorno and Horkheimer.

What does it mean to be human? Constructing a (human) identity.

Anxiety of being. (Cf. A Little Fable)

Artist and a mediocre world. (Cf. The Hunger artist)

Eurocentric, but increasingly standardized and thus relatable.

A Little Fable

"Alas", said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I am running into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

Minor Literature

Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

Postmodern text.

Kafka- Writing in German, in Prague. Jewish.

Minor literature- Not preoccupied with Closure and Familiarity. Becoming, than defining. Resists totality and definition (think of Nazism).

Does not mean literature of a minor language. *“Revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.”* -Deleuze and Guattari

Kafka gave us a new style of writing- Urban Grotesque with existential attitude. He produced something new, something strange, from his usual surroundings. He is marginalised, but non-conformist and innovative.

Tradition and Kafka as Event

Slavoj Zizek on Event.

Event as an extraordinary, revolutionary effect, which exceeds the cause.

Retroactive illusion.

It is a miracle, an effect stronger than its cause.

Kafka as an Event.

“Kafka before Kafka is only perceptible once Kafka is here.”

Kafka retroactively produces his tradition.

State bureaucracy as the only remaining contact closest to divine.

Funniness of Kafka

David Foster Wallace in Harper's Magazine, Laughing with Kafka.

“The horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle.”

Irony and exaggeration.

We murder to dissect

Vladimir Nabokov on Kafka.

Reality-Fantasy

“His Freudian biographers, like Neider in The Frozen Sea (1948), contend, for example, that "The Metamorphosis" has a basis in Kafka's complex relationship with his father and his lifelong sense of guilt; they contend further that in mythical symbolism children are represented by vermin—which I doubt—and then go on to say that Kafka uses the symbol of the bug to represent the son according to these Freudian postulates. The bug, they say, aptly characterizes his sense of worthlessness before his father. I am interested here in bugs, not in humbugs, and I reject this nonsense.”

