

LIVING AS THE BUG:  
KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS* AS READ THROUGH CRITICAL DISABILITY  
THEORY

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the teachers who encouraged me and the family who love me.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka is a writer of short stories and novels from the early half of the twentieth century, born in 1883 to a Jewish family in Prague, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (and is now the capital of the Czech Republic). His stories are well known for their absurd plots and strange settings. Everyday life is twisted in Kafka's works. His unique style of writing has even inspired other authors to write 'Kafka-esque' stories, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* or Kōbō Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*. Much of Kafka's work can be read with different lenses to find meanings and metaphors for other parts of life, like the absurdity of society or the senseless brutality of authority. Perhaps his most well-known story, *The Metamorphosis*, has a real-world analogy hidden underneath the surface story beyond the accepted theories. There are many interpretations and meanings that can be gleaned from Kafka's works. This thesis will approach his story *The Metamorphosis* using critical disability theory to see how Gregor Samsa's transformation into a bug is a metaphor for the reaction to, and treatment of, disabled people in modern society. From his physical and mental changes to how his family treats him, we can see the ways in which Samsa's predicament serves as a literary parallel for disability in *The Metamorphosis*.

Critical disability theory analyses disability and what challenges disabled people face in the ableist world. Critical disability theory was first outlined in the 1980s, later becoming a diverse discipline of critical theories that seek to understand social implications and how disabled people are treated. "Over the last couple of decades,

disability studies has led many literary and cultural critics, with increasing momentum, to rethink what bodies are and to rethink what minds are: all minds, and all bodies, and sometimes the idea that we can draw a sharp distinction between minds and bodies” (Parker 367). By applying critical disability theory to literature, we can find representations of disabled individuals in literature where previously representation had been lackluster. Actions and characters who have no obvious connection with disability can be found to easily represent the treatment of disabled people. The disabled identity is something that can be found in many pieces of literature, even outside of characters outwardly identified as disabled. The identity itself changes as our perception of health and wellness changes. Critical disability theory “involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations” (Hall). Examples like Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which deals with soldiers fighting in World War I, show how the definition of disability can change and make our readings different. The novel shows soldiers with what would many years later come to be defined as “post-traumatic stress disorder” (or PTSD), having a feeling of disconnection from others and reacting to loud sounds with fright, but contemporary works had no concept of PTSD. Applying critical disability to works of literature can show us ways that disability can be read from previous works, showing how our perception of disability changes over time.

To help better understand the argument of this thesis, a summary of the plot will be provided to help the reader understand later points. *The Metamorphosis* begins with Gregor Samsa waking up to find that he has transformed overnight into a “monstrous

vermin,” which usually imagined as some sort of insect. The word Kafka uses can mean simply “pest,” and the ambiguity of this word opens the door for multiple different readings of Gregor’s situation. At first, he’s not too put off by the revelation, as he does not like his job as a traveling salesman, and he is worried that he will be late for work. If he were not the sole breadwinner of his family, he would quit. As he is stuck in bed all morning, his manager comes to his home to find him. Gregor’s family and the clerk ask Gregor to come out, but all they hear from inside his room is strange noises. Eventually, Gregor manages to crawl over to the door and open it. The sight of his new body terrifies everyone, and his father forces Gregor back into his room. With Gregor incapacitated, the family has lost their source of income. The father eventually goes out to find a job, and the family start renting rooms to tenants to earn some money. The family care for Gregor initially, as long as they do not have to see him. Grete, Gregor’s sister, leaves him food to eat and will even open the window in his room for him. As Gregor becomes more used to his new body, he takes to climbing on the walls and ceiling to alleviate his boredom. His mother and Grete begin to take furniture out of his room, seemingly to give Gregor more space, but he does not want to lose his furniture and paintings. He manages to grab one painting he loves of a woman dressed in furs before his family can get rid of it. When his mother and sister come in to take away the picture, his mother faints and Grete runs away at the sight of her brother. Gregor tries to follow her but his father throws apples at him to force him back into his room, seriously injuring him in the process.

Gregor begins to eat less and less as his family withdraws from his life. Soon his only source of human contact is the cleaning woman the family hires, who leaves the door to Gregor’s room open when the tenants are out. One evening, the door is left open

while the tenants are still home. Grete plays her violin for the tenants, which attracts Gregor from his room. When the tenants catch sight of him, they cancel their leases and leave. Grete, now tired of taking care of her brother, talks with her family about getting rid of 'it', meaning Gregor. Gregor hears this and goes back into his room to die. The next morning his corpse is thrown out by the cleaning lady while his parents and sister go out to have a picnic. Gregor's parents both note how Grete has grown into a young woman and contemplate finding her a husband.

