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Gregor's "Little Legs"

In Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis, Gregor Samsa's transformation into a bug reflects his inner soul taking over his physical body. Gregor waits on his family with animal-like loyalty; he devotes his whole life to providing for them and taking care of them. Because Gregor will not let his own emotions and feelings out, they literally take over his body and transform him into a "monstrous vermin" (Kafka, 3). While Gregor's whole body represents his suppressed inner turmoil, his legs represent the specific conflict he experiences with his family. Gregor's relationship with his bug legs grows from physical to psychological, paralleling the metamorphosis in his relationship with his family. Gregor realizes that his family only cares about him when caring for him is to their advantage.

Gregor's relationship to his legs begins on a solely physical note and Gregor shies from familial interaction as he does his own touch. At first sight, Gregor's legs disgust him: "He must have tried it a hundred times, closing his eyes so as not to have to see his squirming legs" (3). Gregor expects to see his normal human legs; the bug legs surprise and disgust him because they are foreign. Gregor is as unfamiliar with these new legs as he is with his family; they are both alien to him. As a traveling salesman, Gregor does not spend quality time at home with his family. Gregor maintains "the precaution he had adopted from his business trips, of locking all the doors during the night even at home" (6). Gregor is no more comfortable at home than he is at a hotel and his family members are as foreign to him as the strangers at a hotel. Gregor's

disconnect with his family mirrors the disconnect he first feels from his legs. Even touching himself with a leg “sen[ds] a cold shiver through him” (4). Gregor does not question why he has bug legs or what will happen to him now that he is a giant bug. Similarly, Gregor does not think about his family except for its physical presence. Gregor provides for his family, but he does not get to know them as people.

When Gregor tries to get out of bed, he realizes the physical deficiencies of his legs, which are “thin compared with the size of the rest of him” (3). The weight in Gregor’s bug form is not distributed evenly, nor is the weight of familial responsibility distributed evenly in the Samsa family. Gregor is the body of the family, the sole breadwinner: “They had just gotten used to it, the family as well as Gregor, the money was received with thanks and given with pleasure, but no special feeling of warmth went with it any more” (27). Gregor’s bug legs cannot support the weight of his body, just as Gregor’s family is lazy and cannot maintain Gregor’s workload. The Samsa family’s financial dependency on Gregor means that Gregor cannot count on his family’s support, financial or emotional, when he needs it most. The Samsas cannot carry Gregor as he carries them. Nor can Gregor’s body rely on his legs to support it and, as a result, Gregor has trouble walking in bug form.

Gregor uses great physical force and determination to move his legs, and is the external pressure that forces the Samsa family out of their idleness and into action. Until they feel threatened themselves, the Samsas are “helpless” (3) and act as Gregor’s legs do, thrashing aimlessly in the air. Gregor’s family members need Gregor to direct them. The family does not know what to do while Gregor is locked in his room. They flutter around the house, they speak to him through the wall, but they do not try to help him until they realize the potential consequence. If Gregor does not leave his room, he will lose his job, which “is not the most secure” (11), and

then the whole family will suffer. Gregor's family only acts when they themselves are in danger. Similarly, Gregor's legs only act out of necessity. They function when Gregor forces them to: "Gregor lugged himself toward the door" (14). Gregor's struggle to gain physical control of his legs parallels the Samsa family's effort to rebuild their lives without Gregor.

Gregor's legs act independently of one another, just as the members of Gregor's family struggle to work together. Gregor's metamorphosis forces his sister and parents to gain independence and learn to support themselves. Gregor's legs mirror this independence and as Gregor loses control of his family, he struggles to control his legs:

his numerous little legs . . . were in every different kind of perpetual motion and . . . If he wanted to bend one, the first thing that happened was that it stretched itself out; and if he finally succeeded in getting this leg to do what he wanted, all the others in the meantime, as if set free, began to work in the most intensely painful agitation. (6-7)

With his metamorphosis, Gregor relinquishes all his responsibility and authority in the family. Like Gregor's legs, the Samsas are "in every different kind of perpetual motion" (7) as they struggle to help Gregor and yet rebuild their lives without him. They are "set free" (7) financially, but as a result, must work in the most intensely painful agitation" (7) to support themselves. Mrs. Samsa sews lingerie, Mr. Samsa works in a uniform, which he "refused to take off . . . even in the house" (41), and Grete works as a salesgirl. However, these positions, "about which they . . . never really asked one another in detail" (58), further isolate the Samsas from one another. Like Gregor's legs, each member of the family works toward his own goals.

