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# An Analysis of Change Reasons in Grete from *The Metamorphosis*—Alienation in Particular with Contrast to Marian from *The Edible Woman*

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## Abstract

Most analyses of the novel *The Metamorphosis* have focused on Gregor the protagonist, but the underlying texts suggest a very powerful "hand" from Grete, which shows the study of Grete is of importance. So far, the interpretation of Grete has been done from a feminism perspective only, and thus, this paper is going to demonstrate that a more proper and powerful lens to use to analyze these changes is alienation instead of feminism, which will be illustrated by comparing three stages of the characters on the key notions of alienation, namely *Powerlessness, Meaninglessness, Normlessness, and Self-estrangement*. There is a similar character Marian in *The Edible Woman*, who goes through remarkable changes, from a no-control-of-her-life woman to a freed woman. This paper is also going to briefly study the reason of Marian's changes, so as to provide a different demonstration of alienation and the possible positive effects that alienation can bring.

## Keywords

*The Metamorphosis*, alienation, stages of characters, positive effects

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The general interpretations of *The Metamorphosis*, Grete and Marian

As the most well-known work from Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* has got different kinds of interpretations, varying from a sophisticated influence reflection of his father, the loss of life purposes and individuality in a capitalist society, self-abnegation and rejection from the others (Cécile Rozuel, 2014) to feminist perspective of his sister Grete (Nina Pelikan Straus, 1989). Being the one to whom the protagonist Gregor attached with the most passion, Grete has transformed from a naive and caring 17-year-old girl to, commonly viewed, a cruel, bad and mean woman, which resonates with the novella's name "metamorphosis".

There is a similar character Marian, in *The Edible Woman* written almost 50 years later, who also goes through remarkable changes. Marian has changed from a no-control-of-her-life woman to a freed woman, which gains a lot of praise because it seems a very positive transformation. This proposal is also going to briefly study the reason of Marian's changes, so as to provide a different demonstration of alienation and the possible positive effects that alienation can bring.

### 1.2 General factors that affect characters' changes

As the author of *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka was born in a Jewish family and has a father who is very much like the father of the main characters Gregor and Grete, which leads to a very popular interpretation that the

writing of this novella reflects the influence of Kafka's real father. Besides, the descriptions in this novella about Gregor's work well illustrate social alienation, powerlessness and meaninglessness of life. In such capitalist society, everybody loses their identity and is pushed to be what the society needs them to be. What's more, due to misunderstanding, ungratefulness and disconnection from his family, Gregor becomes self-denying and refusing to eat gradually and dies at the end, the direct cause of which is the indifference of Grete and his family.

From all the above, we can see that most criticism/analyses of the novel have focused on Gregor the protagonist, but the underlying texts suggest a very powerful "hand" from Grete, which shows the study of Grete is of importance. So far, the interpretation of Grete has been done from a feminism perspective only, and thus, this proposal is going to demonstrate that a more proper and powerful lens to use to analyze these changes is alienation instead of feminism.

To compare the general social backgrounds of these two literary works here. At Kafka's time, feminism was not strong enough and not a powerful trend according to the feminism history in Germany. Kafka wrote this novella in Germany during World War I and the second phase of the Industrial Revolution. It was a time when science and technologies were developing at a dramatic pace and a time when mechanism and capitalism dominated the world, as a social effect, individuals were alienated and isolated from many aspects. At the time when *The Edible Woman* was written, feminism had started to gain much more attention, thus most interpretations used feminist criticism.

Since most Kafka's works mainly reveal alienation, social depression and existential anxiety, I could say that Kafka has least intention to shape a character with feminist awareness, adding that I find a kind of demonstration of alienation in the character Marian, this proposal is well grounded.

### 1.3 Research questions

I argue that the changes in Grete and Marian can be interpreted by using the theory of alienation. I will illustrate this by comparing the three stages of the characters on the key notions of alienation, namely *Powerlessness*, *Meaninglessness*, *Normlessness*, and *Self-estrangement*.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

Straus (1989) started feminist studies of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in which close and detailed interpretations of feminist were displayed. He argued that Grete and Gregor can be exchanged, and "Kafka's text, fortunately, no longer delivers a message only to (alienated) men" (p. 667). Besides this study, other studies chiefly focused on the protagonist Gregor by using various concepts. Minar and Sutandio (2017) studied the relationship of shame and alienation, and Cecile Rozuel (2014) argued the moral reflection of *The Metamorphosis* in modern working organizations. Sasani and Arjmandi (2015) illustrated the theme of gender and body, social norm imprints and the search for woman identity in *The Edible Woman*, whereas Hobgood (2002) manifested that the author's intention of emphasizing the nature of capitalist system by construction of a paranoid and schizophrenic character. From searching all these studies, I found the niche for my proposal.