With this, the short and absurd tale of Gregor Samsa's transformation ends. How does this connect with critical disability theory? "The narrative may therefore appeal to a wide range of readers who share such an experience, whether due, for instance, to racial/ethnic identity, gender, social class, religious affiliation, or to physical or mental disability" (Metzger 56). Gregor's tale can be read as a metaphor for a newly disabled person and how they are treated by not only society, but more specifically family. "Acutely or chronically ill readers who have themselves undergone a significant physical change may sense numerous resonances with Gregor Samsa's post-metamorphic experience" (Metzger 56). Much of what happens to Gregor is similar to how disabled people in our own world are treated. Gregor is the sole income earner for his family, unappreciated and unhappy. When he wakes up in his new form, he loses that ability to make money. He instead is the one who needs to be taken care of. People treat him as horrifying or a nuisance. He is completely reliant on his family, and mainly his sister, for food and basic care. Gregor can barely make it out of his own room for the pain and awkwardness of his body. His world is reduced to the people around him, and these people resent him for being a burden to them. Although Gregor once worked at his awful

job to provide for his family, they find returning the favor displeasing. As their dehumanization of him continues, Gregor loses more of his sense of who he was. “Disabled readers may not only empathize with Gregor’s vantage point [...] but also recognize how others respond to his new form attitudes and practices exhibited by the able-bodied toward the disabled” (Metzger 57). His worsening mental health is directly affected by his family’s treatment, until Gregor finally puts himself out of their misery. We see that “we might argue that the social system constructs the definition of disability and constructs the binary opposition between disability and ability” (Parker 368). All of the trauma and dehumanization that Gregor faces due to the system that his family and others constructs to deal with him lead to Gregor losing more of who he is. The Samsas create Gregor’s isolation, disability, and abjectness, which leads to him refusing to eat and eventually dying. After Gregor dies, the family goes on a jaunty picnic, like they are celebrating this burden leaving their life. The way the people around Gregor treat him is sadly reminiscent of how disabled people are still treated in our own society, where their worth as people is often reduced to whether or not they can produce income and be independent, and then they are stripped of their humanity when they become an inconvenience.

## II. GREGOR'S ABJECT BODY

After Gregor wakes up from his transformation, but before his family and boss open his door, he does not find his new body troubling at all. He is surprised to have “transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka 7), but he is not shocked and disgusted. Rather, Gregor spends his time contemplating his family and his job. He thinks about how he would like to quit his job as a traveling salesman, but has to work to support his family and pay off his father’s debts. He thinks about how he does not like his boss and would quit if he could. Despite his change, Gregor does not find himself disgusting. As James A. Metzger writes in “Re-Visioning Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* through Illness and Disability,” “we meet a character here who, against all odds, is able not only to adapt to his new body but to learn how to enjoy it and maneuver about the house quite capability. Although his new form initially evokes anxiety and even despair, it soon becomes a source of *jouissance*: he quickly begins to ‘appreciate’ his feelers, crawl ‘up and down the room’ at will, and suck ‘greedily’ at the food his sister provides” (57). His concern changes quickly from his new body to his job and what others will think of him. Without the reactions of others in his life, Gregor finds his body strange and unnerving, but he still recognizes himself and attempts to continue into his life as he had done pre-transformation. It is when his family and his boss see him that Gregor’s new body becomes a problem. We see that “we might argue that the social system constructs the definition of disability and constructs the binary opposition between disability and ability” (Parker 368). Before his family and others react to him, Gregor’s main problem is that he has trouble moving and is upset by this new fact. It takes him an incredibly long

time to move from his bed to his door. It is difficult for him to navigate this new and changed body, not unlike someone who just underwent a drastic physical change needing time and physical therapy to get used to moving again. However, there is nothing to indicate a sense of loathing about the body. Given enough time and support, Gregor likely could have adjusted to his change and reintegrated with society.

