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Article

Dream of a Monstrous Vermin: An Analysis of Ishida Sui's *Tokyo Ghoul* through the Lens of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Introduction: An Overview of *Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphosis)*, *Tōkyō kushū (Tokyo Ghoul)*, and their Contexts

"If I were to be the protagonist of a work, it would certainly be a tragedy." Thus ends the explosive first chapter of Ishida Sui's *Tōkyō kushū (Tokyo Ghoul)*. Turned into a half-ghoul against his will, in a world where ghouls have to eat human flesh to survive, the protagonist Kaneki Ken recalls the time he read Franz Kafka's short novel *Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphosis)* and wondered what he would do if he were in Gregor Samsa's situation. With his dark fantasy turned into a reality, Kaneki begins the struggle of finding his identity in a society filled with uncertainty, the author taking no pains to hide the grotesque process of Kaneki's multiple transformations.

Serialised from 2011 to 2014, the manga *Tokyo Ghoul* has been a phenomenal success within Japan, ranking fourth in sales in 2014, with nearly seven million copies purchased within a one-year period (Loo). It has every formula for success: an alternate universe which is simultaneously close to our reality, gripping action scenes, memorable characters, a fluid art style, and a solid plot. However, to examine only the above would be to disregard the references to literary texts which we encounter in the course of the story. Besides the clear reference made to *The Metamorphosis*, Ishida brings in other literary titles which are recognisable to the average reader, such as Dazai Osamu's *Shayō (The Setting Sun)* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, among the many within the narrative. These texts are present in both obvious and subtle ways, from a direct quote in the course of the

story to a glimpse of a cover in a single panel. Beyond showing how Kaneki is affected by the literary texts he has read, it goes to show how Ishida, like countless other writers and readers, has been influenced by literary texts introduced into or produced in Japan.

Among these, *The Metamorphosis* is particularly noteworthy for its prominence and the themes it shares with *Tokyo Ghoul*: Samsa and Kaneki both experience a traumatic split in identity and struggle to resolve that split, with varying success. Placed in a situation against which they have to form their identities—Samsa against his family, Kaneki against a society where people are either fully human or fully ghoul—the protagonists parallel each other, and reading Kaneki without an awareness of Samsa's metamorphosis would lessen the impact of Kaneki's transformation on the manga's readers.

Finally, even across the hundred years separating the publication of these two works, with their respective settings in Prague and Tokyo, the challenges of living in a difficult environment are shared between them, further exacerbating the individual's struggle to conceive of and maintain his or her own identity in the face of such challenges. The main themes of humanity versus verminhood, the exploration of authorial and reader identity, and uncertain realities are thus the focus of this article.

Literature Review

While manga has a history that dates back to at least 1053, it is from the Meiji period (1868-1912), and the widespread introduction of Western culture, that manga has gradually developed into the form modern readers are familiar with (Ito 26-30). Besides being an incredibly popular medium read by a vast audience, manga "reflect both the reality of Japanese society and the myths, beliefs, and fantasies that Japanese have about themselves, their culture, and the world" (26). This argument—that manga are significant partly due to their reflection of Japanese readers' thoughts and beliefs—is not an isolated one. Schodt believes that the majority of manga have a "dreamlike quality," affording a convenient venue for readers to "work out their neuroses and their frustrations," with the result that "[r]eading manga is like peering into the unvarnished, unretouched reality of the Japanese mind" (31). Borrowing Michael Billig's concept of "banal nationalism" (Billig 6), Otmazgin proposes manga as a form of "banal memory": he asserts that manga, widely read throughout the nation, make up the everyday "banal memories" that serve to construct—or reconstruct—historical memory in a different way from government-ordained textbooks (12-14). Hence, the field offers a way to understand what Japanese readers are interested in, and more importantly, *why* they are interested in those topics.

Furthermore, in connection with this article, there exist many manga adaptations of classic literary works, such as *Manga Shakespeare*, and, particularly relevant to this

research, a manga adaptation of *The Metamorphosis*. However, while these are a valuable part of manga, providing examples of high literature and popular culture intersecting, there has been little study of the references to high literature *within* the manga narrative itself, and the implications these have for the story or the readers. In particular, why does Ishida primarily focus on *The Metamorphosis*? What place does it have in Japan, such that it plausibly influences Ishida's narrative? In a collection of essays studying Kafka and modern Japanese Literature, Arimura Takahiro has traced Kafka's explosive popularity after the Second World War, explaining that Kafka's works had a strong resonance with Japanese readers due to their themes of uncertainty and the desire for escape expressed in them (8-9). Yagi Hiroshi even compares Kafka and Nakajima Atsushi, focusing on Nakajima's *Sangetsuki* due to its similarity to *The Metamorphosis*, and he asserts the importance of Kafka's influence on his life and works. The themes that resonate with readers and writers thus reveal themselves: chaos, uncertainty, and the self are the enduring themes that connect Kafka's 1915 work to post-war and modern Japan.

The themes highlighted above are clear through an examination of *The Metamorphosis*. Emrich sees the vermin as representing liberation from the human self trapped in an impersonal work-world (120), and Sokel agrees that "[w]ith the metamorphosis [Gregor] gives up his façade self, that of the overworked traveling salesman, and lets a deeper concealed tendency in himself come to light" (168). These scholars believe that *The Metamorphosis* is a tale of identity, where the struggle to express one's real self takes place. In contrast, other scholars take a psychoanalytical approach to the story, examining the struggle between Gregor and his father as an Oedipal one and focusing on familial connections (Kaiser 150-51). It is within this context of available research that the analysis of *The Metamorphosis* and *Tokyo Ghoul* can be advanced, with a focus on the shared themes of identity and the protagonists' relation to figures of authority as well as to the authors.

