

Shifting Gender Roles and Power Dynamics in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: An Analysis of Grete Samsa's Evolution



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Abstract: *This study examines the transformation of Grete Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, focusing on the evolution of gender roles and power dynamics within the Samsa family. While existing scholarship has largely centered on Gregor Samsa, this research shifts attention to Grete, exploring her progression from a submissive sister to a dominant household figure. Through a qualitative textual analysis, the study reveals how Grete's metamorphosis mirrors societal changes in early 20th-century Europe, particularly regarding women's shifting roles and the reconfiguration of family hierarchies. Grete's character development is analyzed using feminist literary criticism and Michel Foucault's power-knowledge framework, highlighting her ascent to authority and eventual rejection of Gregor as a reflection of broader socio-cultural pressures. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of Kafka's critique of gender norms and offers insights into the representation of women in modernist literature. The study suggests that Grete's transformation is emblematic of the struggles women faced during Kafka's era, torn between traditional roles and modern aspirations.*

Keywords: Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, Grete Samsa, gender roles, power dynamics, feminist literary criticism, modernist literature, family hierarchy

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The Metamorphosis is a novella written by Franz Kafka, initially published in 1915, and recognized as one of the most significant works of modernist literature because of its distinctive plot and existentialist concerns. The novella revolves around the life of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman, who, in one of the most memorable scenes in the history of world literature, wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a bug. This monstrous and unpleasant transformation works as a harbinger of change to Gregor's life as well as to the social relations within his family. Whilst on the theme, Kafka is able to take the audience into realms of

social isolation, identity crises and the existence of life in the middle of the purposeless absurdities.

Although, the novella has been centralistically discussed most of the evaluations have revolved around the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa and the burden it bears – that relates to a society transitioning from a feudal to a capitalist mode of production, and the themes of alienation and dehumanization; however, Grete Samsa, the younger sister of Gregor, also undergoes a metamorphosis which has been widely overlooked. At the beginning of the play, Grete is a solicitous sister who takes care of her brother as the traditional women's role is regarded at that time. The first response that Kafka's

protagonist exhibits to Gregor's transformation is worry and an indication of accountability for him subsequently she takes the responsibility of feeding and nursing him even though his new form disgusts her.

Nevertheless, as the development of the plot is introduced; individual changes of Grete are shown due to the worsened situation in the family. The pressure of having to look after Gregor, along with generalized fraying of the family's finances and wellbeing, constitutes the turning point for the change of Grete's position in the household. He is able to chart growth of the female character from a rather coy young woman who is rather submissive to a strong, authoritative woman. Such transformation may not be only a personal growth but also is necessary as a reaction to gender roles changes in the society in the period of Kafka. Female characters were pursuing as a higher measure of autonomy and performing careers that have conventionally been restricted to men, particularly within the light of the socio-economic problems that families encountered in the early part of the twentieth century.

Grete's development could be viewed as the microcosm of the change in the balance of power within the family Samsa, as she gradually moves from the purely patriarchal role in the family. Her growing dominance together with her final decision to promote the change of Gregor's job can be regarded as an indication of the shift in power in the family. This work will therefore seek to assess these changes in detail, in relation to Grete's role and how societal dynamics of gender as well as power relations were or are in Kafka's time. Through exploring the elements of Grete's character, this research helps in extending the understanding of the novel beyond its traditional interpretation as a parable of alienation for analyzing Kafka's view on the gender roles and the hierarchies in the family.

1.2 Research Problem

The novella describes the interrelations of family members and their roles in the house after the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa. Grete Samsa, initially characterized as a concerned and somewhat stupid sister of the protagonist,

become dominant in the family as her brother gets lampauf. This change of power relations leads to wondering about the gender roles and changes of power within the couple and the family. The research problem underpinning this article is to examine how Grete's metamorphoses in the novel exemplify the problem of gender and power dynamics in early twentieth-century literature.

1.3 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Grete Samsa's role within the family evolve throughout *The Metamorphosis*?
2. In what ways does Grete's character development reflect the shifting power dynamics within the Samsa family?
3. How does Grete's transformation align with or challenge the gender roles of her time?

