The *Ungeziefer* and the Insect: the Social Connotations in the English Translation of *The Metamorphosis*

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INTRODUCTION

Accurately translating the many works of Franz Kafka has been a continuous challenge amongst translators. Lauded for the nightmarish, outlandish themes, which have earned the term "Kafkaesque," it was important that Kafka's translated texts preserve not only these essential themes but also the countless metaphors that inhabit the German originals. *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's most confounding as well as most analyzed narrative, has undergone many translations into English, all of which have struggled to capture the essence of the German term "*ungeheueres Ungeziefer*" – the creature into which protagonist Gregor Samsa transforms. Susan Bernofsky shares her interpretation of the "*ungeheueres Ungeziefer*" while discussing her own translation of *The Metamorphosis* in an interview with *The New Yorker*:

> Both the adjective *ungeheuer* (meaning "monstrous" or "huge") and the noun *Ungeziefer* are negations— virtual nonentities— prefixed by un. *Ungeziefer* comes from the Middle High German *ungezibere*, a negation of the Old High German zebar (related to the Old English *ti'ber*), meaning "sacrifice" or "sacrificial animal." An *ungezibere*, then, is an unclean animal unfit for sacrifice, and *Ungeziefer* describes the class of nasty creepy-crawly things. The word in German suggests primarily six-legged critters, though it otherwise resembles the English word "vermin" (which refers primarily to rodents). (Bernofsky)

Transforming Gregor into a "virtual nonentity" through the use of negations stresses his emasculation – his undoing from a dominant male and breadwinner. Gregor becomes imaginary when he wakes up as an *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* – not particularly an insect but an unreal creature so filthy that it is unworthy of sacrifice. The idea that he is not just impure but *unworthy* hijacks Gregor's former respectable position and makes him into an incapable, lowly thing that is dependent on his family for survival. To preserve the ambiguousness of the *Ungeziefer* in her translation, Bernofsky transforms Gregor into "'some sort of monstrous insect' with 'some sort of' added to blur the borders of the somewhat too specific 'insect'" (Bernofsky). However, the

sterile scientific term "insect" still ceases to carry the repulsive connotation of *Ungeziefer*. While "insect" can be used to describe a contemptable or insignificant person, it does not share the same measure of disgust as *Ungeziefer*. Despite Bernofsky's decision to use the phrase "monstrous insect," English readers would not understand the creature the same way as German readers. They will see Gregor as a type of insect throughout the story as opposed to an ambiguous, dirty creature. Bernofsky speculates that perhaps Kafka "wanted us to see Gregor's new body and condition with the same hazy focus with which Gregor himself discovers them," but despite his many legs, hard back, curved belly, and antennae, Gregor is never confirmed to be an insect (Bernofsky). Kafka intended Gregor's transformation to be otherworldly, unthinkable, and revolting. As an unspecified *Ungeziefer*, Gregor has no place in the world as he is nothing anyone has ever seen. By confirming his existence as a monstrous insect, English readers are given a new understanding of Gregor – a form which comes as a shock but is not inconceivable.

It is characteristic of Kafka's stories to victimize main characters and subject them to physical, mental, and emotional trauma. Oftentimes, they are tormented by domineering characters and alienated by friends, family, and society. This recurring characterization was a reality in Kafka's own life: he was misunderstood by his family and emotionally abused by his tyrannical father who seldom approved of Kafka's hobbies, passions, relationships, or even Kafka himself („Franz Kafka", Franz Kafka Letter to His Father). Kafka and his father were polar opposites; Kafka was a passive and scrawny man who enjoyed quiet activities such as reading and writing while his father was a man of "health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly dominance, endurance…" – everything Kafka was not (Franz Kafka Letter to His Father). Therefore, it is understandable why much of Kafka's fiction poses a

struggle against conventional male dominance – be it a son versus his overbearing father or an individual versus greater society. Kafka attempted to refine traditional masculinity as ambiguous as opposed to something strictly *not* feminine, disidentifying from the father instead of the mother as Michael Diamond explains in his psychoanalysis of masculinity and male identity in young boys (Diamond 1100). Embracing nonmasculine, or neutral, roles for his male characters suggests that many of Kafka's stories mirror his own struggle against his abusive father, and that his victimized characters embody his fostered insecurities. Gregor Samsa is perhaps one character who most aptly represents Kafka himself. They are both men with respectable positions; Gregor is a past military lieutenant who works a successful job as a traveling salesman, and Kafka was a well-educated lawyer from a bourgeois, merchant-class family. Nonetheless, just as Kafka regarded himself "a misfit in as many ways as may seem possible" – lacking a sense of grounded self-identity because stemming from his marginalized Jewish heritage – Gregor finds himself in a predicament post-transformation as a despised *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* (Kriesberg 33).

