



Desire, Lack, and the Objet Petit a: Gregor Samsa's Transformation and the Lacanian Dialectic of Desire

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Abstract— This paper explores Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as a Lacanian allegory of desire, focusing on the themes of identity, the unattainable object of desire (objet petit a), and the necessity of exclusion within the symbolic order. By analyzing Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect, the study highlights how Kafka's narrative exemplifies Lacan's concept of the subject's fragmented identity and the inherent lack that structures human existence. Gregor's metamorphosis symbolizes the impossibility of fulfilling desire, as his physical transformation mirrors his internal dissonance and inability to reconcile his desires with societal expectations. Furthermore, the paper examines how Gregor's eventual death serves as a manifestation of Lacan's theory of exclusion, where the family's survival and the stability of the symbolic order are ensured through the expulsion of the "real" — Gregor's monstrous form. Ultimately, *The Metamorphosis* reinforces Lacan's assertion that identity is never stable and that desire remains an elusive, unfulfilled pursuit that shapes and destabilizes the human subject.



Keywords— Lacanian desire, Fragmented identity, Objet petit a, Symbolic order, Exclusion

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Significance of *The Metamorphosis*

First published in 1915, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is perhaps, still the most enigmatic of modernist texts; a surreal yet deeply psychological exploration of alienation and the existential crisis. The novella's hero, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning and discovers that he's been turned into a giant insect, an absurd condition that renders him socially and existentially isolated. Although a great deal of commentary has been written about the text in existentialist (e.g., Camus, 1942/1991), Marxist (e.g., Jameson, 1981), and psychoanalytic terms (e.g., Freud, 1920/1961), for our purposes, an engaging consideration of the novella can be made via Jacques Lacan's re-reading of Freudian psychoanalysis.

The Lacanian perspective focuses in particular on the role of language, the unconscious, and the symbolic structures that shape human subjectivity. A central concept in Lacan's work is the 'objet petit a' or the 'object small a',

which refers to an object of desire that drives all human longing and is ultimately unattainable (Lacan, 1977). If Gregor's metamorphosis is a moment of radical alienation, we can read it in *The Metamorphosis* as disturbing the Symbolic order of language and family ties that granted him the ability to be meaningful. His status changes from that of a provider and object of familial desire to an unwanted surplus, reflecting Lacan's idea that the subject always exists through a lack that can never be wholly satisfied.

In this study, the implication of Gregor Samsa in insect form will be thoroughly examined in light of Lacan's ideas on desire and lack. The application of Lacanian theory through the psychoanalytic lens of Gregor's condition in relation to his family's transformation of perception of him, is the purpose of this research, in addition to his ultimate demise as well.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Gregor Samsa's transformation reflect Lacanian concepts of desire and lack?

2. In what ways does Gregor function as objet petit a within his family dynamic?

3. How does Gregor's eventual demise align with Lacan's concept of jouissance and the death drive?

The last but not least aim of this research is to show that *The Metamorphosis* can be read as a Lacanian allegory of human subjectivity, desire and alienation. By engaging with Lacanian theory, this study will demonstrate how Gregor's transformation embodies a crisis of identity, shaped through the confines of the Symbolic order and the family's recognition of him as an object of utility rather than a subject with innate value.

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Concept of Desire

The Lacanian parody of Freudian psychoanalysis has three focal registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Lacan 1949). For Lacan, the subject's entry into the Symbolic order, the system of meaning made up of social and linguistic relations, forms a primary lack, the absence that shapes desire (Fink, 1995). This is the point of which the objet petit a comes, the missing object of desire, which gets its unattainability from this lack, an ideal object that is not for the subject to ever fully achieve (Evans, 1996).

