



“Locust” of Control: Animorphs versus the Metamorphosis as Transformative Metaphors

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Research Article

Abstract

*The theme of transformation between human and nonhuman has been prevalent for characters in popular media since its first surviving use in text, a Roman poetry collection that would form a cultural foundation: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. From the authors of 15th century werewolf stories to the illustrator that drew DC comic Martian Manhunter, storytellers have gravitated towards portrayals of shapeshifting. This paper serves as a comparative analysis of two such texts: *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and the *Animorphs* series by K. A. Applegate. The prior is a 1915 novella following a working class man named Gregor Samsa after he wakes up one morning having transformed into a giant insect. The latter, meanwhile, is a middle-grade fiction series about five human children who are granted the power to morph into any animal they touch—one of whom becomes trapped in his transformed animal body in the first book. Using frameworks of disability and trans studies—drawing from texts including Devlin and Pothier (2006), Garland-Thomson (2002), and Cael M. Keegan (2020)—this paper argues that while Kafka's work lends itself more heavily to a disabled reading of its protagonist Gregor Samsa's transformation into a dung beetle, a transgender reading is more appropriate for Applegate's character Tobias's morphing into a red-tailed hawk. While both characters experience irreversible transformations into their respective nonhuman forms, Gregor's narrative is characterized by stigmatization, exclusion, and lack of agency; meanwhile, Tobias's story emphasizes empowerment, an embrace of monstrosity, and culminates in an explicit choice to become and remain nonhuman. Both stories exemplify the relationship between body, self, and society—however, they diverge significantly in the implications of what the journeys serve to represent when viewed through the real-world mirror of the medical humanities and the transgender and disabled people represented therein.*

Keywords: Science-Fiction; Fantasy; Genre; Media Studies; Sci-Fi; Young Adult; Middle Grade; Gender Studies; Transgender; Kafka; Disability.

Transformation Spanning Generations

The theme of transformation between human and nonhuman has been prevalent in popular media since its first surviving use in text, a Roman poetry collection that would form a cultural foundation: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. From the authors of 15th century werewolf stories to the illustrator that drew DC comic Martian Manhunter, storytellers have gravitated towards portrayals of shapeshifting. Not yet explored in scholarship is the striking juxtaposition of transformation between Kafka's most popularized novella and the popular early-2000s children's series *Animorphs*, penned by Katherine Applegate and husband Michael Grant. Though the fifty-four books are targeted at elementary-school-aged readers, they tackle advanced themes of genocide, imperialism, and body horror—specifically emphasizing that of transformation itself. This paper compares the depictions of transformation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Applegate's *Animorphs* in order to demonstrate shared patterns across the two narratives while also analyzing key difference in the metaphor most accurately represented by each act of transformation. I argue that the prior showcases a story of disability due to its themes of stigmatization, exclusion, and lack of agency; meanwhile, the latter can



be more accurately read as an allegory for the transgender experience due to alternative themes of empowerment, an embrace of monstrosity, and explicit choice in the allegoric character's transformation.

Franz Kafka's 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis* tells the story of a working class man named Gregor Samsa after he wakes up one morning having transformed into a giant insect. While Kafka's stories were originally penned in German, quotes used in this paper are excerpted from an English translation by Willa and Edwin Muir. In the original novella, Kafka's narrator describes Gregor's form as *ungeheures Ungeziefer* or monstrous vermin, while the housekeeper specially refers to him as a dung beetle. Gregor's insect form has also frequently been interpreted by English-speaking readers as a cockroach. As a result of the limitations and stigma of his new body, Gregor's life falls to pieces: he is unable to make it to work and is subsequently fired, his family rejects him, and he eventually dies after starving himself and being bludgeoned with an apple by his father. He loses the will to live after his mistreatment and passes away, leaving his family to recover their middle-class lifestyle without the burden of caring for Gregor in his transformed and grotesque body.