Gregor becomes an aberration and has no place in society, let alone rational human thought. This is comparable to the nonmasculine characteristics of Kafka, which his family perceives as freakish and unfathomable. The *Ungeziefer* is a creature so far removed from ordinary society that it is something unnamed and therefore inconceivable to German readers. This notion reinforces Gregor as a "virtual nonentity"; without a concrete image of what he has become, readers cannot solidify his existence. Perhaps it was Kafka's intention to make Gregor into something that was not only completely alien to society but also so bizarre that it would make him inconceivable to the minds of his readers. Conversely, the more specific "insect" does not quite satisfy as it does not convey the connotative force of the *ungeheueres Ungeziefer*, as

Lawson disputes, concerning English translations. While the alternative "vermin" is multifarious and, thus, vague as to what Gregor becomes, the pairing of adjectives such as "monstrous," "enormous," or "gigantic" with "vermin" or insect" inevitably imbalances the connotations, shifting the readers' attention to the enormity (Lawson 217). Since the concept of Gregor as a nonentity through ambiguity and grammatical negations does not fully translate into English, English readers interpret Gregor's new "monstrous insect" form as an existing nightmare. Gregor's transformation plays off a common fear of insects, let alone unrealistically large insects. But even though Gregor is monstrous, his existence as an insect still connects him to nature and, therefore, grounds him in a somewhat familiar reality. What is also interesting are the titles of each version. In German, the term *Verwandlung* does not only connote a biological process, such as a caterpillar changing into a butterfly as the English title *The Metamorphosis* insinuates, but also a fantastical change such as in a fairytale or a change of scenes in theatre (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 3n1).

Whether an *Ungeziefer* or insect, Gregor is still rejected by his family and society, stripped from his former identity as the hardworking breadwinner, and neutralized; hence, his family refers to him as an "it" (*es*) instead of "he" (*er*) after acknowledging that he is no longer the Gregor they once knew. Both languages place Gregor outside the gender binary of feminine and masculine by using the third-person, gender-neutral pronoun "it" or "*es*." Nonetheless, calling the *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* an "*es*" rather than "it" for the monstrous insect impacts the connotation of the narrative even more. In German, "*es*" – as well as "*er*" and "*sie*" – refers to nouns regardless of whether they are concepts, inanimate objects, names of animals, or human categories. The same cannot be said for English, a gender-neutral language, since "it" strictly applies to concepts, inanimate objects, or animals – any noun other than that which applies to

humans or that which resembles human attributes. When Gregor is called "*es*" in regard to being an *Ungeziefer*, it is not because he has become an inhuman creature but a creature that happens to be a neutral noun. "*Es*," like "it," is also used to represent a concept or abstract idea that is understood, or used as a placeholder, like in the sentence, "It is raining" (*Es regnet*). Therefore, "*es*" could also be viewed as a placeholder to represent Gregor's new ambiguous form. Calling Gregor an "it," as his family no longer sees him as a man but simply an overgrown insect, blatantly dehumanizes him. Thus, I argue that English translations of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* prompts the reader to focus on Gregor's stark physical transformation as opposed to his loss of human identity, based on the social connotative differences that arise when translating Gregor's transition from the German pronoun "*es*" to the English "it," whose strong connotation to objects further solidifies the insect's physicality. The connotative nuances of the two neutral pronouns may be slight, but they give deep insight into the interpretive function of the *Ungeziefer* in German and the insect, and similar translations, in English.

I

Translation does not come without its challenges. While it is sometimes easy to translate the essential meaning of concepts and simple sentence structures for instance, some concepts are untranslatable, such as culture-specific jokes or puns and social connotations of gender, age, class, etc. that only exist in the target language. Common translation problems that Ziaul Hague addresses in his article include "illegible text, missing references, several constructions of grammar, dialect terms and neologisms, irrationally vague terminology, inexplicable acronyms and abbreviations, untranslatability, intentional misnaming, particular cultural references etc." (Hague 101). Some of these problems are evident in *Die Verwandlung* – one being the

untranslatability of the ambiguous term *Ungeziefer*, but also the connotations thereof. Connotations of gender, for instance, should be considered when translating *Die Verwandlung* into a gender-neutral language like English, since such connotations influence the readers perception of the text. For instance, while a German speaker regards a lake (*der See*) as masculine, a duck (*die Ente*) as feminine, and a boat (*das Boot*) as neutral, an English speaker sees all three as neutral entities. Uwe Kjær Nissen gives examples of the differences between gendered languages, where such languages determine personifications, metaphors, and ideologies of a word based on its assigned gender. Thus, conflict may arise during translation when the word equivalent of the target language connotes a different gender, opposing characteristics, or little to no associations (Nissen 28). Therefore, a literal translation would be disconcerting. A language that does not depend so heavily on gender, such as English, may not pose the same problem, as most inanimate objects or animals do not retain strong preconceived notions of gender. Although it is possible for certain words in modern-day English to retain gender connotations, those connotations are weak and typically stem from the language of mythological or historical texts, such as Latin where the sun is commonly male and the moon female – a concept that Lewis Carroll adheres to in his story *The Walrus and the Carpenter*[1]. The Germanic-based Old or Middle English, conversely, identifies the sun as female and the moon as male (Rauer).

