The Will to Change: The Role of Self-consciousness in the Literature of Metamorphosis

Michael Giovanniello
CUNY City College

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The Will to Change: The Role of Self-consciousness in the Literature of Metamorphosis

Author’s Name: Michael Giovanniello

Advisor’s Name: Vaclav Paris

Date: Dec. 7, 2015

First Reader: Vaclav Paris
Second Reader: Keith Gandal
Third Reader (Joint Degree): Gabriella Vöö, University of Pécs

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Section I- Introduction

Actaeon, an ancient prince, the grandson of Cadmus, was stalking his prey in his ancestral forests. He and his men, experienced and proud, would daily walk beneath the boughs in search of game. Of all the hunters, no one was more skilled than Actaeon, and he was well loved for it. While Ovid, who collected this story in his *Metamorphoses*, does not intimate that Actaeon had any real governing responsibilities in Thebes, the prince is nonetheless portrayed as an important and well-liked peer among guiltless hunters. And though he was free from guilt, he was harshly punished.

Strolling away from his men after a successful hunt he happened upon a shady grove in which Diana, the short-tuniced goddess of the chase, was undressing after her own pursuit. Although it was admittedly "Fortune's error and not his own" (Ovid, Book III, p. 89), Diana was enraged by Actaeon's trespassing and saw him transformed into a stag, his antlers like signal flags, his scent the same musk that riles hounds into bloodthirst. He was terrified; he did not understand why this was happening. He did, however, perceive with a noticeable amount of consciousness the shift he had undergone. The prince was summarily ripped to pieces by his own dogs to the cheers of his life-long hunting companions. Ovid's account of the myth offers a few other details, e.g. the beauty and unattainable purity of the goddess, the devotion of her handmaidens, Actaeon's care-free enjoyment of nature's splendor, but nothing to suggest that he deserves such a harsh punishment. Older versions of the myth hold Actaeon as the typical mythological boaster- as one who, in the tradition of Arachne, compares his skills to those of the gods (Fantham 38) but Ovid's is no such cautionary tale; it is little more than a Roman psychological horror story. Diana's wrath will not be assuaged until her victim's last breath leaks.
from his wreckage of his new body. "He moans / And though his voice [is] scarcely human, / No voice of living deer made such sad cries" (Ovid, Book III, p. 89). He experiences the terror of human emotions trapped within an animal container. Then he is dead.

Actaeon's experience, along with many (but not all!) of Ovid's examples, is highly psychological. It displays the extent to which Roman writers concerned themselves with man's complex emotional spectrum as well as man’s nature as an individual. While not always at the fore, the inner workings of a character, how he feels himself connected to the events surrounding him, is oftentimes present. In Roman lore, the gods themselves were, among other things, representatives of various natural phenomena from sunlight to seasonal floods. As agents of nature, they could not be found culpable for their actions. This particular story's power lies in its ability to display Actaeon not just as a victim of otherwise random violence, but the consequences of victimhood on his mind. The bulk of lines describing his transformation deal with the fantastic corporal metamorphosis in the way that makes Ovid so lastingly entertaining, but without the few, very few, lines devoted to Actaeon's inner plight, the story would be unrepresentative of the scope of classical metamorphosis. A simpler sort of transformation story, one in which punitive action would be the sole driving force, that is to say one devoid of any psychological context, would belong to another time period. Counterintuitive as it might sound, this simpler sort of story would come centuries after Ovid's more complex, psychological example.

Roman philosophy attempted to balance the concepts of self-guidance and divine, or natural, intervention. Literature of the time placed near equal significance on internal and external forces as contributors to a life's journey, thus is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* full of examples similar to Actaeon's story as well as others that display punitive action by external forces without
any psychological importance. While both sorts of stories are offered, though, it must be noted that the impetus of transformation in classical mythology is always external in nature.

As a literary device, metamorphosis has been used for so many centuries and in so many capacities that it would be unfairly narrow to claim its single purpose. The study of literature through the ages is an exercise in identifying patterns, not universal laws. Variation occurs not only within the confines of the literature of metamorphosis, but sometimes within individual works studied. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* alone comprises more that 200 individual accounts of metamorphosis and the poet sought to display the phenomenon in all its variation. To legislate strict parameters with respect to what should and should not be considered metamorphosis, or to suppose a narrowed intention of authors, would be to deny this genre of literature its very essence. That said, a careful combing through of representative texts suggests its use and development throughout history is closely aligned with the development of the concept of the "self-consciousness".

By tracing the path of self-awareness that writers typically employed throughout different periods of history, we discover a relationship between self-consciousness and the manner in which metamorphosis is employed as a literary technique. In times when literature is marked by authors writing their self-conscious fears into their characters, as in Roman and (to a much greater extent) modern times, we notice metamorphosis and a character’s psychological state to be closely linked; in moments in history in which artistic output is dominated by oppressively restrictive and extremely powerful outside sources, as in the Middle Ages, metamorphosis is almost universally an externally driven punitive action if it occurs at all. Transformation in the Middle Ages has very little to do with characters besides their unfortunate fate of being damned by gods. As will be elaborated, the course of self-consciousness over the last two millennia has
indeed been parabolic. The parabola’s dip, representing inversely the rise and fall of the Catholic church, will require historical contextualization in order to be successfully represented.

The fall of Rome was matched in pace by the rise of Christianity. Although the term "Dark Ages" has fallen out of favor for the more sensitive, and admittedly more precise, combination of Early Middle Ages and High Middle Ages, the original term gives a clear sense of the tenor of the times: information was being lost. Expertise in all fields (agriculture, architecture, sculpture, painting, political science, military science, literature, etc.) declined. Although the Church itself cannot be blamed as the sole cause of such hard times, reliance on the Church in the face of such hardship contributed to the externalization of human consciousness. As will be shown, no clearer evidence of this exists than in the literature of the times. Psychological profiles of individual literary characters became subordinate to the importance of the second life, the promise of eternal salvation under the grace of a single almighty god. The focus on the self faded away as the importance of the individual was perceived to be decreasingly important.

On the contrary, modern literature touts the struggle with the self-consciousness as its defining characteristic. In terms of balance of internalization vs. externalization, as far to one side of the scale that literature of the Early- and High-Middle-Ages was to Roman literature, so is modern literature equally distant in the other direction. No longer is there any sense of equilibrium between external and internal forces as they contribute to character development and nowhere is this more evident than in the literature of modern metamorphosis.

The last important factor that determines the scope and likelihood of metamorphosis is the personal circumstances of the author. Artists suffering from actual or perceived persecution seem more likely to indulge in this form of expression. The characters created tend to be a
mirror for personal struggles. While this is not always proven to be the case (e.g. Jennifer Shute’s *Life Size*), there is an unmissable pattern in the work of writers discussed further on (e.g. Dante Alighieri, Franz Kafka, and Margaret Atwood).
Section II- What is Metamorphosis, Then and Now?

Metamorphosis itself is a tricky animal, and understanding its boundaries is one approach to understanding it in general. The most important questions surrounding the technique inevitably involve one of two factors: motivation and extent. We ask ourselves why it is that characters since the literature of antiquity have metamorphosed at all. We ask: Exactly how far do those humans who shift shape get? Ovid himself stresses the importance of the soul and its inherent migratory nature as inseparable from the bodily transformation depicted in his tales. In his perception of the universe, everything is essentially liquid. Shapes are only as constant as their containers, and all containers are subject to the whimsy of countless forces. In the case of the vast majority of Ovidian myths of metamorphosis, the external force is a god — seldom if ever does a human take on another form without the provocation of divine energy. It is the relationship between the externalization of power and the power of a character to affect his own life that is central in understanding how metamorphosis as a literary technique has evolved. Actaeon is transformed into a stag by an outside, punitive force, yet he's aware of himself and his circumstances. A goddess becomes angry with him and he is punished. While this is among the most primal, reductionary examples of psychological metamorphosis, it typifies the ancient model. Actaeon learns no lesson and he does not develop as a character. The transfiguration occurs at the conclusion of the story; Actaeon meets a bad end and the action is completed. It is the reader, not the character, who grows, for he has learned to be fearful (or at least aware) of the great powers beyond the capacity of mankind. Still, Actaeon's low level of self-awareness is of paramount importance.
Metamorphosis in the ancient world is the essential element of change. Ovid serves as our touchstone: "The spirit comes and goes / Is housed wherever it wills, shifts residence / From beasts to men, from men to beasts, but always / It keeps on living" (Ovid Meta. Book XV trans. Gregory). Stories like those read in the *Metamorphoses* cast the notion of change-by-degree out of mind (Warner 72). Metamorphosis in this sense could be viewed as one degree away from non sequitur. Unlike can be born of unlike just as easily as the more linear changes of modern literature develop. Ancient metamorphosis, thus, can be viewed as condensed time, as long lessons being absorbed automatically, instantly and forever. In this way, older examples of metamorphosis are simplified versions of their modern variant. The chief difference between the old and the new will be shown to be the external forces associated with ancient metamorphosis matched against the internal (self-willed) metamorphosis of modernity. In order to prove this point, each major work discussed must be presented not only as a product of its author, but of its environment.