Gregor's new body is described as appearing like that of a giant beetle, with many thin legs and a hard carapace. His ability to move is much more limited now with his changed body, and he has no way to communicate with his family. He is now trapped in a body that is considered abject and inhuman by others. He cannot speak, he cannot move well or without pain, and his outward appearance terrifies others. Gregor is no longer identifiable by the social standards he has previously fit into. As Julia Kristeva states, the "Abject" is "what the subject's consciousness has to expel or disregard in order to create the proper separation between subject and object" (Kristeva, in Leitch 2069). As we see in the book, it is only when Gregor comes face to face with other people that he is made into the abject, the other. Alone in his room, he continues in his day as if he has just woken up with a sore back, acting like he just needs a little time to get used to his body. His mother, father, and sister, on the other hand, are the ones who dictate that this new body is undesirable and ugly. "He wanted to open the door, to actually show himself and speak to the head clerk; he was eager to find out what the others, who so desired to see him now, would say at the sight of him" (Kafka 14). There is no self-disgust in these lines before Gregor opens the door. His sense of self and humanity is still intact. He is eager to see what the others will think, eager to get a reaction. He does not see his body

in the same negative light as others do. It is only when he gets their reaction that Gregor comes to see himself as different and to hate his body.

Once Gregor opens the door, he sees “the head clerk, standing closest to the door, pressing his hand against his open mouth and backing away slowly” (Kafka 16). His physical body is unrecognizable. To the people outside of Gregor’s world, he is not human. This change is so great and disorienting that they become afraid of him. Gregor had not been afraid when he’d awoken as ‘vermin’. Indeed, he had registered the change and moved past it. His concern is how it will affect his job, that the change itself. His drastic bodily change did not destroy his idea of who he is. Gregor still thought about his job, his family, and his duties. There was no hatred of himself for this new body. He did not lose his sense of humanity. It is only when the outside world reacts to his new body as abject, other, unwanted, that Gregor finds himself disgusting.

Without the reactions of the clerk and his family being so antagonistic, Gregor could have retained his humanity. “If parents perceive their child as different from what is considered ‘normal,’ [...] they will more than likely treat him or her differently, thereby encouraging him or her to become as perceived. Internalization of role expectancy occurs at both the individual and at the group level” (Munyi). The reactions of those around him cause “Gregor’s abject awakening as a limiting experience that catapults him outside of language and culture into a regressive state” (Krause 1). We see in the story that he is capable of expressing his wants and desires, such as when he tries to keep the picture of the woman in furs, but he is incapable of communicating the message through language. Gregor is still there inside the monstrous body, but his family cannot see it. They do not allow him to exist as a member of the family still. Once he has

gained this new and different body, he is rejected from their family, isolated within his room and taken care of without interaction, and from society at large.

Abjection, a concept described by the critical theory of Julia Kristeva, “concerns the psychological process of the construction of boundaries between self and other that are involved in the formation of the ego” (Krause 304). “On close inspection all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (Kristeva, *Powers* 207). The abject is what is pushed out, what is not wanted. The boundary of what is human and what is not is created by our societies to create a sense of identity. Someone who produces labor is a subject, a person who is allowed to exist within the parameters set by society, like Gregor before his transformation. Prior to his metamorphosis, Gregor is an able-bodied, male, independent, income earner, all things that society identifies as good, as subject. Anything other than this able-bodied individual subject becomes either an object or merely abject. Objects are allowed to remain in the system, fulfilling the role of objects of desire for subject. Gregor’s new body is not desirable. “Samsa’s shocking but undeniable transformation decenters much established notions of society” (Ghosh 2). He repulses his family, and therefore is not allowed to even become an object of fascination, but an abject horror. As an abject figure, something that does not comply with societal convention, such as an ability to produce income, Gregor is forced outside of the system. Most of the time this outside of the system is through isolation or death.

### III. DISABILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

A 'monstrous vermin' is not compatible with society. Gregor Samsa, pre-metamorphosis, had been a working member of society. He had a job as a traveling salesman and worked to support his family and their lifestyle. He was an able-bodied, work-capable man. These things are qualities defined as desirable in Gregor's society, and to an extent still desired in our own today. The production of capital is an important factor of someone's humanity. The able body is one of the defining traits of being a person. For centuries in human societies, any deficiency with mental or physical capabilities has defined whether a person could be considered human or not. "Persons with disabilities frequently find their opportunities limited because of social rejection, discriminatory employment practices, architectural barriers and inaccessibility to transport" (Munyi). In the nineteenth century, poorhouses and asylums housed people who could not work or care for themselves independently. Families abandoned their members to these institutions due to the burden that they perceived their disabled members heaped upon them. Other families forced these disabled members into isolation within the home, keeping them from the public eye to save their place in society. Gregor's family keep him locked up in his room, barely caring for him beyond basic needs. They want to keep this abject creature out of their lives, rather than care for their changed and dependent family member.