K. A. Applegate's *Animorphs* series began its publication in 1996, following five human children—Jake, Marco, Cassie, Rachel, and Tobias—who are granted the power to shape-shift into any animal they touch. This gift was given to them by a benevolent alien Andalite to further the goal of stopping a second, parasitic race of aliens called the Yeerks. The Yeerks' aim is to take over the brains of every other sentient creature including all humans, whether through the cooperation of hosts or by force. Aximili, a teenaged alien of the Andalite species, joins the human Animorphs in their fight to defeat the Yeerks early on in the series. Tobias is the first of the children to use his power of transformation and is also the only one of the group to become permanently stuck in one of his morph forms, that of a red-tailed hawk, as a result of staying in the animal form for longer than two hours. Through the book series, the characters take on hundreds of different animals ranging from household pets to prime predators to insect pests. My argument's primary focus is Tobias's character arc, as his story lends itself most overtly to a transgender reading of the *Animorphs* series.

Transgender and Disabled Frameworks

Frameworks around critical disability theory and transgender readings of texts are part of rapidly-evolving fields, with many universities beginning to implement crip and queer studies into their curricula. For the purposes of this reading, I aim to distill core ideas that differentiate what makes a fictional experience disabled from qualities that situate a story as transgender in order to help establish common patterns in representations of these communities in narratives—separating these shared patterns from literal disability in real-life individuals in order to effectively interpret literary metaphor. Beginning with a critical disability theory framework, Devlin and Pothier (2006) write of the priorities for the field at the time of their publication pertaining to real-world populations. Due to the difficulty in drawing lines in the sand regarding who is disabled or not, they emphasize instead that “the vital question is not whether the disability inheres in a particular person, but what is society's response to a particular person's circumstances” (5). Society often reacts to disabled individuals with a tendency to try to either prevent or nullify their existence, thereby “fixing” them. The authors further emphasize that “stigmatization is pivotal” with “the existence of exclusionary social practices” (7). Disabled people are habitually denied voice when language is itself “deeply partial” making it all the more important for those who are disabled to be able to speak for themselves (7). Those who have disabilities are also often removed from populations in which they deserve unhindered involvement or inclusion, denying them the rights for voting, parenthood, or inclusion in public spaces: “disability is not just an individual impairment but a systematically enforced pattern of exclusion” (14). Also core to this framework is the idea that disability, while not infrequently a trait possessed since birth,



can also be acquired at any time. As Garland-Thomson (2002) writes, “Disability is an identity category that anyone can enter at any time, and we will all join it if we live long enough” (20).

Previous scholars have published research into Gregor Samsa as fitting into an established mould of disabled allegory. Uttara Ghosh (2013) writes of Gregor as disabled, emphasizing the presence of alienation and exclusion, worthlessness, and lack of voice. Rameez Raja and Ananya Dasghosh (2022) frame sections of their research around the connection between disability and capitalism and how Gregor’s transformation parallels the loss of economic opportunity often experienced by those who acquire disability. Jaya Upadhyay (2023) also analyzes Gregor’s transformed form as a non-normative body that fits within the disables studies lens of interpretation, focusing on the way in which others treat Gregor. This emphasis is similar to the aspects of analysis I employ to differentiate Gregor’s story of disability from Tobias’s transgender narrative. As prior scholarship evaluates Gregor as disabled, the primary originality of my paper is its contrast of the ways in which the descriptions and contexts of transformation drastically alter the implications of the characters as representing minority groups.

The transgender experience and portrayals of it, on the other hand, deal significantly with self-reflection and choice in how one presents. Differentiating queerness from disability, Garland-Thomson notes that “disability and sexual identity, however, seem more porous, although sexual mutability is imagined as elective where disability is seldom conceived of as a choice” (20). Whether someone indeed chooses their sexuality or gender identity is not at the crux of this paper’s argument, but it is relevant that a trans person does choose to come out as their gender identity and, in the case of many trans people, medically transition. Lyrically, Cael M. Keegan (2020) refers to this as the “shifting [of] the transgender body from the position of a medically created *thing* to that of self-author” (68). Rather than being subject to, trans people are agents of their own change. They have a locus of control inherent in the choice to embrace their identity when the path of least resistance for many would be to remain closeted and live a life masquerading as their birth sex. Keegan brings up trans poet Susan Stryker’s fixation upon and use of the monstrous as imagery (70), the reflection one experiences in a mirror while looking at oneself (70), and treating texts as bodies rather than bodies as texts (71) as symbols that can represent transness. Keegan pauses on the idea of the monstrous several times, defining that historically, “transgender phenomena have generally been represented as *things*—indefinable and monstrous objects that threaten the taxonomies of the western scientific episteme” (72), with such language and imagery being reclaimed by trans people in stories such as *The Thing* (1982) featuring a “monster [with a] wildly permutating body... possess[ing] the ability to assimilate living flesh and imitate its forms” (74). Cumulatively, this prior literature establishes disparate reoccurring themes within experiences that are to be read as either disabled or transgender while also setting up a framework for the analysis on which I now embark.

