

Confluence of Magic, Realism, and Fantasy: A Study of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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*Animals are closer to us than human beings...We find relations easier with animals than with men.**

- Franz Kafka

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is widely known as an existential novella. But leaving its philosophy behind and focusing on its narrative strategy, one can find the roots of Magical Realism in the *Metamorphosis*. There is no evidence to prove that like Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Salman Rushdie, Kafka had consciously employed this technique. This paper attempts to show that this masterpiece of Kafka is a fine blend of magical realism and fantasy.

Before examining *The Metamorphosis* it is necessary to understand how magical realism differs from pure fantasy. Fantasy literature transcends the problems of real world and the author creates the world of make-believe. The reader very clearly knows that what he reads is neither possible nor probable. In spite of his/her hesitation to accept the events, incidents and characterization, the reader can enjoy it for the sake of pleasure/entertainment. Books like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and Harry Potter novels and even Isaac Asimov's science fiction can be quoted as examples. In the world of motion pictures, movies like the Matrix trilogy, Superman, and Batman can be quoted as examples. The term "over- imagination" better describes these works.

On the other hand, magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* are best examples for magical realism. The expression "high- imagination" describes these works in a better way. Manoj Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* is an example for movies that have employed the strategy of magical realism in motion pictures.

Realism refers to literary discourse that represents those aspects of the world open to empirical proof, where as magic refers to the literary system that admits the existence of something, which cannot be empirically proven, the existence of the supernatural . The supernatural, however takes culturally specific forms, consisting of man different local manifestations with a variety of different laws and characteristics.(S. Erin Denny)

Another factor that differentiates fantasy from magical realism is “seriousness”. Magical realism is a strategy employed by the writer, which sustains the seriousness of the theme. But fantasy merely entertains. It has no any contemporary relevance. But magical realism uses history, myths, politics and cultural customs.

The following table may help to understand the differences between magical realism and fantasy:

Magical Realism	Fantasy
Serious and significant	No seriousness
Use of history and myths	Myths may be employed but with much or no significance
Realistic due to Contemporary relevance	Unrealistic because of the fantastic world
Amalgamation of realism and fantasy	Only fantasy no realism

The Metamorphosis is a fine blend of fantasy and realism. This story can be read at various levels. It could be allegorical, philosophical or symbolic.

The outline story

Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who is living with his parents wakes up one morning to find himself as an enormous insect.

For this metamorphosis how family members react and finally how he dies is the story of the novel.

If this story is a fantasy, the reader needs to know, what has caused the transformation of Gregor and how he is going to be normal. But the only fantastic element in this novella is Gregor's metamorphosis. Later when his family members come to know this, what kind of change they undergo is the real metamorphosis of the story.

The dictionary meaning of the word metamorphosis is "change of form or character". In this story there is change of form as well as character. The change of form of Gregor into an insect is the magical element and change of nature of the other characters of the story is realistic element.

Gregor is a dutiful son and brother who takes care of aged parents and a younger sister. His mother is a homemaker and his father stays at home as if he is an invalid and always whiles away his time lethargically on his couch. His sister Grete has great concern for Gregor and his mother loves him very much. But when they realize that Gregor has changed, initially they react with concern and little later with indifference and finally with disgust.

Among the family members it was the father character who undergoes a tremendous change. Gregor observes the transformation [metamorphosis?]:

Was this still his father?

Was this the same man in old days used to lie warily buried in bed when Gregor left on a business trip; who greeted him on his return in the evening sitting in his bathrobe in the armchair, who actually had difficulty getting to his feet but as a sign of joy only lifted only his arms; and who on the rare occasions when the family went out for a walk on a few Sundays in June and on the major holidays, used to shuffle along with great effort between Gregor and his mother, who were slow walkers themselves, always a little slowly than they, wrapped in his old overcoat, always carefully planting down his crutch-handled cane, and, when he wanted to say something nearly always stood still and assembled his escort around him. Now, however, he was holding himself very erect, dressed in a tight fitting blue uniform

with gold buttons, the kind worn by messengers at banking concerns; above a the high stiff collar of the jacket his heavy chin protruded; ... his usually rumped white hair was combed flat with scrupulously exact, gleaming part(*Metamorphosis*, 27-28)

The way Gregor's father change is the most realistic part of the novella.

The encounter between Gregor and his father is fantastic. Towards the end of the second part, the infuriated father starts throwing apples at Gregor. One apple gets stuck to his back and causes great pain to Gregor and ultimately causes his death at the end.

Gregor's portrayal is truly a typical example for magical realism. He becomes an enormous bug with a human mind. After changing in to a bug he acts and behaves as an insect but he thinks emotionally and sentimentally like a human being. Most of the insects prefer to hide in holed and crevices and dark places. Gregor prefers that. And very importantly his repulsion for normal food must be mentioned. Hen he was a normal human being he liked milk. Having this in mind his sister brings milk for him because that was his favorite drink. But it is not tasteful to him anymore.

.....he immediately dipped his head into the mild almost over his eyes. But he soon drew it back again in disappointment...because he didn't like the milk at all, although it used to be his favorite drink, and that was certainly why his sister had put in the room; in fact, he turned away from the bowl almost with repulsion and crawled back to the middle of the room.(*Metamorphosis*, 16)

And later his sister brings an assortment of food because she was not able to guess what he will like. Among the food he prefers the cheese which two days before he had declared inedible. He also like half rotten vegetables and other decaying stuff.

The fresh food on the other hand, he did not care for; he couldn't even stand

their smell and even dragged the things he wanted to eat a bit farther away.(Metamorphosis, 17)

Finally at the end of the story, Gregor realizes how much his family members hate him and with hat king of disgust his father sees him. So he wishes to disappear or die immediately. That too after the scene with the roomers his sister shouts, “It has to go”.

These words cause great pain to him than the rotting apple at his back.

He thought back on his family with deep emotion and love. His conviction that he would have to disappear was if possible, even firmer than that of his sister’s (Metamorphosis, 39)

At the end when he dies, his father’s words are,” Will now we can thank God”(40)
And the family hopes for a better future.

This story has some fantastic elements and a lot of realistic elements, the mixture of the two make the reader to think Kafka as the forerunner in using the strategy o magical real9sm. But the fact is magical realism is a minor element in this book. To have an acquaintance with magical realism, one has to read the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Salman Rushdie and very importantly Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

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