In modern literature, it is much more common for a body to shift shape while still retaining the lion’s share of original character thought. It has been posited that there is an intrinsic "integrity of the self that remains" (Giaccherini 62) whenever metamorphosis occurs, but I would amend this to say that there is, in the majority of cases, at most a symbol of the self that remains and that the character first introduced has vanished, if only temporarily. This is especially true in ancient examples in which we more often see the casting of characters into inert objects. In these cases, the character, the essential being, is gone, and what remains are only the bullet points of a moral existence. Phyramus and Thysbe, the young lovers who took there own lives in mistaken sorrow, are the reason mulberries are no longer white, but blood-red.
Their color tells the story of the pair's demise, yet the berries are sweet in their uncultivated purity. In cases such as these, metamorphosis is a symbolic death and not second life.

The symbolic significance of transformation is a grand topic on its own, and one that meets resistance in about every direction of study. A fair amount of the inconstancies regarding critical analysis of symbols has to do with the genre’s size and diversity. Francisco Vaz de Silva synthesizes the corpus of criticism in a well-structured argument called *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales* (2002) in which he culls examples from a variety of source material. While he makes implications of fairy tales’ relevance to modern literature, he focuses on making sense of the ubiquity of contemporaneous fairy tale symbols spanning great geographic distances. One of his most salient points, and the one most relevant to this study, is his investigation of transformation in Norse mythology. If a diversion into a relatively obscure facet of world literature can be excused, it will pay dividends in the end.

Vaz de Silva concentrates on the gods Odin and Heimdall. Odin was well reputed for his foresight and Heimdall for his intensely sharp sense of hearing — hearing so acute that he was actually able to perceive the green grass grow. Paradoxically, both of these gods were missing one of the sensory organs traditionally linked to their powers; that is to say: Odin had only a single eye and Heimdall only one ear. Under similar circumstances, each had willingly sacrificed his bodypart in trade for heightened senses. The implication here is quite obvious, but Vaz de Silva does well in phrasing it: "since the essence of reality lies beyond empirical perception, [...] to 'see' in a fundamental sense requires overcoming sensory perception." (Vaz de Silva 67-8). It is only after forsaking the limitations of a human form that these gods are able to surpass the ordinary usefulness of flesh through a technique that Vaz de Silva refers to as "self-sacrifice"; essentially, these gods sacrifice a part of themselves to themselves, the end result
being the acquisition of expanded powers. It might be pointed out that such sacrifice is, in effect, no sacrifice at all.

Only after humans no longer rely on the power of supernatural beings to transform-- after humans become, in essence, their own gods -- is the relevance of this example to human transformation is made apparent. True, Odin and Heimdall were never human; they were gods that were born of gods, and, just as the scions of the high Greek gods, even their children enjoyed demi-god status. In fact, the closest examples of similar kinds of human transformation in Ovid (examples in which humans gain clairvoyance) are the tales of Tiresias and Cassandra. While these humans do gain expanded sensory perception, their bodily sacrifice is obligatory; neither enjoys the freedom of choice as their divine counterparts do. Tiresias is blinded in revenge for his justly judging a contest between gods and is partly compensated by being bestowed second-sight while Cassandra is seduced, given power, rejects her seducer and is subsequently made incoherent. These are cases of punishment in which the human does not barter for change but change is forced upon him and her.

At least in the context of ancient lore and literature, the type of heightened sensory perception that the gods Odin and Heimdall enjoy are reserved for the divine, and such cases in which mortals are given expanded powers are always godly in origin. Only after man's relationship to the divine has been severely restructured is literature able to present human characters in which transformation spawns from within and expanded powers are granted. The symbolic importance of these transformations, though, is almost entirely the same as those presented in theocentric myth. In a later section of this paper, we will see how the self-sacrifices of Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Margaret Atwood's unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* (1972) line up on a one-for-one basis with those of the older gods.
The concept of the self-consciousness should never be far from sight when studying the literature of metamorphosis. One critic links the experience to memory by citing the case of Io, whom Jove turns into a pure white heifer in order to hide their adulterous relationship from his wife. Io indeed becomes the outward visage of a cow, yet her mind remains entirely human. The central element of the tale is her mental frustration at not being able to communicate to her loved ones that it is actually she who is standing beside them all along. It is only after a long, arduous journey that she is finally restored to her human form. We must note here, though, that this restoration is not a reward for the completion of some assigned task: this is, to Io, totally chaotic. She is transformed as a result of her sexual persecution by Jove and eventually restored upon accidentally reaching some essentially arbitrary geographic point. Both transformations are entirely outside of her control. The claim that the critic is trying to make is that without the link of memory, there would be no substantial psychological implication, thus the story would carry no real weight beyond that of a rudimentary horror story (Perutelli 62). Here we are introduced to the difference between the psychological myth and creation myth, another topic that will be expanded upon in a later section.

As in Actaeon’s story, Io’s salvation is frustrated by language. If only she could communicate her human feelings, then all her troubles would be at the very least assuaged. The problem of expression is one that will return in modern cases of metamorphosis, though with a difference color. Instead of the pattern Transformation → Communicative Frustration → Damnation that we see in older varieties, modern cases follow the pattern Communicative Frustration → Transformation → Damnation. This shift, too, has its roots in the external vs. internal debate.
Metamorphic tales often share close similarities to other genres. While painstakingly delineating what should and should not count as sincere examples of metamorphosis would be a strenuous exercise in futility, an awareness of some boundaries will be helpful in grasping the social implications of such literature. Enrico Giaccherini likens tales of metamorphosis to doppelgänger stories, specifically Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) because both, in essence, express the existence of one soul in two bodies. Doppelgänger stories indeed share a certain sense of morbidity with stories of metamorphosis in that the conclusions of most of both feature "madness, death or suicide of the divided self" (Giaccherini 62-5). But while Stevenson's story (published very late compared to our examples from Ovid) has deep thematic relevance to the myths discussed above, there is also a crucial genre difference. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a relatively early example of science-fiction writing. We would do well to separate the many, many examples of metamorphosis in science-fiction from those examples we will be focusing on in this study. This is because science fiction is the use of tools, either by author or character, to change a fundamental truth within a system. Whether a writer employs fantastic spaceships as a tool to enable human life to live on a distant planet or a character uses a common sewing needle to stitch two bodies into one, this cannot be considered metamorphosis in the strictest sense because it is missing one of its most essential elements: spontaneity.

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to hew a working definition of what we refer to as metamorphosis, keeping in mind that, even among scholars, there is much disagreement. First off, its definition pertaining to the change of a person or state of affairs predates the zoological one associated with butterflies. The earliest (1533) puts special emphasis on external forces like "magic or witchcraft", under which godly intervention would surely fall. But roughly
contemporaneous with this last definition (1548) puts the emphasis on the transfiguration of the human form. Both, though, suggest a total change of form and/or behavior. Modern literary criticism provides us with myriad definitions that run the gamut from intensely liberal to obscenely conservative. Perhaps David Gallagher provides the most balance by acknowledging the term in all its history:

"Metamorphosis has ... a variety of meanings ... but with a specific focus on corporeal transformations of the body that occur either in reality or in the imagination. Rather than use the term imprecisely in the sense of historical or biographical change, metamorphosis is to be understood in the sense of physical transformations of the body from human beings to animals, birds, invertebrates, vegetables or mineral forms or visa versa. This definition will encompass actual, suggested [or] imagined physical transformations of a human being into another animal form..." (Gallagher 15)

Gallagher goes on to place further importance on spontaneity with specific reference to more modern examples like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. While he correctly allows for the reverse (i.e. the transformation of animals into humans) as well as the transformation of gods into either human or other forms, this study will focus purely on the shifting of humans to something else, as this will allow us to limit many anthropological questions while focusing on the psychological. The fear is that, by opening the discussion to the concept of divine of animal desires, we will begin to ask questions on what it means to be other-than-human, while the more precise questions center on humanity. The concise comparison between antique and modern metamorphosis depends on this.