In this section, the ultimate goals are to investigate the changes in Grete and Marian in the light of alienation concept. There will be 3 sections in this part based on the 3 stages for each character. For Grete, stage 1 is the period of time before her brother Gregor turns into an insect; stage 2 is the period when she is taking care of her brother; stage 3 is the period after her brother's death. For Marian, the 3 chapters in the original novel represent 3 stages respectively because she is the protagonist and the descriptions accord with her development. For each section, the meanings of alienation from Seeman (1959), *Powerlessness*, *Meaninglessness*, *Normlessness*, and *Self-estrangement* will be discussed accordingly.

**Stage 1**

Before Grete's brother turns into a disgusting insect, Grete and her brother are leading a very harmonious and happy life. She is 17 years old and is such an innocent sweet girl that all she knows are "…*nice clothes, sleeping late, helping out in the business and playing the violin*…"1, and she is viewed as "*somewhat useless*" by her father and mother and they are "*frequently been annoyed with her*", and her conversations with her brother always end up by talking the conservatory – "*a lovely dream*" for them. Even though there is not much detailed depiction, we can still see the meaning of her life at this stage is just dream, fantasy and self-interest. Because she depends entirely on her family, she cannot make the slightest decision on her own affairs. As Seeman (1959) states that when an indi-

vidual is not clear about what s/he should believe when their lowest standard of decision-making can't be met, it is the meaninglessness of alienation. In Adorno's (1969) descriptions of post-war German, he explains meaninglessness as the situation in which individuals cannot confidently make choice among different explanations.

While for Marian in stage 1, it is very different and seems normal at first without any sign of alienation. She looks like a common independent young lady with a job, a perfect fiancé and a bright future. She lives a life that most women would dream about. It is when approaching to the end of this stage that she starts to lose appetite for certain food such as meat in particular. It is only a starting point of self-estrangement.

**Stage 2**

At this stage, we come to the main development of characters. For Grete, first she takes up the caring work for her brother, then finds a job, finally proposes to get rid of her brother.

To begin with, she takes up the caring work for her "insect" brother, "*cleaning up Gregor's room was for her and her alone*" and begins to build up the connection with the insect by identifying and figuring out what kind of food he likes and by trying to make more space for him to crawl around. For Jewish people, "there was always the expectation that everything could be understood, if perhaps not controlled", states in Strodtbeck's empirical research (1957). So, at this period of time when Grete still has patience to look after her brother, she attempts to understand Gregor-the-insect, acts as know-everything-about-her-brother agent and expects to find new meaning of her life. She is performing her best like a bridge connecting her brother and her parents. She enjoys this kind of connection and control over her brother's care. Once this kind of control is threatened, she would be "*highly aggrieved*" and "*broke into convulsive tears*". This can be explained in the light of powerlessness from alienation concept. The frustration Grete fells is the "consequence of the discrepancy between the control he [she] may expect and the degree of control that he [she] desires" (Seeman, 1959, p. 784).

With the story developing, Grete seems to successfully build up the connection with the outside world by working as a salesgirl at daytime and learning shorthand skills and French at night, in order to make money to support the family. She proves to be more resourceful and hardworking than what her family have thought her to be. This part depicts that Grete is engaging with the working place. According to Marxist criticism in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844) and The German Ideology (1846) "under capitalism, workers inevitably lose control of their lives and destinies by being deprived of control of their actions". Under this kind of background, she actually stays distant from others. Even though there are no descriptions of her work as a salesgirl, but from similar accounts in Mills (1956) about self-alienated salesgirls and estranged men from each other in the work place, we could imagine the situation of self-estrangement. Self-estrangement is to be aware that there's a discrepancy between the ideal and the actual self (David Riesman, 1950). We could not find any trace of intrinsic meaning or any pride in Grete's feeling about her work, which, based on Seeman (1959), is a general characteristic of self-alienation. She is always exhausted from her work and she also says that she works as hard as she has to and there are no meaningful satisfactions intrinsically.

