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Samsa's Alienation in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Sample Student

English 125: Introduction to Literature

Professor Smith

Month and date, year

Samsa's Alienation in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

One would normally think of the home and family as a sanctuary; however, the opposite is true for Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Instead of receiving love from his parents and sister, Gregor is outcast. His transformation into a vermin is a physical manifestation of his already alienated state and demonstrates how the family viewed him as a commodity instead of a son or brother that they loved. By analyzing Gregor's room, his relationships with others, and his own internal dialogue, one can see that Gregor, in fact, did not transform at all.

Various aspects of the room in which Gregor lives illustrate that his life is not that of a human engaging with the world. His room is described a "proper human room" (Kafka 1915). The addition of the qualifier "human" is an example of verbal irony; Gregor has already morphed into a creature at this point. The room is also "small" and mention is made of the "four walls" (Kafka, 1915). Though many rooms are small and have four walls, the highlighted of this fact by the narrator evokes a sense of enclosure or imprisonment.

The furnishings of the room (or lack thereof) support Gregor's disengagement with human connection. Nothing is related of photos of family or friends, and the room seems empty, save for his bed and a few other items. We read that "textile samples lay spread out on the table" (Kafka, 1915), thus informing us that Gregor, who works as a salesman, takes his work home with him. The only picture Gregor does have in his room is one of a woman that he cut out and framed (Kafka, 1915), thus suggesting he finds more interest in the image of a stranger than with that of any person in his life. Save for some furniture, a table covered with work, and an image of a stranger on the wall, Gregor's room is empty and resembles a prison cell more than it does that of a human being connected with the world.

Author

**Comment [1]:** Include a brief yet meaningful one- to two-sentence lead-in.

Author

**Comment [2]:** The thesis presents a claim founded on analysis and directly responds to the prompt.

Author

**Comment [3]:** This "essay map" presents the three supporting points in the order in which they will be addressed.

Author

**Comment [4]:** Body paragraphs should begin with a topic sentence that also relates to the thesis.

Author

**Comment [5]:** The body paragraph should contain specific textual evidence and an explanation of how the evidence illustrates the paragraph's main point.

Author

**Comment [6]:** This topic sentence continues the discussion in the previous paragraph yet still offers the focus of this one.

Author

**Comment [7]:** Note that quotations are smoothly integrated into the discussion.

Author

**Comment [8]:** Proper APA in-text citations should be included whenever referring to a text.

One more item in the room that supports Samsa's involvement in his work and alienation from the world is that of the alarm clock which serves to symbolize the control that his job has in his life. Despite being transformed into a bug, Gregor is more worried about missing work than he is about his physical state. Brooding about how he would like to quit his job after paying about his parents' debt while tossing and turning in bed, he says to himself, "First of all though, I've got to get up, my train leaves at five" (Kafka, 1915). Then, an entire paragraph is devoted to Gregor's worrying about missing his train and wondering if he had slept through the alarm. Gregor then wonders how he will deal with the repercussions with his boss who would certainly be angry with him for missing work. Gregor's worries are supported when the chief clerk does stop by the apartment wondering why he did not appear at work (Kafka, 1915). Sokel (1983) notes that Gregor is further alienated from the products as his labor, as he does not even enjoy the money he earns but gives it to his family. He explains, "Gregor's sole reason for enduring the hated position, the need to pay his parents' 'debt' to his boss, drastically highlights the doubly extrinsic purpose of Gregor's work. For not only is his labor alien to his true desires, but its...salary or commission that it affords him—does not even belong to him" (p. 487). Gregor's room and everything in it tell the story of his life: he sleeps, he works, and he has no connection to other humans.

Gregor's relationships with others also reveal his alienation and role as a commodity, not a person. The interaction with the chief clerk at the office makes it clear the Gregor is valued simply for his ability to make the company money. As already mentioned, the clerk at Gregor's office soon came by the family apartment to check on Gregor's whereabouts. The description of the visit makes it clear that the clerk was not at the home to inquire about Gregor's welfare but to reprimand him for not being at work. When Gregor did not respond to the family's questions

Author

**Comment [9]:** The discussion demonstrates an application of the literary elements discussed in the textbook.

Author

**Comment [10]:** Note that secondary material is used sparingly. It is to support your own original argument.

Author

**Comment [11]:** Transitional language is included in this topic sentence to signal the move to the second point in the essay map.

(because he was physically unable to do so), “[t]he chief clerk now raised his voice, ‘Mr. Samsa,’ ... You barricade yourself in your room...you are causing serious and unnecessary concern to your parents and... you fail to carry out your business duties in a way that is quite unheard of” (Kafka, 1915). When Gregor does finally respond (in a way incomprehensible to all), they assume he is mocking them instead of trying to explain his predicament (Kafka, 1915). The clerk is quick to fire Gregor, thus suggesting that Gregor is a commodity that can be easily replaced.

The chief clerk is not the only person who views Gregor as a commodity; Gregor’s own family sees him as a means to their own end and as something that is useless when it is no longer able to make money. Early in the novella, Gregor thinks about the fact that Gregor was working to pay off his parents’ debt and would need to work “another five or six years” to do so (Kafka, 1915). One would think that in such a situation that the rest of the family was incapable of working, but this is not true, as the family soon finds other means of income upon Gregor’s inability to work.

