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Gregor's Legs

by Karen Hess

(Honors English 150)

The Assignment: Students were assigned to write a five-page paper that responded to one of seven prompts on Kafka's "The Metamorphosis."

Gregor's Legs: Freud, Oedipal Conflict, and the Phallus in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis."

How do we read "The Metamorphosis?" Is it a biographical revelation, a comment on social class, or just a tragic tale of a man transformed into his worst nightmare? This question seems impossible to answer because, to some extent, it seems that any of these interpretations are true. Still, as Edward Honig states in his essay "The Making of an Allegory," the story is a statement about Gregor himself who is transformed as a result of his inability to understand his own inner self (114). It seems that on some level Kafka created a window to the mental disorder of his character Gregor and as a result Freud, the most influential psychologist of the time, must be considered. Kafka shared Freud's interest in life's early events as the cause of mental disorder, but differed from Freud in his assertion that emotional disturbance is an intrinsic part of human existence and cannot be cured by psychoanalysis (Sokol 145-47). These facts lend themselves to a psychological reading of "The Metamorphosis," simply because Kafka's tale is so filled with hopelessness and despair, a justifiable effect if the story is considered an illustration of incurable mental disorder. Thus, examining Gregor's qualities as an insect and his familial relationships in light of Freudian theory, one can come to understand the image Gregor's legs are meant to evoke: the impotent phallus.

In light of Freud's influence on Kafka, we can rightfully assume that Gregor's insect form might result from some emotional or mental disorder. Wilhelm Emrich asserts that Gregor's insect form, "represent[s] the subliminal dream-like world, the state of man before he thinks, the part of him that is prehuman and early human, a part that is always present along with everything else in his soul" (141). Gregor's transformation represents an "escape" from his life and an "intensification" of it (Goldfarb 200). As such, one must examine the insect form more closely for what part of Gregor's unconscious it might represent. What was he both escaping and intensifying? As a beetle, Gregor has become a literal manifestation of his unhealthy desires, he feasts on garbage, lives in filth, and frightens his family members, at the same time becoming helpless and dependent. In Freudian terms, Gregor has regressed to the phallic stage of development. Freudian psychology posits that human development evolves sexually, each stage corresponding with obsessive behavior relating to some erogenous zone, a compulsion that must eventually be controlled. The phallic stage is characterized by the Oedipus complex, a boy longing to replace his father as his mother's lover, and causes fixation on the genitals as a source of physical gratification. It also involves a desire to replace the child's impotent phallus with the father's mature penis and anxiety about castration at the hands of the more powerful father (Wu <<http://psychology.about.com/library/weekly/aa11500a.htm?once=true&>>).

Evidence of phallic obsession and Oedipal longing are present in "The Metamorphosis" and are often related along with some description of Gregor's legs allowing one to infer that his legs are indeed representative of his penis, but not as a symbol of power and virility. Instead representing weakness, despite his apparently significant familial role prior to transformation. In Freudian psychology, as well as in this story, power struggles are often represented as sexual dysfunction. The first images of Gregor's legs describe them as "pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk" and "struggling" or "waving helplessly" before him (Kafka 3). He finds them impossible to control as he lies feebly on his back, and he has difficulty discerning their function once upright (8-13). The vulnerability and lack of power contained in these appendages represent his feelings about the inadequacy of his manhood. Gregor never possesses a woman in the flesh throughout the story, and we never, in fact, learn of a sexual relationship

with any woman ever. As Frederick Karl echoes in his book, Gregor's interactions with women are both an attempt to gain control and a confirmation of his impotency (133-35). Karl also states that Kafka viewed sexuality as an illness marked by compulsion (119). This lends credence to the interpretation that Gregor in insect form has regressed to the phallic stage, since there are several instances of Gregor pleasuring himself (i.e. his possession of the picture of the "woman in furs" and his tactile pleasure involving the contact of his legs with various household surfaces). It also may explain why Kafka uses many legs to symbolize the phallus. A man obsessed with sexual pleasure would reasonably also be compulsively preoccupied with his genitalia. Thus, Kafka is calling attention to this obsession by representing the penis as multiple appendages.

Gregor finds great pleasure in climbing on the walls and furniture, leaving sticky secretion stains behind, so much so that it distracts him from the changes taking place in the lives of the other characters (26). In another instance, Gregor reverts to laying on the couch "scrabbling for hours on the leather" after he hears his father discussing the financial situation of the family (20). This incessant scraping of his legs on the cool couch is an escape for Gregor from the embarrassment he feels at not being able to support his family, and the subsequent loss of power brought on by his transformation. Although these examples are not explicitly sexual, they represent the escapism and childish reversion to self-pleasure present in the phallic stage. Gregor's compulsive masturbation acts as an escape from his feelings of powerlessness both to provide for his family and to control his aberrant sexual desires. His obsession with the phallus springs from these feelings of inadequacy about his manhood and sexuality. The function of Gregor's legs in these solitary acts provides some evidence that they represent the phallus, but a stronger connection is forged by the examination of the family dynamic.