To resolve this issue, the translator might find another noun of the same gender in the source language to connote the same sex-based stereotypes. A third language that is in some way familiar to the target language might be introduced to communicate the gendered connotations of the source language (Nissen 29). As a last resort, the translator might use foreignization to

[1] Carroll, Lewis. "The Walrus and the Carpenter." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43914/the-walrus-and-the-carpenter-56d222cbc80a9.

communicate the essential meaning of the original foreign text through inscription or footnoting to maintain a sense of transparency in the translated text. This might also bring attention to the differences in the foreign text by "disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language" (Venuti, "Invisibility" 20). Bernofsky attempts to help her readers understand what Kafka was trying to convey in his original text by providing footnotes throughout her translation of *The Metamorphosis*. On the first page of the story, Bernofsky dedicates half a page of footnotes detailing the etymology and cultural connotation of the German term *Ungeziefer,* alongside other original terms and references from the German text. One of those footnotes is referenced after Bernofsky's translated "monstrous insect," in which she is quick to explain the ambiguity of the original German term *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* as it "does not refer to a particular insect or animal per se but in a general way to harmful, parasitic animals, especially insects and rodents, to bugs, fleas, lice, and beetles" (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 3n2). It is understandable why Bernofsky would immediately follow her own translation of Kafka's famous *Ungeziefer* with a footnote. No English translation could precisely convey the effect of the metaphorical combination of *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* and the syntactical structure of the sentence encompassing the term. Despite momentarily disrupting the story to redirect the readers' attention to cultural differences, Bernofsky's use of foreignization ensures English readers a thorough understanding of Kafka's novella. This stark foreignization also ironically reflects the physicality of the "monstrous insect," calling attention to its forged existence via addressing cultural connotations of its original German counterpart in the footnotes. This makes the reader stop in the midst of the story to visualize the *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* that Bernofsky attempts to explain. Nonetheless, having already been exposed to the term "monstrous insect,"

the reader is fated to imagine just that, especially since the footnotes confirm the possibility of the *Ungeziefer* resembling anything from "bugs, fleas, lice, and beetles," as stated above.

Another common translation issue in regard to the *Ungeziefer* concerns grammatical and pronominal gender. German, for instance, demonstrates both grammatical and pronominal gender, having three classes of nouns that can be determined syntactically. Generally masculine, feminine, and neutral nouns represent their respective person, animal, or inanimate object of that same gender, making translation from one language with grammatical or pronominal gender to another relatively easy, as long as the concept of a given word is the same (Nissen 26). However, if the syntax of a language with grammatical gender is composed in a way that the target language cannot refabricate, other grammatical means need to be taken into consideration. Nissen gives an example of this problem in the first stanza of the poem *Ninguneo* by Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos, in which the gender of the person in question is revealed merely through the language's grammar: "¿qué diablos hago aquí en la Ciudad Lux,/ presumiendo de *cult**a** y de viajad**a***/ sino aplazar la ejecución de una/ sentencia que ha caído sobre mí?" (Nissen 27). To Spanish speakers, it is apparent that "de culta y de viajada" refers to a female, hence both adjectives ending in "-a." But, in order to translate this poem into English, one would have to alter the line to "a cultured and well-traveled **woman**," thus shifting the emphasis of the speaker being "cultured and well-traveled" to that fact that she is a *woman* who is cultured and well-traveled. Nissen points out the inevitable stress on the speaker's gender in the English translation, inadvertently distorting the readers' understanding of the text as well as the author's intended message to appear perhaps more feminist-centered (Nissen 27).

In regard to *The Metamorphosis*, the same inadvertent emphasis is placed on the creature that Gregor Samsa transforms into – the concrete "monstrous insect" as opposed to the more

abstract "*ungeheueres Ungeziefer*." The shared neutral pronouns of German and English contribute to the characteristics of their respective translation. For instance, "*es*" is how Gregor's family refers to him once they acknowledge that he is no longer human and want to be rid of him: "wir müssen versuchen, *es* loszuwerden" (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 28; emphasis added). In this moment, Gregor is disconnected from his former identity as an upright, hardworking man who was referred to as "*er*," in accordance with his male gender. He is then launched into the unfathomable reality of being an *Ungeziefer* when addressed as "*es*," hence the neutrality of the noun *Ungeziefer*. Grammatically, the shift from *er* to *es* is not as momentous as Gregor's physical transformation. Unlike English, inanimate as well as animate nouns can be classified as any of the three genders, including neutral nouns for people or respective titles such as *das Mädchen* or *das Kind*. However, on closer inspection, the fact that Gregor transitions to a neutral entity, or "virtual nonentity," can be indicative of his loss of masculine power and privilege, or what many scholars interpret as emasculation[2]. Gregor does not become *einen Käfer* or *einen Schädling*, both masculine nouns that resemble *das Ungeziefer*, nor does he transform into a feminine noun, for instance *eine Schabe*. Thus, his descent from a notable man to a closeted, unnamed creature not only alludes to his loss of masculinity but his loss of visibility through neutralization.

That loss fails to shine through the same way in English translations, however. In his transition from man to creature, Gregor becomes an "it" when before he was humanely referred to as "he." The moment his sister Grete proposes to their parents that they "get rid of *it*" (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 41; emphasis added), Gregor not only loses his former identity and the male pronoun, with which he identifies, but also all respect as a living being, let alone a human being.