Sans Metaphor: Preliminary Comparison Between Kafka & Applegate

A unifying plot device in both *The Metamorphosis* and the *Animorphs* series is the transformation of human characters into insect forms, an experience that is painted in a negative light for each of the protagonists; this shared representation differs in the magnitude of emotional descriptions of and visceral reactions to the bodies themselves. It is clear that Gregor gains no satisfaction from his transformation into a bug, and this change sets into motion a series of events that eventually leads to his death near the end of the story. The opening pages of the story portray Gregor as fraught with anxiety about the implications and aftermath of his new form—fears that come to pass in the proceeding acts of the book—though he does not comment directly on the transformative experience and focuses instead on secondary effects. The stage is set with reference to Gregor’s “uneasy dreams” the night before and an “overcast sky [that] made him quite melancholy” (89). After this, the process of getting out of bed is both difficult and painful for Gregor—narrated with



descriptions I will analyze in the context of disability in the subsequent section. All of Gregor's mental energy is fixated on his inability to go to work that day, fretting about losing his job when he takes his first sick day in the five years at his job and being seen as lazy by his family members. He later stops eating and stays confined to his room for the majority of the text's second half, entering an isolated depression. However, Gregor's transformation is not described using highly emotional language by the third-person narrator of the novella. Though Gregor does not have an internal dialogue directly lamenting his new form as a beetle, the text is laden with images and thoughts with negative connotations stemming from the transformation.

The Animorphs, on the other hand, verbalize a specific and visceral disgust at the idea of taking on their insect bodies—a reaction that both foils and echoes the coinciding chronic depression that Gregor develops. Before the opportunity and necessity to take on a bug morph presents itself, narrator Rachel preemptively remarks that when Jake morphed a lizard, it “had crept him out big time. A roach would be even worse” (*The Visitor* 25). The Animorphs continue to speculate on the eventual task, with Rachel telling the others, “I don't think I'll be willing to [become a bug]” (*The Visitor* 41). It's a vehement emotional rejection, one that is fitting for the child who is experiencing the feeling. The changing of the self into something that they are afraid of or disgusted by presents a reaction tangible in the first-person narrative voice. Still, in spite of it being “not anyone's favorite morph” (*The Conspiracy* 31), every one of the Animorphs assumes a cockroach form at at least one point to further their fight against the Yeerks. In fact, it is one of very few animal forms that all of the children able to shape-shift do eventually take on at some point in the series. They emphasize the resilience and functionality of the body as well as mentioning its downsides, calling the body “harder to kill” than other forms even if less emotionally favorable (*The Conspiracy* 24). It is a necessary discomfort, and one that the young protagonists opt into. In this way, the two stories demonstrate the experience of an insect transformation as narratively different while also showing key emotional parallels for those being transformed: no one draws pleasure from this change, but the Animorphs are given agency and functional silver linings that Gregor is not granted.

Gregor's Condition as Disability, Tobias's Journey as Transness

As noted previously, there are key differences present between the bug transformation of Gregor versus those of the Animorphs, and further analysis of these juxtapositions supports broader interpretations of the transformative metaphors. In the *Animorphs*, there is a very strong emphasis on each character's experience of existing within their body—an experience that becomes strongly negative and emotionally arduous when faced with inhabiting a body that the protagonists do not identify with and are disgusted by. This is a perspective that is absent from Gregor's own experience as described by the narrator of his text. Most of Gregor's upset is not about the body he inhabits but rather than effects that it causes: he focusses on his immobility and the resulting inability to work rather than trains of thought surrounding disgust with himself. There is not a significant amount of emotional connotation to the narrator's depictions of his form, rather a matter-of-fact description of the events of the story. For the Animorphs, however, emotions run high as the young characters discover new relationships to their changing bodies—like a young transgender person going through puberty and realizing they do not align with their maturing body, there is a dysphoria that strikes the heart of the teenaged Animorphs' tumultuous emotions. Gregor lacks this intense internal turmoil and presents as pragmatic about the limitations caused by becoming a dung beetle, possessing the emotional regulation of the older person he represents. In relating this to the differences in metaphor between each fiction, the propensity for dysphoria to appear in adolescent years versus the near-inevitability of disability in older age form the first allegoric discrepancy in these two works.