Despite Gallagher’s (or anyone else's for that matter) precisely tuned definition, we must often ask ourselves if certain instances in literature qualify as genuine examples. Some examples are obviously easier to identify, like any of Ovid's myths in his *Metamorphoses*, but the line becomes particularly blurred in many cases of modern fiction. The intensely psychological
nature of modern literature can take the bulk of blame here. While writers from centuries past dealt with the wider problems of defining a species against an environment, the task of modernity is to define the self against the backdrop of the species. Modern fiction is the struggle to find thresholds: Where do I begin and end? What are my responsibilities within this larger system? Thresholds are the key to understanding our individual humanity.

One study on metamorphosis in literature begins its discussion by approaching the problem in real life and in reverse. In the early 1980s, a trainer began to teach a female gorilla, Koko, to express her basic emotions through the use of American Sign Language. Progress was slow and the trainer's research was met with heavy criticism. Detractors suggested that Koko's responses were either memorized Pavlovian reactions to stimuli or that the results were outright faked. Decades later, though, the experiment produces little cynicism. Koko can make more than 1,000 signs, understand more than 2,000 individual words in English and can combine these talents to answer questions regarding her emotions. If you ask Koko how she's feeling at a particular moment, she gives you an honest answer. If you place her in front of a mirror and ask who it is, she makes the sign for "Koko". The suggestion is that now it is "no longer legally proper to treat the gorilla as mere chattel because when you give it the conceptual apparatus for conscious reasoning, you have radically altered it ... If it has never been one before, it is an individual now" (Skulsky 6).

Clearly Koko the gorilla is not human and never will be; she will always be a gorilla. But does her aptitude bring her closer to humanity? Conversely, would a human’s shift toward animalia force him to drift away from humanity? Actaeon, in the middle of his terrible punishment "longed to say, 'O miserable me!' but had no words, nothing but animal cries while tears ran down his changed, bewildered face. Only his mind remained what it had been" (Ovid,
Book III, p. 91). How much of Actaeon remains after his transformation? In this case, the human capacity for thought remains, but this is not universally so in Ovidian example.4 We might consider how much of the human mind remains as our metric of metamorphosis. We might, however, decide that simply shifting shape is enough to deem a character no-longer-human.

Thinking about oneself in terms of another existence is one of the essential functions of metamorphosis as a literary technique; displacing one's sense of comfort and familiarity aids in shedding light on the “other”. In essence, this is why we read slave narratives or any sort of fiction: to attempt to gain a perspective that is not wholly our own. The question of how far we can distance ourselves from our seemingly inseparable consciousness is an attractive one. In exploring this question, we approach an understand of our own conceptual limitations.

American philosopher Thomas Nagel summons the existence of cave-dwelling bats to the human imagination. Bats are chosen because, unlike dogs or elephants or some other such creature5, their state of existence is so far removed from our own as to present serious imaginative problems, yet few would question whether or not bats actually experience consciousness by discerning the fact that they themselves exist.6 Bats spend the majority of their time hanging upside down in dank caves and hardly enjoy the faculty of sight. They do, however, have a highly developed sense of echolocation. As far as we can tell, this sense allows bats to produce a 3D image of spaces in total darkness. It is believed that these images can give the bat a sense of shape, distance and texture comparable in detail to that which our eyes afford to us. There is even some data to suggest that echolocation can give a bat a sense of temperature and density of its surrounding media, which would enable it to determine safe landing points or potable water. While we can understand the merits and possibly even the physics of such a
sense, attempting to imagine its possession would be as ineffectual as trying to imagine a new color.

While the way our brains work might allow us to imagine what it would be like to be in the shape of a bat, the differences between humanity and a bat's existence is simply too vast to span. The power of our brains can only take us so far from home and Nagel concedes this. For all his research and imagination, he is not a bat; he is Thomas Nagel pretending to be a bat. He does not concede, however, the projecting of oneself into the experiences of another human as altogether futile, though it is not a simple task. The literature of metamorphosis has a long history of exploring the questions Nagel has refined. The rest of this study will investigate the differences between how metamorphosis was treated in ancient literature versus its treatment today, and the major agent of this change.
Section III- Metamorphosis in the Classic Milieu

Metamorphosis is, among other things, the product of conflict, which makes it an undeniable extension of the human experience. Metamorphosis exists as a sort of middle ground between existence as we know it and the existence of something else. Harold Skulsky asks us: if a body metamorphoses, can it still be considered human at all? (Skulsky 21). The opposite question, whether a metamorphosed body can be considered anything but human, is equally valid. These are, after all, human stories.

Ovidian tales are populated almost evenly with human and extra-human characters (nymphs, demi-gods and gods). I call them extra-human because while they might be endowed with powers beyond those which we can conceive (so distant they might as well belong to a bat⁷), they are still subject to the familiar range of human emotions. Some of the most terrible acts of Ovidian transformation are spurred on by the jealous rage of jilted gods. Semele, for example, is consumed with fire when Juno, under the guise of an old nurse, convinces her to petition Jupiter to consummate their relationship while in his godly form. While one of the most scandalous and comical of examples, it serves to show the simultaneous distance and closeness among gods and humans. Still, humans in Ovid are rarely if ever the progenitors of metamorphosis and are instead its victims.

Victimization in these tales is more complex than it appears at first glance. This complexity can be attributed to the relationship between self-consciousness and external strife that existed in Roman literature. Self-consciousness, which is the crucial element governing all modern metamorphosis, isn’t always present in ancient examples.
Traditionally, there are understood to be three major types of metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*: tales of punitive action (Laycaon being changed into a wolf, Actaeon into a stag), tales of self-transformation (Narcissus into a flower) and salvation tales (Daphne into a laurel) (Dente, 105). Without having to do imaginative acrobatics, though, we can restructure these into only two categories: punitive and externally driven. Such punitive accounts like those involving godly jealousy are straightforward and require little discussion. The Semele and Actaeon tales have already been examined. Ovidian tales of self-transformation and salvation, on the other hand, require a bit more decoding. We will use the story of Narcissus as our first example, as his fame has endured so that mostly everyone has at least a superficial understanding of his story.

Narcissus was the gorgeous human son of the nymph Liriope. His beauty was such that all who saw him, man or woman, desired him sexually. Popular knowledge of the story has Narcissus eternally shunning all lovers and instead opting for self-love. It is commonly understood that the reason for this is that no one but he himself could match the beauty that he possesses. This, though, is a simplification of the actual myth as reported by Ovid.

At sixteen, the weight of Narcissus’ oppression is so burdensome that he is compelled to spend most of the day walking alone under the cover of grottoes to escape the relentless persecution of his suitors. He is acutely aware of his loneliness and otherness, and he tries to assuage the pain with secluded contemplation. This, directly, is not his downfall. The boy's doom actually has its genesis in the jealousy of another. One of his many rejected suitors becomes so enraged by his rejection that he utters a curse: 'Oh that he may love himself alone' the suitor cries 'and may he fail in that love.' (*Met*. Book III trans. Gregory). Nemesis, the goddess of retribution, accepts this curse as something delectable. This godly agent relishes the
opportunity to use her powers to create the story of Narcissus that posterity has come to know. The key element here is that this self-love (which led to transformation and symbolic death) does not have its inception in the self, but in outside powers.

Similarly, Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree is entirely dependent on external powers that are far greater than her own. The story goes that Apollo and Cupid become engaged in a trivial quarrel and that Daphne, Apollo's love interest, becomes caught in the crossfire. In an effort to prove to the warrior god that his powers, though different, are equally potent, Cupid shoots him with a magic arrow that causes him to develop uncontrollable lust for Daphne. Daphne is struck with another arrow causing her to reject all of Apollo's advances. When Phoebus eventually tracks her to where she can no longer evade his advances, she raises her hands in supplication, begging salvation in whatever form possible. Her father, a river god, sees fit to change her into a plant. She becomes the first laurel tree. Her transformation, though not punitive, is externally certainly driven.

The Daphne myth does differ from the Narcissus tale in an important way, though. While the pains of Narcissus’ loneliness are fairly explored, Daphne's psychology is ignored. We know she is uninterested, even fearful, of all men who would have carnal interest in her, and we know why, but we are not afforded a window into the deep struggle of her character. She remains, to put it simply, quite two-dimensional.