The miscommunication among Gregor's legs mirrors the disjointed relationships within the Samsa family. Mr. and Mrs. Samsa do not value knowing their children on a personal basis. Gregor, as a bug or as a person, is easy to lock up and forget about. When Gregor is gone, they consider what they will do with Grete, already looking "to find a good husband" (58). The Samsas do not work well as a team because they always put their personal priorities first. Like Gregor's legs, they resist working in unison until a disaster such as Gregor's metamorphosis forces them together.

The coordinated movement of Gregor's legs symbolizes a turning point in the text. Once Gregor conquers the physical challenges of his metamorphosis, he believes he will be able to conquer the psychological obstacles and rejoin his family. Gregor believes that he can put mind over matter, that his life will return to normal and he will once again hold a position of responsibility in his family:

Gregor fell down with a little cry onto his numerous little legs . . . for the first time that morning he had a feeling of physical well-being; his little legs were on firm ground; they obeyed him completely, as he noted to his joy; they even strained to carry him away wherever he wanted to go; and he already believed that final recovery from all his sufferings was imminent (17).

Gregor feels "joy" because he believes that he can undo his metamorphosis. Gregor now has complete control of himself as a bug and believes that with this control he can become human again and life will go back to normal. For although Gregor is not happy with his job, he likes taking care of his family. Unfortunately, Gregor does not have the kind of control over his body or his family that he imagines. At this time, Gregor's legs, which he depends on for mobility and direction, take over. Meanwhile, the roles in the Samsa family reverse. Gregor is now at the

mercy of his family. Whether Gregor can achieve “final recovery from all his sufferings” (17) is up to his parents and sisters, who hold the key to his room and decide what to do with Gregor so that he is the least encumbering.

Gregor begins to lose mobility in his legs as the Samsas reject him in his bug form. As a bug, Gregor “noticed with horror that in reverse he could not even keep going in one direction” (19). This linear mobility reflects the Samsa’s narrow-minded acceptance of Gregor; they only accept Gregor when he is in human form. Although Gregor’s sister feeds Gregor, and his mother begs to visit him, the family’s ultimate consensus is that they need to get rid of Gregor to better their own lives. Thus, Gregor’s familial support is conditional. The Samsas support Gregor when he is capable of helping them financially, but abandon him when he cannot help them. Similarly, Gregor’s legs function when he is moving forward, but fail him when he tries to move backwards.

Gregor begins losing mobility in his legs as soon as it becomes clear that his family does not intend to help him in his plight as a bug. Gregor’s father attacks him, trapping him in the door and Gregor “actually had to limp on his two rows of legs. Besides, one little leg had been seriously injured in the course of the morning’s events—it was almost a miracle that only one had been injured—and dragged along lifelessly” (21). The Samsas trap Gregor both physically and mentally; they will not let Gregor be the man he still thinks he is, but they will not accept him in his new bug form, either. The Samsas do not give Gregor anywhere to go with his life, and as a result, Gregor’s familial relationship, like the mobility of his legs, begins to die.

Gregor’s ultimate immobility belies a shift in mentality. Gregor “soon made the discovery that he could no longer move at all. It did not surprise him; rather, it seemed unnatural that until now he had actually been able to propel himself on these thin little legs” (53). Gregor

realizes that his familial relationship was never healthy. Just as he wonders how his “little legs” (53) could ever have supported his big bug body, Gregor wonders how he lived with his family so long. Gregor’s family no longer considers him a person, but an “it,” and as such, Gregor becomes a stranger in his own family.

Thus, Gregor gains self-awareness through his relationship with his legs. As Gregor learns to control his legs, he realizes that his perceived relationship with his family is a facade. Gregor’s family members do not care for Gregor as much he does for them. Gregor devotes his life to working and sacrifices his own happiness for his family’s financial well-being. Yet, when Gregor most needs his family, they lock him up and think of ways to get rid of him. Like his legs, the Samsas hold Gregor back. Gregor loses all mobility when he realizes the truth about his family. Because Gregor cannot live without his legs, or with a family so selfish and needy, Gregor finds escape in death.

Kafka, Franz. The Metamorphosis. 4 Ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1972.

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