



A Critical Analysis of the Character 'Grete' from Transcendental Perspectives in *The Metamorphosis*

Literary Research Paper

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Abstract

The Metamorphosis is a brilliant work of Franz Kafka. Several critics tried to identify different aspects of this novella from different point of views. Apparently, the title of this novel *The Metamorphosis* refers to the transformation of the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, into a bug, considering the whole story readers can finally discover that not only Gregor but every character gets through some transformation, though physically not at all. Readers can also identify the transcendental quality of human being almost in all the characters especially in the characterization of Gregor's sister, Grete. The paper aimed to analyze one of the most significant characters of this novel, Grete, from transcendental perspective where the transcendental quality of this character is twisted for the sake of society and its regulations and thus to find out a reflection of transcendentalism in *The Metamorphosis*.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, *The Metamorphosis*, Grete, critical analysis

Transcendentalism is a philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century whose pioneer was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Many scholars and critics have diversely interpreted this word in different times. The features of transcendentalism are a quest for truth or divinity, self-trust, strong connection to nature, ultimate reliance on intuition, individualism, dislike of materialism, etc. The essential idea of transcendentalism is to rely on one's intuition or instinct. Emerson suggests in his major essays that every human being has personal intuition that indicates their inner goodness, which they gain for divine connection, but when they come with the contact of society, they gradually lose this personal intuition or inner integrity. Thus, human being loses their innocence and becomes experienced for the demand of society and its institutions. From this perspective of transcendentalism, we can analyze the character of Grete where at the beginning of the novella *The Metamorphosis*, the readers get a clear picture of her as a loving and caring sister of Gregor Samsa. Still, towards the end of the story, she gets through some changes as her connection with society is gradually established.

Goodman (2019) defines, "Transcendentalism is an American literary, political, and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century, centered around Ralph Waldo Emerson". He says that a core belief of transcendentalism is in the inherent goodness of people and nature (Goodman). Adherents believe that society and its institutions have corrupted the purity of the individual, and they have faith that people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. However, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* draws its title not from Gregor's change but from the change of his family members, especially Grete (Mazumder, Sarder & Islam, 2017, p.18).

In *The Metamorphosis* Franz Kafka depicts the features of the modern people in a very significant way. In this novel, suddenly, the protagonist Gregor Samsa is transformed into a monstrous vermin in one morning. With all the features of an insect, he reacts like a human being, but he is not realized by the family members and is rejected. Though initially, his sister Grete tries to understand him soon, she is also changed and thus leads him towards his premature death. So, the character of Grete for this novel is very significant as we find the transcendental idea of Ralph Waldo Emerson within herself.

At the beginning of this novella, Grete comes in front of the readers when Gregor becomes "a monstrous vermin" and the manager and his parents do not understand his words and his mother yells for Grete to call a doctor as she thinks her son is very ill.

"Grete! Grete!" she yelled at that point. 'Mother?' called the sister from the other side. They were making themselves understood through Gregor's room. 'You must go to the doctor right away. Gregor is sick. Hurry to the doctor.' (Kafka, 16)

Here, Grete is a wanton young girl who gets panicked about a sudden accident at her home. Her childish image is presented through her brother's thinking, where it seems that she is a lazy and fancy girl and unable to do any serious task. Again, from his thought, we know that she is an intelligent girl who can properly communicate with others. As when the manager comes, Gregor thinks-

"If only the sister had been there! She was clever. She had already cried while Gregor was still lying quietly on his back. And the manager, this friend of the ladies, would certainly let himself be guided by her. She would have closed the door to the apartment and talked him out of his fright in the hall. But the sister was not even there." (Kafka, 22)

From the lines, the affinity between the siblings can easily be recognized. It becomes clearer when Grete tries to feed his brother as she is aware of him. In chapter II, he describes-

"but also because the milk, which otherwise was his favorite drink and which his sister had certainly placed there for that reason, did not appeal to him at all". (Kafka, 28)

"In this way Gregor got his food every day, once in the morning, when his parents and the servant girl were still asleep, and a second time after the common noon meal, for his parents were, as before, asleep then for a little while, and the servant girl was sent off by his sister on some errand or other". (Kafka, 32)

From these extracts, we can observe the good attitudes of Grete where she is very much aware of every member of her family. At the same time, she is very eager to understand her brother and to simplify the grief of her parents and the terror of the servant girl. So, this inner goodness of her character can be defined as "personal intuition" which is the main idea of *Transcendentalism*. Unlike others, she can maintain this intuition because of her childish nonconformity, which is identified through Gregor's voice-

"Should his sister earn money, a girl who was still a seventeen- year- old child, whose earlier life style had been so very delightful that it had consisted of dressing herself nicely, sleeping in late, helping around the house, taking part in a few modest enjoyments and, above all, playing the violin?" (Kafka, 37)

Thus, his sister is described as seventeen years old and is still a child. It is a pity to deprive her of the life she had been, so long, accustomed to lead until now. But nowadays, he often hears his parents appreciate his sister's work. Strangely enough, he is habituated to hear until now that they consider her as being a little useless.

