Story in the Floor Plan: Intentions and Familial Relationships through Spatial Relations in *The Metamorphosis*

The firm hand of the architect draws straight lines on translucent paper. The lines intersect into corners—forming rooms. More lines intersect—forming more rooms. The rooms line up, one after another, leaving spaces for doors, naturally. The house is built. In *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, the narrator’s voice shadows this architect’s hand, ingraining the familial relationships and intentions of the Samsa family into the walls. The rooms of the architect are the vessels that the narrator fills with the virtuous and appalling intentions of the members of the Samsa family. In sum, the floor plan of the Samsa apartment and the family’s use of space in the apartment parallel their relationships with each other and intentions towards one other. In particular, the narrator reveals the relationship between Gregor and his parents as well as their intentions towards each other through the layout of the apartment.

The order of the rooms in the Samsa apartment demonstrates the relationships within the family. The main rooms are laid out linearly. The living room is the first room beyond the foyer (Kafka 16). Because Mr. Samsa and Mrs. Samsa primarily inhabit the living room, this room may represent them. There is a direct line through the foyer to Gregor’s room, and Grete’s room is exactly behind Gregor’s room (6; 11; 15).

The placement of the living room in front of Gregor’s room with respect to the foyer sets up the perception that Mr. and Mrs. Samsa are the dominant characters of the household. The living room leads to the outside room via the foyer, and thus, is the first room viewed by outsiders. This placement gives Mr. and Mrs. Samsa superiority over Gregor and Grete. For example, Gregor’s manager steps into the Samsa living room from the foyer and delivers “the first word of greeting” (9). This “first word of greeting” is of course directed at Mr. and Mrs. Samsa because they are the first people that the manager perceives upon entering the apartment. The initial perception of Mr. and Mrs. Samsa gives them dominance over the rest of the household.

However, the living room is just a façade on the face of the actual nucleus of the apartment—Gregor’s room. His room is the heart of the apartment while the living room is just the skin. Gregor’s room is physically the center—the nucleus—of the apartment. Gregor himself is also the nucleus of the family because he is the sole provider for his family. The central position of Gregor’s room also emphasizes the parasitic nature of the family. For example, Gregor’s room is connected to Grete’s room and the living room by doors on opposite sides of the room (6). The family gathers at their respective locked doors on the fated morning after Gregor’s transformation, and implores Gregor to unlock the doors and go to work (5-6). Gregor’s centrally located room is trapped between Grete’s room and the living room just as Gregor is trapped between his parents’ and
sister’s need for him to go to work and provide for them. His sister and parents are free to nag Gregor as they please because his room is so accessible to each of them. Therefore, the central placement of Gregor’s room and the two doors leading into Gregor’s room parallel his central, as well as supportive, role in his family.

Mr. and Mrs. Samsa also demonstrate their parasitic natures in the way they treat their space. Specifically, the manner in which Mr. and Mrs. Samsa conduct breakfast demonstrates their parasitic natures. The “lavishly” laid out breakfast dishes suggest that there are a plentiful number of dishes and, therefore, that the dishes are sprawled across the table (15). The sprawl of the dishes and the large amount of time required to eat from those dishes reveal that his parents are at leisure most of the day while Gregor toils away. His parents and sister feed off Gregor by eating the sumptuous breakfast provided by his hard work as a traveling salesman.

The way in which Mr. and Mrs. Samsa use the space around Gregor reveals their manipulative and controlling intentions towards him. The two doors leading into Gregor’s room demonstrate his parents’ complete control over him. In one example, the narrator omits the size of the door into Grete’s room, while he includes the detail that the door from the living room into Gregor’s room is actually a set of doors (19). The larger door width from the living room into Gregor’s room may signify that his parents’ influence over him is greater than his sister’s influence over him. The Samsa parents have more room to walk into Gregor’s room just as they have more room to walk all over Gregor.

In another example, Mr. Samsa refuses to open the other wing of the door so Gregor can move his broad vermin body through it with ease (19). This act of controlling Gregor’s space demonstrates Mr. Samsa’s control over Gregor. Furthermore, Gregor obeys his father’s demands and passes through the single door, injuring his side (19). Gregor’s willingness to physically obey his father in the face of injury further emphasizes Mr. Samsa’s dominance over Gregor. In addition, Gregor’s willingness to move through a too small space parallels his selfless denial of his own needs in order to satiate the selfish needs of his family. Therefore, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa display their manipulative intentions towards Gregor by manipulating Gregor’s space.

The way in which Mr. Samsa, Mrs. Samsa, and Gregor inhabit their respective spaces also parallels their intentions towards one another. While Gregor inhabits a clearly defined space, the narrator never reveals the placement of Mr. and Mrs. Samsa’s bedroom. The narrator hints that Mr. and Mrs. Samsa’s bedroom is located off the living room, but the exact placement is ambiguous (50). Mr. and Mrs. Samsa never openly discuss their dependency on Gregor, so they may use their bedroom as a place to hatch their plots. The mysterious placement of Mr. and Mrs. Samsa’s bedroom may conjure images of a puppet-master for the reader. Just as Gregor does not perceive Mr. and Mrs. Samsa manipulating him, the audience never sees the puppet-master controlling the puppets.
In contrast to his manipulative parents, Gregor is a virtuous and selfless character. The manner in which Gregor inhabits his space as a vermin parallels his nature. Gregor’s use of the couch in his room reveals his considerate nature. At first, Gregor feels “nervous” in the “high-ceilinged room” and hides under the couch in order to feel secure (23). But, after he becomes accustomed to his room, he continues to conceal himself under the couch in order to make Grete feel more comfortable (25; 30; 34). Gregor realizes that the sight of him “[is] still repulsive to [Grete] and [is] bound to remain repulsive to her in the future,” so he even further diminishes his presence by pulling a sheet over himself while under the couch (30). Gregor’s self-inflicted concealment and inhabitance of the “sub-room” below the couch demonstrate his thoughtfulness and selflessness towards his family.

The way the family treats Gregor’s space after he is transformed into a vermin parallels his constantly diminishing role in his family. For example, at Grete’s suggestion, she and Mrs. Samsa remove all the furniture from Gregor’s room. They remove the furniture under the guise that Gregor would benefit from having a larger space to climb around in (34-35). While the removal of the furniture could be perceived as an act of acceptance towards Gregor, it is not because they do not remove the “indispensable couch” (34). The couch is the only object that makes Gregor’s presence bearable to Grete and her parents, and therefore, represents his isolation from his family. Grete demonstrates that Gregor is not human anymore by stripping his room of all his human possessions (his dresser and desk).

Additionally, the family discards “things for which they [can] find any other place” into Gregor’s room (45). The spatial infringement of the rest of the apartment on Gregor’s room parallels Gregor’s diminishing role in the Samsa family. Significantly, the Samsas places objects they have no use for in Gregor’s room because they have no use for Gregor anymore either. Items they wish to forget are put in a space they wish to forget—Gregor’s room. Thus, Gregor’s relationship to his space and the family’s relationship to his space reveal Gregor’s nature as well as the relationships within the family.

In The Metamorphosis, the narrator fills the walls and spaces of the Samsa apartment with stories of the family. The apartment’s walls quietly whisper the intentions of Gregor and his parents. His parents’ intentions are heard scraping the furniture across the floor, while Gregor’s rot away underneath an old couch. When the door is shut for the last time on the Samsa household, the walls will remain to tell the story of puppet-masters and their faithful insect. The reader only needs to study the floor plan and the characters’ use of space to discover the Samsa familial relationships.

Works Cited