In addition, an interview Ishida Sui gave with the *Yomiuri Shimbun* (a major newspaper in Japan) in August 2018 reveals that he has a particular empathy for minorities in society, he himself having struggled with loneliness in his childhood years, being a Christian, and also moving from place to place due to his parents' work. In the final volume of the sequel, *Tokyo Ghoul: Re*, he uses the afterword to express his feelings about his work, dwelling on the loneliness he spoke about in the interview. Using these cases of authorial statements from Ishida, in addition to the analysis of *The Metamorphosis*, we can pursue the ideas of identity as shown through *Tokyo Ghoul* and enhanced by the references to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

Finally, this research on the intersection between literary and manga narratives cannot be conducted without an understanding of the framework within which manga operates. Noël Carroll's theory of mass art sets the overarching framework within which

manga fits: firstly, he argues that mass art is designed to reach a large audience; secondly, he explains that to reach this large audience, mass art uses technology that allows for mass reproduction; thirdly, he states that its contents are deliberately designed to be understandable and accessible to the average audience. It is his third argument that is of particular interest to this thesis: if *Tokyo Ghoul* was deliberately designed to be accessible to the average audience, how does that affect the interpretation of the original text? The consumption of *Tokyo Ghoul*, as well as the analysis of their narratives, must be examined in the above-mentioned context.

Secondly, David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* posits a way for readers to interpret comics, given their place as both visual art and text. Different from art pieces that require expert interpretation to understand their meaning, "[i]n comics, word balloons and narrative sequence present the story transparently ... [y]ou don't need to know anything, apart from that shared knowledge we all possess about contemporary everyday life, to interpret comics" (85). Such an art form appeals to readers' knowledge and experience, an aspect that will inform this thesis's understanding of *Tokyo Ghoul*'s themes and how they resonate with the readers in contrast to the readers of purely literary texts like *The Metamorphosis*.

Lastly, for an insider view on manga and ways of reading, Azuma Hiroki offers a theoretical perspective on Japanese fans of manga, anime, and video games (categorized under the broad term of "otaku") and believes their consumption patterns are representative of modern Japanese society. Referencing Jean Baudrillard's writings on the simulacrum (Baudrillard 6-7) and Jean-Francois Lyotard's argument about the loss of grand narratives, whether religious myths or political ideologies such as nationalism (Lyotard xxiv-xxv), Azuma states that Japanese otaku now endlessly consume derivative works and small narratives due to the lack of grand narratives to define oneself against (25-29). Considering how *Tokyo Ghoul* is a work dependent on the incorporation of other texts, in particular *The Metamorphosis*, it would be interesting to consider it as a narrative of derivatives and to thus examine what meaning readers can derive from it.

I. Between Two Selves—Storytelling in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

In David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics*, he considers theories of reading which are useful to our understanding of how Kafka tells the story of *The Metamorphosis*.

> Just as, according to classical epistemology, the knower constructs the world from the scattered experiences of sense perception, so the printed text is the material from which the reader creates the literary work ... the

> text is a construction of the reader, a product of our attending to the printed words. We the readers, in synthesizing the successive scenes, recalling earlier events, and anticipating the conclusion, create the literary artwork from those mere printed words, which are but ink on the page ... literature, by contrast [with paintings], involves private experience. (79-80)

At the same time that he gives a place to reader interaction with the text, acknowledging that all readers bring differing knowledge and expertise to their interpretations, Carrier argues that "[i]nterpretation employs all possibly useful information" such as that concerning the authors' lives, and there is no cause for the exclusion of this in the act of interpreting (82). His theory, combining reader interaction and acknowledgement of the author's life, is particularly useful in examining Kafka's work: though Kafka's writing is undeniably autobiographical and an understanding of his life helps inform a reading of *The Metamorphosis*, there is a certain abstract quality to the text that opens spaces for multiple interpretations, spaces which will later be transformed when we examine *Tokyo Ghoul*.

How Very Monstrous: Who is the Vermin, and What does It Actually Look Like?

The inscrutable and abstract nature of *The Metamorphosis* makes itself known from the first line: "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin." The reader is given enough information to discern that it is some sort of insect he has turned into: his back is "hard as armor plate," his belly is brown and "sectioned by arch-shaped ribs," and his many legs "wav[e] helplessly before his eyes" (3). However, beyond that, it is left to the imagination what this vermin is—could it be a cockroach, a dung beetle, or a centipede? How monstrous is this vermin exactly, and why should we fear it?

There is a reason for the abstract quality of the vermin: the ambiguity of the term "monstrous vermin," from which this article borrows for its title, derives from the original German term "ein ungeheueres Ungeziefer" which Carolin Duttlinger analyses as follows:

> The German 'ein ungeheueres Ungeziefer' is a double negative. The noun *Ungeziefer* originally referred to unclean animals which were unfit to be sacrificed; the adjective *ungeheuer*, 'monstrous' or 'enormous', is the negation of *geheuer*, 'familiar', but as in the case of *Ungeziefer*, the negative form is the more common. By using two words where the negative has become the main form, Kafka creates a vacuum of meaning. Faced with

> Gregor's transformation, language can only gesture towards something that resists explanation. (34)

The vermin is not just open to question; through Kafka's use of language and the act of negation, the vermin *defies* any concrete explanation. Kafka creates an image as abstract and ambiguous as the narrative, "an ambivalent, unstable entity which has inspired countless interpretations but can be reduced to none" (36). The reader has the sense that Samsa has been transformed into something monstrous only through the reactions of the people around him: his mother screams when he snaps his jaws in the air, the manager who had come to demand he turn up to work runs away from the house, and his father violently chases him back into the room (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 17-18). Their reactions strike the reader as both absurd and horrifying, for, on the one hand, without a name to the vermin, without knowledge of any of its dangerous qualities, there is no telling how exactly the vermin is meant to be frightening, but, on the other hand, the lack of a concrete image is more terrifying than if there had been one, as it is now an unknown, a vast space with shapeless dangers lurking within. "Like a horror filmmaker, Kafka creates suspense through omission, and when in 1915 *The Metamorphosis* was about to appear as a book, Kafka instructed the artist who was to draw the cover illustration [to not depict the vermin on the cover]" (Duttlinger 35-36). As a result, the cover of the first edition shows only the wordless terror of a man who has gazed into a darkened room, the horror of that which lies beyond hidden to us:

Fig. 1: *The Metamorphosis* (1916), First Edition Cover.
Image taken digitally from *Open Culture* ("Should Never Be Drawn").