1.4 Objective of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the development of Grete Samsa's character throughout *The Metamorphosis*.
2. To examine the shift in power dynamics between Grete and other family members as Gregor's condition deteriorates.
3. To explore the implications of Grete's evolution for understanding gender roles in Kafka's work and in the broader context of early 20th-century literature.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This paper serves the Kafka scholarship as the novel's main subject which has been explored in numerous works – Gregor Samsa – is expanded in terms of added depth analysis and attention paid to the profound yet understudied character of Grete. Studying the process of Grete's character's transformation and the dominance/submission switch within the Samsa family, the present work contributes to the understanding of Kafka's view on gender

relations and the society of the male-dominated society of his time. Moreover, the work advances a general appreciation of how *The Metamorphosis* relates to the genre of the modernist literature that challenges and traumatizes conventional expectations.

Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Existing Scholarship on *The Metamorphosis*

Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, has elicited criticism that explores themes that pertain to identity and absurdity among other themes. This has led to much of critical focus being directed towards discussion of the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa and its consequences for the interpretation of the meaning of human being and social functioning (Corngold, 1972; Sokel, 1983). Nonetheless, Grete Samsa as the significant character in the novella has not been discussed elaborately. This literature review attempts to fill this gap by concentrating on literature dealing with such issues as the role of family, gender, and power relations, with special reference to Grete.

2.2 Gender Roles in Early 20th-Century Literature

As stated above, the early part of the twentieth century was a further era of revolution particularly within gender traditions within the west. Material for this class from this time period is typically informed as well as influenced by the conflicts and paradoxes of these changing positions. Women in Kafka's work are usually presented as adjuncts to the male character or as representations of the basic concepts of the society in which they live. Grete Samsa's transformation in the novella *The Metamorphosis* can be seen in the same perspective where initial submission turns into a revolt that goes against the established gender roles of the family. In reflecting the changes in society during the time Kafka penned his work, the women depicted here are not only criminally minded – more to the point, some of them are sexually liberated and are demanding more self- or better still power.

2.3 Critical Perspectives on Grete Samsa

While most critics concentrate on the protagonist of the novel, several researchers examine Grete's position more extensively. At the beginning of the novel, Grete is shown to be a loving sister with some wisdom in handling matters at home; however, as the story unwinds and Gregor's health declines, she assumes the role of a head of the household. While some scholars take this as a positive change scholars who study psychoanalysis observe that Grete's growing 'fat' show the woman is growing into her power (Dodd 2002). However some people consider her last statement- the final act of turning away from Gregor as the evidence of the process of her assimilation of cultural norms of the time that celebrates productivity and submission to the state and social norms.

2.4 Power Dynamics in Kafka's Work

A common thread in Kafka's writing is the idea of authority and its consequences for the psyche of particular subjects. Therefore in the novel *The Metamorphosis*, power relationship reorient within the Samsa family once Gregor conspicuous himself as a bread winner while Grete takes over this post. In this respect, it is possible to view this shift in terms of Kafka's more general concern with issues of social domination, whereby the unconventional are subjugated or excluded (Sokel 1983, p.63). Likewise, it is possible to see Grete's transition from a comparatively passive protagonist to an active one as a figure for the exertion of agency and oppression in the context of the social roles she is obliged to fill.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This present research work uses a qualitative research method with a focus on a text analysis of Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*. The research is qualitative, its purpose being to try and uncover the social constructs and tensions surrounding gender roles and power relations as seen in the text. Thus, concerning the objectives of the study, it aims at analysing the elements of narrative construction, the character transformation, and the dialogue in order to

reveal the details of Grete Samsa's development as well as the secret meaning of this process in the context of the novella.

3.2 Textual Analysis

The main strategy for data analysis in the present research is the method known as 'close reading,' which presupposes the detailed textual analysis. Some of the passages that depict the relationship between Grete and Gregor and other family members are used to analyze the changes in her character. Here the concern is shifted towards constructing cases on the basis of when and where Grete changed her position and her behaviour, and its relevance to the dynamics of power within the household.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The framework and rationale applied to the text are those of a more specific branch of post-structuralist criticism known as the feminist literary criticism, which offers the means of understanding how gendered subject positions are being produced and narrated in the texts. This theoretical approach is especially valuable for studying how Grete's change plays with or reinforces the conventional gender roles. Moreover, the historical, power-knowledge approach by Michel Foucault is employed to understand how power is yielded in the family and how it transforms as Grete assumes power.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection entails a process of sourcing and screening of relevant passage from the novel titled *The Metamorphosis* that relate to the study of Grete Samsa. It is in these excerpts where Grete is given new roles, communicates with other family members and where she Rejects Gregor The last time. Much focus is given to these passages to determine how Kafka manipulates the relations of power and gender in the novella.

Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Initial Presentation of Grete Samsa

In *The Metamorphosis*, at the novel's start Grete Samsa seems quite tender, although silly and truly loving her brother Gregor. At first, she is the stereotype of a helpful and caring sister

which is willing to help her newly changed brother. For example, it is she who first realizes that Gregor has not eaten and she only offers him dishes which, in her opinion, he might fancy. Even the simple action of buying a sweet is described by Kafka in the following manner: "*To find out what he liked, she brought him a whole selection of food all set out on an old newspaper*" (Kafka, p. 12). This early portrayal of Grete places her as a subordinate member of the family, a loving daughter, who as the female figure in the family, bears all the mesmeric characteristics of women of her premier age.

4.2 The Impact of Gregor's Transformation on Grete

Grete, the younger and more dependent family member, can also no longer escape the metamorphosis that is overtaking her brother and, soon enough, the entire family—she is forced to take on the role of a caregiver for Gregor and, in the process, changes her character as a result. At this stage, it looks as if she cares for Gregor because it is her responsibility to do so and not out of love. But as the case with Gregor gets worse, the actions that Grete demonstrates denote a change in her attitude and she emerges as resentful. Kafka illustrates this shift when he describes Grete's changing behavior: "*She was so startled that without being able to help it she slammed the door shut again*" (Kafka, p. 18). Despite all that mere, Grete had tried her best to please the suffering father, at the end of the day, she was frustrated at the extent that she closed the door on herself. At this point, the reader can see the initial steps of Grete's process of alienation from Gregor as her compassion turns into the fear of the unknown, and, consequently, disgust.

Grete is also an active part of the family's dynamics and her role in the family increases, especially when the family's financial problems arise. This shift is important in as far as it captures a shift in the power relations of the Samsa family. Because, as Grete increases her activity and assumes more responsibility for the support of the family, she tried to become more active, something she never was before. For instance, as in the case when describing the idea of moving the furniture out of Gregor's chamber

to provide more space, Grete volunteers saying, *“He would certainly have stripped it off the sofa again for it was clear enough that this curtaining and confining of himself was not likely to conduce to Gregor’s comfort”* (Kafka, p. 24). This quote, expresses Grete’s ascendancy to a position of authority and dominance as the change of power shifts to her due to the diminishing power of Gregor.

4.3 Grete’s Increasing Authority and Changing Attitude

When Grete becomes more involved in taking care of Gregor she also attains her share of power within the family. This change is illustrated in the way that the protagonist at some point in the story decides to rearrange Gregor’s room as a way of asserting more control over him. Kafka continues to write *“And so she was not to be moved from her resolve by her mother...she had in fact perceived that Gregor needed a lot of space to crawl about in while on the other hand he never used the furniture at all so far as could be seen”* (Kafka, p. 27). Here, Grete manipulates her behaviour both in part due to necessity and in part due to unconscious rebelliousness – contradicting her previous role of a submissive daughter.

However, this increasing authority is also accompanied by a hardening of her attitude towards Gregor. As she becomes more involved in the family’s struggle for survival, her feelings of compassion are gradually replaced by frustration and disgust. This shift culminates in her decision to stop caring for Gregor altogether, as seen when she declares to her parents, *“We must get rid of it...I won’t pronounce my brother’s name in the presence of this monster, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it”* (Kafka, p. 34). This statement marks the final stage in Grete’s transformation, where she fully embraces her new role as the family’s primary decision-maker, even at the cost of severing her emotional ties to Gregor.

4.4 The Final Shift: Grete’s Transformation

At the end of the novella, the character of Grete has been metamorphosed totally, having changed from a sensitive and caregiving sibling to a confident and domineering female in the

household. Her final rejection of Gregor is an epitome of shift in power relation that we might see in the earlier part of the novel. Kafka underscores this transformation in the closing scenes, where the parents observe Grete’s physical and emotional maturation: *“And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when at the end of their journey their daughter got up first and stretched her young body”* (Kafka, p. 39). This description focuses on the fact that Grete becomes an adult, capable to face the future free from her brother.