Dependency has been an issue for the treatment and value of disabled people in society. The ability to produce capital through labor is a large part of what we see as making someone a person. In American society, there is a deep-seated idea that respect

and humanity is allowed only to people who work. Those who are reliant on others are considered weak or lazy. Ask any number of Americans, and you will get many people who relate being a person to what that person can produce. Support for dependents, where social or legal, has been a long-standing problem in many countries. Disability has bare protection under the law, and what qualifies someone for government support is so low that many with disabilities are 'not disabled enough'. As Chomba Wa Munyi has observed, attributes of disabled persons

are distinctly divided into positive and negative categories, and are likely to critically affect the relationship between persons with disabilities and non-disabled people. They form some of the attitudes which can stigmatize persons with disabilities, impose artificial limitations upon them, deny them equal opportunities for development and living, and inequitably demote them to second-class citizens to be pitied (in the sense where pity is seen as devaluation tinged with contempt). (Munyi)

In Gregor's case, revulsion outweighs pity in the way his family and strangers treat him.

Gregor loses his humanity not only because of his new body, but also in how he can no longer produce capital. His job, which he hated, was the sole source of income for his family. His change into his new body marks not only his physical loss of humanity, but his societal loss as well. Gregor cannot work. He cannot produce income anymore due to his transformed body and to the reactions of others to his body. Even if his family had allowed Gregor outside of his room and home, the society around him would still consider his body abject. He has trouble moving and cannot speak human words. If his society didn't demand for him to become an abject being kept away from others, he still

would not be able to produce capital anymore. The skills his job require have been taken away from him. Gregor cannot be a member of the productive member of society anymore. Acceptance in society would not change his new dependence on others. The dependence is what Gregor's family resents him for, more than his physical change. "We can't carry on like this. Maybe you can't see it, but I can. I don't want to call this monster my brother, all I can say is: we have to try and get rid of it. We've done all that's humanly possible to look after it and be patient, I don't think anyone would accuse us of doing anything wrong" (Kafka 30).

Marxist theory defines how humans are valued in terms of capital. The ability of humans to produce labor has been a defining factor in modern society of whether someone can be judged as a person. Since the introduction of capitalism, and the use of money, value as a human has been directly linked with producing money. Historical sources show throughout history how badly poverty has affected the treatment of humans. Poverty due to disability, whether physical or mental, is also well documented in history. Poorhouses, asylums, or neglect have all been used against disabled people. Animosity towards the perceived burden of taking care of disabled people is rooted deeply into the production of labor. Disability has long been a deterrent for employers. In America, disabled peoples did not have any legal protection against employment discrimination until the 1990s. Civil rights protections were guaranteed only in 2008. Even with these legal protections, the perception of personhood is still linked with independence and labor. On the Antidefamation League's own website show this prejudice. "Americans with disabilities are a group of approximately 40.7 million people that today lead independent, self-affirming lives and who define themselves according to

their personhood—their ideas, beliefs, hopes and dreams—above and beyond their disability” (ADL).

Even in disability, the ability to produce capital and be independent is prioritized. Disability is something to be overcome. Disability becomes acceptable if the disabled person is independent, thus no longer being a burden on others. “Discrimination and marginalization, however, is not only between the non-disabled and disabled individuals but also exist within the categories of disability shared by other individuals”, Uttara Ghosh notes. Ghosh recognizes the internal ableism of the disabled community, saying how “persons with less disability consider themselves superior and consequently more acceptable in the sphere of able bodied than the others with a superlative degree of impairment” (Ghosh 3). Gregor’s transformation robs him of his independence, alongside his ability to produce capital. If he had someone been allowed out of his home and been allowed to continue working, his family would not have hated him so much. But as we see, humanity and personhood are linked to productivity and independence, even by other disabled persons. Gregor’s semblance of humanity may be outwardly changed, but his dependence and lack of production are what really cause his family to hate him. The “hostile manner in which he is treated and the sure prospect of a life utterly bereft of ordinary human social interaction” lead Gregor to starve himself to death, because “the prospect of being imprisoned indefinitely in a bare room all alone is unbearable” (Metzger 57).