Through this cover, Kafka invites the reader to connect with his or her own fears of what might lie in the darkness: a cockroach might be terrifying to one but a mere annoyance to another, to whom a centipede presents the greater terror. The reader's interaction and our psychology are thereby played upon to make this story personally unsettling.

Despite the seeming horror of his transformation, this metamorphosis is made all the more ambiguous as the narrative progresses. Though the story opens with a complete transformation, Samsa finding himself unable to move while on his back and with his many legs waving before him, he is still able to communicate with his family. Even though "an insistent distressed chirping intruded" into his voice, "which left the clarity of his words intact only for a moment really, before so garbling them as they carried that no one could be sure if he had heard right," his family members understand his first few responses before his voice gives way to "the voice of an animal" (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 5-12). Samsa later finds himself enjoying rotten food compared to fresh food, becomes aware that he is becoming short-sighted like an insect, and realises that he is more comfortable in enclosed spaces. Unlike what we are given to think at first—that the transformation is complete and the narrative is about its aftermath—it is in fact ongoing and, perhaps, not even completed at the end. Throughout the narrative, Samsa retains clarity of mind and tries to communicate with his family, and when he dies with thoughts of love for them, "Gregor dies here not as a monstrous vermin (do bugs have nostrils through which a dying breath passes?) and not as an Oedipal son (that tenderness and love are not erotic), but as a human being with affection, acceptance, and peace" (Eggenschwiler 216). The abstract nature of his metamorphosed form lends itself to such an ending, for the picture of Samsa cannot be accurately summed up by any concrete form of a vermin: he dies as both vermin and human, in a monstrous form with a human mind.

The transformation of Samsa from a human body to that of a vermin is the most obvious one in *The Metamorphosis*, though it is also worth noting the transformation his family members undergo, leaving one to wonder if their metamorphoses have changed their minds and hearts from those of humans to those of vermin. Duttlinger notes that "the changes they undergo are less sudden but no less disconcerting," such as the mother and sister taking up paid work, and the father no longer spending his days at home but rather working in the bank (38). Such a transformation—seemingly for the better—hides the unsavoury layer, seen in the stains on the father's gleaming uniform, the streaks of dirt in Samsa's room from their neglect, and the apple embedded in his back from his father's wrath. Where Samsa has, on the surface, undergone a physical transformation, his family undergoes a mental one. Freedman suggests that Samsa's changes "are not wholly generated from within [his] transformed shell. They are also conditioned by the world's reactions to his condition ... The world has been wrenched out of recognition. For the

helplessly observing Gregor, its change has become irreversible" (132-33). It is the world's rejection and abuse of him which marks him as transformed, and Samsa's transformation is impossible to discuss without examining the corresponding one on his family members' part, making this narrative one of multiple transformations, all of whose status of completion is in question even at the very end.

Overlapping Selves: Samsa as Kafka, Kafka as Samsa

One popular interpretation given to *The Metamorphosis* is that it represents Kafka's life and emotions. In his biography of Kafka and study of his works, Stach states that "Kafka's self-image had been veering for some time in the direction of what he saw as the perspective of an animal ... Alienation, worthlessness, exclusion, and muteness are notions that Kafka combined so well in the image of a bug that they produce a strong resonance in the reader's mind. All these elements, however, played a significant role in his inner world long before he had his decisive literary inspiration" (196). In Stach's analysis, the work is particularly linked to Kafka's own sense of self and his disappointments in his relationship with Felice Bauer, and *The Metamorphosis* plays a key part in establishing the autobiographical nature of Kafka's oeuvre.

Simultaneously, *The Metamorphosis* is seen to be inextricably linked to Kafka's relationship with his family. Scholars have made note of the strained relationship between Kafka and his father, Hermann Kafka, and how such a relationship threw a shadow upon Kafka's writings. Pressured by his father to pursue law and, later, to succeed as a businessman, Kafka despaired because he was losing time to write (Northey 12). In his "Letter to his Father," Kafka states his feelings about his father grooming him to take on business.

> What you are, in fact, set upon is living entirely on me. I admit that we fight with each other, but there are two kinds of fighting. There is chivalrous fighting, in which the forces of independent opponents are measured against each other, each one remaining alone, losing alone, winning alone. And there is the fighting of vermin, which not only sting but at the same time suck the blood too to sustain their own life. (Qtd. in Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 195)

Such bitterness about their relationship and the way Kafka views it as "the fighting of vermin" show in *The Metamorphosis* and *Das Urteil (The Judgement)*, where "[t]hese characters' self-destructive loyalty to their families reflects Kafka's own enduring ambiguity towards family life and the (masculine) roles associated with it" (Northey 12). Thrust into a

situation where he has to earn money due to his father's failed business, "Gregor's sole concern had been to do everything in his power to make the family forget as quickly as possible the business disaster which had plunged everyone into a state of total despair" (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 25). Despite his pride in being able to put food on the table, he notes that "[t]hey had gotten used to it, the family as well as Gregor, the money was received with thanks and given with pleasure, but no special feeling of warmth went with it any more" (26). Furthermore, when his father reveals to his mother and sister the savings they have from Samsa's work, we are informed that "[o]f course he actually could have paid off more of his father's debt to the boss with this extra money, and the day on which he could have gotten rid of his job would have been much closer, but now things were undoubtedly better the way his father had arranged them" (27). For Samsa, this is a job to be "gotten rid of," explicitly highlighting that he is only doing this job for the family's sake. The vermin-like relationship rears its head: there is a passive-aggressive note in Samsa's thoughts when he emphatically states that things were better the way his father had arranged them, when this actually means the family is taking advantage of Samsa's efforts for their own comfort.