"In earth she stood, white thighs embraced by climbing Bark, her white arms branches, her fair head swaying In a cloud of leaves; all that was Daphne bowed
In the stirring of the wind, the glittering green
Leaf twined within her hair and she was laurel.”

There is no internalization the likes of which we get during Narcissus transformation; this is, in fact, an example of a simpler type of metamorphosis myth: the creation myth. True, the Narcissus tale does provide us with an explanation of the flower, but its more important function is to explore an individual psychological crisis. And while creation myths in Ovid can also be deeply psychological with respect to their transformations, the Daphne tale was chosen as an example because it proves that self-consciousness is not a necessary factor for metamorphosis. Not every example of Roman transformation myth is deeply embedded with elements of self-consciousness, not every myth even has hints of it, but taken together as a period we detect the roots of modern self-conscious thought.

Just because self-conscious elements might exist in Roman literature, though, does not necessarily mean metamorphosis will develop. Without sufficient conflict between internal and external motivators, it fails to develop. Take for example the poet Horace, a contemporary of Ovid’s, who explored similar themes, but often with very different outcomes. Horace's poetry, especially his earlier work, is "full, consciously filled, with the tension between restraint and excess" (Armstrong 8). His highly contemplative and self-reflective verse is typical of the highest order of Roman literature, but very seldom, if ever, do we encounter transformation or shape shifting in his poems. Rather, his interests are couched in the real; they are the deliberate, hard-learned lessons of a man who has been given full license of artistic exploration. It is in the space between internal and external motivators that Horace’s poetry differs from Ovid’s and it
is this difference that has important implications on the use and development of metamorphosis as a literary technique.

Metamorphosis occurs in moments of calamity; this is the case in examples stretching from antiquity until the present day. It is a last resort and in most cases, a burden to those who are transformed. In Ovid, metamorphosis "often breaks out in moments of crisis as the expression of intense passion" (Warner 15). For all Horace's obvious poetic prowess, few would call him an overly passionate writer. Even when he elaborates on his various sexual and social excursions, there is a persistent even tone, a lack of catharsis. Horace's poetry is like Horace's life: carefully measured. He was a man of wealth and high political position and he enjoyed the liberal benefits these qualities afford. As a result, we find no poetic explosion of passion, no unrestrained indulgence in emotion in his verse-- only the threat it, the possibility of it, without anyone actually succumbing to its temptation.

In Ovid, conversely, passion seems to be the driving force behind all of the action. Similar to the old trope about a gun never entering a scene without eventually firing, so do we universally indulge in Ovidian temptation. While we might not be able to predict the exact fate of characters in the Metamorphoses, we can always be certain that there will be a lively series of events that will lead to their (almost inevitably unfortunate) transformations.

The difference between Ovid and Horace doesn't begin with their artistic interests and writing styles, it begins with their lives and relationships — most importantly their respective relationships to Caesar Octavian Augustus. While Ovid was at one time well-received into the libraries of the Roman elite, his fascination with the scandalous left him
in ill-favor to the ruling class. After a series of warning shots over Ovid's artistic bow, the Caesar decided in AD 8, possibly because of certain incidents involving his daughter and even grand-daughter, to banish the poet to the provinces. His work was banned, burned and he was all but forbidden to keep producing artistically. Luckily, though, banned books have always enjoyed the type of popularity that secures a culty preservation.

It was only now, living in the periphery of the Empire, away from the society that he once fully enjoyed, surrounded by a more "vulgar" language that a despondent Ovid began to work on the piece that would secure him as one of the more widely-read authors in history. The *Metamorphoses* itself was born of crisis; it is the result of punitive action by forces far greater than the author's own, the likes of which writers like Horace never encountered.\(^x\)

Horace enjoyed a long life as one of the darlings of Roman literary society. Though only a wealthy freedman's son, he climbed the social ladder to a cushy position working just under the lowest form of elected senators. No doubt the highly-placed admirers of his work helped to secure him this position. He earned a very healthy pension, and was afforded the time to travel to his several properties and to write. Though clearly a very contemplative man, he was never harried for his artistic expression, and as such his verse shows no signs of critical metamorphosis that Ovid so vividly recounts. Observe this excerpt:

```
On unaccustomed wings, but broad and strong,  
through liquid aether, bird and poet  
soon shall I fly. Not here on earth  
shall I stay quiet, but above your carping  
shall leave your cities. I am the poor blood  
of humble parents, merely the friend  
whom you ask over, dear Maecenas.\(^x\)
```
But the dark Styx will not constrain me;
I shall not die. Now on my legs the harsh
skin folds and blackens; my upper body
becomes a swan; on my fingers
and shoulders delicate feathers sprouting
show that, renowned farther than Icarus,
I shall look down on the Black Sea's wailing shore,
on Sidra's gulf, Morocco; singing
musically to the Arctic northlands.
(Horace *Odes* 2.20, trans. Armstrong)

Typically Horatian in style, this poem, while at once boastful and aggressive, is measured and subdued. It shows no trace of the anger, the confusion with which Ovid must have written his *Metamorphoses* during exile. While highly self-conscious, there are no punitive external forces at work here (not within the poem, nor in Horace's life) that would breed metamorphosis. Instead, what we are given is mere metaphor. His referencing of Icarus (a story that Ovid will pick up only a few decades later, and with much different implications) is couched in the reality of Horace's own life. The poet "intentionally mocks the idea of metamorphosis with his realistic description" (Armstrong 72). The results of each poet’s version of the story are polarized: where one meets a watery doom when "sweet-smelling fluid ran hot that once was wax" (Ovid *Meta*. Book VIII, trans. Gregory), the other soars safely in musical harmony with the universe.

The details of an author’s life no doubt translate to the likelihood of metamorphosis being employed as a literary technique. Yet it is not only the personal attitude and position of authors that governs metamorphosis, but the larger ideals of the societies in which they live. In the late Roman period and through much of the Middle Ages, conditions existed under which metamorphosis almost went extinct. So powerful were these new forces that artistic output throughout the Western world refocused itself
to the external— the inner working of individuals relegated as no longer worthy of exploration, the conditions under which metamorphosis thrives nearly non-existent. The following section will explore this shift.
Section IV – The Eye Sees Not Itself: The Shift in Conscious Perspective from Paganism to Christianity

Although it is removed from the time of the Roman poets by more than a millennium, Dante Alighieri’s treatment of metamorphosis in his *Commedia* does not differ from the Ovid’s in such overt ways. Nevertheless, subtle but important differences are evident, most notably in the realm of conscious perspective. Between these two epochs, the actual progress of conscious perspective is slight, but its path was a long one. That is to say: progress was not linear. In the time between the Roman poets discussed earlier and the time of Dante, literary self-consciousness (thus metamorphosis) took a backseat to dominant, Church-bred artistic pressures. It was only after important historical developments in Italy, where a new government encouraged a social and political distancing from the domination of the Holy See, when literary progress ceased to backtrack and eventually made headway into new levels of complexity. Dante is perhaps the best example of this later period.

The *Commedia* is claimed to be the first "silent epic" (Oppenheimer 37), which hints at the deeply personal journey that the text holds for character and reader alike. The nascent return of self-consciousness connection with metamorphosis in Dante is here apparent. It is important to note that the *Commedia*, like the *Metamorphoses*, was written during Dante's exile from Florence. His property confiscated and himself cast out of the city of his birth for his involvement in Florentine politics, he would spend the rest of his life far from the land that interested him most. By the vicious letters he sent to Henry VII and other princes petitioning not only his reinstatement, but also the exile or execution of his political and personal enemies, it can safely be said that the he wished lifelong to
return to his native land. Unfortunately for Dante, his punishment of death in absentia would not be rescinded in his lifetime\textsuperscript{iii}. No doubt the personal turmoil that the poet was under in the face of exile was one of the root causes of the internalized nature of the writing as well as the transmigrative nature of all the elements therein. Be it flesh, stone, fire, atmosphere or even the ethereal soul, nothing in the exile of Hell seems safe from possible mutation.