Gregor’s family used him as their source of income. At the beginning of the story, Gregor is the sole income producing member of the family. This is not due to necessity, however. As we see after Gregor’s transformation, the financial state of the Samsa family

is not solely related to Gregor being able to work. Gregor's father is able to find a job for himself, which not only provides income but instills in him a new sense of pride and purpose. Moreover, the family is able to make additional money by renting out their extra rooms to lodgers. The apartment in which the family lives has enough rooms to take on renters to get income without dislodging members of the family. If Gregor, Grete, and the parents have their own rooms, then there are at least five rooms in the apartment: a bedroom for the renters (if they were all in only one), one for Gregor, one for Grete, one for the parents, and the parlor. Gregor has his own room, and it is doubtful that the Samsas would allow the renters to sleep in the same room as their daughter. This estimate is discounting any bathrooms, kitchens, or other rooms. The apartment is large, even when only counting the minimum amount of rooms. With the father not working, all of these rooms are paid for with Gregor's job. He is receiving no help in supporting his family. Instead, Gregor works long, hard hours for promotions and income to sustain his family's lifestyle.

Even after his transformation, we learn that the family's financial situation is not dire. Gregor shares that

a sum, admittedly very small, remained from the old days and had increased slightly in the meantime due to the untouched interest. And besides that, the money Gregor brought home every month—he had only kept a few guilders for himself—had not been entirely depleted and had now accumulated into a small capital sum. [...] Of course he could have used this extra money to further pay off the father's debt to the Chief, thus bringing him much closer to the day he could

have rid himself of this job, but doubtless things were better this way. (Kafka 26-27)

Even with their income suddenly disappearing, the Samsas are still well off enough to pay for their lodging and food for a while yet, to hopefully find jobs in the meantime. Money might not be overflowing in the Samsa household, but their lives are not dependent on Gregor bringing in money every month.

After Gregor's change, Grete takes a job as a salesgirl, and Gregor's father takes up a job too. Their large apartment is split into rented rooms, supplementing these incomes with rent. Despite the loss of Gregor's income, the Samsas are still able to live comfortably with their own incomes. The family's financial situation turns out not to have been entirely dependent upon Gregor's working. Even without Gregor's capital production, the family is still able to support themselves and stay in the large apartment. They are not able to live as comfortably as they once had, but there is no doubt that losing Gregor's capital is not an end-all for the Samsas. Indeed, as the story proves, the rest of the family ultimately seems to be doing better without Gregor, such that when he dies, they are relieved and even happy.

The other members of his family could have been working as well to help Gregor and alleviate his stress. Before Gregor's transformation, he could have received help in producing capital if his father and sister had gotten jobs. There was nothing stopping them before the transformation from seeking employment. Indeed, the only reason given as to why the father did not work is that he has debts. But the father is not the one working to pay off these debts. At the beginning of the story, Gregor is the only member of the Samsa family who is working. His use in the family is as an income earner.

When Gregor undergoes his change, he loses the ability to bring income into the household. Since the sole source of income is gone, the other members of the family must take up means of bringing in capital. Gregor's change is frightening and strange to his family, but the real animosity comes from the fact that Gregor is no longer able to support them. Before his transformation, Gregor had "begun to work with consuming energy and was promoted, almost overnight, from a minor clerk to a traveling salesman with much greater potential to earn money, and his success was soon transformed, by way of commission, into cash that he could then lay on the table before the astonished and delighted family" (Kafka 26). After Gregor's transformation, Gregor

not only adapted easily and quickly to his new body but managed to die in peace, somehow still full of "tenderness and love" towards an increasingly unsympathetic, at times overtly hostile, family. The other three [family members], however, consistently exhibited "complete hopelessness" and subscribed to "the belief that they had been singled out for a misfortune such as had never happened to any of their relations of acquaintances." For them, the entire experience remained chaos, and they were only able to discover a modicum of "composure" and acknowledge emotional gains once Gregor had passed. (Krause 59)

Gregor now must rely on his family to provide for him, taking away their effortless life with no need for working. Instead of returning the favor of care, the family resents this change. His physical form and newfound dependency make him an abject creature to his family.