In this way, the transformation of Samsa takes on new light as a reflection of Kafka's most desperate desire. Emrich argues that Samsa has put off the fulfilment of his desire to become a "self" for five to six years, which resulted in him attaining freedom through the metamorphosis into a vermin (119). Sokel's analysis agrees with this:

> In its practical result the metamorphosis represents Gregor's refusal to toil any further for the family. With the metamorphosis he gives up his façade self, that of the overworked travelling salesman, and lets a deeper concealed tendency in himself come to light ... The metamorphosis functions in its practical result as the flight from responsibility, work, and duty. (168)

What he transforms into can be seen as vermin, as "unfamiliar," and it can equally be seen as the once familiar self that had become unfamiliar through the giving up of his soul to work. Though in this form he has lost his freedom of movement outside his room, he has time to look outside the window or to hang from the ceiling where "one could breathe more freely [and where] a faint swinging sensation went through the body" (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 30). It is also in this form that he can give priority to his needs and wants: when his mother and sister are moving his furniture out of his room and his mother worries that it looks like they have given up on him,

> Gregor realized that the monotony of family life, combined with the fact that not a soul had addressed a word directly to him, must have addled his brain in the course of the past two months, for he could not explain to himself in any other way how in all seriousness he could have been anxious to have his room cleared out ... They were clearing out his room; depriving him of everything that he loved; they had already carried away the chest of drawers, in which he kept the fretsaw and other tools ... And so he broke out. (31-33)

No longer playing the part of obedient son and brother, Samsa strives to protect what represents himself, like the tools for his hobby, or the picture of the woman in fur on the wall. For the first time since he began to toil for the family, Samsa asserts his desires in a way that to the family is abhorrent (crawling onto the picture and thus exposing his disgusting form) but that is to Samsa the only way to rescue his belongings. *The Metamorphosis*, read on the level of a parallel to Kafka, can thus be viewed as a story in which a young man who tries to assert himself is seen as vermin by the rest of the world. The horror of his situation aptly epitomises the combination of the familiar with the unfamiliar, the uncanny, the *unheimlich*, where "[w]hat is *heimlich* (familiar) thus comes to be *unheimlich* ... on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (Freud, *Uncanny* 802). The familiar and unfamiliar are one, what is meant to be familiar—the family—concealing Kafka's repressed sense of self.

Interestingly, Kafka himself rejected any reading of *The Metamorphosis* as paralleling his own life. When Gustav Janouch, who knew Kafka personally, mentioned that Samsa sounds like a cryptogram for Kafka, Kafka stated, "It is not a cryptogram. Samsa is not merely Kafka, and nothing else. *The Metamorphosis* is not a confession, although it is—in a certain sense—an indiscretion" (Qtd. in Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 107-08). Admitting that the story is an "indiscretion," an airing of his family's dirty linen, Kafka nevertheless asserts that Samsa is more than a parallel of Kafka's own life. While his assertion has not stopped critics from bringing Kafka's family life into the picture, it affords a space for readers to consider if, through rejecting Samsa as himself, Kafka too is rejecting his metamorphosis into something both familiar and unfamiliar.

Dream of a Vermin: The Blurred Lines between Reality and Dream

Kafka wrote in a time when Sigmund Freud published his theories on psychoanalysis and dreams, and though Kafka claimed to know little about him and thus had only general but insubstantial respect for Freud, a reading of his texts benefits from some

knowledge of psychoanalysis (Duttlinger 11-12). The above section addressing Kafka's difficult relationship with his father is an example of the psychological (or psychoanalytical) aspect of *The Metamorphosis*, wherein the text can be read as an Oedipal struggle between father and son. Though in this case Samsa does not want to kill his father and bed his mother, the struggle between father and son is between authority and desire, obedience and freedom. However, what is more relevant to this section, and the later comparison with *Tokyo Ghoul*, is the nature of dreams and reality in *The Metamorphosis*.

In *Conversations with Kafka*, where Janouch noted Kafka rejecting Samsa as a cryptogram of his own name, the conversation continues as follows:

> [Janouch said,] "*The Metamorphosis* is a terrible dream, a terrible conception."
> Kafka stood still.
> "The dream reveals the reality, which conception lags behind. That is the horror of life—the terror of art." (Qtd. in Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 108)

The Metamorphosis is noted for using both conventions of nineteenth-century realism as well as introspective psychological narration, which has created a story both fantastical and realistic (Duttlinger 33). Studying the language of dreams, Freud posits a close connection between dream-thoughts and the dream's manifest content and puts forth a theory that dreams are a means for repressed thoughts or desires to make themselves known (*Dreams* 791-93). In the context of psychoanalytical theories that Kafka came into contact with, *The Metamorphosis* can be read as a dream that reveals the hidden issues we fear to face in the waking world.

Opening with Samsa awaking from unsettling dreams to a transformed self, he realises "it was no dream" due to the familiarity of his room (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 3). This motif of dreaming repeats itself in the beginning of Chapter Two, when Samsa awoke from his "deep, comalike sleep" (20). In Emrich's analysis, it is Samsa's conflict between duty and his desire to become independent that causes the unsettling dreams, which in turn result in his transformation as a way for the repressed self to come to the fore (118-19). Following this line of argument, the "deep, comalike sleep," in which no dreams make an appearance, is possibly indicative of the transformation being complete and Samsa no longer having to struggle with the difference between his ideal self and his working self. At the same time, Emrich argues that there is no meaning in interpreting Samsa as a real vermin and that the vermin represents something "alien," the uninterpretable that cannot fit into the human ideation world (125-28). Interpreted as such, *The Metamorphosis* is a fantasy of self and other, of a struggle given concrete form only through an abstract vermin.

Which is the dream, which is the waking world? If dreams reveal the reality, and if Kafka had accepted Janouch's claim that *The Metamorphosis* is a terrible dream, then the transformation is the fevered dream of a tortured young man seeking to find relief.

> Kafka represents the struggle of the self with itself to be, in the form of a dream. The truth revealed in the dream is the real truth and asserts itself against the official truth of the waking self which is an official lie. The dream is an intuitive avenue to the truth; it is a part of what in one of his notebooks he terms "man's intuitive capacity," which, "though it often misleads, does lead, does not ever abandon one." ... The horror of life lies in the fact that the self is split in this way rather than being whole, so that we do not know who we are or what we do. The terror of art lies in the representation of the hidden reality, with its shattering effect. (Greenberg 67)

The Metamorphosis becomes a double or triple-layered dream world when the vermin is read as an abstract entity: Samsa believes himself to have awoken from unsettling dreams, when the dreams might be the reality; the text, as art, reveals hidden truths in reality, though it presents itself as fiction; Kafka, through the creation of the text, reveals parts of himself he denies. Like Zhuangzi's dream of a butterfly, where a man ponders if he was a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man, there is no clear distinction between butterfly and man, dream and reality, both parts blending to reveal what Kafka sees as the horror of life.