As Gregor is the only bread earner for his family his transformation changed the family into a needy one. The old maid is released and replaced by a gigantic bony cleaning woman who did only the heaviest work. So, his mother had to do everything else and sew, and his sister had to assist her

with household chores. They sell all of their jewelry to maintain their family, but at last, they find out different simple sources of income-

"Bent far over, the mother sewed fine undergarments for a fashion shop. The sister, who had taken on job as a salesgirl, in the evening studied stenography and French, so as perhaps later to obtain a better position". (Kafka, 54)

Here, we notice the gradual meeting of Grete with society and its institutions, which is just like a joint-stock company that makes people rigid. As a result, people lose their divine connection, and their spirit lose their inherent goodness. Grete is also changed gradually as she loses her previous intuition for her brother by the touch of society. Her careless attitude may be observed through these lines-

"Without thinking any more about how one might 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.

Thus, cautiously we notice a change in the character of Grete which is not intentional but she steps in to save her family. She has to struggle a lot to survive with her parents where the only bread earner becomes their burden just in one night. This nightmare is very pathetic not only for Gregor but also for his family who has been untouched by the harsh reality of the notorious world especially for Grete. She is exhausted from her work as a salesgirl at the store. Alongside, she has to learn shorthand and French in the evening for a better job, and in the house, she has to take care of her brother and father, even she has to do a lot of work to help her mother. Though she is not mature enough to do all of the things in her brother's eyes, her transcendental quality allows her to continue all the jobs at a time.

Then an extra pressure comes to her when they have to take in the paying guests to overcome their financial troubles in the absence of Gregor's contribution; unsure of how to treat their boarders, and they show undue respect to them in their own home. They have to take their meal in the kitchen ever since they have taken in the roomers. Both Gregor's mother and sister serve them delicious dishes to keep them satisfied which is also an extra tension for them:

"The mother immediately appeared in the door with a dish of meat and right behind her the sister with a dish piled high with potatoes. The food gave off a lot of steam. The gentlemen lodgers bent over the plate set before them, as if they wanted to check it before eating, and in fact the one who sat in there middle (for the other two he seemed to serve as the authority) cut off a piece of meat still on the plate obviously to establish whether it was sufficiently tender and whether or not something should be shipped back to the kitchen. He was satisfied and mother and sister, who had looked on in suspense, began to breathe easily and to smile". (Kafka, 61-62)

However, the most significant side of this situation is the changing attitude of the family members where they behave more formally and consciously even in their living room for the outsiders. Out of excessive honor towards them, which they don't deserve, they don't even dare to sit down on their chairs. Here, we observe a similarity between the attitude of the people towards society and the attitude of Gregor's family towards the lodgers. As Emerson points out in his essay *Self-Reliance*:

"Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most requests is conformity" (1047).

Thus, we observe similarities with the attitude of the family members as they will get financial support from them. In this way, they are confirmed and lose their intuition or inner goodness what

gives pain to Gregor most. This conformity affects Grete the most, which we understand her changed behavior towards her brother when Gregor spoils her violin concert. After which, a skirmish takes place between Mr. Samsa and the lodgers, and Grete becomes furious with her brother. She insists to her parents that it is high time that they must get rid of Gregor. She is so exasperated that she refused to pronounce her brother's name in front of a monster. So, what they should all try to is got rid of it, not him. She also says that they have done everything possible to take care of it and to put up with it. She doesn't think anyone can blame them in the least. Unfortunately, she is scared at the slightest movement of him once; she hides behind her father, thinking that her brother is about to attack her.

"My dear parents,' said the sister banging her hand on the table by way of an introduction, 'things cannot go on any longer in this way. Maybe if you don't understand that, well, I do. I will not utter my brother's name in front of this monster, and thus I say only that we must try to get rid of it. We have tried what is humanly possible to take care of it and to be patient. I believe that no one can criticize us in the slightest.'" (Kafka, 67-68)

Thus, it is not the Oedipal father nor the hysterical mother, but Grete announces that Gregor must go. From these speeches of her, it is understood how much she is aware of the comment of society. We observe her innocence and childish quality as perverted into a conscious adult, whose behavior is confirmed with social values. As Emerson says,

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do." (1050)

"Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose." (1053)

Her speech and her mean attitude hurt her brother so much that even the pesky apple on his back does not bother him anymore. Thus, she leads her unfortunate brother to his premature death when she loses her inner goodness.

"Gregor was startled by the sudden commotion behind him, so much so that his little limbs bent double under him. It was his sister who had been in such a hurry. She had stood up right away, had waited, and had then sprung forward nimbly. Gregor had not heard anything of her approach. She cried out 'Finally!' to her parents, as she turned the key in the lock". (Kafka, 71)

When they get the news of Gregor's death from the cleaning woman, they scramble out of bed and rush for his room. Grete also joined them soon-

"Well,' said Mr. Samsa, 'now we can give thanks to God.' He crossed himself, and the three women followed his example. Grete, who did not take her eyes off the corpse, said, 'Look how thin he was. He had eaten nothing for such a long time. The meals which came in here came out again exactly the same,'" (Kafka, 73)

After that, she even follows her parents not without looking back at the corpse. Then she joins her parents on a pleasure trip to the country. Thus, at the outset, she was concerned about her brother's physical change. But after a month or so, she too wants to get rid of 'it' or him.

Finally, it can be said that the transformation of Grete is not less than the transformation of her brother) as we notice that there is a similarity between these transformations where Gregor is changed biologically and the transformation of her sister is psychological. And this psychological change of human beings is very much connected with the idea of transcendentalism, whose pioneer is Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to the transcendental point of view, human being, whether man or woman has personal intuition which is divine and good, is corrupted because of the rigid rules and regulation of society and its institutions. Thus, Grete's transformation in *The Metamorphosis* is very similar to this idea.

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