The Threats of Sleep in "The Metamorphosis"

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Kafka's writings are often lauded for their treatment of the absurd. In "The Metamorphosis," this absurdity is most visible in Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant insect, but most tellingly also expresses itself in his attitude toward his transformation. In a text that deals so closely with the inversion of the dream-like and reality, Gregor's relationship to sleep speaks volumes about the nature of his metamorphosis. When engaging the theme of sleep in Kafka's works, literary critics have often examined its "dream-like" elements, as well as Kafka's own relationship to sleep. This paper examines a third perspective on this theme: the role of sleep as a physical act, and what it reveals about Gregor's state. Gregor sees sleep at times as the cause of and other times as a possible cure for his metamorphosis. His inability to sleep is a troubling indicator that he is losing his grip on life and humanity after his transformation, but his relationship to sleep before the metamorphosis shows how long he has really been dehumanized.

Most literary criticism that treats the theme of sleep in "The Metamorphosis" focuses on the ways in which it is "dream-like." As is the case with most of Kafka's writings, Gregor's story is often described in terms of a nightmare, despite its being explicitly presented as "no dream" (Kafka 89). In "Kafka and the Dream," Selma Fraiberg finds that Kafka's literature "erases the boundaries between reality and the dream; his transition from one world to another is as imperceptible as the moment between waking and sleeping" (Fraiberg 30). In *Dreaming and Storytelling*, which investigates the nonfictional dream itself as a narrative, Bert O. States uses "The Metamorphosis" as an example of an accurate fictional depiction of the "dream experience," which is characterized by "the dreamer's unquestioning belief that the dream and everything in it are utterly real" (States 8). Such analyses focus on the ways in which Kafka uses the language and imagery of dreams portray an illogical, often nightmarish reality. They examine sleep and dreams at the level of language, as stylistic devices that lend a unique perspective to Kafka's depiction of the similarly absurd waking world.

Though it receives less critical attention than the dream-like and the nightmarish, the physical act of sleep itself and one's attitude toward it also serves as a powerful medium of expression for Kafka. Sleeping is not benign; it poses and presents real threats to Gregor throughout "The Metamorphosis." There appears to be an autobiographical element to this portrayal of sleep. Kafka himself struggled with sleep; in one diary entry of many on the subject, he complains of yet another "sleepless night. The third in a row…indeed I sleep but at the same time vivid dreams keep me awake. I sleep alongside myself, so to speak, while I myself must struggle with dreams" (Kafka 60). The same intense involvement in the realm of the dream that made Kafka so adept at portraying the dream-like also appears to have been the source of many of his anxieties about his own identity; he felt that he became separated from himself in sleep, engaged in a nightly struggle. Fraiberg finds that for Kafka, it was "as if sleep had become the formidable opponent who could not be conquered and to whom it was dangerous to submit" (Fraiberg 32). Kafka was tormented by these "sleepless nights," but also felt they were essential to his writing. Fraiberg believes that this speaks to his anxiety over losing "the self, or awareness

of self," in the act of sleep (Fraiberg 32). Later, Kafka expressed the fear that "perhaps insomnia itself is a sin. Perhaps it is a rejection of the natural" (Fraiberg 32). These three conflicting attitudes—fear of sleep, finding insomnia useful, an ultimately fear of insomnia—illustrate Kafka's shifting but always troubled view of sleep in his life. Kafka felt sleep to be inherently risky, an act or force to which one's life, humanity, identity and soul are inextricably bound. Most scholarly examination of sleep as an act focuses on its role in Kafka's own life as seen in his letters and diaries; however, his anxiety is also expressed through the significance and transformative power that this seemingly mundane activity takes on in Gregor's life.

While sleep plays such a significant role in the lives of both Gregor and Kafka, it is interesting to note how little the reader actually hears of Gregor in the act of sleep. Upon waking "one morning from uneasy dreams" Gregor "[finds] himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 89). For such a significant night of sleep (as he soon after sees it as the cause for his metamorphosis), Gregor and the narrator play very little attention to it. Nothing about that night's sleep sounds particularly unusual; even the "uneasy dreams" that characterize it are described in such vague language as to seem commonplace. This introduces the idea that what has so dramatically changed Gregor is not some cosmic event, but rather the very everyday affairs that make up his life.