This section has explored the concepts most relevant for the discussion of *Tokyo Ghoul*. Through the interaction with the text, readers formulate for themselves a vision of the vermin and, for those with an understanding of Kafka's life, they can understand how it is related to his sense of self and his uncertainties. It is in the next section that we will examine the three concepts as they function within *Tokyo Ghoul*, and the confluence of Kafka's literature and Japanese popular culture.

II. The Monstrous Vermin of *Tokyo Ghoul*—An Analysis of the Manga through the Lens of *The Metamorphosis*

> Among Kafka's famous works, there's one about a young man who turns into a monstrous vermin. I read that when I was in elementary level five, but at that time I had this dark fantasy: *what would I do if this happened to me* ... (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 1, ch. 2, p. 49. Translation by article author.)

In a world where ghouls consume human flesh for sustenance, Kaneki Ken, an ordinary university student, is attacked by a woman while on a date, and he is subsequently turned into a half ghoul. Published by Shueisha and serialized in Weekly Young Jump, *Tokyo Ghoul* was branded and marketed as a *seinen* or *youth* manga (a category targeting young adult men) for its themes of violence and gore (Ingulsrud and Allen 14). The number of readers is remarkable: it ranked fourth in 2014, with a sale of nearly seven million copies within a one-year period (Loo). It was popular enough to warrant its sequel, *Tokyo Ghoul: Re*, being serialized from 2014 to 2018, and in 2019, despite the series' end, an anime adaptation of the sequel was produced and café collaborations were held, signaling its continued popularity.

Among the many aspects of the manga, this article focuses particularly on the relationship it has with *The Metamorphosis*. As seen in the quote at the beginning of this section, the *mangaka*, Ishida Sui, does not shy away from direct references to literary works that have influenced the protagonist, and Kafka is one of the many whose works are referenced in this way. Others include Kitahara Hakushu's poems, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Dazai Osamu's *The Setting Sun*, and C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. However, there is reason to believe Ishida gives *The Metamorphosis* particular weight due to Kafka's influence in Japan.

Kafka wrote most of his works in the early twentieth century, and while there were academic papers from Kafka scholars in Japan produced from 1933, it was only after the Second World War that his works had a noticeable impact. According to Arimura, Kafka's works gained recognition and were well-acclaimed in Japan after the War precisely because of the chaotic situation then, during which the values that the Japanese had held steadfastly to were thrown into disarray (4). Tracing the arguments put forth by Japanese Kafka scholars pre- and post-war, Arimura notes that they see themes of alienation, a desire to escape, and disquiet in the rhythms of daily life (6-10). For Japanese society struggling with the post-war chaos, it is not difficult to imagine how such themes might have appealed to them. More concretely, the collection of essays analyses authors such as Nakajima Atsushi, Hanada Seiki, and Ogawa Kunio, all of whom were influenced by Kafka. According to the editor of the Kadokawa edition of *The Metamorphosis*, "nobody can deny ... that without Franz Kafka, it is impossible to speak of twentieth century literature or more recent world literature" (Nakai 212).

On a more casual basis, Kafka's influence is not difficult to perceive. Murakami Haruki has a work titled *Umibe no kafuka* (*Kafka on the Shore)*, while *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* (*Bungo Stray Dogs)*'s author has adopted the pen-name Asagiri Kafka. East Press, a publisher which produces manga adaptations of works like Dazai Osamu's *Ningen shikkaku* (*No Longer Human)*, Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* (*Kokoro)*, and Miyazawa Kenji's *Ginga*

tetsudō no yoru (*Night on the Galactic Railroad)*, has also issued a manga adaptation of *The Metamorphosis,* to make such classic literary works accessible and enjoyable to the general public.

However, unlike manga adaptations of literary works which aim to educate readers, *Tokyo Ghoul* has been produced primarily for entertainment, profit, and for a massive audience, falling solidly into the category of what Noel Carroll calls mass art. *Tokyo Ghoul* fulfills the three tenets of mass art as Carroll defines them: it is art deliberately designed to be consumed by a massive audience (such as the vast readership for JUMP works), it is produced by technology that allows it to be cheaply distributed, and the content is understandable without the need for extra background knowledge (187-92). To this end, rather than educating the readers about the story of *The Metamorphosis*, the original text is used to advance Kaneki's narrative, though the direct and indirect references in the manga to the original narrative would still be clear to readers familiar with *The Metamorphosis*. Yet, by nature of its inclusion, the way *Tokyo Ghoul* adapts and presents these stories might also affect the way readers approach both the original narrative as well as *Tokyo Ghoul*.

This section thus analyses *Tokyo Ghoul* through the lens of *The Metamorphosis* using the following three concepts: the form of the monstrous half-ghoul, the conflation between Kaneki and Ishida, and the blurred lines between realities.

Ghouls as Vermin: The Nature of Society in *Tokyo Ghoul*

Set in Tokyo in the 2010s, the protagonist Kaneki Ken manages to go on a date with a woman whom he admires. However, her sole purpose is to eat him, which is thwarted by an accident that severely injures both of them and, it is heavily implied, kills the woman. In an operation to save Kaneki's life, the kidney of the ghoul woman is implanted in him, turning him into a half-ghoul unable to consume food produced for humans, but not with the full capabilities of a ghoul. It is through his friendships with the employees of his favourite café—all of whom turn out to be ghouls—that Kaneki navigates his new reality as a half-ghoul, one who is highly sought after due to the unique nature of his body's constitution.