It is at this point in literary history when the soul begins to untether itself from God and becomes more closely synonymous with "reason" (Oppenheimer 3). The essence of being human, the spark of knowledge that separates us from the lower animals, is beginning its shift to be entirely contained within the individual. This does not happen overnight, but a new pattern of reliance on human, rather than divine, sources for those seeking answers to life’s difficult questions begins to emerge. Dante's Hell serves are a middle point between the Early Middle Age's obsession with divine guidance and man's steering himself toward intellectual and emotional completeness. While Dante's projection of himself is highly contemplative, the ubiquitous theme of metamorphosis and transformation is still reserved for the damned; still are the causes of shape-shifting external and punitive. To this, Marina Warner adds,

"In medieval eschatology, metamorphosis by almost any process belongs to the devil's party; devils, and their servants, witches, are monstrously hybrid themselves in form, and control magic processes of mutation. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, metamorphosis has marked out heterodoxy, instability, perversity, unseemliness, monstrosity. As a philosophical and literary trope, as a theological principle, as a cosmic and biological explanation, it distinguishes good and evil, the blessed from the heathen and the damned: in the Christian heaven, nothing changes, whereas in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams, compounds, breeding hybrids, monsters-- and mutants." (35-6)
Perhaps no example of Warner's explanation is as complete as the transformations offered in Cantos XXIV and XXV wherein thieves are ruthlessly pursued by serpents. Snakes are complex images. In classical literature they are most often the symbol of knowledge, and while Dante's work "seems to be aroused by classical rather than Christian exemplars" (Dante, Sayers 42), we cannot discount the obvious Christian connotations, nor the practical human aversion to a poisonous animal that hunts by stealth and swiftness. Although older mystic Christian iconography holds the snake as a symbol of rejuvenation and ascension because of its habit of periodically discarding its husk, the serpent of Genesis "leaves no possibility of mistake as to the snake's part in this drama; he is definitely the seducer, the tempter and the very incarnation of the Spirit of Evil" (Lassay 152-64). As in most cases in Hell, there is a perverse justice being enacted upon the doomed in this section. They who lived dishonestly, who skulked in shadows, who could not be trusted among the society of others are to spend eternity pursued by their animal counterparts. The vivid images of torture do not end with pursuit, but rather with a cyclical and never-ending merging of beings. Thieves in Canto XXIV attempt with futile determination to avoid the long fangs of hideous snakes that corner, bite, reduce to flames and reconstruct their victims.

"Never did writer with a single dash
Of the pen write "o" or "i" so swift as [the thief]
Took fire, and burned, and crumbled away to ash.

But as he lay on the ground dispersedly,
All by itself the dust gathered and stirred
And grew to its former shape immediately"
(Hell Canto XXIV, Ins. 100-6, trans. Sayers)
The poet characteristically devotes none of his self-awareness to his characters, but reserves it for himself in connecting the reader to the writer and both to the moment of the poems construction. One can feel a chilling link to the artist shaping his work in front of his audience, a certain unveiling of technique, a cognizance of craft and purpose.

Snakes return in the following Canto to harass a different breed of thieves. The punishment doled is unlike any other of Dante's examples and similar to only a single instance in the Metamorphoses. xiii Escape impossible, a thief is again cornered and entangled by an overwhelmingly agile and powerful serpent. His softest parts wrapped so tightly by the scaly length, he is squeezed so that the two bodies are visually inseparable until Dante and the reader simultaneously notice that they are actually inseparable.

"Two heads already had become one head,
We saw two faces fuse themselves, to weld
One countenance whence both the first had fled;

Into two arms the four fore-quarters swelled;
Legs and thighs, breast and belly, blent and knit
Such nightmare limbs as never eye beheld;

All former forms wholly extinct in it,
The perverse image - both at once and neither -
Reeled slowly out of sight on languid feet"
(Hell Canto XXV, Ins. 70-9, trans. Sayers.)

The shifted being scampers off without any conversation; he offers no interior monologue, no hint that anything human remains in the horrid combination of material left over. He is "extinct". The mutability of hell, as well as Satan as the tyrant king, sets itself in obvious relief against the constancy of "resurrection, eternity, vitality and nourishment" that heaven offers the devout (Warner 37). The transformation in Hell is nothing short of pure punishment; no character sees himself transformed into a rock to
avoid being eaten by lions, no one turns himself into a lake to avoid the fires of the
damned. Rather, the emphasis is on a forced removal of the individual's identity. The
damned are utterly reduced to something between character and setting. The confusion
of the elements removes the individual to such an extent that only a shadow of their
bodily forms remain-- they exist no longer in actuality, but in allegory. No deep
psychological insight into the characters is hinted at. The shades in Dante’s hell are
stories for the reader, flat characters, not the psychologically deep examples explored by
the Romans, not by a long shot the narrative agents that would become the standard
model of modern literature. And despite this, Dante can still be considered avant-garde
for his time, for he and his contemporaries were working against many centuries of
artistic repression.

The middle of metamorphosis’ story is framed by the sharp rise and slow fall of
the Church. The glory days of classical transformation came to a swift end upon meeting
the doctrine of the external. Entire centuries elapsed in which the technique was
relatively unused. Due to the overwhelming power that the new religion acquired, it was
able to impose artistic and intellectual restrictions on huge geographic regions,
restrictions that built upon themselves generation after generation. Marilynn Desmond in
her essay "The Goddess Diana and the Ethics of Reading in the Ovide Moralisé" explains
in wonderfully clear detail the shift from classical ideals of self exploration to the more
structured, i.e. restrictive, ideals of European life under Church rule.

Ovid’s representation of the deities in the *Metamorphoses* reflects
Roman cultural assumptions towards ethics and morality: in classical
Rome, ethics and morality were philosophical rather than religious
issues, and Roman religion did not look to deities as figures who
represented ethical ideals. Such cultural attitudes towards divinity
represented considerable obstacles for the medieval Christian reader.
situated in a culture that assumed that divinity represented ethical exemplarity\textsuperscript{xiv}

A sea change in the treatment of moral issues resulted in a corresponding shift of what was to be included in the corpus of the literary arts. In replacement of the classical examples of creation and psychological tales, a Church-imposed obsessive moralization of art took a firm hold that continued until modernity, although a spattering of old church mentality can still be found in secular literature published up until the present day. A late but particularly relevant example of Church restructuring of classical ideals exists in the anonymous early 14th. C. French translation and adaptation of the \textit{Metamorphoses} titled the \textit{Ovide Moralisé} in which biblical allegory is superimposed over the ancient "immoral" work. The \textit{Metamorphoses} is actually contorted into an ethical text. The resulting version is one in which Roman myth and Scripture exist on the same page, although the dominant force in unavoidably Christian. What remains is a suppression of Ovid's psychological examinations and the introduction of a level of didacticism that is not otherwise found in classical mythology. "Rationalistic explanations" abound in the newer text, effectively removing Ovid from the genre of fantasy, a genre outside of which metamorphosis struggles to exist.\textsuperscript{xv} This restructuring of classical ideals was to be so aggressive that the older model would be entirely replaced in the span of just a few short centuries. Progress in all directions was met with a newfound resistance. Not only literature was effected by this new mentality, but also the physical sciences.

While a geocentric understanding of the universe had already been the dominant celestial theory in ancient Rome, that too was eventually perverted to support new Christian doctrine. All geocentric theories held that humankind was at the geographic core of existence, but some differ in the species’ relative importance. Even though the
universe's structure was understood to be geocentric in construct, the Christian doctrine proposed that it was a far cry from being anthropocentric at all. Human beings' importance in the universe was deemed insignificant beyond the confines of our earthly dwelling. Our planet was indeed the center-point of nine concentric rings, each representing both the ideals and the living spaces of the various orders of angels, but God himself was purported to inhabit the furthest space, the Empyrean. Seen from this perspective, humankind could not have been more remote from the Empire of God. While His light penetrated every conceivable (and inconceivable) thing in the universe, we were essentially blind to the intricacies of His plan. It was now seen as our fate to understand His work through the accepted corpus of Christian texts and no longer, as had been the case in ancient Rome, through the exploration and translation of our physical world.

The vast geographic and spiritual distance between the surface of the Earth and the Empyrean prompted speculation as to how to close the gap. In 426, Saint Augustine produced his *City of God*, which is, in essence, a roadmap for the human soul's journey toward His empire. St. Augustine's work did more than any other single man's to put naturally derived human knowledge and divine instruction at odds (Draper 44). He describes the world of men and the world of God as being two distinct cities, with the possibility of dual-citizenship impossible. The world of men, according to Saint Augustine, is dominated by the fall. The first sin set the groundwork for all distraction from our true aim: perfect and simple salvation. As a result, we inherited the city of Flesh. God's city is that of the soul. And while these two cities are "beyond reconciliation", one cannot hope to abandon the first in hopes of reaching the second.
The two places are linked, even overlapping. While we are still earthly, we must maintain a relationship with the city of Flesh, "for he who extolls the nature of the soul as the chief good, and condemns the nature of the flesh as if it were evil, assuredly is fleshy both in his love of the soul and hatred of the flesh" (Augustine 533).