Disability, when addressed in the *Animorphs* books explicitly, is positioned in diametric opposition to the alien morphing technology. Thirty-one pages into the first book when Jake assumes



his very first morph, he immediately uses language that directly juxtaposes his transformed body and its abilities with a visual disability, saying, “It was like being blind all your life and then suddenly you can see” (*The Invasion* 34). Leaving his peregrine falcon form in the second book, Jake once again describes the morphed animal form as opposite disability, describing being “back in a human body [as] feel[ing] like [he is] handicapped” (*The Visitor* 10). Cassie follows this up with “and blind,” echoing his comment from the previous installment (10). The Animorphs’ native form is the one that leaves them feeling limited while the new, transformed versions of themselves grant a freedom they haven’t felt before as humans. Tobias uses slightly different emphasis when he describes the difference between being a hawk and being human, focusing on the upsides of the red-tailed hawk rather than using language surrounding disability as a metaphor. He says, “There were millions of things I could do as a bird that I couldn’t do as a human” (*The Encounter* 45). In both characters’ cases, when they are morphing into a form they prefer, they do not feel out of place in their transformed body. The abilities of the non-human are lauded while the less capable human bodies are dismissed, showcasing morphing as something like an opposite to disability, at least from the teen protagonists’ perspectives.

While Gregor’s transformation into a beetle eventually causes his demise after his father attacks him, the Animorphs’ transformations are not only painless but actually heal any non-genetic health conditions. The process of morphing is not painful, as Marco says in book five, “morphing doesn’t hurt. It creeps you out some times, but it doesn’t hurt” (*The Predator* 4). But morphing goes far beyond simply not causing harm. This is established in book one, when Marco explains why one could acquire the morph of an injured bird but still shapeshifter into its healthy form: “DNA has nothing to do with some injury. The DNA wasn’t broken. Just a wing” (*The Invasion* 46). When Tobias first reclaims his ability to change shape after being stuck as a hawk for thirteen books, he does so under duress: his hawk morph’s wing has been broken, and he is in peril of death from a hungry raccoon that is closing in on his vulnerable body. Discovering he can once again acquire other animals, he transforms into the raccoon that is threatening him before “remorph[ing] back into [his] own body” as a hawk, now in perfect condition (*The Change* 81). He reinforces this with explicit language, as is common in the middle-grade series: “The others had done it. They had morphed out of injured bodies. Then when they re-morphed, the bodies were whole again” (p. 57). Morphing even saves Jake from death in book six after his cockroach morph is sprayed with bug poison—he is “trapped inside a dying body” but morphs out of it in the nick of time as a healthy but very stressed human boy (*The Capture* 35). The temporary injuries of the animal bodies are made even more fleeting when a simple transfiguration will reset them to full health.

If that was not example enough, book fifty of the collection has an even more poignant stance on the matter: disabled children who are granted the morphing capability are no longer affected by their disabilities after morphing and resuming their human form—just as long as their disability was not genetic in origin. As the war with the Yeerks continues escalating, the Animorphs realize they need to find kids who they know for certain are not Controllers to grant morphing capabilities to. “The Yeerks don’t want a blind Controller. They don’t want a disabled Controller. Deaf people, people in wheelchairs, people with serious illnesses” (*The Ultimate* 53). Previously, Tobias’s mom “was blinded in an accident. Tobias gave her the ability to morph, and now she’s not blind” (57). The same is true for James, the leader of the new Auxiliary Animorphs, who is healed from the paralysis he acquired in a car accident years prior. Following his initiation into the Animorphs, his unmorphed form is athletic and healthy, not even experiencing the muscle atrophy of living in a wheelchair for many years. The culmination of the Auxiliary Animorphs’ plot is every one of them being killed in one of the final conflicts of the war with the Yeerks. Though *Animorphs* is a series that involves disability, disabled characters don’t tend to ‘stick’ narratively, and morphing certainly is never shown



to create disability in a character in a way that would support the transformation as a disabled allegory.