Gregor's interactions with his family are characterized by the Oedipal conflict; both Gregor and the father are vying for the position of power in the family and sexual dominance in connection with the mother figure. The power struggle is characterized by Gregor's aggressive attempts for control and the father's actions to subdue him. The most concrete evidence of Gregor's Oedipus complex is introduced in the second section of the story. Gregor's father is pelting him with apples to force his retreat as a result of Gregor's perceived aggression toward the mother. The text states:

...Gregor wanted to drag himself forward, as if this startling, incredible pain could be left behind him; but he felt as if nailed to the spot and flattened himself out in a complete derangement of his senses. With his last conscious look he saw the door of his room being torn open and his mother rushing out ahead of his screaming sister, in her underbodice, for her daughter had loosened her clothing to let her breathe more freely and recover from her swoon, he saw his mother rushing toward his father, leaving one after another behind her on the floor her loosened petticoats, stumbling over her petticoats straight to his father and embracing him, in complete union with him—but here Gregor's sight began to fail—with her hands clasped round his father's neck as she begged for her son's life (27).

According to Richard H. Lawson, Gregor is forced to witness the one scene he wishes most to avoid, "the father in perfect sexual union with his wife" (31). He also states that the "oedipal component" is "a given in Kafka's fiction" (32). As a result of viewing his parents united in passion Gregor becomes unconscious to repress his memory of this trauma, which indeed is fitting if he suffers from the Oedipus complex and regression into the phallic stage.

Gregor's incestuous desire is extended also to his sister Grete, who is the main nurturer of Gregor throughout the story. Gregor spends much of his insect existence concerned with the action of his sister, because, like the mother figure, she is his source of nourishment and life. His unhealthy desires for his sister are related most explicitly near the end of the story, when Grete is playing her violin for the boarders. In this case, Gregor's selfish desires overpower any consideration for the well-being of his family members, as the text states: "Gregor, attracted by the playing, ventured to move forward a little until his head was actually in the living room. He felt hardly any surprise at his growing lack of

consideration for others..." (33). As his sister plays he is propelled forward by the beauty of the music, and he allows himself to slip into an incestuous fantasy of their relationship:

Gregor crawled a little farther forward and lowered his head to the ground so that it might be possible for his eyes to meet hers. He was determined to push forward till he reached his sister; to pull at her skirt and so let her know that she was to come into his room with her violin, for no one here appreciated her playing, as he would appreciate it. He would never let her out of his room, at least not so long as he lived; his frightful appearance would become, for the first time, useful to him; he would watch all the doors of his room at once and spit at intruders; but his sister would need no constraint, she should stay with him of her own free will; she should sit beside him on the sofa, bend down her ear to him and hear him confide that he had had the firm intention of sending her to the Conservatorium...After this confession his sister would be so touched she would burst into tears, and Gregor would then ...kiss her on the neck (34).

Gregor's "erotic" and "incestuous" daydreams are evidence of his need for power or control over Grete similar to his father's control over her (Sokel 177). Only Gregor's desires are incestuous and rise out of his Oedipus complex, connected not to love but to a quest for dominance. Gregor evidences his intention to possess Grete; when in order to preserve his dominant breadwinner position he wants to use Grete and her powers of seduction to force the office manager into submission, and save his job (13). Gregor's oedipal longings for his sister, resulting from her charge as his caretaker and surrogate mother, are rooted in his desires for dominance and characterized by selfish, child-like behavior and fantasy, all in keeping with an interpretation of regression to the Phallic stage.

As to the relationship between father and son, the father, through two distinct acts of aggression toward the son, fulfills the castration fantasy that is another part of Freud's phallic stage (Kaiser 152). In Hellmuth Kaiser's essay "Kafka's Fantasy of Punishment" he states that these aggressive acts can only be perceived as "acts of castration" (153). The first incident occurs in the first section of the story when Gregor snaps at his mother and scares her. He retreats to his room at his father's insistent hissing, but is unable to fit through the door. The father pushes him from behind damaging his legs. When Gregor awakes that evening he notices, "he had to actually limp on his two rows of legs. One little leg, moreover, had been severely damaged...and trailed uselessly behind him" (15). The next incident, in section three, involves the father whipping apples at Gregor after a perceived aggression toward the mother. Afterwards Gregor's movement is "impaired, probably forever...and for the time being it took long, long minutes to creep across his room like an old invalid—there was no question now of crawling up the wall" (28). During both occurrences, the father inflicts damage on Gregor's legs to punish his aggressive behavior toward the mother. Only in viewing his legs as phallic representations and his links to pleasure can we realize the full effect of the father's acts. Fitting with his role in the Oedipus complex, the father is attempting to neutralize his son to maintain dominant status. It is only after the father has weakened Gregor irreparably that he recognizes Gregor as his son again by opening the door in the evening and restoring human contact (28).

To quote Wilhelm Emrich "the terrible truth of this short story is the realization that even the most beautiful, most tender relations among people are founded on illusions. No one knows or suspects what he himself 'is' and what the other person 'is'" (142). This sentiment is especially true in light of the interpretation of Gregor's sexual disorder. He hides his dysfunction from everyone including himself under the guise of benevolence when in human form, but as an insect his true desires are made evident by his physical form. Gregor's struggle for dominance against his father, his incestuous longing for his mother and sister, and his obsession with physical pleasure in connection with his genitalia are representative of his regression into Freud's phallic stage of development. Each incidence of sexual symbolism in the story, such as Gregor's obsession with self-pleasure, his loss of consciousness at the sight of his mother and father united in passion, his incestuous desires for Grete, and his father's attempts at castration, include a description of either Gregor's legs or movement of some kind. The connection

between the insect legs and Gregor's sexual dysfunction seems too strong to be ignored. There are certainly other valid approaches to analyzing the story, but one cannot deny the influence of Freud on the consciousness of the early twentieth century mind or the immense sexual symbolism present in the story. As a result one cannot erase the image of the insect legs as the representation of Gregor's impotent phallus and aberrant sexual desires.

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