Here we begin to notice the nascent dispute between the classical values of the body and a new externalized existence, of the individual human experience and the values of a religious substructure that was rapidly gaining power. No longer was it common to seek moral guidance from natural or common law, but solely from the dogmatic lessons handed down from Scripture. Rather than emphasis being placed on the exploration of earthly life, the focus was shifted to that of the life eternal. In a very real way, human existence in the medieval world was viewed as an insignificant middle point, a staging area between non-existence and our everlasting lives at His side. Prayer to an unnamed god and obedience to religious law were to become more highly valued than the self-discovery that was the hallmark of Greco-Roman literature and art. Consequently, internalized thought in literature became scarce to the point of non-existence. Spiritual servitude and a dogmatic adherence to Scripture became the driving force behind medieval Europe’s artistic and economic systems, and would eventually contribute to a very dark period in human history.

In the turmoil of the Middle Ages, great amounts of European literature was lost, but more than enough remains to make confident generalizations. A survey of medieval court literature displays an astonishing lack of self-reflection and contemplation of characters when compared to Roman examples. Rather than characters considering their actions in the context of moral and individual struggle, a newly-dominant allegorical
style suggests that the protagonists’ actions are not only obvious, but obviously correct, for they are guided by an unquestionable divine will. As in the case of Perceval, the eponymous main character's search for the grail is piloted by an inner knowledge of external law. Perceval is never instructed in God's law, he simply knows it by virtue of its potency. Even in the very few times when he encounters difficulty in carrying out his holy mission, there is no internal crisis but only the guiding light of divine sanction. In only a single oblique instance in this text does self-contemplation exist, and this brief scene has been the center of abundant scholarly examination.

Near in the middle of the story, between two battle scenes, Perceval is seated motionless on his horse while looking at three droplets of blood that have made their mark on the snow. He is so caught up in his thoughts, thoughts of his estranged belovéd, that he ignores a forthcoming challenge to fight. Perceval's prime function is that of a warrior; until this moment, fighting seems to be the single driving force behind the story's action. This scene is "usually read as a sign of the new knight's initiation into an awareness of love and of himself" (McCracken 158) but the entire section is about as brief as this paragraph explaining it. Perceval carries on as an allegory rife with just battles and princesses wooed without any further mention of anyone's introspection. The reason scholars hold onto this example so strongly is because it is one of very few in the corpus of extant court literature.

This lack of introspection can be credited to the ease of medieval characters' actions. They suffer no rebuke from their superiors, their god or from within; there is no "self in conflict" that is the hallmark of self-consciousness (Oppenheimer 3). Perceval
floats through his existence with the ease of knowing that his every move is justified by an external power infinitely more important than his own personal choices.

As for the existence of metamorphosis, such a thing is entirely out of the question. The restricted artistic expression that the Church, both *de facto* and *de jure*, placed on Europeans accounts for the removal of the necessary elements: self-consciousness and actual conflict. Metamorphosis "goes underground during epochs of officially enforced, credible ideology and political stability, slow economic and lifestyle change, and perhaps also horror of, and total revulsion at, change itself. This would explain why we have very little of it in the European Middle Ages..." (Dente et al 18).

Church rule excluded ideas of fantasy. Its main source of power was its ability to preapprove all modes of acceptable thought. This, obviously, did not include unexplained phenomena, thus metamorphosis slipped largely into disuse the better part of thousand years.

While the majority of John William Draper's dated but still remarkably relevant *History of Conflict between Science and Religion* (1874) focuses is on dogmatic adherence to Scripture and its relationship to science, it extends itself to all human facets of human production including the literary sciences. He cites all true art, all incarnations of free speech, to be in perpetual struggle against any religious ruling party. "A divine revelation must necessarily be intolerant of contradiction; it must repudiate all improvement in itself, and view with disdain that arising from the progressive intellectual development of man". Absolute power such as the Church acquired cannot allow its potency to be questioned by ideas stemming from outside of itself. All progress must be made internally if it is to be sanctioned; all contradictory advancements must be
suppressed. The "intellectual night which settled on Europe", the dark ages that Draper scarcely believed the society in which he lived was truly rid of, was the inevitable result of social-political and religious domination. Draper proposes that a modern civilization's tranquility "depends so much on the stability of its religious convictions", yet he immediately concedes that "faith is in its nature unchangeable, stationary; Science is in its nature progressive; and eventually a divergence between them, impossible to conceal, must take place" (Draper 5, 6).

Christianity was given an opportunity to spread East of Syria as a result of the replacement of individual kingdoms by Roman imperial domination. This bringing together of different societies limited the sectarian violence that disrupted economic and philosophical exchange which proved to be so vital in the coming days of the empire. The widespread and long-standing peace that ensued provided a relatively safe atmosphere in which the dissemination of new ideologies-- namely Christianity-- where given license to germinate. So quickly did Christianity’s teachings spread and its power grow to that of a formidable political machine that, by A.D. 300, this new religion began to form "a government within the government, an empire within the empire" (Draper 31).

Christianity's sanctification within the government owes its thanks entirely to Constantine, who exploited its potential for his own political advancement.

In a state where paganism, already diluted by the infusion of countless gods from the recently consolidated provinces, was already half out the door, the move was logical. Constantine's official approval of the religion, which already had finger-holds throughout the provinces (and especially in the East), was much more a stunt to gain popular support than to a sincere gesture of admiration for the its theological or social tenants. It is
popularly known that he himself didn't receive the rite of baptism until he reached his deathbed. The coins minted by his government showing Constantine's laureled head on the obverse and the sun god on the reverse speak for themselves. The new officially endorsed religion, though, backed by well-funded leaders with popular support, was gaining steam despite its emperor's lukewarm endorsement.

The new Roman Empire had, to use a modern expression, serious identity issues. This duality, the coexistence of the new God Almighty and the older traditions of pagan polytheism, had a deep impact on the way in which the Church would later begin to restrict its constituents' rights to academic exploration, and was the starting point important literary techniques (like self-consciousness and metamorphosis) relegation to the sidelines. The battle wasn't won so swiftly, though. Christianity indeed became somewhat of a perversion of its original purity mixed with the ritualistic rites and symbols of the older religions, and evidence of the struggle between two the irreconcilable ideologies persist until the present day. Says Draper:

"The pagan party [...] counted among its adherents all the disciples of the old philosophical schools. [...] It asserted that knowledge is to be obtained only by the laborious exercise of human observation and human reason.

[...]

"The Christian party asserted that all knowledge is to be found in the Scriptures and in the traditions of the Church; that, in the written revelation, God had not only given a criterion of truth, but had furnished us all that he intended us to know. The Scriptures, therefore, contain the sum, the end of all knowledge. The clergy, with the emperor at their back, would endure no intellectual competition.

[...]

"Thus came into prominence what were termed sacred and profane knowledge; thus came into presence of each other two opposing parties, one relying on human reason as its guide, the other on revelation" (Draper 38)
Greek and Roman philosophy, was eventually outlawed even in Athens by the emperor Justinian. Church law eventually superseded common law to the extent that "to affirm that death was in the world before the fall of Adam was a state crime" (Draper 41). Restrictions on the dissemination of ideas that ran counter to Church teachings became some of the stiffest in Western history. Book burning was rampant; some of the great libraries in history were summarily emptied in order to furnish fires for the Roman baths. It is reported that six months wasn't sufficient to burn through one library's volumes. The Church stranglehold on academic advancement was to be "a stumbling block in the intellectual advancement of Europe for more than a thousand years" (Draper 50).