From the beginning, the relationship between ghouls and humans is depicted as fraught, the reasons being readily apparent: firstly, similar to the way ghouls in traditional folklore devour humans and wear their skin, thus directly harming them, the ghouls in *Tokyo Ghoul* must eat human flesh to survive; secondly, ghouls look no different from human beings, which aggravates fear as one never knows if somebody is a ghoul or not; thirdly, there are trained hunters who kill ghouls to protect human beings. In this setting, to human beings, the ghouls are the monstrous vermin that prey on them. Yet, as

Kirishima Touka—a ghoul Kaneki befriends—implies, for ghouls it is not a matter of pleasure, for they have no choice but to eat what they need to survive. Kirishima Touka states that she cannot enjoy human food due to the constitution of her body nor live a peaceful life due to the presence of human hunters (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 1, ch. 3, pp. 100-01). Immediately, the themes of survival, eating, and being eaten are apparent in a way that can be fruitfully compared to *The Metamorphosis*. Just like the way in which Samsa eating rotting food is a sign of his becoming a vermin, the ghouls' consumption of human flesh labels them as parasites upon society. When Kaneki eventually consumes human flesh, he too is marked as changed. The ghouls and humans are aware of their position in the food chain and their places within society, a macrocosmic parallel of Samsa's changed position in the family the moment he is viewed as a vermin. However, where eating is only one of many markers for Samsa's transformation into a vermin, eating is the *main* marker of difference in *Tokyo Ghoul*, as we will see later in the exploration of Kaneki's many transformations through his consumption of human and ghoul flesh.

Poisonous Centipede: The Form of a Monstrous Half-Ghoul

In the page that accompanies the quote at the beginning of this section, there is an image of the vermin Samsa has transformed into: a many-legged centipede towering over the mother (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 1, ch. 2, p. 49). This creature will make its appearance twice more in the series: once when Kaneki is tortured by having a centipede put into his ear canal, and once more when his fully transformed figure—after having cannibalised ghouls in an effort to become stronger—shows itself to be a centipede. For Ishida, the "monstrous vermin" has a poisonous and threatening image. The centipede takes center stage, dominating not only Kaneki's dark fantasy from when he was a child but also the eventual form he takes.

Of interest is the way in which Kaneki achieves the complete verminous form of the centipede. For Samsa, there is no explicit reason why he transforms into a monstrous "unfamiliar"—it simply happens. For *Tokyo Ghoul*, Kaneki becomes a complete vermin after two stages: the first stage is the torture inflicted on him by Yamori, through which he decides his identity is that of "ghoul"; the second stage is when he actively consumes only ghoul flesh—in other words, only through the consumption of what human society considers verminous. After these two stages Kaneki transforms into the monstrous centipede, indicating that "vermin" do not just appear one day the way Samsa did—they are born out of circumstance.

For the first stage, when he is tortured by Yamori, Yamori places a centipede in his ear canal (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol.7, ch. 61, p.61). While trapped and with the centipede

still in his ear canal, Kaneki then hallucinates Rize—the woman who tried to eat him—and they go through a half-dream, half-flashback journey during which we learn of Kaneki internalizing his mother's motto that "it is better to be hurt than to hurt." Not long after, Kaneki sees two innocent ghouls murdered by Yamori due to his inability to make a decision as to whom to save. With the realization that his mother's philosophy is flawed, Kaneki metaphorically consumes Rize, the woman who was the cause of his having been turned half-ghoul, breaks out of his restraints, and overpowers Yamori (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 7, ch. 63, pp. 98-99). Kaneki's eventual transformation into the centipede that Yamori used to torture him with can be seen as an internalization of Rize's and Yamori's beliefs, specifically the belief that misfortunes are a result of one's own lack of ability, and thus the only way to live is to "eat" others or to be a vermin to them.

At this point, Kaneki does not have any visibly different form except his white hair. It is the second stage that decides this form, when Kaneki refuses to eat human flesh and only eats ghoul flesh. The explicit reason he gives is that cannibalising ghouls is the fastest way to build up enough strength to fight; implicitly, however, we can reasonably deduce that Kaneki has an aversion to eating human flesh due to his identification with humankind (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 11, ch. 104, p. 60). Kaneki's choice of which side he stands on is a marked change from the beginning of the series when his first transformation into that of a half-ghoul happened: where at that point he sees himself as neither human nor ghoul, at this point of the narrative he has devoted himself to "becoming" fully ghoul by "rejecting" his human side and consuming only verminous flesh. Unlike Samsa, who is seen as vermin through his consumption of waste or rotting food, Kaneki turns vermin through consumption of *vermin*. Finally, his transformation into a centipede is accompanied by a loss of sanity, a descent into vermin-hood in both body and mind, in a way that is absent in *The Metamorphosis*. Such a transformation as that which Kaneki goes through has larger societal implications, hinting that the reason why humans might become "vermin" is because of their association with and consumption of similar vermin.

However, like *The Metamorphosis*, Ishida deliberately throws a spanner into the view of what we might consider vermin. As argued in the first section, the transformation of Samsa's family is perhaps more horrific, for their vermin-like hearts appear in the face of a family member no longer being productive. Similarly, despite Kaneki's struggle between what he sees as separate identities and his clinging onto his human identity, he begins to see the humanity of the ghouls he interacts with and fights to protect his ghoul friends against the human hunters. From Kaneki's perspective, the problem lies not in any single vermin but in the nature of the world that forces humans and ghouls to see each other as parasites. As Pandey suggests, "the Japanese context, unlike that of the Christian West, offers a much greater fluidity between man and beast, which mitigates

against the monstrous animal's merely being demonized as "the other"" (224). For Kaneki, who has lived on both sides of the human-vermin paradigm, he is best suited to engage the readers in questioning what exactly constitutes the monstrous.