Gregor's transformation in *The Metamorphosis* operates like an intrusion of the Real, rupturing his symbolic identity as (1) a worker and (2) a caring member of a family. Before his metamorphosis, Gregor is an economic provider, the stabilizing force around which his family's needs are inextricably ordered. But when he turns into an insect, he no longer functions this way, and so he exposes the contingency of his objectification from the family perspective. His family's abandonment of him corresponds to Lacan's assumption that desire is always structured to the around an absence; as soon as Gregor is rendered no longer useful, he is cast out of the Symbolic and becomes an unbearable excess.

Gregor's trajectory also relies heavily on Lacan's theory of jouissance, or excessive, self-destructive pleasure. His reclusion from food, his en masse alienation, his demise—all align with a movement toward the death drive, a term first posited by Freud (1920/1961), later augmented by Lacan. Gregor's death can therefore be understood as the potentiality of an impossible desire, his being as objet petit a is unlivable for his family, yet his death re-establishes their stability within the Symbolic order.

II. LACANIAN DESIRE AND THE CONCEPT OF OBJET PETIT

In this chapter, we will elucidate Lacan's gloss of Freudian psychoanalysis — his vision of the structure of the psyche, the nature of desire, and the notion of the objet

petit a — as a foundation of theory to denote Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis in *The Metamorphosis* as a subjectivity crisis, organized according to the dynamic of lack, alienation, and infinite desire.

2.1. Freud's Theory of Desire and Its Lacanian Reinterpretation

Sigmund Freud's theory of desire, most notably expressed in texts like *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1961), requires a drive-oriented theory of the subject that argues that human behavior is subject to drives encountered in unconscious forms, specifically the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Hauser notes that according to Freud, the pleasure principle drives an organism to pursue gratification (primary process thinking), while the reality principle requires that some gratification will be withheld or postponed (Freud, 1920/1961).

The structure of desire is re-conceived by Jacques Lacan informed by both structural linguistics and poststructuralist theory, rooted in Freudian concepts. Lacan describes Desire as an effect of language, not just a biological urge (Lacan 1977). By learning language, he contends, human beings are introduced into an order that takes symbolic form, and thereby shaped to find their identity and their relations with others mediated through symbolic structures. But this process also creates a deficit, in that humans lose their primordial inflammation with the world (Fink, 1995). Whereas biological needs are finite, stable, and can be satiated (at least temporarily) such as hunger for food, desire is the unending and often illusory chase of something that can never be attained.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's change is an externalization of this deficit. Before his transformation, he is an economic provider, trying to meet his family's expectations. But this role does not satisfy him; it alienates him, as Lacan points out in his axiom that "desire is mediated by the Other" — the social structures, family expectations and cultural norms (Žižek, 2006).

2.2. The Structure of the Subject in Lacan: The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic

As rooted in Lacan's tripartite model of subjectivity—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Lacan, 1949)—a fundamental structure, through its rearticulations frames our understandings of the formation of identity and desire. Each of these orders contributes to how the subject relates to the world:

The Imaginary: This stage corresponds to the mirror stage, in which an infant recognizes a mirror image as its own and, for the first time, understands itself as an image. But this recognition is deceptive, because as the child misidentifies itself with an idealized, coherent image it masks the fragmented nature of her being (Lacan, 1949). Gregor's life before metamorphosis can be seen as existing

in the Imaginary—he builds a self as a committed son and worker, but this self is ultimately a mirage.

The Symbolic: The entry of the subject into this symbolic order is mediated by the acquisition of language and the internalization of the cultural and social structures. Thus, this subject's identity is alienated in the symbolic realm of the Father's Law (Nom-du-Père), a framework of prohibitions defining permissible desires (Lacan, 1953). Gregor's transformation, then, represents his ejection from this order — his loss of speech, his inability to fulfill his role in society, the rejection of him by his family all indicate the collapse of his symbolic function.

The Real: The Real is whatever escapes language and cannot be symbolized. It rears its head in times of trauma, breaking up the unity of the Symbolic order (Fink, 1995). Gregor's introduction of an insubordinate body is quintessentially an invasion of the Real, and his rigid insect body cannot be allegorically subsumed into the Symbolic order and thus exists as an unassimilable excess.