[2] De Bruyker, Melissa. "Who Identified the Animal? Hybridity and Body Politics in Kafka's The Metamorphosis and Amerika (The Man Who Disappeared)." Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings, by Marc Lucht and Donna Yarri, Lexington Books, 2012, pp. 191–209.

Explicit attention is drawn to the dehumanization of Gregor, stooping from human to inhuman, a worthless creature, a monster. Since "it" is only ever used in relation to inanimate objects or trivial animals, immediate offense is taken by the person being called "it." The pronoun objectifies that which it describes; although the insect that Gregor has become is inhuman, it is of this world and is still somehow grounded in reality. Instead of becoming invisible as a result of identity loss, Gregor remains in the forefront as a transformed being that cannot be ignored – a monstrosity that needs to be dealt with.

II

Gender roles are a prominent theme in *The Metamorphosis*, in which Gregor not only participates but also his parents and sister. Conventional concepts of gender is an unquestioned law perpetuated by the society outside the Samsa family home, presumably, but more importantly inside the home, within which the transformed Gregor finds himself trapped. Kafka represents the strict gender binary of a patriarchal society through his characters, while Gregor's new life as an *Ungeziefer* or insect demonstrates instances of gender neutrality – neutrality that reinforces the *Ungeziefer*'s imaginative existence and the insect's physicality.

Before his transformation, Gregor works a well-paying job as a traveling salesman. Despite the enduring a hardhearted boss and carrying the burden of his parents' debt, Gregor dutifully strives to make his old parents and young sister live a comfortable life. As a result of his profession, Gregor spends much of his time away from the home, a seeming indicator of independence. Yet much weighs on Gregor's shoulders to live up to the expectations of his family, boss, and co-workers. Although burdened by his duties, Gregor takes it upon himself to meet the societal expectations of what he believes a man should be. Thus, he demonstrates an

unshakable dedication to his job. He hoists himself out of bed early every morning to catch the train to work. Even in his awkward transformative state, Gregor is still determined to make it to work, pressured by the fear of being deemed a "faule[r] [Sohn]" (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 3). His mother, unaware of Gregor's state, vouches for her son's reputation to the inquisitive manager:

> Wie würde den Gregor sonst einen Zug versäumen! Der Junge hat ja nichts im Kopf als das Geschäft. Ich ärgere mich schon fast, daß er abends niemals ausgeht; jetzt war er doch acht Tage in der Stadt, aber jeden Abend war er zu Hause. Da sitzt er bei uns am Tisch und liest still die Zeitung oder studiert Fahrpläne. Es ist schon eine Zerstreuung für ihn, wenn er sich mit Laubsägearbeiten beschäftigt. (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 6)

The mother not only explains Gregor's commitment to his job, but exaggerates it, as it is a commendable feature of the conventional male role. Nevertheless, Gregor's obsession with work dictates his life and forbids him to take a break. He must always prove that he is diligent or, in other words, more masculine than female. Despite this high and burdensome expectation, Gregor displays confidence in his capabilities to perform said job. For one, he is confident that he will not lose his job because of one absence.

> Und warum weinte [die Schwester] denn? Weil er nicht aufstand und den Prokuristen nicht hereinließ, weil er in Gefahr war, den Posten zu verlieren und weil dann der Chef die Eltern mit den alten Forderungen wieder verfolgen würde? Das waren doch vorläufig wohl unnötige Sorgen. Noch war Gregor hier und dachte nicht im geringsten daran, seine Familie zu verlassen. (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 6)

This passage shows that Gregor is not only relentless but also loyal to his family. Even if Gregor were in fact sick, the manager mentions that, „wir Geschäftsleute – wie man will, leider oder glücklicherweise – ein leichtes Unwohlsein sehr oft aus geschäftlichen Rücksichten einfach überwinden müssen" (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 6). This frame-of-mind refers again to the ideal masculine character, one which includes being tough and resilient, discarding any indication of

femininity, as defined by Diamond (Diamond 1100). As long as Gregor endeavors to appear tough and hardworking, he can prove himself worthy enough of his job and please his parents. But despite his role as sole breadwinner, Gregor struggles to achieve fully the position of alpha male in the eyes of others, and himself.

When Gregor misses his first train to work, his mother questions him in a "sanfte Stimme," his sister asks whether he needs anything, but his father "klopfte an der einen Seitentür … schwach" and "mahnte" him (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 3). Although no one barges into his room, the fact that his father feels as though he must *mahnen*, or admonish, Gregor leads us to believe that perhaps Gregor is not completely in control of his homelife. Although the breadwinner, Gregor is burdened with a taxing job, the debt of his parents, and the duty to ensure his family's comfortable lifestyle. Meanwhile, Gregor has little to no time set aside for himself, for a vacation let alone a life of leisure. So, the fact that his father admonishes him to get out of bed demonstrates that Gregor is not head of the family; his parents are, making sure Gregor is put to work. The mother, in her attempts to explain to the manager Gregor's tardiness, also refers to him not as her son but instead a boy: "Der Junge hat ja nichts im Kopf als das Geschäft" (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 6). Being referred to as such reflects Gregor's role in the family's eyes; he is not the leader but the supporter, as he is one step below the father. His strenuous profession as a traveling salesman also demonstrates Gregor's subordination to authority; this is underscored by Gregor's domineering and unsympathetic boss who subjects Gregor to intense hours of work, with the insinuation that his parents' debt is still owed to him. The manager even uses his authority to come into Gregor's house and demand that he come out of his room, suggesting that Gregor is clearly not in control of his life as a masculine figure, but the one who is controlled (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 5).

