

Food as a Symbol in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Before discussing about the aspect of food in this work, it is important to talk about the work itself. *The Metamorphosis* was written by the German novelist Franz Kafka and published in the year 1915. It tells us the story of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman. The novella became well known because of its extra-ordinary opening sentence. The story begins by telling the readers of the very transformation of the protagonist into vermin. It begins thus,

“One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug” (3).

It is not so much the unconvincing aspect of a person turning into a bug one morning that is strange, but the very casual and ordinary manner in which it has been narrated that makes it absurd. Moreover, we see that Gregor betrays no emotion of shock or disbelief at his condition. His immediate thoughts are about his work life. We can see him fretting about the train that he needs to catch and the possible admonishments he would have to face from his boss. His bodily transformation doesn't bother him at all, at the moment.

Kafka wrote this novella in the 1900s during which time Germany had become a major European power. There was a huge industrial growth driven by the steel and pig iron production. The urban working-class population grew rapidly during this time. German employers were considered hostile and authoritarian and the workers had very little political rights. On the whole, one can gather that the German society at the time was very materialistic and inhuman. We get a glimpse of this from the novella very clearly. Gregor's vexations about his work life and the everydayness of the various hurdles he needs to face as part of it, is very evidently given in the text:

“What a demanding job I've chosen! Day in, day out on the road. The stresses of trade are much greater than the work going on at head office, and, in addition to that, I have to deal with the problems of traveling, the worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly changing human relationships which never come from the heart. To hell with it all!” (4)

Hence, one can see that Gregor is presented as a victim of the deeply inhuman and materialistic German society. There are enough evidences in the text to show that Gregor and his family belonged to the proletariat class. Gregor was the sole breadwinner of his family and he stayed in on his unpleasant job only because of his family's poor financial status and to pay off his father's debts. But his transformation into vermin changes everything. From being the provider, he becomes

the one who needs to be provided. After Gregor's transformation, his family reacts in a repulsive way towards Gregor; something they couldn't help doing. The only way they could now love and care for him was by providing him food, which his sister Grete did dutifully three times a day.

As mentioned before food cannot be seen as just a source of sustenance. One of the most palpable ways of expressing one's love and care to someone is by preparing and serving them good food. Food has this remarkable quality of giving people a sense of contentment and warmth. Grete expresses her concern for her brother by bringing him food. On the first day, she brings a bowl filled with sweetened milk with tiny pieces of white bread dipped in it. She brings him the sweetened milk because it was his favourite drink which makes Gregor, even in the pathetic condition that he is in, to "laugh with joy". When she finds out that milk no more suits Gregor, she brings in an entire new variety of food items the next day, like, half-rotten vegetables, bones from the evening meal, covered with a white sauce which had almost solidified, some raisins and almonds, cheese, a slice of dry bread, a slice of salted bread smeared with butter, a bowl of water etc. Because of Gregor's transformation into the vermin form, there was no way to communicate with him and food became the only channel through which Grete could show that they still considered him as family, in spite of his condition.

This routine slowly dies out as the story progresses, showing the diminishing concern of the family towards Gregor. In a materialistic society, humanitarian values give way to concepts like utility. Gregor's transformation into vermin renders him unable to work and earn for his family and the story clearly marks the diminishing concern of the family for Gregor for now he cannot provide them anything and also the slow disintegration of the Samsa family. As the story progresses, one can see how the Samsa family slowly slips into abject poverty and how they turn to do things that are suggestive of poor financial conditions. Gregor observes,

"What the world demands of poor people they now carried out to an extreme degree. The father bought breakfast to the petty officials at the bank, the mother sacrificed herself for the undergarments of strangers, the sister behind her desk was at the beck and call of customers, but the family's energies did not extend any further" (56).

In midst of their struggle for living, they start caring less and less about Gregor. Their change in attitude towards Gregor is again brought out by the way Grete feeds Gregor. While earlier Grete was concerned about what sorts of foods pleased Gregor and took notice of how much he had eaten his meal, later on she becomes indifferent and busy with her own chores. Gregor laments about this lack of care as follows:

"Without thinking any more about how one might be able to give Gregor special pleasure, the sister now kicked some food or other very quickly into his room in the morning and at noon, before she ran off to her shop, and in the evening, quite indifferent about whether the food had perhaps only been tasted or, what happened most frequently, remained entirely undisturbed, she whisked it out with one sweep of her broom" (57).

Hence, the author uses the act of feeding here as a tool to depict the changing attitude of Gregor's family towards him.

The act of dining is something very much integral to every conventional family. It is the time during which the family sits around and spends time together. It is symbolic of the unity and harmony that is there within a family. The importance of this culture of sitting together to eat within a family is that it gives opportunity for the members within the family to sit together and spare some time from their busy schedules to share their stories and show care and love to each other. Kafka shows the changing pattern of dining routine of the Samsa family to show the disintegrating harmony and order within it. In the beginning Gregor talks about his father's routine of sitting at the table for a prolonged breakfast, reading newspapers. It was around the dining table that the father sat and read the newspaper aloud to his family.

In spite of his busy schedule, it is suggested in the story that, Gregor always sat down with his family for his meals. This was a routine that the Samsa family never broke. However, after the bizarre event of Gregor's transformation, things change. Kafka deftly shows the disorder that creeps into the Samsa family and distorts whatever goodwill existed in the household. One can eat only when one is happy and peaceful. Gregor observes how the people in the house slowly gave up eating. He also observes that they now ate in complete silence opposed to the earlier times when they talked and discussed matters. Also, one can see later on that, three lodgers come to stay at the Samsa household who take the place of the family at the dining table and that Grete, her father and mother eat at the kitchen. By this time, Gregor's family had completely given up on him for they stop feeding him now. This shows the complete breakdown of the homely ambience that once existed in the house. Food and the ways of dining of the Samsa family become symbols that the author uses to bring out this aspect to the readers.

Food also plays an important role in the story, telling the readers about the changing psychological state of the protagonist. The first time Gregor finds food at his door he is overwhelmed with joy and feels thankful to his sister for the gesture. Later on, we see his appetite diminishing as he turns into a rebellious mood over the neglect he was facing from his family. His appetite returns once again when he watches the lodgers eat sumptuously at their dining table. This hunger is symbolic of his want of attention and the jealousy he feels towards the lodgers for now they have taken his place in the family.

As mentioned before, food forms an integral part of our daily lives and there are emotional, psychological and cultural ties that are associated with it and hence it finds ways into our literature too. In this paper an attempt was made to look at the ways in which food has been used symbolically by the author to tell the story, set its ambience and also shed light into the psychological states of its characters.

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