

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Premise-Driven Narratives

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Premise-oriented narratives use a unique situation or circumstance as the main anchor for its story. Using a situation to drive a narrative through its development is a technique that has been used since Homer's *Odyssey*, and continued to be the dominant method used in 19th century Romanticism and books such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The spread of literary Realism led to a decline in the use of premise-driven narratives, but continued to be prevalent in genre fiction, and exists today in the work of science fiction writers Ray Bradbury and Stephen King, as well as in the work of other genre writers, such as John Grisham and Agatha Christie. Like other storytelling frameworks, the use of premise to construct a narrative presents its own unique problems and limitations, and the success of a premise-driven story lies in a writer's ability to use the presented situation to promote its other elements. Few novels have been able to succeed so completely in this approach as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, first published in 1916.

Kafka introduces the reader to the premise of *Metamorphosis* in the first sentence of the novel:

When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect.¹

This illustrates Kafka's tendency to reserve the end of his sentences for his most striking statements, and the situation he presents is indeed striking enough to hold interest and create anticipation in the reader. However, the story's greater achievement lies in how Kafka uses this premise to develop his themes. Specifically, Kafka's approach exemplifies what Bradbury refers to as the “greatest art”²: Kafka's accomplishment lies in what he chooses not to say, the elements of character he deliberately left out, and how emotional response is conveyed clearly to the reader.

Besides Gregor, the main characters in the story are his sister and his mother and father. The family comes from a background typical of their time and place, and Gregor holds a tedious sales job to support his parents and sister. Using indistinct characters from ordinary backgrounds follows Wilde's view that the best subject matter for artistic work is one which the recipient feels generally indifferent,

1 Kafka, Franz. *Metamorphosis*, translated by Malcolm Pasley, 1992.

2 “[The writer's] greatest art will often be what he does not say, what he leaves out, his ability to state simply with clear emotion, the way he wants to go.”

Bradbury, Ray. *Zen in the Art of Writing*, Joshua Odell Editions, 1994.

and in the case of writing, one in which the reader would “have no preferences, no prejudices, no partisan feeling of any kind.”³

Though the story's premise is presented immediately, its thematic elements reveal themselves after Gregor begins to adjust to his situation. He comes to find that he cannot communicate with his family: although he can still hear and understand them, he has lost the ability to talk. Kafka's choice of one-way communication between Gregor and his family allows for a great opportunity for introspection and self analysis for Gregor, but it seldom comes. Instead of questioning the origins of his metamorphosis or wondering about his fate or the state of his humanity, he accepts his situation with only a small degree of distress. His passive acceptance follows closely Gregor's reaction to his father's business failures, after which Gregor begrudgingly took up the role as the family's income earner. Instead of focusing on the nature of the premise itself, Kafka uses Gregor's submissive reactions to explore instead the nature of responsibility, and how we as individuals follow the expectations imposed upon us by society and ourselves. Gregor's lack of contemplation and Kafka's cold attention to the actions of each main character creates a story that Stevenson would call “not immoral, but simply a-moral ... where the interest turns, not upon what a man shall choose to do, but on how he manages to do it.”⁴ Stevenson thought highly of this approach, and believed that “it is possible to build, upon this ground, the most joyous of verses, and the most lively, beautiful and buoyant tales.”⁵

Like Gregor, his parents experience little change throughout the story. Instead of worrying about their son's well-being, his mother and father are chiefly concerned about the loss of Gregor's job and what his condition will mean for the family's income. The only character that undergoes significant change in *Metamorphosis* is Gregor's sister, Grete, the only other character that Kafka has given a full name. As a teenager, Grete has not yet fully entered adulthood and Kafka suggests in the story that she and Gregor shared a closeness prior to his transformation. Afterward, she tries to help her brother, and proves to be the only member of the family who is not repulsed by his presence. She makes efforts to understand Gregor, and to care for him by leaving out food, or clearing away furniture so that he can roam about his room. As she matures, however, she begins to grow repulsed by her brother. Near the end of the story, when she obtains a job and takes on more family responsibilities, she treats him with the same disdain her parents exhibit. It is not coincidence that this change in Grete occurs alongside her maturity into an adult, and again, Kafka uses Grete's change in attitude to suggest limitations in our capacity for pity; namely, that pity only exists insofar as our own welfare is not affected.