Especially of note is that Gregor would produce "cash that he could then lay on the table before the astonished and delighted family" (Kafka 26). The family is

specifically mentioned as being delighted by the money that Gregor makes for them. Little mention is made of his work ethic, or Gregor as a person, so much as his ability to produce income. Producing this income is a source of pride for Gregor, and when his transformation takes away this production, Gregor starts to hate himself. His family's treatment due to not only his new body but his lack of income cause Gregor great distress. He begins having the thought that he is causing his family financial ruin, despite their ability to bring income. Because they now need to work, instead of sitting at home and getting money from Gregor, Gregor feels guilty. His reduction to an abject body which can not work makes him throw "himself into the cool leather sofa nearby, he felt so flushed with shame and guilt" (Kafka 27). The self-loathing and sense of shame start to destroy Gregor's mind and humanity. "Prevailing attitudes not only determine the social expectations and treatment accorded to a person with a disability in the society, but also his or her self-image and function" (Munyi). Gregor is seen as a waste and a burden, and so begins to see himself as such as well.

#### IV. GREGOR'S HUMANITY

This is not to disregard Gregor's physicality. It is his physical change that starts his isolation. The reaction of Gregor's boss, the head clerk, to his change is one of horror. He runs away at the sight of Gregor. Gregor's family are also startled, and his father yells at him and threatens him with a cane until Gregor is forced back into his room. "What strikes his other able-bodied observers is the gross ugliness of his transformation. His appearance, which is a vivid reminder of his otherness, becomes the core of his new identity" (Ghosh 2). Gregor becomes isolated from not only the outside world, but his own family. His new body, changed and far from the socially accepted, makes his family reject him. His body is something that can't be considered as human by his peers anymore. There is what is accepted in society, the Subject, and that which is expelled from society, the Abject. Gregor's change places his body outside the realms of acceptability, making him abject in the eyes of those who see him. This abject body overrides any humanity Gregor had. This monstrous body, drastically different and abject, must be isolated and forced out. "In general, the social construction of identity is displayed when forbidden bodies and minds enter spaces" (Siebers 296).

Gregor's world is shrunk down to his room, to keep this abject being out of sight and out of mind. Outside contact is nonexistent. His father and mother do not enter Gregor's room. His only real source of human connection is his sister Grete. Even Grete, however, will not go into Gregor's room when he is not hiding. His physical form repels her. "Her recognition of Gregor, not as Gregor but as monstrous being amplifies the demonic inhumanity which man reveals easily when faced with slightest discomfort"

(Ghosh 6). Gregor's placement in the story and his society has been changed to abject. Abject is a term used in critical theory in literature to describe the other that a person or object becomes due to changes from the standard. Abject is "what the subject's consciousness has to expel or disregard in order to create the proper separation between subject and object, usually by isolation or rejection. "As "something rejected from which one does not part" abjection becomes a force that sets out to unhinge "identity, system, order" ... and threatens to draw the self into meaninglessness. Largely an "undefinable 'thing'", it "elicits fear, dread, horror" (Krause 305). Society creates distance between things that are accepted and things that are not, giving us a sense of who we are as a person.

The idea of personhood and humanity cannot be altered, or else the separation between what is human and what is inhuman is blurred. Blurring the lines of what is human scares people. In literature and other forms of media, the blurring of humanity is a common theme. Often, these blurred humans are the source of horror, due to how they distort the rules of humanity. Aliens, werewolves, minotaurs, ghosts, and other mythical beings have been beings of horror due to their in-between state. Transformation into inhuman creatures, such as the metamorphosis Gregor undergoes, is also a source of horror. "Physique (as well as certain other personal characteristics) has an enormous power to evoke a wide variety of expressions and feelings about the person. In fact, physical deviation is frequently seen as central key to a person's behavior and personality and largely responsible for the important ramifications in a person's life. This spread holds for both the person with a disability himself and those evaluating him" (Wright 118, qtd. in Munyi). Alien, abject creations that do not exist inside the parameters of a

'person' are held in disgust and pushed outside of society. Whether this is in folktales with things like monsters or in real life with people who do not fit what society says a human is. What counts as "human" is functional, able-bodied, healthy, confirmative, and non-threatening to the status quo. Similarities can be drawn between other real world examples of abjectness and Gregor's transformation, like how the treatment of AIDS infected individuals reduced their personhood into being abject beings outside of society. "History shows that ignorance, neglect, superstition and fear are social factors that have exacerbated isolation of persons with disabilities" (Munyi).

Queer studies have been looking at the issue of minority treatment by the status quo for decades and can be helpful when looking into the treatment of the disabled minority. Judith Butler wrote on the treatment of the AIDS infected male body in relation to the subject and Kristeva. Butler builds on Kristeva's "discussion of abjection in *The Powers of Horror*, mentioning the "uses of this structuralist notion of boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion. The "abject" designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered "Other". This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion" (Butler 2546). The AIDS infected body is expelled from society, becoming other due to the illness within it differentiating it as other. Abjection is created by the world around the person forcing them outside of society due to a designated deficiency.

