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Philosophy/Literature

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Libidinous Bugs; Lecherous Quacks

Freud glanced at the Underground Man who stood hunched over – no doubt a result of forty years he had spent crouched in his mind. “Having read the notes you sent me, Mein Herr,” said Freud, “I know everything about your case already. May I begin by collecting some information from Herr Samsa?”

The Underground Man shrugged ambiguously and Freud inclined his head. “Very well,” decided the doctor. “Herr Samsa, if you would,” he patted the sofa.

Still weak from his near starvation and the apple core rotting in his back¹, Gregor found that he could not climb as well as he used to. The Underground Man noted this, so clasped his hands about Gregor and lifted the beetle onto the sofa before sitting in the corner.

The shock of being touched by another human being overcame Gregor momentarily.

“*Sehr gut*, Herr Samsa,” said Freud. “Would you kindly tell me how you came to be like this?” he indicated Gregor’s monstrous form. The insect laid his head down sadly, something like a pitiful spaniel and recounted his tale.

¹Still...back: the physical wounds that Gregor is suffering are from the neglect and fear of his family. The physical wounds are visible, painful reminders of the deeper emotional pain his family has inadvertently inflicted on him by rejecting him.

Freud nodded and occasionally wrote notes while Gregor spoke. From the corner, the Underground Man hung raptly upon Gregor's every word.

"I would like to try some word association," said Freud when Gregor had finished. "I will say a word and you reply with the first thing that comes to mind."

Gregor nodded his assent.

"Family," said Freud.

"Duty²," replied Gregor stalwartly.

Then Freud, "Home."

"Filth.³"

Freud nodded and made a note. "Love."

And Gregor, "My sister⁴."

Then Freud, "Beauty."

"The violin⁵," sighed Gregor.

"Thank you, that is plenty," said Freud surveying his notes. "Curious," he mumbled.

"Can you help me turn back into a man?" asked Gregor hesitantly.

² "Duty": In The Metamorphosis, Gregor's thoughts are almost exclusively of his family and his duty to support them. When he first discovers he is a bug, his first reaction is to wonder how he will get to work not how or why he is an insect (which would be a more logical reaction). Even when Gregor is dying and his family is discussing how to get rid of him, he thinks of his family "with tenderness and love" (457).

³ "Filth": This thought is derived from the literal filth and destitution of Gregor's room and from the nasty natures of his family that show following his transformation.

⁴ "My Sister": Initially, Grete is the only person who cares for Gregor when he becomes a bug. To quote Shakespeare: "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds" (Sonnet 116). In this sense, Grete is the only person who seems to still love Gregor, yet much to Gregor's dismay, her love dissolves as he becomes more and more of a burden.

⁵ "The Violin": Gregor is thinking of Grete playing the violin as something soothing and beautiful.

“Your symptoms are certainly unusual,” said Freud. “I’ve never known a man to crawl into my office as a literal insect, but the root of your problem is much the same as any other man’s.”

“Yes?” asked Gregor, hopeful.

“Your metamorphosis is a sublimation – a rather unusual sublimation – of your repressed sexual desires.”

“My...?” Gregor’s feelers drooped, in disappointment.

“For your sister,” said Freud matter-of-factly. “To classify you based on libido, you are predominantly erotic, choosing to focus on your emotional relationships with others which is why, even in the lowest of your low moments, your thoughts went to your family before yourself⁶. Before your transformation, you clearly had suppressed feelings for her: you were prepared to go through the trouble of sending her to a conservatorium and you had clearly reveled in your plans to announce your intentions at Christmas.⁷”

“Yes, but-”

“And after your transformation,” continued Freud, “the more of an insect you became, the more you came to realize your desires which is why her playing affected you so much that night.

⁶ “To classify...yourself.”: In the given excerpt of Civilization and Its Discontents Freud briefly touches on libidinal types, including the erotic man who “will give first preference to his emotional relationships to other people” (30).

⁷ “Before...Christmas.”: Gregor’s plans to send Grete to study music seems to be the only extravagance he afforded himself before his transformation and afterwards it is the fantasy he clings the most to.

“You associate beauty with the violin because you associate the violin with your sister,” said Freud. “The sound of the violin is a substitutive satisfaction⁸ which diminishes your desires for your sister. You are also attracted by the general aesthetic of the violin, derived of your yearning. Just consider for the moment the *shape* of the violin⁹. Also consider your thoughts as you listened to the music: you expressed a wish that Grete would willfully come to your room and stay with you. At first you only thought of the violin, but within a moment you noted that she had begun to keep her neck bare¹⁰.”

“You are narrow-minded, Herr Doktor,” cried the Underground Man from his corner. He stood abruptly, knocking over his chair.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Freud, calmly, turning to face him.

“This poor creature’s *libido* has nothing to do with his plight,” said the Underground Man. “Just look at the great injustice practiced upon him by his own family! I sense that Herr Samsa was a man of action before he fell prey to hyperconsciousness and so came into this monstrous form. His primary cause was to support his family and he did just that working non-stop to see that all three were more than amply provided for. Then he must have begun to question himself¹¹. He must have

⁸ “Substitutive satisfaction”: Freud alludes to art as a “substitutive satisfaction”, a means of diminishing misery by indulging in fantasies (22).

⁹ “You are...violin.”: The violin is shaped like a woman’s (“ideal”) body. But hey, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

¹⁰ “Also consider...bare”: Freud is referring to Gregor’s quasi-hypnotic state induced by his sister’s violin. To Freud, Gregor’s fantasy of Grete coming to stay in his room and letting “kiss her on the neck” must seem fairly sexual particularly in lieu of any other young female playing a prominent role in Gregor’s life (454).