The situation-driven nature of *Metamorphosis* and the way in which its premise leads the action follows closely the classical tradition of storytelling, which places a greater importance of situation over character. This view was held by the Greek dramatists,⁶ and was the dominant mode of storytelling up to the age of Romanticism.⁷ However, writers began to hold different views after the advent of Realism. Among other innovations, this movement popularized the concept of the character-driven narrative, and writers such as Gustave Flaubert ignored unique incidents and stories led by premise, focusing instead on accurate depictions of society.⁸ This change caused great debate among the writers

3 Wilde, Oscar. “The Decay of Lying,” *Intentions*, 1891.

4 Stevenson, Robert. “A Gossip on Romance,” *Longman's Magazine*, November 1882.

5 *Ibid.*

6 “Tragedy is the imitation of an action ... and thought and character are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends.”
Aristotle, *Poetics*, circa 335 BCE

7 “Drama is the poetry of conduct, romance the poetry of circumstance ... It would be hard to say which of these modes of satisfaction is the more effective, but the latter is surely the more constant.”
Stevenson, Robert. “A Gossip on Romance,” *Longman's Magazine*, November 1882.

8 “What strikes me as beautiful, what I should like to do, is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments,

of the time. Some, like Wilde, continued to support premise-oriented narratives and their speculative nature, rejecting the notion that art should attempt to accurately depict society. He warned that “if something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify our monstrous worship of facts, art will become sterile, and beauty will pass away from the land.”⁹

This view was not upheld, however, and novelists continued to move away from premise and situation-driven narratives. The success of character-oriented novels such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* provided further evidence that this change in approach was more than just fleeting experimentation. More contemporary novels, such as John Updike's *Rabbit* series and Frank Norris's *McTeague* have continued the tradition of character-driven novels, and helped to reinforce its dominance in literary fiction and theory.¹⁰ Modern critics, such as W.J. Harvey, still support the belief that the great novels of history are chiefly memorable for their characters, not the situations they present.¹¹

Despite this change in focus, premise-driven narratives still have not fully disappeared. They are found today amongst most genre fiction, and echoes of Romanticism can be found amongst the opinions of some of the most popular writers in the field.¹²

The continued publication of premise-oriented stories provides evidence for the effectiveness of using premise as a storytelling framework. However, the relatively recent preference for character-driven narratives suggests that following either method may be useful for a writer, depending on the relative strengths of the rest of a story's elements.

Like any other narrative method, premise-driven stories present their own problems and difficulties. Given the nature of story transmission and the process of revealing a written narrative to the reader, premise alone is not enough to maintain interest for the duration of a story. A good premise will also not compensate for deficiencies in other story elements, such as character development, plot and theme. A writer must also make sure that a unique premise is handled in such a way that the characters and plot revolve naturally around it; Steven suggests that “the right kind of thing should fall out in the right kind of place; and not only the characters talk aptly and think naturally, but in all the circumstances in a tale answer to one another like notes in music.”¹³ Considering this, the greatest successes found in this method of storytelling will, like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, use a unique premise in such a way that it develops and enhances all other story components.

which would hold together by itself through the internal force of its own style. ... A book which would have practically no subject, or at least one in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that is possible.”

Flaubert, Gustave. “On Realism,” reprinted in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, George J. Becker, Princeton University Press, 1963.

9 Wilde, Oscar. “The Decay of Lying,” *Intentions*, 1891.

10 “Let us write and paint only what is, or at least what we see, what we know, what we have experienced.”

Desnoyers, Fernand. “On Realism,” reprinted in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, George J. Becker, Princeton University Press, 1963.

11 *Character and the Novel*, Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1966.

12 “A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot, which is fine with me. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a what-if question.”

King, Stephen. *On Writing*, Pocket Books, July 2002.

13 Stevenson, Robert. “A Gossip on Romance,” *Longman's Magazine*, November 1882.