At the end of this stage, she becomes busier with her work, so much so that she "*no longer thought about how she could please him [Gregor] but would hurriedly push some food or other into his room with her foot*" and "*sweep it [food] away again with the broom, indifferent as to whether it had been eaten*". Finally, she bursts out and screams to her father and mother that they have to "*get rid of it [Gregor]*" with her hand "*hitting the table*". This dramatic, ruthless or cold-hearted change in most readers' minds is the explosion of all her emotions. The powerlessness and depression towards the situation finally gets its way.

For Marian in stage 2, the author Margaret Atwood changes the narrator from first-person to third-person, which is a strong demonstration that the protagonist is losing self-control and is alienated from her own body. Unlike Grete, Marian even doesn't care about her own wedding date and seems no interest in control anything. Unconsciously she lets her fiancé to control her life. This is a strong showcase of alienation, the loss of meaning of her life and doesn't anticipate any future reward (Seeman, 1959). It is a reflection of alienation that she "always desperately needed someone to belong to" (Margaret & Ravindran, 2017, p. 16).

**Stage 3**

At this stage, after Grete's brother has died, the family takes a walk outside, during which the parents notice the changes in Grete that she has been "*blossoming into a well built and beautiful young lady*" and "*becoming livelier*", more independent, taking initiatives and charges, and think it is time to find her a husband. Grete, "*as if in confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions……was the first to get up and stretch out her young body*". This resonates with the normless meaning of alienation. Seeman (1959) argues that common values are submerged when

individuals are seeking private interests by any effective means. It seems, to the family, that the most effective way to lead a better life is to find a husband for Grete. We can not criticize this choice. According to Merton (1968), people tend to emphasize the mysterious function of luck, chance and fortune in society, which is also one meaning of alienation—normlessness. This last stage of Grete indexes such concept of alienation in a way that they put the good hope in the chance of finding a promising husband for Grete and believe in chance.

While the last stage of Marian is very inspiring and doesn't have any negative implication. She bakes a cake in the form of a lady to reveal her entire self-control and confidence. She eats the cake, regains control of her appetite, her body and her mental self, and breaks up with her fiancé. She becomes even more independent than before. The author uses back the first-person narrator view as a symbol of self-control. This reaction towards alienation or probably we could say this outcome of self-alienation, different from the descriptions of Grete, have positive effects on the society. Somehow people can be startled by this kind of self-alienation and find a right path to change the states.

### 2.2 Conceptual groundwork

Seeman (1959) had studied the meaning of alienation in a comprehensive way, concluding 5 meanings of alienation: *powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement*. By separating these 5 varieties, he provided a detailed but clearer lens of alienation concept which can be applied in close reading of *The Metamorphosis*. Of course, these varieties are sometimes hard to differentiate from each other and are interwove with each other in some situations, but they are valuable in close-reading of a literary work and also accepted by most scholars. The key elements revealed in his study, namely *reward value*, *behavior* and *expectancy* also provide us a critical way of interpreting the text. Based on his conclusion, powerlessness of alienation refers to the "sensed ability to control outcomes", meaninglessness points to the "sensed ability to predict behavioral outcomes" (p. 786), normlessness denotes the breakdown of social rules for behaviors, isolation means the "detachment of the intellectual from popular cultural standards" (p. 788), and self-estrangement is "the degree of dependence of the given behavior upon anticipated future rewards" (p. 790). By exerting these notions of alienation, we could be more critical and neutral towards the characters in these literary works.

### 2.3 Conclusion

*The Metamorphosis* from Franz Kafka has been studied by many scholars from various aspects, mainly concentrating on the protagonist Gregor Samsa, whereas there are very few studies on the younger sister of the protagonist Grete Samsa. As Grete is a vital character in this novella and some even argue that it is she that leads to the death of Gregor, I find the study of her is of importance. To achieve the objectives of illustrating the significance of alienation concept in the changes of Grete, I put forward 4 meanings of alienation - *Powerlessness*, *Meaninglessness*, *Normlessness*, and *Self-estrangement*, and compare another character Marian from Margaret Atwood *The Edible Woman*, from whose perspective I mainly explain self-alienation and meaninglessness. The different outcomes of these two characters also prove to a certain extent that alienation can bring not entirely negative effects, but also positive effects on an individual's life. However, since there has been much less depiction of Grete than the main character, and since the novella is translated into English, the interpretations of Grete need further discussions. More literary works from Kafka and more works on alienation shall be further studied.

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