Metamorphosis was chosen as our litmus paper because its course in history perfectly matches the pace of intellectual restriction described above. Transformation, the kind of which has been described in Greco-Roman lore, ceased to exist in the middle ages. Rather, metamorphosis becomes the tool of evil without psychological implication. Black magic capable of enacting such changes is given to evil stepmothers, witches living on the outskirts of towns or deep in forests, devils and the like. Allegories, essentially religiously motivated cautionary tales, take the place of literature aimed at discovering the inner workings of the individual. The external is realized in full effect; the individual is marginalized. Fairy tales from the gamut of Western Europe, which Francisco Vaz de Silva argues stem from the same very few sources (Vaz da Silva, 227-32), can be quite easily summed up into a short list of lessons: don't stray from the path, obey your elders, do not succumb to the temptation of the vices, etc..
The breaking point, proposed by Paul Oppenheimer, is the first couple decades of the 13th century, the place: Emperor Frederick II’s Sicily. It is here where the restrictions explained above begin to rebound in such a way that artists once again begin plunging the depths of the individual. Modern European thought owes an "enormous debt" to the advances birthed in this period. Likely, it was Sicily’s vast cultural diversity that had something to do with the "open-mindedness, anticlericalism and scientific curiosity" that Frederick’s emperorship would come to be known for. While probably not quite the tolerant uniter of multi-faith society that history has painted him to be, Frederick did allow for certain circumstances in which entire Saracen, Jewish and Slavic communities could exist under quasi-self-governmental conditions, though it is to be mentioned that their rights were often at least partly restricted and they were subject to special taxes. David Abdulafia concedes that indeed this is not at all comparable to "toleration in the modern sense" (Abdulafia 144), but it is still relatively unusual for contemporaneous rulers. Frederick even employed many non-Christians, particularly Jews and Muslims, to fill important administrative posts within his court. He seems to have been personally concerned with surrounding himself with agents most capable of carrying out their duties whatever their religious backgrounds. While he did indeed also issue restrictive laws, like the rounding up and mass deportation of Sicilian Muslims to Apulia or the requirement of Jews in certain cities to don the robes and beards that made them so identifiable, infrequently could he be accused of the medieval equivalent of crimes against humanity. Frederick’s goal was land, obedience, order and progress; while he was no economist in any modern sense, his letters portray him as a man keenly aware of the value of human resources. A great emphasis on the freedom of artistic and
scholarly expression was a major part plan. Why he allowed such novel freedoms will become evident after some historical context.

Sicily in the 13th Century was exceedingly productive financially, even more so than contemporary England, but expenditures on real or perceived foreign threats were draining the coffers. Frederick's reign is dominated by his feuding with two popes, Gregory IX and Innocent IV, which, in simplified terms, stemmed from his not following through on his promise to separate the crowns of Germany and Italy. In fact, Frederick spent most of the second half of his life attempting to, and for the most part succeeding in, bringing the rebellious region of Lombardy under his political control. Rome's continual fear was that Frederick would eventually control of all the land surrounding the Papal States. A cessation of territorial interests in northern Italy would serve to weaken Frederick's position while strengthening, relatively, that of the See.

Though a lawfully elected Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick was still nominally less powerful than the pope himself. Whereas the latter was elected by God through his vessels in the Church, the emperor was elected by men. While this nominal subordination was reinforced by papal and constitutional documents, as well as affirmed in the coronation ceremony (in which the newly coroneted emperor traditionally held the pope's stirrups as he mounted his horse in symbolic subordination), in truth the Emperor and his dynasty was as powerful as the army he funded and the allegiances he maintained. As it would turn out, the new emperor had the resources, desire and political savvy to rival the dominance of his sworn superior.

At the heart of his feud with the Church was the desire for a tangible change in political science and practical government. By the concessions Frederick made in the
form or eventually funding (nominal) crusades, by sometimes restricting his seizure of certain militarily significant cities, by exercising patience in waiting for responses from Rome, by not entering Rome with his armies despite bringing them to her gates, it can hardly be said that the emperor was motivated by irreverence of papal authority, but instead by his farsightedness in governance. True, by the time of his most significant victory over the papal armies in 1230, after which the cessation of his excommunication was achieved by force, he wore no fewer than three crowns (Sicily, Germany and Jerusalem), but this vast empire was still less vast than the entirety of Church dominion, thus more able to be justly ruled by a single administration. In fact, while Frederick did issue sweeping edicts that were to be enforced over the breadth of his domain, the governance of his three kingdoms were officially, if not practically, separated.

In 1232, Frederick issued his Constitutions of Melfi which consisted of more than 200 laws and edicts, changes which history has recorded as "the clearest evidence of Frederick's wish to make Sicily a 'model state', well-ordered, centralized, efficient" (Abdulafia 202) Not entirely, or even mostly, original, the new laws harken back to older Roman laws, laws which stressed the state (as opposed to a religious body) as the filter through which society's inherent impurities would be strained. Important to note is that Frederick did not seek entirely to eliminate the Church from society, for he was still a devout ruler. The Constitutions of Melfi elaborate

"a more optimistic view of the purpose of rulership and the ways in which government can bring society towards its most urgent objectives: peace and the exercise of righteous conduct. [...] His explanation of the nature of political authority was based in Christian sources and upon Christian assumptions about God's relationship to man; but it was a system that subsisted without the aid or intervention of a Roman pontiff. It was not a secular idea of monarchy; Frederick's power was divinely endowed, as the introduction to the laws clearly states. But there was no sacerdotal intermediary between God and the prince." (Abdulafia 206-7)
Frederick's contribution was to weaken the major force in the Medieval world that restricted individual expressive freedoms. While later scholarship on Frederick II is revisionist in that it attributes fewer of the political and intellectual gains that were fostered in his court to this powerful man’s careful planning and more to the circumstances that arose around the many changes he enacted, Frederick’s motivation is irrelevant to this study. Whether or not the intellectual progress that Frederick II’s court would become famous for was accidental or contrived makes little difference to the purpose of this study; the result was that a wedge was tapped into place between the spiritual and academic dominance of the Church and an intellectual freedom comparable to that available to the critical minds of pre-Christian Rome. It was Frederick who personally funded the medical college at Salerno, he who opened the University of Naples, he who insisted that the arcane and nearly illegible old styles of handwriting be abandoned for simpler and more standard forms-- and it was in his court that older, more progressive forms of literary expression were once again to be found.

Although the Europe’s emergence from religious orthodoxy wasn’t as swift as its falling into it, the changes reverberating from this court did make quite immediate and unquestionably lasting effects on the course of Europe's intellectual history. It was also in Frederick's court that the sonnet was first constructed. The case has been made that "modern thought and literature begins with the invention of the sonnet" (Oppenheimer 3). Traditional courtly love poetry, that which was popular for centuries prior to the sonnet's making the scene, was often performed (sung) by the writer in front of a crowd, in essence bridging the gap between public and private life. Provençal courtly love poetry
was closely aligned with Ptolemy’s medieval system of describing the known universe. Ptolemy’s theories were largely theological-- the older notion of a helio- and theocentric universe had its roots in, among other things, the belief that human life was close to valueless and that only death was "a possible gateway to heaven" (Oppenheimer 7). At this point, not just a geo- but a an anthropocentric universe was beginning to emerge. The sonnet, compared to courtly love poetry, was more ontological, more introspective and was intended to be read silently to oneself. It has been claimed that this new poetic form is the birthplace to the modern concept of the self, thus modern self-consciousness, thus the revival of literary metamorphosis.

For centuries, monks, learned men and even casual readers were taught to read vocally. To be seen staring dumbly at a document would have been as unusual in the Middle Ages as to be heard reading the newspaper aloud while seated in a modern bus. That these new sonnets were meant to be read silently as opposed to being sung with accompanying music led to stylistic and thematic changes. Simple plot lines were abandoned for complex emotional content; a veering away from repetition, so common in music, allowed for greater emphasis to be placed on central themes. As noted above, it’s important to keep in mind that this was not exactly a sea change; for "centuries of medieval allegory, in painting, drama and other literary genres, had habituated people to the idea of externalized conflict" (Oppenheimer 9). But while the church was beginning to lose ground in its domination of intellectual expression, this first distance since the fall of Rome provided the space for the individual to incubate.

Art was now seeing the reentrance of original thought and truly personal elements. The hallmark of the truly personal poem, says Oppenheimer, is ambivalence.
"The poem is the locus of reconciliation of opposed passions... Often the reconciliation involves a change of attitude or even character" (Oppenheimer 32). Pieces of fiction were no longer obsessed with couching their claims in older works or sources, but felt confident in working problems out internally, and imaginatively constructing the future of literary standards. The concept of "truth" was beginning to shift from proof based on someone else's work to a writer's own beliefs being persuasively written down.