4.5 Comparative Analysis

Comparing Grete’s transformation together with the other female characters in Kafka’s texts helps notice a pattern in the way Kafka depicts women as going through many struggles connected to gender, family, and community. Thus, Grete’s transformation might be viewed as an expression of the problems which women experienced in Kafka’s era, when they were torn by the struggle between the domestic and the modern roles. In this regard, Grete’s advancement from authority and her transformation into a callous figure in relation to Gregor should be seen as a reflection of the prevailing oppression from the structures in which she exists and where Kafkaesque heroines fight and in most cases give in to the pressures of the society.

Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

In light of the above analysis, this research paper has sought to examine the nature of the transformation of Grete Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, particularly in relation to evolving gender relations and hierarchical structures of the Šamša household. In the context of social gender expectations cherished in the early twentieth century, the nature of Grete is introduced as a sister who is caring, self-sacrificing, and obedient. However, as the story progresses, and Gregor’s health declines along with the family’s financial stability, Grete also changes dramatically. She transforms from being a docile and submissive wife to a dominant figure within the home.

Thus, the analysis has stated that it is not a simple character development in the novel, but has a context of change occurring in society, during Kafka's time. Increasing duties and assumed direct management of the home also portray the emerging position of women in the society and their transition from mere homemakers. Grete also shows that shifts of power in the family exist as she becomes the center of attention and rejects Gregor later.

5.2 Implications of the Study

Based on the findings of this work, here is a breakdown of the implications of this study for Kafka's work and for gender and literary criticism at large. The wonderfully named character of Grete Samsa has typically incurred the wrath of analysis though in fact her metamorphosis within the novella should not be overlooked. Through the analysis of the changes in Grete's character, this paper aims to enrich the understanding of Kafka's approach to the depictions of the society and expectations it has for women.

However, the role of the protagonist, Grete, can also be largely associated with woman's submission to the social and, at the same time, a harsh critique of the role of women during Kafka's time and their attempts to combine tradition with the processes of modernization. Her transformation from a caring sister to a dominating family member also depicts the cost of such societal type of pressure which is seen when she finally rejects Gregor as being a coping mechanism of dealing with the enormous pressures she is subjected to.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Although this paper has been devoted to Grete Samsa's character in *The Metamorphosis*, there are a number of directions that this study could expand upon these results. It is possible to continue the work done in this paper and investigate the representation of female characters in other novels by Kafka focusing on how they experience similar power relations and gender expectations. Comparisons can also be made between Grete and other female protagonists in other contemporary pieces of literature so as to get a broader perspective on

the concepts of gender and power in the novels of modernist literature.

The following may be seen as another promising strand of future research: the significance of gender for Kafka's texts can be elaborated through greater attention to other aspects of social division that play a role in Kafka's writing, including class and economic position. Metamorphosis of Grete is also associated with the family's financial situation, thus, one can point to the fact that the social and economic problems are the central issue of Kafka's work.

Thus, the final potentiality for the researching of Kafka's novella embraces the integration of methods originating from literature, psychology or sociology in order to yield fresh insights into exploring Grete's nature and perspectives and aspects of the themes of alienation, individual identity and power. They could contribute to enhancing our knowledge of how Kafka's texts remain (or are again becoming) relevant to gender issues of today's society.

5.4 Final Thoughts

The growth of Grete Samsa in Transformation is one of the potencies that Kafka applied between all characters to modernize societal problems. In the transformation of a helpless sister to an authoritative and confident woman, Kafka also tries to convey a message that there can be a change in the power sector and traditional female gender roles should be changed in a family. On the whole, the plot of the novel is a mirror that reflects the transformation of society in Kafka's time, and the character of Grete as a sexual object is also the key to understanding the contemporary significance of *The Metamorphosis*.

It is future's readers and scholars' duty to study the works of Kafka in order to pay attention not only to the protagonists, but also the others as well to embrace all the subtlety of the critique of society developed by the author. Still, it is worth paying attention to the fact that Grete Samsa's character also has a sense of the tragedy of the new woman who is attempting to adapt to the changing society.

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