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Metamorphosis Thematic Essay:
How Identity is Transformed Through our Relationships with Others

No two individuals' lives align identically, therefore people are fundamentally unique. Each and every person is a combination of distinctive interests, abilities, goals, and choices that merge to shape their identity. Our relationships play a crucial role in the development of these aspects of ourselves, as we often base them on those of the people closest to us. When we become isolated from those relationships that have helped us develop our sense of self, it can cause us to question our identities and lead to a change in our disposition. In *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, the protagonist Gregor Samsa undergoes a miraculous physical transformation overnight and wakes up as an insect. He learns to adapt to his new physique, but he finds himself unable to maintain the relationships in his life and is forced to watch them decline. Gregor's transformation causes him to lose his connection to his profession, his family, and ultimately himself, demonstrating that alienation leads to a loss of his identity.

In the midst of Gregor's absurd circumstances, he makes no attempts to ascertain why he has become an insect. He never once contemplates the supernatural nature of his transformation, or what he may have done to deserve such a fate. His only concerns lie with his job, and how he will manage to get there in his present form. He reflects on his choice of profession as a traveling salesman, "Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked up on! Traveling day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the office, and on top of that 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.

The devil take it all!” (Kafka, 89-90). Immediately, it is revealed that Gregor’s job prevents him from having much of a social life, which is further supported by the absence of any mention of friends he may have throughout the story. Additionally, it is later explained that Gregor works in order to support his family financially, since his father’s business failed. These details indicate that his work is the foundation of his identity, therefore why it is his first priority. However, as he enters complete social isolation following his transformation, he both loses his ability to hold his job and jeopardizes his ability to provide for his family. This demonstrates that Gregor’s alienation from his job and from his family effectively stripped him of these crucial aspects of his identity.

As Gregor becomes more acquainted with his physique, he learns to appreciate crawling around his room. Gregor’s sister Grete notices this, and decides to remove some of his furniture with the help of his mother in order to make his environment more suited to his new pastime. However, upon seeing them carry out his possessions one by one, Gregor is described to become distressed, “They were...taking away everything he loved; the chest in which he kept his fret saw and other tools was already dragged off, they were now losing the writing desk which had almost sunk into the floor, the desk at which he had done all his homework when his was at the commercial academy, at the grammar school before that, and, yes, even at the primary school...” (Kafka, 118). Though it seemed he had momentarily come to terms with his new life, he was reminded of the sentimental value of his things just as he was about to lose them. His fondness of his possessions conveys that their lasting presence in his life made them feel like a part of him. Therefore, becoming alienated from them represented his last physical connections to his former life being taken away from him, and furthermore a part of his identity being taken away from him.

For the entirety of Gregor's time as an insect, he always hid himself out of consideration for his family's distaste for his new appearance. However, when attempting to save his beloved picture of a woman in fur from being removed from his room, he reveals himself to his mother, causing her to faint from the sight of him. Gregor's father attempted to drive him back into his room by throwing apples in his direction, in which he was successful but with the consequence of a piece of apple becoming lodged in Gregor's back. The altercation is described, "The serious injury done to Gregor, which disabled him for more than a month--the apple went on sticking in his body as a visible reminder, since no one ventured to remove it..." (Kafka, 118). None of Gregor's family desiring to remove the apple expressed that they gradually came to resent their responsibilities of caring for him in his current state, causing his relationship with them to suffer even further. The apple was left attached to Gregor's body for the remainder of his short life, decaying alongside his connection to them. It is mentioned in Gregor's final moments, "The rotting apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, all covered with soft dust, already hardly troubled him" (Kafka 135). Kafka uses the apple to illustrate Gregor's deteriorating physical and mental state as he rots alongside it. The detail of the apple being "covered with soft dust" and no longer troubling also alludes to Gregor's acceptance of his total loss of self, from which he gives into his demise. This symbol functions as a physical manifestation of Gregor's relationship with his family, demonstrating how his alienation from them transformed his mental state and how he eventually lost his identity entirely.

As we lose touch with relationships in our lives, we lose the things that define us. Kafka's depiction of Gregor's life following his transformation into an insect shows a complete metamorphosis of his identity as his alienation from his job, his family, and his possessions cause him to lose his relationship to each of them, and ultimately lose himself. Kafka ends his novella

with the Samsa family feeling both grief and peace from his death, leaving us to wonder how the end of their relationship with Gregor will continue to transform their lives.