Gregor's first solution for his condition, after observing that he not dreaming, is to sleep it off: "What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side" (Kafka 89). Gregor's initial reaction is to sleep in order to forget the nonsense of reality. From the outset it is clear that he has an inverse relationship to the dream-like and to waking life, and he is ready to accept this inversion as he expresses little wonder or fear at finding that "it was no dream" (Kafka 89). He is kept from returning to sleep by his physical condition, not by any emotional or mental aftermath from it. The absurdity of this reaction is also reflected in the language used to describe Gregor's thought process. In "Franz Kafka: Outsider in his Own World," Arnold Heidsieck finds that Gregor's thoughts are characterized by a "microscopic realism" that is "unsettling because minute details take on a magnified and threatening significance; they seem fixated, independent of a personal narrator's perceptions and judgments or of the laws of the physical world" (Heidsieck 177). Gregor's fixation on minute details not only draws attention to the absurd nature of this inversion of conventions of the waking and dream worlds, but also highlights his willingness to accept the irrational and the dehumanizing in his own life, even as it renders his own body alien to him.

Rather than dwelling on the cause of his transformation after finding himself unable to sleep, Gregor's almost immediately thinks in irritation of his tiring job: "Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! ... There's the trouble of constant traveling, of worrying about train connections, the bed and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends" (Kafka 89-90). The fact that Gregor connects his current inability to sleep caused by his physical transformation with his inability to rest because of his job demonstrates Gregor's awareness, however tenuous, of the link between his inhuman physical state and his dehumanized mental and emotional state from his career. At work as a traveling salesman, Gregor worries most about missing train connections; but such things are for the most part out of Gregor's hands. By letting his mind "wander" to this thought in the wake of his shocking transformation, Gregor reveals that he has long ago accepted responsibility for things that are beyond his control.

Gregor's understanding of himself and the cause of his metamorphosis oscillates. At times he somewhat subconsciously recognizes that he had been dehumanized and de-individualized by his career for quite some time before his physical transformation, but at other times he still regards himself, and believes others would regard him, as human. Finding himself unable to move as he would like to because of his unfamiliar body, his thoughts once again return to sleep: "This getting up early, he thought, makes one quite stupid. A man needs his sleep;" he then goes on to complain to himself that his boss and job deprive him of sleep more than others' do (Kafka 90). Gregor still classifies himself as a man; it is unclear whether he is denying that a significant change has taken place, or whether this change has been so long in coming that it is now not shocking to him. Gregor also seems to believe that others would still regard him as human: he is sure that his boss would send him to "the insurance doctor, who of course regarded all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers. And would he be so far wrong on this occasion? Gregor really felt quite well, apart from a drowsiness that was utterly superfluous after such a long sleep, and he was even unusually hungry" (Kafka 91). Gregor bases his self-image on how he believes his boss and the insurance doctor would see him; he has internalized their views and attitudes and uses them to define his own state of well-being. He also returns here to the idea that his physical transformation stems from his irregular sleep. This time, however, it is a plentitude of sleep and not a lack of it that he believes has led to his transformation. This shifting understanding of sleep's effect on his body parallels Kafka's own ambivalent attitudes toward sleep. Like Kafka, Gregor finds both sleep and his inability to sleep to be disturbing, but he does not possess a strong enough understanding of himself to decipher the connection between the two.

After Gregor finds that sleeping to forget the "nonsense" of his physical change does not work, he plans to cure himself by getting up and starting his day:

> His immediate intention was to get up…since in bed, he was well aware, his meditations would come to no sensible conclusion. He remembered that often enough in bed he had felt small aches and pains, probably caused by awkward postures, which had proved purely imaginary once he got up, and he looked forward to seeing this morning's delusions gradually fall away. (Kafka 92)