Gregor's transition from the Symbolic to the Real means that he is disappearing as a subject. The third and final great crime is represented elegantly, and comically, in the second half of the film as we see the protagonist slowly strip him of the ability to express himself, to think on his own, and he ultimately loses his will to live—all foreshadowed by that imaginary bubble world he once inhabited but was expelled from.

2.3. Objet Petit a: The Elusive Object of Desire and Lack

A defining feature of Lacanian desire is the object petit a, the object that eludes attainment but that constitutes the human structure of desire. According to Lacan (1977), desire always aims at a distress, something out of reach and impossible to attain, and the objet petit a alludes to this irremovable lap between effective imagination and desire. Not an object in itself, but the abstract cause of desire — something the subject expects will bring complete satisfaction and yet the act of attaining it only mirrors a persistent state of incompleteness.

Gregor's role in his family can be examined through the lens of the objet petit a: as an object of familial desire—as a person he possesses no value in and of himself, but acts as a function, providing economic stability. His family wants him to the extent that he lives this role. But, once transformed into an insect, he no longer plays this role, and as such his status within the family falls prey to the contingency of this fact.

His insect form simultaneously represents the horror of objet petit a — the object that cannot be matched to the terms of the Symbolic — and an alternative solution. The family's initial reaction to Gregor is confusion, but as they discover that he has outlived his utility, their reaction becomes one of rejection. As objet petit a, Gregor stirs up

the family's symbolic order, uncovering the fundamental lack that undergirded their desires (Žižek, 2006)

2.4. Alienation and the Role of the Other in the Formation of Desire

The subject's desire is always mediated by the Other, which for Lacan refers to the collective social structures that define meaning and impose prohibitions. The subject, in other words, does not want for itself, but what it imagines the Other wants (Lacan, 1977). This idea, the "desire of the Other," emphasizes the ways that identity is built in relation to others.

Murderous or otherwise, this flourishing is just one possibility — in Gregor's own life, pre-metamorphosis, he is shaped by the desires of his family. He does it not for his own benefit but to live up to their expectations. But his transformation makes him an object of horror, not desire. As a result, he ends up increasingly alienated because The Other (his family) no longer regards him as a relevant element of the Symbolic order.

Gregor's loss of language is another manifestation of this alienation. Lacan (1953) contends that the subject is formed through language, and Gregor's chickenspeak signifies his symbolic death long before his corporeal one. That lack of language renders him an object instead of a subject, an illustration of Lacan's hypothesis that identity only exists through its recognition by the Other.

Ultimately, Gregor's transformation speaks to the fragile nature of desire and identity. His family's shifting view of him — transformed from provider to burden — shows how desire is built more around absence than presence. Gregor's death, then, resolves this crisis; his removal allows his family to regain their symbolic stability, supporting Lacan's assertion that desire is always structured around absence rather than presence.

III. GREGOR SAMSA AND THE LACANIAN DIALECTIC OF DESIRE

This chapter provides a close reading of *The Metamorphosis* through the Lacanian dialectic of desire. By examining Gregor's role within the family, his transformation as an externalization of lack, and his shift from a desired object to an abject figure, this chapter argues that Gregor's metamorphosis exposes the fundamental instability of desire and identity.

3.1. Gregor's Role in the Family as an Object of Desire

Gregor operates as a phantasmatic object within the family's symbolic economy before his transformation. He is the family's chief breadwinner, supporting his parents and his younger sister, Grete. But his value is not intrinsic to him, but rather based on his function. As Lacan (1977) explains, the subject's desire is mediated by the Other, be it

parents, social norms, or institutional structures, that define the subject's position within the symbolic order.

Gregor's self-concept before his transformation conforms with what Lacan terms the desire of the Other, in other words his identity is organized around the demands placed on him by his family. His father, who used to be the money earner in the family, becomes reliant on Gregor's salary, and Grete avails herself of a life of luxury paid for by her brother's death (Kafka, 1915/2009). Gregor internalizes that want, thinking he only has value to give to the family, as their breadwinner. But it is not a sustainable position, erasing his own subjectivity.