The Holy Trinity of Author, Protagonist, and Reader: Kaneki as a Metaphor

Compared to Kafka, very little is known about Ishida Sui apart from the rare interviews and the afterwords in the manga. In an interview Ishida had with *Yomiuri Shinbun*, he stated that he hopes the series will allow people to feel sympathy for the minorities, as he himself belonged to a Christian family that moved from place to place due to his parents' work. He further states that Kaneki is perhaps his representative in voicing his thoughts (21). Ishida hence sees *Tokyo Ghoul* as a way for people to sympathise with others different from themselves, shown in the way Kaneki fights to protect the ghouls whom he sees as possessing humanity. It is in the final volume of *Tokyo Ghoul: Re*, in his afterword, that he reveals the most vulnerable parts of himself:

> Because my father was a strict person, home was a stifling environment for me ... When everybody around me began looking for a job, I didn't do anything because there wasn't a job I wanted to do ... I was vexed over what to do as the only person left behind. I quarreled constantly with my parents too. Finally my father yelled at me and I gave up and started looking for a job. I don't have clear memories of then, but I think I told my father, "I have died." Perhaps because of those words, they gave in and allowed me to choose a path other than working. The path that I thought of then was becoming a *mangaka*. (318-19. Translation by article author.)

Compared to his mother, whom Kaneki loved deeply but whom he later realizes has neglected him, Kaneki has a vague, unspecified relationship with his father, as his father died when he was young. The only way he clung to his father is through reading the books his father left behind, which stimulated a love of books in him. Hence, the reading of the father-son relationship is more ambiguous than with Kafka, where the father-son relationships in life and in *The Metamorphosis* have clear parallels. However, it is interesting to note that Ishida struggled with his own father-son relationship and had similar woes about being forced into a path he did not desire. To that extent, it is unsurprising that Ishida might have sympathy for Kafka, and hence why *The Metamorphosis* has such a central place in *Tokyo Ghoul*.

Kaneki thus can be seen as an appropriate representation of Ishida's thoughts and

feelings regarding minorities, relationships, and literature, though he is not fully a stand-in for Ishida the way Samsa is commonly seen as a stand-in for Kafka. That said, the popularity of *Tokyo Ghoul* and Kaneki's character can also be fruitfully used to explore, beyond Ishida's life, the state of modern Japan. Schodt argues the following of manga:

> [O]f the more than 2 billion manga produced each year, the vast majority have a dreamlike quality. They speak to people's hopes, and fears. They are where stressed-out modern urbanites daily work out their neuroses and their frustrations. Viewed in their totality, the phenomenal number of stories produced is like the constant chatter of the collective unconscious—an articulation of the dream world. Reading manga is like peering into the unvarnished, unretouched reality of the Japanese mind. (31)

Just as the dreamlike quality of *The Metamorphosis* speaks to the type of dreams Samsa and the readers might have, *Tokyo Ghoul* provides a space where fantastical worlds can be safely explored. In many ways *Tokyo Ghoul* is a manga with the closest representation of modern life and can thus be more easily used as a form of catharsis for readers. For one, its setting is a Tokyo that is accurate in both design and geography. Instead of Tokyo's twenty-three wards, *Tokyo Ghoul*'s Tokyo has twenty-four wards, with the twenty-fourth being the "underground" ward where ghouls can hide, a symbolic representation of how "vermin" are hidden in our society all the time. Other than the twenty-fourth ward, the society in the manga is a replica of modern Tokyo, with places like Ikebukuro and its major bookstore Junku recognisable to readers familiar with central Tokyo (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 11, ch. 108, pp. 147-48). Having recognisable locations places the series in both the real and the fantastic realms, allowing readers and viewers to easily imagine their world to be more magical than it actually is. Furthermore, the lifestyles for *Tokyo Ghoul*'s characters are similar to that of a modern person. Kaneki and his best friend go to a university reminiscent of Tokyo University, and most of the friendly ghouls he meets work in a café, a very normal job. The balance between the real and the fantastic provides the optimal setting for readers to "work out their neuroses and their frustrations."

What could those neuroses and frustrations be? In Azuma Hiroki's examination of otaku, he formulates the hypothesis that today's otaku culture is characterized by two features: the consumption of simulacra and the decline of a meaningful grand narrative by which to define our lives. There is no longer a difference between the original and the copy, and the modern consumer endlessly consumes derivatives—that which lies between an original and a copy—as well as small, fragmented narratives that replace a singular social standard (25-29). He sees society today as defined by fragmentation, with

nothing to guide the viewer or the reader the way religion, for example, functioned as a guide in the past. *Tokyo Ghoul*, as one of the small narratives in an increasingly fragmented world, similarly cannot function as a guide. Perhaps it is suitable for the readers precisely because of that: as Kaneki changes and transforms, he constantly struggles with his sense of self and the way of life he should choose in a world that he sees as distorted. This struggle of identity is not confined to him or Ishida—it is a concern of twenty-first century Japan. Furuichi Noritoshi, in *The Happy Youth of a Desperate Country*, writes the following:

> We still have time; though it seems inevitable that this country will go on sinking little by little, we still have enough time to contemplate the future. The "strange" and "warped" kind of happiness will still endure ... We no longer have "those days" we should be returning to, and we face problems that are stacked up before us, and we have no such thing as "hope" for the future. But we aren't that dissatisfied with our existing circumstances. We're somewhat happy, and somewhat anxious. Such are the times we live in, and will be living through—as the happy "youth" of a nation in despair. (253)

His research has brought him to the conclusion that young people report being happy precisely because they have given up on any hope for the future, thus the happiness they have is "strange" or "warped." If his hypothesis and research hold true, then modern Japan is the perfect ground for readers to find resonance in *Tokyo Ghoul*, where Kaneki is equally uncertain about his place in society. In Carrier's words, "[a] successful comic strip must engage the fantasy life of many different people, which is why interpreting that work tells us a great deal about ourselves" (85). Read in the context of these theories about the fantasies and dreams of comic and manga readers, *Tokyo Ghoul*—or more particularly Kaneki's transformations—can be seen as a way for readers to explore their identities, fears, and hopes, in a way that makes more sense to them than reading Samsa in 1912 Prague.

Where the Mind Lies: Disintegrating Barriers between Realities

Given the prominence of manga as a site of fantasy, this section will explore the line between dreams and reality. If *The Metamorphosis* is read as a dream, it is a lucid one, following a logical thread, despite the fantastical nature of Samsa turning into a monstrous vermin. Such logical dreams are no longer the reality of *Tokyo Ghoul*.