Here Gregor equates his metamorphosis to common pains from awkward sleep position. He connects his transformation to sleep, but believes its origins are likely physical, caused by his own body's contortions or those exerted on his body by the act of sleep. He also believes that being in or near the sleep state is making him insensible and detached from his body and from reality; his solution is to become active and start his day's work. There is clearly an element of irony in Gregor finding himself "well aware" that he is incapable of rational thought or action while in bed. Here he tries once again to make a rational judgment from an irrational position, to apply logic to the realm of the illogical. This claim further suggests that he has faced these problems (or similar ones) before, and knows how to convince himself that his problems are temporary and not threatening. Gregor even goes on to describe his changing voice as "probably a precursor of a severe chill" (Kafka 92). He does not treat the physical manifestations of his metamorphosis as a severe change, just a possible harbinger of one. In *The Fantastic*, Tzvetan Todorov sees such attempts at rationalizing his condition as one of a handful of aberrations from "the general movement of the narrative, in which the most surprising thing is precisely the absence of surprise;" he believes that Gregor's attitude can be best characterized as an irrational acceptance of his metamorphosed state and all the problems that come along with it (Todorov 169). Judging by Gregor's familiarity with rationalizing and repressing physical symptoms of

discontent, however, such attempts at justification seem to be the rule rather than the exception. Gregor's readiness to attribute his metamorphosis to a mild illness or a night of awkward sleep is just as absurd and telling as his eventual acceptance of his condition.

Gregor continues to rationalize the threatening aspects of sleep after he has been discovered and essentially rejected by his family. Part 1 ends with "at last there was silence," and Part 2 begins, "Not until it was twilight did Gregor awake out of a deep sleep, more like a swoon than a sleep;" Gregor tells himself that he would have woken up on his own soon because he "felt himself sufficiently rested and well slept" (Kafka 105). Gregor justifies what seems to be an involuntary bout of unconsciousness, brought on by the violent reaction of his father, by telling himself that he is now well rested. In this scene Gregor is clearly attempting to make things that are out of his control (and in fact that are harmful to him) seem to work in his favor. This claim that he controls and benefits from his sleep pattern parallels that of the protagonist in Kafka's "The Burrow." The narrator in that story also tries to pass off his falling in and out of sleep as something that is in his hands rather than those of his enemies. This is particularly clear when the unnamed, mole-like narrator falls asleep "in some favorite room" despite meaning to stay awake, and is woken by "an almost inaudible whistling noise" while he is in "the last light sleep which dissolves of itself" (Kafka 342-3). Both of these scenes introduce dramatic threats to the protagonist (the family's rejection of Gregor in "The Metamorphosis," the unknown enemy to the narrator in "The Burrow") that assert their power by interrupting the protagonist's sleep cycle; and in both cases the protagonist at first chooses to see these interruptions as natural and in his control. This pattern may signify a simple denial of external threats, but also illustrates how natural such threats and disturbances have come to be in the lives of both characters.

Though (or perhaps because) Gregor has little to no sleep after his physical metamorphosis, it remains a very revealing indicator of his attitude toward his humanity, dreaming and reality. Near the end of Gregor's life, the narrator tells the reader that "Gregor hardly slept at all by night or by day. He was often haunted by the idea that next time the door opened he would take the family's affairs in hand again just as he used to" (Kafka 125). Whether it is night or day makes no difference to Gregor's ability to sleep; he has lost his connection to the natural waking and sleeping pattern of human society, and is thus dehumanized. Despite Gregor's inability to sleep, his hopes and fears from everyday life are described in terms of the nightmarish and ghostly; he is "often haunted by the idea" that he will return to his normal position in the family and in society. The inversion of the dream-like and reality thus permeates the very language in which Gregor's thoughts are described, wedding the dream language and the anxiety over physical act of sleep. Instead of trying to make the absurd aspects of his life conform to a logical explanation, Gregor now sees any hope for normalcy as the most absurd and nightmarish thing of all.

As many critics have rightly observed, Kafka uses the language and images of the dream in "The Metamorphosis" to pull the reader into the realm of the dream, forcing him to experience the absurd in the everyday and rendering it at once alien and familiar. As this paper has demonstrated, however, the act of sleep itself is an equally significant aspect of Kafka's literature and his life. In Gregor's troubled relationship to sleep, Kafka maps out his own anxieties at sleep and dehumanization. Kafka felt that his simultaneous fear of and obsession with sleep separated him from humanity, made him "'a citizen of this other world, whose relationship to the ordinary one is the relationship of the wilderness to cultivated land'" (Fraiberg 22). The immense popularity of "The Metamorphosis" and the rest of Kafka's works, however, suggests that Kafka did not write as an outsider to society. Rather, his use of sleep and dreams positioned him as an

insider to the fears of a dehumanized and alienated modern society, which felt profoundly out of touch with itself.

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