Freud (1920/1961) maintained that repression results in the return of the repressed in distorted ways, and Gregor's change can be seen as the externalization of his repressed dissent. His desire is not his own but the product of exigences of the Other. His transformation therefore signifies a radical departure from his designated role, revealing the contingency of his being in relation to the family structure

3.2. Transformation as a Manifestation of His Lack and Alienation

Lacan (1949) suggests that identity is structured around the subject's misrecognition of itself in the mirror stage, producing an illusory sense of wholeness. Such a misrecognition underlies Gregor's pre-metamorphosis self—he imagines himself a dutiful employee and son, but this self is a fiction propped up by the Symbolic order. His metamorphosis unravels this illusion and compels him to confront his inherent lack in his most naked state.

Gregor's deficiency is only aggravated by his loss of language. According to Lacanian theory, language is the conduit through which the subject accesses the Symbolic order (Lacan, 1953). In losing the ability to speak, Gregor is cast out of the intersubjective order and into the Real. The family cannot recognize him as any subject; he resigns to be an abject object. His loss of language becomes his symbolic castration — he no longer participates in the family conversation but becomes an excess without meaning.

Kafka's text makes Gregor's alienation self-evident through his family's changing view of him. At first they try to care for him, but their discomfort deepens as they come to see that he no longer has a function. His father's violent retribution—driving Gregor back into his room and wounding him on an apple—symbolizes the brutal rejection of the Real when it intrudes upon the Symbolic order (Kafka, 1915/2009). As objet petit a, a concept that Lacan defined as the object at the center of our most urgent wishes, Gregor becomes unendurable for the family, since he is the hole at the center of what they want.

3.3. The Family's Changing Relationship to Gregor: From Desire to Rejection

According to Lacan (1977), desire is structured around a lack, and the moment this lack becomes too apparent it creates anxiety. At first, Gregor's family responds to his condition with reluctance, trying to keep things as normal as possible. Grete takes on the role of caregiver, but that role is dependent on her ability to manage the crisis. As Gregor becomes more deteriorated, he also becomes ever intolerable, leading to total rejection.

Grete's changing attitude toward her brother reveals the mechanics of this so-called Lacanian desire. At first, she views Gregor as an object to be cared for, but when he can no longer function as a subject, he becomes for her a surplus object, an excess to be discarded. Her last declaration — “We have to rid ourselves of it” (Kafka, 1915/2009, 49) — is a clear sign that Gregor has completed his transition from a subject to an object, from objet petit a to abject waste

3.4. Gregor as *Objet Petit a*: The Inaccessible Object of the Other's Desire

Gregor's transformation shows what he really is, objet petit a, the object that defines desire and is as well its interruption. Before his transformation, the desires of his family turn on his labor, and after he loses that capacity, he is an unwieldy, disruptive entity. His death resolves this crisis — through the expulsion of excess, the family re-establishing its symbolic stability.

Žižek (2006) describes how objet petit a is the cause of desire and simultaneously, its most basic impediment. Gregor's existence gives testament to this paradox—his presence supports the family's economy, while his continued existence as an insect reveals the instability of their desires. His death restores order, then, and reasserts the Lacanian assertion that desire always turns on a lack that must be hidden.

IV. THE DEATH DRIVE AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF SUBJECTIVITY

This chapter explores Gregor's gradual decline through the lens of Lacan's concept of *jouissance* and Freud's theory of the death drive. Gregor's self-negation, culminating in his voluntary starvation, exemplifies the destructive excess of desire when the subject loses its place within the Symbolic order.

4.1. Gregor's Deterioration and the Concept of *Jouissance*

Jouissance (Lacan, 1977) is an enjoyment that is excessive and often self-destructive, one which goes beyond the pleasure principle. Contrary to pleasure, ruled by the reality principle, jouissance knows no discipline and brings frequently about suffering. This is the destructive

mode of *jouissance* that characterizes Gregor's life after he becomes an insect — his body decays, he loses his appetite and gradually he emits himself from reality.