The one direct reference to disability in *The Metamorphosis* similarly features Gregor praising the healing capacity of his dung beetle form. After noticing he's healed from past wounds, the narrator describes that Gregor "felt no disability" and remembers how "more than a month ago he had cut one finger a little with a knife and had still suffered pain from the wound only the day before yesterday" (Kafka 108). In spite of the word choice of "disability," the majority of the narrative tells a very different story about Gregor's new form compared to his old. He is painted as ineffectual and incapable of basic mobility from the beginning. When he wakes and tries to rise, his "pitifully thin" legs "wave helplessly," leaving him unable to easily get out of bed; facing this inconvenience alone, he is struck by "how simple it would be if he could get help" (89). When he makes his first efforts to move out of bed, he feels "in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before" (p. 89) akin to a form of chronic pain. Gregor is unable to go to work, demonstrating that he fits within an economic definition of disability as established by Julie Smart (2004) and further discussed by Jan Grue (2022) wherein he has "an inability to perform socially valued roles, most often work roles" (Smart 37). As he is sequestered to his bedroom, unable to leave, his circumstances also echo Devin and Pother's description of the habitual exclusion of the disabled, resulting in an inability to participate in a space he was formerly able to. When he does emerge from the room, his father strikes him with an apple which starts a spiral of mental and physical health issues that end in Gregor passing away. Gregor's dung beetle body is overall a disabling change, foiling the Animorphs who repeatedly contrast disability and their preferred animal forms.

Gregor also does not have any choice or cause to why he ends up in his newly transformed body. The opening line is all of the context the reader receives, which is to say, very little: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 89). The form is permanent, but no decision process goes into it, nor is there a reason or fault to it. Much as there is not a choice made by disabled people to opt into their disability, Gregor does not elect to embody his new insect form. "Disability is seldom conceived of as a choice" (Garland-Thomson 20), and Gregor does not choose. Going further, this plays into the idea that any person could become disabled at any time. If there was no cause for Gregor's transformation, it could have just as easily happened to any other person in their bed on a particular night. This differs greatly from Tobias's journey of transformation. His initial transformation was seemingly accidental albeit causal, a change laden with a permanency that Tobias didn't feel entirely comfortable embracing. However, from that point forward he began a process of accepting that the red-tailed hawk was more representative of his true self than his original body as a human.

Time and time again, Tobias refers to his transfigured body as preferable to his human one. "I hate changing back. It's like going back into a prison or something. I hate it when I don't have wings" (*The Invasion* 53). This comment and Tobias's subsequent identity arc have led to fan speculation about whether he might have intentionally become stuck as a hawk from the very beginning, but there is not a canonical consensus therein. When the Animorphs are planning to acquire new morphs from the zoo early in the series, Tobias initially has no interest in any form but his eventually-permanent raptor form. "I'm happy with just my hawk morph. I don't want to be anything else" (*The Invasion* 68). He continues to reiterate this sentiment after the fact even as his friends see the transformation as somewhere between an accident and a curse. Tobias not only is at ease in the new body, but it is the animal of his choice, saying, "If you ever have to be stuck as an animal, I think being a hawk is the coolest choice of all" (*The Encounter* 21). By the final few books of the series, the other Animorphs begin to share the previously mentioned fan sentiment, with Cassie saying of Tobias's permanent change, "None of us are one hundred percent sure it was an accident" (*The*



Ultimate 8). Unlike the fluke change of Gregor into a beetle, Tobias's change is loaded with insinuations not only of an overt cause but of choice and consequence.

The thirteenth Animorphs book *The Change* culminates in Tobias choosing to remain in his hawk body with reclaimed access to morphing capabilities, a gift granted by a cosmic deity called the Ellimist. Hints are peppered throughout this book in regards to what Tobias's innermost desire is for himself, a yearning not to become a human again but stay a hawk—in spite of his insistence otherwise. Midway through the book, Tobias mentions that he's "changed" in reference to now living in the body of a hawk instead of a boy; the alien Jara Hamee to whom he is speaking says that he has changed too, earning his freedom from slavery under the Yeerks (72). Though Jara's line is spoken without context to Tobias's journey, and the alien's intelligence is suspect, the dialogue hints at a truth about Tobias. He, too, can be read as achieving a newfound freedom through his transformation. In the scene where he encounters the Ellimist, Tobias's physical form in the dreamscape is transient and mid-transformation, a seeming representation of the true inner form of Tobias himself: "both a human and a bird and some third thing that was in between the two" (58). At this book's culmination, he has the opportunity to change the course of his timeline and avoid ever becoming trapped as a hawk, but he chooses to actively encourage his past self to begin the series of events that led to his present raptor self. He also has a moment of reflection, not in a mirror but staring into his own face as a human through the eyes of his true bird form.