In fact, Gregor admits that if it were not for his parents' debt, he "hätte längst gekündigt, […] wäre vor den Chef hin getreten und hätte ihm meine Meinung von Grund des Herzens aus gesagt" (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 2). Although in a position of masculine power, the stress thereof causes him to yearn for the opposite lifestyle, such as the other easygoing salesmen who „leben wie Haremsfrauen" – an insult that rings a bit like jealousy. By calling them Haremfrauen, Gregor intends to degrade the other traveling salesmen by likening them to the domestic attribute of women to emasculate them, but ironically *Haremfrauen* evoke women in Muslim culture who traditionally had access to a private, domestic space, known as a harem, used to maintain their modesty, privilege, and protection (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The fact that Gregor uses the term *Haremfrauen* to describe his easygoing co-workers alludes to their autonomy – individuals who have control over their own lives unlike him. Therefore, Gregor complains that he would have the freedom to censure his boss had it not been for his family. Nonetheless, he knows that if he were to try the same thing with his boss, he „würde auf der Stelle hinausfliegen" (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 2). He hesitates for his parents' sake and the sake of his reputation as a hard worker, which keeps him in line with or trapped by society's expectations. These expectations are not solely an annoyance but that on which Gregor thrives to impress those around him and earn their approval. For instance, while turning the doorknob, Gregor hears the manager take note of his attempts to open his bedroom door:

> Das war für Gregor eine große Aufmunterung; aber alle hätten ihm zurufen sollen, auch der Vater und die Mutter: ‚Frisch, Gregor,' hätten sie rufen sollen, ‚immer nur heran, fest an das Schloß heran!' Und in der Vorstellung, daß alle seine Bemühungen mit Spannung verfolgten, verbiß er sich mit allem, was er an Kraft aufbringen konnte, besinnungslos in den Schlüssel. (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 8)

He imagines this triumphant moment with the notion that his parents and the manager should be cheering him on, showing him that they are delighted with his attempts. Gregor also dares not to

make any bold moves toward those above his social rank, such as censuring the manager for simply walking into his home and nagging him to get out of bed. Instead, he reacts passively to his arrival:

> Herr Prokurist! Schonen Sie meine Eltern! Für alle die Vorwürfe, die Sie mir jetzt machen, ist ja kein Grund; man hat mir ja davon auch kein Wort gesagt. Sie haben vielleicht die letzten Aufträge, die ich geschickt habe, nicht gelesen. Übrigens, noch mit dem Achtuhrzug fahre ich auf die Reise, die paar Stunden Ruhe haben mich gekräftigt. Halten Sie sich nur nicht auf, Herr Prokurist; ich bin gleich selbst im Geschäft, und haben Sie die Güte, das zu sagen und mich dem Herrn Chef zu empfehlen! (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 7)

Gregor is not the dominant figure in his own life. While it may seem masculine that Gregor works relentlessly in order to provide for his family, he does so while under the pressure to fulfill their expectation of him – hardworking, resilient, and capable. While his family appear to be dependent on Gregor, Gregor is actually the one dependent on them. His family has shaped him into a socially acceptable masculine persona, who instilled in him a sense of familial duty and paved the way for his success in his career. Therefore, they play a key role in Gregor's masculine identity, serving as a reinforcement of masculine ideals but also as reassurance in regard to his worth. When Gregor becomes an Ungeziefer and is incapable of fulfilling masculine ideals, he becomes worthless to the family. No longer does his family commend him for his success, yet Gregor does not fathom struggling to take back his role as the head of the household or leaving the home out of his own will. He instead obediently stays in his bedroom and guilts himself over his inability to fulfill his designated male role and keep his job. Thus, one can see that Gregor does not necessarily long for authority but rather approval. Without his family's validation, Gregor loses confidence in his identity – an identity not his own but that which was formed by his parents. He is a product of his parents, of a patriarchal society, and does not know how to function outside of it. While the masculine is typically the one deemed to exert control over the

feminine, it is not free from the societal restrictions that are applied to its gender. Likewise, Kafka demonstrates the neutral role of the *Ungeziefer* or insect, into which Gregor eases as his former male identity begin to fluctuate.