In *The Metamorphosis*, there are markers for when Samsa is awake or asleep, such as when we are informed he has awaken from "uneasy dreams" or when we see him waking up from a "deep, comalike sleep" at the beginning of the second chapter. Simultaneously, the text can also be analysed as a dream and thus as a metaphor for Kafka's conception of language or for Samsa's exploration of identity. *Tokyo Ghoul* has similar markers, such as when Rize "visits" Kaneki in the torture chamber. At this point of the narrative, as Rize is assumed to be dead, readers know this is part of Kaneki's hallucination. However, the manga medium lends itself particularly to blending reality and fantasy: we see Rize sharing the same space as Kaneki, standing on the same checkered tiles, and his shocked reaction to her presence as though she truly exists (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 7, ch. 61, p. 64). She is aware of what is happening in reality, as seen in her taking her leave before Yamori makes a re-entry. Readers know most clearly that this is a hallucination because they are looking at scenes from Kaneki's memory, indicating that this is all happening within his mind. The distinction is less clear to Kaneki: to him, she seems to exist physically in the torture chamber and mentally in his mind, and when he metaphorically consumes her, the art is visceral, reminiscent of a physical act of devouring taking place.

Such hallucinations become a part of Kaneki's life after he devotes himself to becoming a ghoul: after he has transformed into his full centipede form, he has a breakdown that is born of his consumption of other ghouls and their identities. This is most clearly seen when Kaneki mixes three pronouns—*boku* from himself, *watashi* from Rize, and *ore* from Yamori—in his speech, hinting that he is going through a disintegration of identity (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 11, ch. 101, p. 11). This disintegration happens once more when he is close to death: in his hallucination Rize and Yamori make a re-appearance, but instead of Kaneki devouring them, he is the one being devoured, which is when he realizes it has not been him devouring ghouls, the devouring has been *of* him *by* the ghouls (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 14, ch. 136, pp. 71-73). Through devouring the ghouls, it is Kaneki who loses his sense of reality and his identity, in a parallel of Samsa losing his identity when he devotes himself to the working self. Furthermore, even when Kaneki's best friend appears in reality, he sees his presence as a fantasy, in a reversal of when he sees the hallucination of Rize as real. Kaneki's hallucinations show how two distinctions have disappeared: the distinction between self and others, and the distinction between reality and fantasy. Where the narrative of *The Metamorphosis* takes place in lucid realities and fantasies, *Tokyo Ghoul*'s narrative places an emphasis on the uncertain nature of identity and reality.

Fittingly, then, Kaneki's reconciliation with his own self happens only in the final dream he has before he is considered "dead." After being dealt fatal injuries, Kaneki's mind returns to his past. He and his child self walk through a field of flowers under a

checkered-tile sky, reminiscent of the checkered tiles in the torture chamber, and he apologises to the self he had been and the self he had wanted to be for the monstrous unfamiliar existence he has become. When they disintegrate, the suggestion is that rest is a space void of self, struggle, and the confusion over what is real (Ishida, *Tokyo Ghoul* vol. 14, ch. 140, pp. 144-48). Unlike the original text, where Samsa dies thinking of his family with love, Kaneki's narrative is one of a disintegrating self that can only rest in death.

If manga allow us a glimpse into the dreams and neuroses of modern Japan, then Kaneki's increasingly massive breakdown between reality and imagination is worth considering. Freud writes that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on" (810). If there is an uncanny effect in *The Metamorphosis* we can find it in the questionable line between reality and dreams and in the way it is never made clear whether the story is Samsa's hallucination. This struggle of identity and reality is exaggerated in *Tokyo Ghoul*; just as Samsa's story can be read as one huge dream, Kaneki's story can be seen as his imagination of what it would be like if he were the protagonist of a tragedy, and the struggles over identity Kaneki goes through are a fantasy within the realm of fiction, in itself an entire dream world that merely parallels our reality.

Where Ishida has paid homage to *The Metamorphosis*, he has also diverged in several significant ways, making *Tokyo Ghoul* a tale that centers on the dissociative self within a society of monstrous vermin. Through Kaneki, readers can entertain the thought of where the vermin in society lies or if, perhaps, there have never been any vermin at all. If the fundamental mode of survival is through eating, then all there is in this world are beings struggling to survive in a world turned upside-down, a world where hundreds of thousands of monstrous vermin dream of being butterflies. Though core themes remain similar, Ishida has adapted *The Metamorphosis* to the concerns of contemporary readers, such that they can understand his story without any knowledge of *The Metamorphosis*. To that end, the original text has necessarily been shaped into something both familiar and unfamiliar, a tool now for a different audience.

Conclusion: The Evolving Form of Monstrous Vermin

Section I concluded that the ambiguous form of the vermin lends itself to reading *The Metamorphosis* as a tale in search of a young man's disappearing identity due to the pressures he faces from supporting his family. The parallels between Samsa's life and Kafka's own mean that one can also see this as an exploration of Kafka's struggles with his

relationship with his father. The writing of *The Metamorphosis* can thus be seen as a giant dream within a dream, the fictional world giving space for Kafka to air his family's dirty linen.

Using the insights gleaned from an exploration of these core themes in Section I, Section II argues that, unlike the way in which Samsa in the original tale is a reflection of the deeply personal struggle Kafka faces, Kaneki in *Tokyo Ghoul* can be seen as a reflection of the uncertainties of Japan's modern readers. The struggle of identity is amplified in *Tokyo Ghoul*, ending in the disintegrated self. For Kaneki, transformations bring suffering and he can resolve this struggle only through death. Perhaps this is reflective of modern society: it is one fraught with uncertainties and where the vermin lies in all of us.

Set a century apart, *The Metamorphosis* and *Tokyo Ghoul* have offered differing views of what the monstrous vermin is and where it lies in society. Where the core struggles remain the same, the vermin has evolved to encompass all of us rather than a single being. Where does the vermin evolve from here? What transformations await us and our society in the future? While it is beyond the scope of this article to answer these questions, it is hoped that through the examination of these texts, readers are given the opportunity to ponder these questions.

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