It is not Gregor who distances himself from the outside world. He is ambivalent towards his new body until he is face to face with others. Only when Gregor meets the outside world does he become abject, expelled from his family and social life and forced

into isolation. “Prevailing attitudes not only determine the social expectations and treatment accorded to a person with a disability in the society, but also his or her self-image and function” (Munyi). Gregor’s alienness is “established through this expulsion” by his father threatening him, his mother being frightened by him, by the head clerk running away at the sight of him. He is expelled from his family and from his society, being an abject figure that must be hidden away due to distorting the line between inhuman and human.

Gregor’s expulsion as waste is seen both metaphorically and literally in the story. He is seen as literal waste by Grete feeding him the left-overs. Grete, initially, is the only one who seems to care for Gregor still. She does not interact with him, but she does bring him food and opens his window. However, she will not come inside Gregor’s room if she can see him, and changes his food from “milk, which had otherwise been his favorite drink” to “old, half-rotten vegetables, bones covered with congealed white sauce from the supper the night before, some raisins and almonds” (Kafka 21-23). His metaphorical expulsion is by the rejection he faces from his family and others due to his new body. He is expelled from his previous life and social relationships by his able-bodied family and coworkers. “It is the unconscious fear of degenerating into equivalent state of ugliness that operates at the psyche and that triggers an absurd amalgamation of pity, fear, hate and shame” (Ghosh 4). As mentioned above, that which is identified as abject must be expelled from the body due to the differences and the fear of how this abjection can affect the boundaries of personhood. “The uncanny encounter with another, then, puts us face to face with our own vulnerability ‘with and for others’. And, it is the fear and denial of our

own vulnerability that causes us to hate and exploit the vulnerability of others” (Ghosh 4).

The reminder of vulnerability, the weakness of the human body, is what caused the initial expulsion of the differently abled from society. Gregor has to be hidden because of how he disrupts the social parameters of what it means to be a person. His form and difference from the standard of humanity reminds others who see him how unstable and flexible their bodies and mental states are. One does not think of how lucky they are to see until faced with the reality of someone without sight. The loss of a limb is not something a person thinks will happen to them until it does. “In general, the social construction of identity is displayed when forbidden bodies and minds enter spaces” (Siebers 296). Able-bodied becomes a standard when someone who differs enters the space. Gregor must be isolated once he encounters those who are not like him. Blindness is only a disability when entering a space where that difference is not accounted for or accepted. Deviations from standard are made deviations by comparison to what is decided as the status quo, then they are isolated and expelled.

The mistreatment of disabled people is not inherent within human nature. A person who is born blind or missing a limb or autistic would have had a more difficult life, but in human societies before the eighteenth century we see a much more inclusive and supportive society. While these people were seen as different, the treatment as abject and excrement was not as harsh. Churches and communities did their best to care for their disabled brethren. Life, dictated by the growth of plants and not the production of capital, was hard for all. Care must be taken for your community members as a moral duty. However, the eighteenth century introduced a much more different idea of society, one

that set boundaries that excluded these disabled individuals. Production and income became the main ideas of economy. Classes started to form. Production required physically fit, able bodied men to create income. Women were shoved out of public life and into the home. Commerce became much wider spread and the main source of revenue for countries. The boundaries of what was acceptable for a society based on production started to appear, and people started to identify and expel those that did not fit in these boundaries. “When one falls into stigmatized category or possesses an undesirable attributes, those not of this category tend to devalue the stigmatized individual, to practice the variation of discrimination, and to impute a wide range of imperfection on the basis of the original one” (Goffman 5).

The asylums and poorhouses were the main ways that disability was expelled. “At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a few hundred people were living in nine small charitable asylums. By 1900, more than 100,000 ‘idiots’ and ‘lunatics’ were in 120 county pauper asylums. A further 10,000 were in workhouses” (Historic England). This was just in England. All over the world, the attitude towards disability shifted. Boundaries grew stricter, and disabled people became abject creatures in their societies. The isolation and hiding of disabled persons expanded, especially in the nineteenth century. People who relied on the support of others due to physical or mental handicaps were now perceived as lazy or wastes of space. They were not producers; they did not adhere to the boundaries of what creates the subject. They had to be expelled because they put “us face to face with our own vulnerability ‘with and for others’. And, it is the fear and denial of our own vulnerability that causes us to hate and exploit the vulnerability of others” (Ghosh 4). The challenge of status quo and what constitutes a

person in this new production-focused society made disabled people dangerous, and so they were attacked, expelled, and forced out. They weren't people; they couldn't be. A person worked. A person made money. A person was independent.