In Sandy Stone's "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," she describes a trans woman formerly called James Morris "say[ing] good-bye to [himself] in the mirror" leading up to the moment of transition—for James (soon to be Jan), this is via surgery, while for Tobias, this is through the morphing capabilities which will soon be bequeathed to him. One step beyond the trans mirror imagery to which Keegan and Stone refer, Applegate narrates Tobias's post-transition self encountering his old form and acquiring the ability to morph into that human body when he chooses. Instead of fully leaning in the "wrong body" interpretation of a gender discovery experience and an emphasis on "passing" as a binary, Tobias instead bucks the idea that "only one body per gendered subject is 'right'" (Stone 13). He is not "erasing a considerable portion of [his] personal experience," but following in Stone's ideals of the post-transsexual (12). This is juxtaposed by his friends' own perspectives on his change, consistently not understanding that his transformation is net good. Cassie uses this "wrong body" interpretation common to cisgender perspectives and more dated trans theory when she calls Tobias "our friend, who had been trapped forever in a body not his own" (*The Message* 48); however, Tobias does not echo this language when referring to himself and his existence halfway through a spectrum of identity. Going beyond standard human constraints wherein a person can embody only one slowly-changing form, Tobias is able to assume an ultimate control over his own presentation and image, existing between spaces of embodiment and acquiring a fluidity of presentation.

Because Gregor wakes up already transformed, there is also no opportunity for descriptions of physical change in his narrative. Gregor is not shown in his narrative to have ever been anything but a dung beetle. His bodily change from a man to an insect is neglected to be described and he simply is. It is often considered a faux pas or outright offensive to ask a disabled person how they became disabled. The internet footprint of disabled individuals asking for new friends to avoid this line of conversation is immense. Some people are born with disabilities, other acquire them, and very few of either want to break the ice by telling a stranger about it. Meanwhile, descriptions of change are constant and graphic in the *Animorphs* series. Tobias and his fellow teens are repeatedly shown to change from one body to another. They are nearly-constantly in an act of transformation. Trans identity is based thoroughly around the act of change, the process of transformation being innate in the identity. No person is born having already medically transitioned, and the changing of one's body



is a shared and important experience for a large majority of transgender people—whether that is the simple act of cutting their hair or the more intensive hormone replacement therapies and surgeries available.

Associations between disability, transness, and the monstrous are varied in prior research; however, there is an emergent pattern in literature wherein disability scholars are engaging in a concerted effort to disconnect disability from body horror while various trans artists and audiences have leaned into their identities' intersection with it. I turn my attention to Susan Stryker's seminal trans theory text mentioned previously, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." In this, she likens her identity as a trans woman to Frankenstein's monster in 1994, beginning her written monologue with the remark that:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker 245)

Stryker is by no means unique in how she embraces monstrosity as prominent imagery to represent her transition. Movies such as mind-bending Sundance film *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024) have been overwhelmingly interpreted as trans allegories which use body horror to convey the transgender experience. While the story has horror elements, it does not frame its genderqueer or questioning characters in a negative light. Mirrors also play a pivotal role in the film, as the final scene features the likely-transfeminine Owen cut into his chest, which he stretches open to reveal a television screen that he gazes into in his reflection. The canonically transmasculine protagonist of the young adult novel *Hell Followed with Us* by Andrew Joseph White also embodies transformation into the monstrous without undergoing medical transition. Benjamin refers to himself as "a monster standing among the living, a boy made of raw meat and dying flesh" (290). He revels in embodying monstrosity because it separates him from girlhood and being perceived as a woman: "everyone will see my razor-sharp, jumbled mess of teeth and rotting flesh when people look at me, the first thing they'll think is *monster*, is *Seraph*, not *girl*" (313).