Since becoming an *Ungeziefer*, Gregor is confined to his room and never allowed out. While his parents and sister are busy supporting the household funds, Gregor is left to his own devices. No one bothers to involve him in the family affairs or socialize with him, and attempt to spend as little time in his room as possible. Gregor's new lifestyle may appear feminine in the sense that he is no longer responsible for a strenuous job or his entire family – duties that once were a part of his male role; however, the fact that Gregor is forced to stay in his bedroom alone removes him from the family dynamic and social circle. He is ostracized, being treated as if he were barely there, and does not reap the benefits of his family's new jobs as they once did when he could still work. The family never even acknowledges Gregor's past hardships and sacrifices for their sakes. Such neglect shows just how invisible Gregor becomes to his family as an *Ungeziefer*, which eventually worsens as Grete loses interest periodically visiting his room to feed him and clean his room. In English, the physicality of the insect is recognized by its ability to crawl around and hide underneath furniture. But it is not only that family who insist on keeping Gregor in his room; Gregor soon becomes accustomed to the small space, making a hobby of crawling around the walls and ceiling and consuming the rotten food during mealtimes, which he thoroughly enjoys. However, when his mother and sister attempt to give him more space to do just that, Gregor reflects on his changed lifestyle:

> Hatte er wirklich Lust, das warme, mit ererbten Möbeln gemütlich ausgestattete Zimmer in eine Höhle verwandeln zu lassen, in der er dann freilich nach allen Richtungen ungestört würdekriechen können, jedoch auch unter gleichzeitigem schnellen, gänzlichen Vergessen seiner menschlichen Vergangenheit? War er doch jetzt schon nahe daran, zu vergessen… (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 18-9)

Gregor's realization of his changing situation makes him question what he has become, recognizing his pitiable state as an *Ungeziefer* instead of the proud, hardworking man he once was. He becomes determined to retain his former human and masculine identity as the breadwinner – a performance which Gregor had constantly reenacted until it has become a part of him – before it is overwritten by his new physical state (Sokel, *The Myth of Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka* 283). Thus, he attempts to retrieve at least one of his possessions before Grete and his mother take it away: "… er wußte wirklich nicht, was er zuerst retten sollte, da sah er an der im übrigen schon leeren Wand auffallend das Bild der in lauter Pelzwerk gekleideten Dame hängen, kroch eilends hinauf und preßte sich an das Glas, das ihn festhielt und seinem heißen Bauch wohltat" (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 20).

Melissa De Bruyker analyzes Gregor's behavior in an animalistic sense. By embracing the picture of the lady in the furs, he attempts to regain his masculinity through a gesture that can be interpreted as sexual, covering the picture with his body, especially his belly. This could also appear as an act of vulnerability. Gregor not only attempts to save this picture but also risks his mother and Grete seeing him. De Bruyker interprets his "heißen Bauch" as a spot which needs to be relieved, as heat indicates of stress and anxiety (De Bruyker 195). She also notes that the picture of the lady in the fur – "a symbiosis of womanhood and sexual connotation" – overthrows the dominant male body, considering that her furs suggest she is of high class and a competition to nature (De Bruyker 196). Gregor's effort to regain dominance over his life shocks his mother and sister, considering the fact that he is now visible as opposed to hiding underneath his bedroom furniture. In this moment, he makes the choice to change what he is, yet to no avail. Despite still being addressed as Gregor, his mother and sister are shocked by his appearance and forced out of his room. His exposure to the living room, however, then prompts his father to

attack him with apples: “gleich flog ihm ein zweiter nach; Gregor blieb vor Schrecken stehen; ein Weiterlaufen war nutzlos, denn der Vater hatte sich entschlossen, ihn zu bombardieren” (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 22). As an *Ungeziefer*, Gregor’s loss of human respect and power haunts him by that fact that his father, sister, and mother cannot look at him the same way that they did before he transformed. This is one interpretation of the father’s otherwise irrational attempt to harm Gregor, despite his compliance. Gregor’s former self is encased in the semblance of a bizarre *Ungeziefer*, an imaginary being experiencing an inexplicable situation. Meanwhile, as an insect, it would make sense to want to exterminate a pest, hence the family’s use of force to contain Gregor. The family endeavors to separate Gregor from their lives, his new appearance unfitting for the gender binary to which they adhere. Therefore, Gregor I forced to remain neutral, in the void of his room away from his family’s ordinary way of life.

III

Many of Kafka’s characters represent different facets of Kafka’s life. His father, although someone he disdained, played a large role in Kafka’s writing, inspiring prominent themes such as victimization, emotional and psychological torment, hegemony, and power struggle. Gender is also something with which Kafka has experimented, crafting new identities outside the binary of masculine and feminine traits. Whether human or creature, Kafka uses his characters to make a statement by assuming a neutral role or non-binary existence, disregarding traditional masculine traits and yet never fully embracing femininity. These neutral roles can relate back to the *Ungeziefer* or insect; but whether Gregor’s transformation is meant to represent his loss of self and masculinity or his transition into an unsightly monster, their connotations in the text stem from Kafka’s own experiences with neutralization.