Perhaps the most telling scene of the family’s view of Gregor occurs at the very end of section I when Gregor rushes out of his room in an effort to reach out to the clerk and save his job. Though one might understand confusion on their part, Gregor’s family, in particular his father, shun him and react violently. Upon seeing Gregor, his father “seized the chief clerk’s stick in his right hand..., picked up a large newspaper from the table with his left, and used them to drive Gregor back into his room, stamping his foot at him as he went” (Kafka, 1915). The father then started “making hissing noises at [Gregor] like a wild man” (Kafka, 1915). Clearly, Gregor’s father sees Gregor not as a son but as an enemy. This is ultimately illustrated when he shoves Gregor into his room, injuring him. After the scene calms, “For two whole days, all the

Author

**Comment [12]:** Brackets may be used to make small modifications in a quotation in order to retain correct grammar.

Author

**Comment [13]:** The discussion here and throughout this paper does not simply retell the story. Rather, the focus is on presenting an argument. Specific details are included to support claims.

Author

**Comment [14]:** Note the pattern in this and all body paragraphs: introduce main idea. Offer textual evidence and commentary. Offer another point or two of textual evidence, including commentary after each.

talk at every mealtime was about what they should do now" (Kafka, 1915), leading one to believe such talk was about how the family would provide for themselves, not how they would care for Gregor. There is no care or concern demonstrated to Gregor by his father or anyone, for that matter; rather, his father exemplifies the fact that the family only cared about Gregor when he was useful to them. Now that he is not of use, he is simply a burden. Ryan (2007) makes note of additional significance of Gregor's role that is lost in translation. He explains that a term used to refer to Gregor in the story's original German was "Ungeziefer," a word that has a history of connotations varying from "unclean animal," to "louse," to "cockroach" and other such undesirable creatures (p. 11). Regardless of the translation, it is clear that Gregor is simply not wanted.

Sadly, Gregor's own internal dialogue parallels how his family talks to and about him. In fact, one might say that he has internalized the voices of his family and the clerk. One example of this includes his reaction upon realizing he was an insect. As mentioned earlier, Gregor was not concerned about finding a way to get his human body back; rather, he was concerned about whether or not he was late to work. Even after the clerk's visit, Gregor is keen on finding a way to get to work: "If, however, they took everything calmly he would still have no reason to be upset, and if he hurried he really could be at the station for eight o'clock" (Kafka, 1915). Gregor plans for the family's future even though they do not; in fact, they take for granted that they will be provided for and "had so much to worry about at present that they had lost sight of any thought for the future. Gregor, though, did think about the future" (Kafka 1915). Though one might first think it is good of Gregor to work so hard for his family, Gregor has completely lost his own identity in doing so. He simply sees himself as a means to their welfare, just as they do.

Author

**Comment [15]:** This topic sentence introduces the third and final point mentioned in the essay map.

Ironically, it is after Gregor morphs into an insect (or “un-thing,” as would be a closer translation of the novella’s German title), that Gregor begins to demonstrate more human qualities. One early example of this occurs near the end of the first section as the chief clerk is about to leave. After rushing out of his room in an effort to appease the clerk, Gregor sees his mother look at him and briefly forgets about the one thing that had previously consumed his entire life: “‘Mother, Mother,’ said Gregor gently, looking up at her. He had completely forgotten the chief clerk for the moment...” (Kafka, 1915). As the story progresses, we read less and less of Gregor worrying about his job and more about him thinking of his own emotions. Reflecting upon his sister’s efforts to leave him food, Gregor wishes he were able to share his gratitude with her. The narrator laments, “If Gregor had only been able to speak to his sister and thank her for all that she had to do for him it would have been easier for him to bear it; but as it was it caused him pain” (Kafka, 1915). This Gregor is quite different from the work-obsessed Gregor at the beginning of the story. Gregor shows thoughtfulness for his parents even though they do not demonstrate care for him as his sister does: “Out of consideration for his parents, Gregor wanted to avoid being seen at the window during the day” (Kafka, 1915). These are not the thoughts of an unfeeling, monstrous vermin but those of a caring, considerate brother and son.

Gregor’s change from a travelling salesman to an insect in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* was not truly a transformation; in fact, by studying his room, his relationships and this thinking, it becomes clear that Gregor did not change at all. The true metamorphosis happens after Gregor’s physical transformation. Turning into a bug made Gregor realize what was most important in his life: not his job, but his human relationships. Sadly, his family is not able to reciprocate his feelings of love and concern. At the close of *The Metamorphosis*, it is not

Author

**Comment [16]:** Here and throughout the essay you’ll notice that a variety of sentence structures are used. This helps to retain reader interest and more effectively communicate ideas.

Author

**Comment [17]:** This is another way to include quotations: add an introductory phrase. A quotation should never stand on its own as a sentence. Using a variety of methods to integrate quotations will demonstrate your own control of the material.

Author

**Comment [18]:** Conclusion restates the thesis. It also reminds us of a significant and ironic quality of Gregor’s transformation.

Gregor, but his family who have morphed into unfeeling creatures, while Gregor is the most human of them all.



## References

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- Ryan, S. (2007) Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*: Transformation, Metaphor, and the Perils of Assimilation. *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 43(1), 1-18.
- Sokel, W.H. (1983). From Marx to Myth: The Structure and Function of Self-Alienation in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. *Literary Review*, 26(4), 485-496.



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