For disability theory, there is too long a history of disabled representations in media coming from those who are not disabled themselves, a prevalence of films within the horror genre which paint their disabled characters in negative lights. Paul D. C. Bones (2022) writes that "disability isn't just another horror trope, it is the cornerstone of how we express and understand fear" due to the assumptions that have been instilled in the back of each viewer's mind about real-world disabled people; he goes on to state that "consuming horror is very much an act of reaffirming the status quo and reinforcing stereotypes" (257). In this light, disability rights voices in the digital sphere have published dozens of articles arguing for the trope's elimination as a Hollywood staple. There is not a wave of reclamation of the grotesque and the other in relation to this movement (nor does there need to be) but rather pleas to separate genuine and literal disability from the role of monster or villain. Juxtaposing the way in which young trans artists seem to gravitate to body horror, stories of disability from disabled authors often take on other metaphors and images.

Drawing from this understanding, I would like to emphasize the difference in visceral imagery and emotional language regarding the transformations portrayed in Kafka versus Applegate's work. *The Metamorphosis* paints Gregor's new body as more helpless and ineffective than grotesque. The other characters are appalled at his insect form, but the narrator of the story itself as Gregor's main voice does not lean into this as the raw description of Gregor's new body. Applegate's imagery, on the other hand, is frequently gruesome—surprisingly so for a middle-grade children's series. Their



transformations are plagued with the children's skeletons defying laws of biology: "the odd crunching sound you get sometimes when bones are stretched or compressed" (*The Message* 31); "a sickening crunch as her knees changed direction" (*The Encounter* 19); "the terrifying sensation of knowing that all the bones inside my body were dissolving" (*The Predator* 25). The morphs are unpleasant, unattractive, "something straight out of a nightmare" (*The Encounter* 18). To demonstrate the frequency of these descriptions, I would like to note that all of these quotes are excerpted from the first five books of the series, demonstrating a pattern of language that continues throughout. (*The Change* 87) The ineffectual emphasis and matter-of-fact descriptions regarding Gregor's body could not be more different in connotation from the words describing the Animorphs, paralleling the ways in which real-world disabled and transgender people choose to self-describe in their art.

Kafka's Gregor is rendered less able to communicate with others due to his transformation, both through his voice itself and how he is understood externally. The first section of the book has him speaking comprehensibly to others, but only through the physical barrier of a wooden door; his words then become "no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before" (99); finally, communication lapses fully as Gregor's mother becomes "convinced that he could not understand her words" (116). Two months of "lack of all direct human speech" (116) isolate Gregor, driving him to self-starvation and desolation. He is stripped of voice in the way that Devlin and Pothier (2006) describe is common for disabled people. In this case, the silencing is literal, as he is no longer capable of human speech and could not be understood even if his voice was valued. For Gregor, though, no one wants to listen to him in the first place—which is at the crux of how many disabled people in real-world society are left unheard.

Meanwhile, the Animorphs are able to speak telepathically, expanding their power of communication beyond human limits while in their morph forms. As humans, they speak like anyone else, but in their animal forms they can project their thoughts into the minds of anyone they want, whether a specific person or a larger group. They can even talk through barriers like brick walls, communicating in a way that neither auditory language nor visual languages like American Sign Language are able. In this way, each of the characters is actually more capable of being heard when they are not limited by their human form. By eliminating a barrier of communication, the morphs are painted as more of a superpower than a curse. Tobias is able to be heard by others better and from a greater distance than in his past human body, and it is his friends who he cannot hear as easily, directly contrasting Gregor who could hear his family but was not understood by them.

Throughout Applegate's *Animorphs* series, the act of transformation is framed as expansive and freeing, described using language that explicitly juxtaposes words pertaining to disability while echoing experiences of adolescent dysphoria. Tobias's arc demonstrates patterns of autonomy, comfort with monstrosity, and bodily fluidity—providing an opportunity for analysis of his experience as a transgender metaphor. These narrative choices juxtapose the hindered communication, exclusion, and lack of agency granted to Gregor in his inadvertent and detrimental metamorphosis that parallels a tale of disability. Though both texts introduce overlapping experiences of insect transformations, the prior lends itself naturally to a genderqueer interpretation in ways that Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* does not. Coincidentally, K. A. Applegate and Michael Grant's child who was born the year after *Animorphs* began its publication would later come out as a transgender woman; years after the release of *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka would die from an acquired disability, suffering for seven years with the negative health effects stemming from tuberculosis. Though neither author could have known they were penning a reflection of their life's later plot points, there is poetry in the reverberations of their fictions into the life stories that would follow.



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