Kafka's accounts of Gregor's deteriorating body symbolize his embodiment in *jouissance*. He takes grotesque delight in creeping up the walls, hiding under the furniture and finally, rotting. His self-negation can be viewed as an extreme version of the death drive, an impulse toward self-destruction that Freud (1920/1961) contended was integral to all life.

4.2. His Death as a Resolution of Desire and Lack

Gregor's death is not an accident of fate but a logical end to his alienation. Once he understands that his existence is no longer tolerable to his family, he refuses to eat, assimilating to his excessive object nature. His choice to starve himself signals his last dislocation from the Symbolic order, representing the absolute implication in the Real.

For Lacan (1977), this would be the death drive: not a desire for death itself, but a drive to escape the limits of the Symbolic order. Gregor's death embodies this escape—by taking himself out of the picture, he solves the family's crises of desire. His absence enables their return to symbolic coherence, reinforcing the Lacanian axiom that social stability is secured through the exclusion of excess.

4.3. The Family's "Liberation" and the Restoration of the Symbolic Order

With Gregor gone, his family undergoes a symbolic rebirth. His parents and sister leave the apartment for the first time, discussing plans for Grete's future (Kafka, 1915/2009). This ending reinforces the idea that Gregor was an obstacle to their desires; his removal allows the Symbolic order to reassert itself.

4.4. Conclusion: The *Metamorphosis* as a Lacanian Allegory of Desire

One of the most significant texts for Lacan as a psychoanalyst is Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which explores the nature of human desire through the lens of fusion at the limits of self. Gregory Samsa's metamorphosis into a giant vermin forms an outward presentation of a man torn apart from the inside, the struggle between Gregory's desire and the demands of the symbolic order around him. Lacan teaches that desire is constructed by the absence that arises from when the infant is detached from the mother, and enters into the realm of language and the symbolic order. This fragmentation creates a basic absence that the subject will always try to fill, but it will never be filled.

Gregor's transformation represents that founding absence and impossibility of satisfaction. Before his transformation, he is a man of too much responsibility, a breadwinner for his family. His identity is defined by duty and labor; it represents a submission to the symbolic order

— the social roles that constitute and bind the person. But his physical transformation reveals the dissonance between how he sees himself and how he serves the family and society. His new shape as a feckless, cockroach-shaped insect is a human allegory of Lacan's *objet petit a*, the object of desire that one never attains but forever chases. Gregor's inability to assimilate his desire into any stable structure or identity is a reflection of Lacan's notion that, for him, identity is not a stable, coherent entity — but a fragmented formation influenced by both the unconscious and the external.

Furthermore, Gregor's demise lays bare the acts of exclusion that uphold the symbolic order. According to Lacan, the symbolic system functions only on the grounds of the exclusion of the real, the unrepresentable, and the excessive. Gregor's monstrous body, the real — the unspeakable and unmanageable dimension of the human subject — is finally rejected by his family. Such expulsion is necessary for the survival of the family, and for the preservation of their symbolic structure, even as it leads to the annihilation of Gregor. His death is a return to an idealized, pre-crisis state for the family, whose life resumes normalcy once Gregor is out of the picture. Thus, Kafka's novella reiterates Lacan's claim as to the fundamentals of a subject's desire as a ceaseless, un-quenched endeavor, and identity, always bound up in the symbolic order, is predicated on this process of exclusion and of repression of the real.

In this sense, the tale becomes a compelling allegory of Lacanian desire, whereby the unattainable nature of desire is rendered inextricably linked to both the key is the signifier, the play of exclusion and the functioning of the symbolic order itself. Gregor's tragic demise reflects the Lacanian perspective which maintains that the subject is endlessly plagued by a lack, perpetually attempting to fill a space that can never be filled and thus shows the dire ontological ramifications of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

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