Struggling with masculinity is a common theme, mirroring Kafka's own conflicts with his father. Scholars have argued Gregor's transformation into an *Ungeziefer* to symbolize emasculation, relating it to many of his inabilities post-transformation – one being his inability to rival his father. The Samsa family dynamic shows a stark dichotomy between dominant and submissive, masculine and feminine, which reinforced the ideal of the gender binary. Gregor is forced back into his bedroom when he attempts to leave or tries to take back his masculinity by saving the picture of the lady in furs. Gregor is completely emasculated when his family, specifically the father, usurps his dominant role and he proves incapable of working and providing. The father's attacks on Gregor allude to the persistent male rivalry for dominance. Gregor is seen as a rival to his father's position of power. Gregor's emasculation is also a threat to stereotypical masculinity, which fears castration. Therefore, father overpowers son, attacking him with objects, such as apples, to demonstrate his restored virility (Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* 22). The apple penetrates the most vulnerable spot on his body leading to his death, which could allude to sodomy in an attempt to disempower Gregor in male society, leaving him no chance to regain his masculinity. The tense rivalry can also be traced back to Kafka's relationship with his own father – a power dynamic that Kafka expresses in his works. This relationship could also be considered sado-masochism, which Norris explores, considering that "tyranny is not merely a symbolic expression of the paternal role, the superego function, in sadism but that the sadist uses tyranny subversively to expose the absurdity of the Law by enacting an extreme application of 'the letter of the law,' for example, as in the 'Strafkolonie'" (Norris, "Sadism and Masochism in Two Kafka Stories: 'In Der Strafkolonie' and 'Ein Hungerkünstler'" 434).

In addition to gender, the theme of emasculation has been interpreted in other works of Kafka, including "The Hunger Artist" to which Heather Merle Benbow refers in her article

"'Was Auf Den Tisch Kam, Mußte Aufgegessen [...] Werden': Food, Gender, and Power in Kafka's Letters and Stories." She discusses "gender hegemony" in relation to the diets of Kafka's male characters – the consumption of meat signifying "masculine privilege" while vegetarianism and fasting connote the rejection thereof. Gregor's new appetite for the rotten vegetables, nuts, raisins, and bread given to him by Grete reinforces his state of emasculation. Benbow goes on to argue that "[t]o eat is, for Kafka's figures, to consume social—and therefore gendered—norms" (Benbow 348), which could also be argued in *The Metamorphosis* that Gregor's new vegetarian diet alludes to the embracement of his emasculation; however, neither does he fully embrace feminism. When he is abandoned by Grete and left to starve, Gregor rejects both masculine and feminine ideals, as well as the society that perpetuates them, thus succumbing to death. Melissa De Bruyker discusses the hybridity of human and animal, focusing on the overlap "Kafka's stories create […] between seemingly natural categories in order to question the different ways in which naturalness (an epistemological notion) and human (an anthropological notion) are defined within their narrated realities" (De Bruyker 191). Kafka does the same with masculinity and femininity, making a hybrid, or a third gender, out of the two that is unlike its former components because of its neutrality – the canceling out of opposites. Through this, he questions the definitions of masculinity and femininity, as well as to what extent something is masculine or feminine. Influences of the gender binary do to penetrate his new simple lifestyle after his transformation. Although physically restricted to his room, he is free to use the space in the way he feels most comfortable. This freedom from the societal pressure of gender norms allows him to slowly form a new identity. De Bruyker also looks into how hybridity "signals a contested boundary between social norms and the individual" through analyzing Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *Amerika*. The "monstrous insect" or *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* symbolizes

Gregor's detachment from society as a result of his lost human physical characteristics, including masculinity. She debates that the idea of being human "is shown to be culturally predetermined since the body parts refer to cultural notions: labor (back), mind (head), procreation and sin (belly), femininity (absence of a phallus), and a human upright position (legs)" (De Bruyker 192). However, amongst the list, the absence of a phallus does not directly mean that Gregor's transformation transports him to a feminine role as he neither has feminine genitalia. He has become something else, definitely inhuman as an insect but also inexplicable as an *Ungeziefer*. Kafka uses this allegory to reflect his own relationship with his father, Hermann Kafka. Like Gregor, Kafka could not match his father's overbearing masculinity and, thus, experiments with gender roles in his stories not simply to mirror his personal life but to exert control over it as well.

Whereas masculinity is typically displayed as the dominant of the binary, Kafka makes his main characters ambiguous as a "critique of the gender hierarchy" – characters who "respond neither with a masculine sense of entitlement nor with empathy for the feminine role" (Benbow 356). The same can be said for Gregor – a work-oriented man and breadwinner who empathizes with his family's needs and does his best to please them. These characters who fall outside the binary often stand as a statement in Kafka's stories because they are belittled and victimized. Kafka's embracement of victimization, which Hanif Kureishi describes as "the tortured male frame," is a recurring element of his characters – a term with which Kafka finds himself fascinated. The insect's body is a prime example of "the tortured frame" as it is delicate and often targeted for extermination. The same can be said for the *Ungeziefer*; however, the insect's evocable physical form properly fits the term. Thus, the insect represents the acquisition of a new identity as opposed to a loss – it being the embodiment and embracement of victimization. The

imagined form of the *Ungeziefer*, on the other hand, is a subject of victimization, in that it is not only the manifestation of Gregor's loss of identity but an ambiguous mask unfit to exist and, therefore, a victim of abandonment. Therefore, it is the manifestation of not only Gregor's invisibility in his home after transforming but also Kafka's invisibility in regard to his own family, or the fact that his artistic potential was unacknowledged because his passive personality.