“What are we going to do?” Julian Huxley wrote in 1930. The chairman of the Eugenics Society bemoaned that “Every defective man, woman, and child is a burden. Every defective is an extra body for the nation to feed and clothe, but produces little or nothing in return”. In the early twentieth century, many public figures agreed with the idea of eugenics. They believed that “anyone disabled or ‘deficient’ was a threat to the health of the nation” (Historic England). Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis* in 1915. The attitudes towards disabled peoples had been as such for over a century. People living in 1915 would be well aware of how much production was linked to personhood. Gregor Samsa, upon awakening to find himself changed into a new and strange form, worries how the form shall affect his job. He wakes up and is horrified, not by his new body, but by the fact he has overslept and missed his train. Throughout the story, Gregor's sense of shame and burdenhood is directly linked to his lack of income production. He feels shame for not providing his family with the comfortable life they've been used to. He feels horrible that his family members have to get jobs and take on renters. His own physicality and health is second to what he no longer produces.

## V. CONCLUSION

Disability makes people uncomfortable. As mentioned above, these boundaries that identify what makes a person become challenged when abjections exist inside the society. Acknowledging disability means acknowledging how unstable 'personhood' is, and the uncomfortable nature of these boundary pushers necessitates that these abjections be expelled. "Grete [...] frantically outbursts – 'we can't carry on like this. Maybe you can't see it, but I can. I don't want to call this monster my brother, all I can say is: we have to try and get rid of it. We've done all that's humanly possible to look after it and be patient, I don't think anyone would accuse us of doing anything wrong'." (Ghosh 6). Historically, people's attitudes towards the disabled have been much like Grete's. Taking care of the disabled was considered troublesome. "Christians such as Luther and John Calvin indicated that the mentally retarded and other persons with disabilities were possessed by evil spirits. Thus, these men and other religious leaders of the time often subjected people with disabilities to mental and/or physical pain as a means of exorcising the spirits" (Munyi).

Disabilities, which made a person abject and outside of the social boundaries, became demonized with the rise of social Darwinism. "In the 19th century, supporters of social Darwinism opposed state aid to the poor and otherwise handicapped" (Munyi). Supporting these members of society was seen as subtracting from the human race by letting them live and distort the evolution of society. The treatment of disabled peoples varies widely between places and people, but the majority of European sentiments on disabilities leaned towards this abjection. "Persons with disabilities were completely

rejected by some cultures, in others they were outcasts, while in some they were treated as economic liabilities and grudgingly kept alive by their families. In other settings, persons with disabilities were tolerated and treated in incidental ways, while in other cultures they were given respected status and allowed to participate to the fullest extent of their capability” (Munyi). In countries like England, Poland, the United States and others, disabled peoples were identified as abject beings due to their differences. The sentiment expressed by Grete and the eugenics movement sound similar in their exasperation and sense of how help should not be given to those who cannot contribute.

Grete doesn't “want to call this monster my brother”. She says that the Samsas “have to get rid of it” and that they had “done all that’s humanly possible for it”. Gregor’s transformation is a tragedy to Grete and her family, a “tragedy that follows with an air of inevitability as predestined opens itself as a potential archive of the silence voiced by all those whose existence so long had been only an absence presence—the ‘disabled’, the ‘crippled’, the ‘handicapped’, or the ‘challenged’” (Ghosh 2). In a sentiment expressed by the social Darwinists, the eugenicists, Gregor has lost his humanity and personhood with his new body. He is no longer a person, but an abject creature that has replaced Gregor Samsa. The Samsas have done all they can bear to do, but “every defective man, woman, and child is a burden”. Taking care of this abject creature any longer is something the Samsas do not wish to do. Gregor the human was acceptable for what he could produce and for how he fit into the social boundaries of their society. But once Gregor finds himself outside of these boundaries, his family isolates and ignores him.

Disabled people in history have faced this same mistreatment due to being identified as other. Gregor’s treatment after his transformation is similar to the perception

and treatment of disabled persons. His story mirrors how real world attitudes have been towards those who do not fit within the accepted parameters of human. The story of Gregor Samsa is analogous to the story of disability and of the people that societal boundaries identified and ostracized.

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