¹¹ “Then he...himself.”: Prior to his transformation, Gregor led a mundane existence. While he initially took pride in supporting his family, he soon lost the “special uprush of warm feeling” when he provided for them (442). This is the first sign of his troubles.

sensed that they were ungrateful and so he became an insect. He, one man, saw that three people were well provided for and yet when this befell him, three people could not even spare him basic necessities. As for his reaction to his sister's music: isn't that what separates man from beasts?¹²

"An interesting interpretation," said Freud, "but your analysis is a projection of your own desires. While Herr Samsa is predominantly an erotic man, you are a narcissistic man, deriving pleasure from your internal reasoning¹³. While Herr Samsa notes the destitution of his family before himself, you are quick to feel ill-used at any given moment. Your narcissism was clear in the entire body of your notes, both in that you recorded the perversity of your own thoughts and your reactions in the events recalled: did you not immediately feel ill-used when you arrived at the hotel an hour early?"

"I *was* ill-used! I-"

"Feeling ill-used must to some extent please you," said Freud, "or you would not immediately blame others for everything that happens to you."

"Of course I wouldn't do it if it didn't please me!" laughed the Underground Man. "Man never does anything unless it pleases him¹⁴."

¹² "As for...beasts?": Gregor wonders the opposite: "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him?" (454)

¹³ "While Herr...reasoning.": Explaining basic libidinal types, Freud also illustrates the narcissistic man as deriving pleasure from "his internal mental processes" (30). Though the Underground Man is disgusted by his hyperconsciousness, it is undeniably his main source of pleasure.

¹⁴ "Man...him.": The Underground Man illustrates how one might find masochistic pleasure and claims "if he did not find enjoyment in them he would not moan" (475). On this count, at least, Freud and the Underground Man agree.

“But in your case,” said Freud, “your bitterness is also something of a defense mechanism. Man is ‘never so defenseless against suffering as when [he] love[s]’¹⁵. Even as a narcissistic man, you have erotic tendencies. Take the prostitute, Liza: a truly narcissistic man would never have even spoken to her.”

“I spoke to her out of common human decency¹⁶,” snapped the Underground Man.

“And you fell in love with her because of your erotic nature.”

“If I fell in love with her, I did it on purpose – out of sheer boredom¹⁷,” the Underground Man replied.

“You projected upon her the suppressed libidinous thoughts you harbor for your non-existent daughter¹⁸,” said Freud.

“Does sex occupy your every thought, you lecherous quack?” demanded the Underground Man. “This was exactly what I was trying to avoid when I spoke with Liza. There is more to love and beauty than *sex*. You are trying to fit me into your mold and

¹⁵“But in...loves.”: “It is that we are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love” (Freud 28). Freud recognizes two main methods of achieving happiness: to avoid pain and to obtain pleasure (23). The Underground Man achieves both of these by wrapping himself in bitterness. The hopelessness and degradation pleases him (in some perverse way) but also, since he does not allow himself to love, he shields himself from some suffering.

¹⁶ “I spoke...decency,”: The Underground Man feels (a perhaps uncommon) shame when he realizes that he has been intimate with a woman and not said a word to her (516). He initializes his conversation with Liza hoping to save his humanity.

¹⁷ “If...boredom,”: The Underground Man is perhaps referring to Liza when in Part One he says, “I tried to force myself to fall in love...all out of boredom” (476).

¹⁸ “You...daughter,”: Freud would have a field day reading what Underground said to Liza about how much he would love his daughter if he had one (520-521).

figure me out with your equations¹⁹. But it isn't going to work. I will *prove* to you that I don't fit your model."

"Denial is also a defense mechanism," sighed Freud, reaching for a cigar.

"Come along Gregor," the Underground man jerked his head towards the door.

"We've had enough of Herr Doktor's ludicrous postulates."

There was no reply. Freud and the Underground Man looked about but the insect was nowhere to be found. Somewhere in all the discussion, Gregor had decided there was no hope for redemption and that he was no longer fit to live amongst men²⁰. Dejected, he crawled away.

¹⁹ "You are...equations.": The Enlightenment Age principle of applying science and mathematics to classify human nature seems to especially annoy the Underground Man. He greatly dislikes the idea that one could "calculate [his] whole life thirty years in advance" because what, then, would be the point in living? (482). In such a scientific world, the Underground Man sees "proving to himself continually that he is a man and not an organ stop" is the chief pursuit of his life (484). He therefore sees Freud's cookie-cutter psychoanalysis as a challenge to his free will and humanity.

²⁰ Gregor had...men.: Shortly before Gregor's (alleged) death, Grete notes, "If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can't live with such a creature, and he'd have gone away on his own accord" (456). If Grete accurately judges her brother, then Gregor coming to this conclusion is ironic, since by considering the feelings of others, he is mentally and emotionally still his human self and therefore redeemable.

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Reflection Paper #3

Choose ONE of the following:

- (1) Imagine that you are Sigmund Freud and the Underground Man has come to you for help. What will you offer him in the way of Freudian analysis? After addressing his various problems, what practical advice—if any—can you offer him toward finding a more meaningful existence?

 - (2) Now you're faced with two patients: the Underground Man and Gregor Samsa. Turns out, after being chucked out on the trash heap to die, Gregor was only unconscious. He managed to drag his roach carcass down to the docks and onto a ~~tray~~ tray loaded with some pretty decent *ceegars* headed for you know where (whom). In the waiting room of Freud, he sidles out of a box and UM recognizes a kindred spirit. Being the animal lover he is, UM has an inspired thought: let's see^{if} Herr Doktor can treat two broken souls for the price of one. What might Freud say to the two and how might each respond?
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