By writing his own distress into being, Kafka makes himself into "a slave, while attempting indirectly … control[ing] the master" by "transform[ing] [the master] into a text" (Kureishi 11-12). Through his gift of writing, Kafka was not only able to control the image of his all-powerful father but also empower the victims through his talent "to demand complicity from the reader" and thus gain a successful readership (Kureishi 13). This proves Kafka's seemingly defenseless characters to be not "timorous, weak or indecisive" but "powerful beings, [with] the alterations they choose hav[ing] a dramatic effect. Kafka's work was a violent fantasised attack on himself and on the other, via his own body. He aestheticised his suffering…" (Kureishi 13); and through aestheticizing his suffering in his writing, he turns himself from a victim into a retaliating survivor. Through victimization, Kafka ensures that his male characters will refrain from being starkly masculine. They are non-binary, falling someplace between a masculine and feminine characterization. Gregor's transition from man to *Ungeziefer,* or rather insect, solidifies this non-binary existence, as he becomes something else, the other – a characteristic many of his characters share, human and animal.

CONCLUSION

Both German and English versions of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* contain a nuanced understanding of Gregor's new form. While the soft German pronoun "*es*" represents

the *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* – an unspecified creature that is cloudy in the minds of German readers – the translated "it" refers to the monstrous "vermin," "cockroach," or "insect," as described in English translations – a *thing* recognized by its buggy characteristics and enormity. The original "virtual nonentity" of the *Ungeziefer*, as Susan Bernofsky describes, is instantaneously overwritten by the stark physicality of the insect upon translation, giving a species to the *Ungeziefer* and, thus, solid identity where there were none. This slightly yet noticeably misleads English readers' perception of Gregor's transformation. Instead of the emphasis on the fact that Gregor transitions from a man to something that has no specific name or description and, therefore, no physical hold on existence, the strange overgrown physicality of the insect steals the attention of the readers. The focus of the story then shifts to Gregor's new body as opposed to its symbolizing his undoing. The conflicting terms stand as an example for how seemingly minor connotative differences between the source and target language can alter the understanding of the text. Especially with such an untranslatable term, Bernofsky's choice of footnotes to convey the original meaning of the *Ungeziefer* seemed unavoidable but perhaps also advisable. This way, while it's not guaranteed that readers will experience the text the same as if they were reading the original, the author's intention behind the work will be clearer.

One of those intentions might have been the idea of aberration in *The Metamorphosis*, which Kafka tackles through gender norms and gender hierarchy. Gregor's fall from his lofty position in his home and workplace plays into the stark gender binary; but his adaption to life after his transformation demonstrates the neutralization of his existence. No longer does he adhere to a traditionally male role, nor does he stoop to adopt a feminine role. Removed from his family, as well as from the pressures of a patriarchal society such as its reinforcement of a gender binary, Gregor embraces his neutral existence, as well as environment – the confines of his small

bedroom. As an *Ungeziefer*, his family's neglect contributes to the fact that his existence seems imaginary or unreal and that he has lost his former identity. Conversely, the same situation as an insect might harbor the idea that the family is to restrict and control Gregor's new physicality, not only because it is bizarre and but also since its neutral existence lies outside the gender binary. While the *Ungeziefer* exists only in the minds of the readers and the insect grounds itself in reality through physicality, the shared neutrality reoccurs between the transformations in both German and English language and challenges gender norms through deviation of their existence. In relation to gender studies, Kafka's novella demonstrates that gender can be neutral, and according to either language, has the possibility of manifesting both physically as representation and psychologically such as an identity.

Through his characters, Kafka mirrors his sense of self, using instances in stories such as torture and struggle to not only reflect the hardship that he once lived through but also his relationship with that hardship. Kafka's emotional abuse by his father shaped the way he not only perceived but also challenged the world, motivating him to make masterpieces that inspired many through his twisted Kafkaesque themes, which include the victimization of the protagonists. Kafka recreates himself, acknowledging his pitiable position as the victim of his father, but then using that position to fight back. He takes what we consider weak and worthless and transforms it into a form of power. He does the same with masculinity – one "power" that he could never achieve according to the constant disapproval of his family for his passive behavior; his characters refute it and create their own identities that do not conform to masculinity or femininity. Knowledge of Kafka's past helps us reason and better connect with his stories. Moreover, it allows us to gain a clearer picture of his intention for his works and the metaphors that might otherwise be overlooked, such as his allusions to neutrality and the feeling of

invisibility, as demonstrated by the *Ungeziefer*. Even if in translation, the idea of neutrality, or existing as the other, stands in English and perhaps languages that do not have neutral pronouns, considering Gregor's detachment of conventional gender rules.

The nuanced understanding of the imaginary *Ungeziefer* and the physicality of the insect demonstrate the inevitable flaw in translation in terms of communicating connotation of the creature. However, it also gives insight into two different yet similar experiences reading *The Metamorphosis*. While the original German focuses on the unreality of the *Ungeziefer* and Gregor's loss of identity, addressed by the pronoun "es," English translations put emphasis on the physicality of the insect and the objectification thereof through the use of "it." Despite the slight shift in understanding, both versions keep to the idea of neutrality in the text, with which Kafka uses to convey the message of identity; and through identity and gender, we gain a better understanding of Kafka as well as the messages behind his works.

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