As Ovid's *Metamorphoses* "remains the single most fruitful ancient source of classical ledged" (Morford 716), it would be impossible to have a balanced discussion of medieval literature (not to mention the literature of metamorphosis) without often referring back to it. But as mentioned earlier with respect to the *Ovide Moralisé*, the tenor of metamorphosis in medieval literature is vastly different from its ancient ancestor. Dante Alighieri, the most famous son of Frederick II's School of Naples, exploits the technique of transformation in a way typical for the century in which he was writing, but at the same time is progressive in his exploration of the self. Instances of metamorphosis and horrible transformations abound in his *Commedia*, particularly his first book on Hell, and often rework some of the characters popularized by Ovid. On at least two occasions, the later poet compares his own technique to the former's. In Canto IV, Dante encounters Ovid personally. Exactly how indebted this late medieval work is to its classical predecessor is undeniable, but while Dante provides a more impressive artistic example of his transformations, the characters transformed do not come complete with the personal psychological struggle that can be found in the *Metamorphoses*. Self-consciousness in Dante must be found elsewhere.
In his *La Vita Nuova* (1295), he claims as his paramount goal to be the "showing forth [his] inward speech". This unique book of poems and accompanying explanations deliberately contemplates itself in its construction and content. The highly self-reflective character is nearly impossible to separate from the author's own personality as the biographical details of both are so closely aligned. The character finds himself engaged not in a geographic, and not just a spiritual journey, but and deeply personal emotion one.

Although we can say with impunity that at this moment the Church was forced to loosen its grip on the intellectual output of some of those living under the umbrella of its rule, by no means are we safe to insinuate a total intellectual freedom; this was the turning of an hourglass, not the flipping of a light switch. Frederick II’s court can be seen as a marker of the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, a movement which spread North through the rest of Europe, engulfing it in centuries of artistic energy fueled by economic success, but we need no convincing to understand that the majority of art produced during this period was done so under the aegis of the Church. Most if not all of the master painters, scholars, architects, composers claim themselves in the letters that survive them to be devout. True, there are skeptics on this point with respect to nearly each of the producers of important works, but even if many of our favorite artists were the secret skeptics that modernity would drool over, the fact that they all felt compelled to share their glory with God indicates the immense power that the Church retained. Safely we can say, though, that a relaxation in personal freedoms with respect to artistic output had begun, and this motion posed a real threat to the long-term health of Church dominance.
It can hardly be believed that many in the Church respected or even recognized the growing threat. This was a time of plenty that few could be supposed to have wagged their finger at. Political ideas were growing in tandem with rapidly evolving ideas of science and the liberal arts. This was occurring to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to separate the political from the artistic. Ideas of all varieties were building off each other thanks to the complex network of scholarly sharing cultivated by the organization of large political territories. Fewer feudal societies and more large kingdoms meant fewer skirmishes and safer transport. The trade of manufactured goods and foodstuffs should not be thought of as separate from the trade of scientific and literary advancement. The diffusion of information all across Europe, this crosspollination of intellectual minds, created an atmosphere where academic advancement was able to thrive in a way that previous centuries had disallowed. Such a sustained explosion of discovery was exactly what the Church had rightfully feared since Justinian first put forth his strict edicts on what was to be considered acceptable intellectual exploration.

We are the legacy of this relaxation of an ancient Church position. The literature of the modern era owes a debt of gratitude to the progress made in Frederick II’s court. While the Church remains arguably the most powerful institution in the world, its sway over even the devout has been reduced to a fraction of what it once was. If anything that is not a Church teaching is to be considered a distraction, than we are to be considered distracted. The revolution of industry (itself a form of oppression, and one that will be explored) has provided him with uncountable (sometimes compulsory) pastimes. The New New World has created new uses for man, new economic systems in which he is
plugged in. The ability to create goods on a mass scale has enabled wars beyond the measure of anything in antiquity. These new wars, thus the political and expressive fallout from them, can be conjured and completed in a small fraction of the time it took the crusades to play out. Holy wars took years, sometimes decades to raise and fund armies, organize leaders and march their soldier to the battlegrounds. The new divine, the economic systems that separate one ideology from another, is what we are left with. The individual is torn between the older model of Church rule, whose legacy still permeates many facets of society, and the oppression of economic systems which dictate that all individuals work for the political machine into which they were born.

In a sense, all modern literature is economic literature because of its preoccupation with class. The knowledge of one’s social position, be it as an individual within a large economic model, or within a subset of people, or even within one’s own family, is the new self-consciousness. Literature of the modern era cannot help but separate the individual from his environment because the new conflict does not exist in the external, but within. To define oneself against the backdrop of oneself in the new struggle. Clearly, the particulars of a character’s environment cannot be discounted because of their lending a context to his situation, but more important than how the outside world views him is how he views himself within the context of his environment. Metamorphosis in the modern era reflects this.

The dominant literature of the time is Realist in nature, so we must necessarily discount other subordinate genres in which metamorphosis often occurs, most notably science-fiction, if we hope to make any claims that can be applied in a more or less universal way. Because science-fiction necessitates a suspension of disbelief under
which fantasy can survive, we still find in it older forms of metamorphism, namely:
punitive transformation. Super-modern ray guns and medical marvels are comparable to
the magic spells of fairytale witches. Similar arguments can be made for magical realism
and related genres.

In Modernist and Realist literature, no longer do we encounter instances of
metamorphosis in which characters are transformed by omnipotent outside sources for
punitive reasons. Although the case can be made that the motivations are still punitive in
nature, the source of transformation now comes from within. We are the powerful agents
that force ourselves to mutate into beings other than human. Metamorphosis is now a
self-willed extension of self-expression, something useful to characters in times when
traditional language or thought are no longer viable avenues of expression. It is a
(sometimes temporary) escape in which a character provides himself with a necessary
distance from the confines corporal prison. The goal of this distance is to achieve some
necessary realization. Unlike the metamorphosis of times past, the complex economic
environment of more modern times will be shown to be inseparable from this new mode
of self-expression.
Among other things, Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915) is a meditation on ambivalence. Although there is always a touch of surrealism, and sometimes absurdism, Kafka writings are realist at heart, dealing most directly with the personal struggles of individuals in economic systems too large to avoid. In his *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa, an over-burdened traveling salesman, wakes up one morning in the shape of a gigantic bug. And although the visual metaphor is unbroken throughout the length of the story, only very seldom do we get the inclination that Gregor’s mind has been turned into something more bug-like than human. His tastes and proclivities have altered, but this is certainly the result of the physiological changes associated with life as some sort of beetle. And although we cannot with confidence claim that Gregor’s mind is any more bug-like than when he went to sleep early the previous evening, we can certainly glean enough information from the text to say that there has been a distinct shift in body perception and overall motivation. The hard-working, resolved, dedicated and trustworthy family member and employee that he had been his entire working life (and presumably even well before that) is no longer home. In his place is another version of the same man. What remains is the physical manifestation of the negative answers to all of the questions that we ask ourselves throughout the course of a workweek. Is it really time to get up already? Couldn’t I just call out sick? What is the point? Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis is not the result of any one external source exerting its omnipotence on him, but his willfully escaping the manifold pressures that govern his every day.
Gregor’s first confrontation is overwhelmingly economic and most subsequent conflicts have strong economic undertones. Kafka, who famously paints his stories with just enough resolution to be vaguely discerned, gives us few precise details from which we must extrapolate the bulk of the Samsa family story. What we know is that Gregor must earn enough to support his parents and his younger sister. We also know that on top of paying for the apartment and incidentals, he must also pay back a debt that his parents owe to his current employer, a debt which is likely linked to the collapse of the family business five years prior to the beginning of the story. There is a palpable stress associated with these responsibilities.

The Gregor we are introduced to is a mixture of the meek Gregor of the past and the assertive and independence Gregor of the future—or at least the Gregor that he would hope to become after his metamorphosis. What we soon come to realize, though, is that this transformation is incomplete. The protagonist is left in such a state that the old and the new Gregors exist simultaneously in a confusing amalgam of contradictory impulses. For instance, the eager son lauds his father’s “unexpected foresight and thrift” (31) in virtually embezzling family funds despite the possibility of this money to grant the son an early parole from the sentence of debt-bondage. Might not the assuaged stress of knowing that he would have fewer than the projected 5 to 6 years left to pay this debt back have made such an escape (of which this metamorphosis obviously is) unnecessary? Still Gregor’s inner cynic is tempered by his meekness. With this financial secrecy, as with seemingly all unfairness in his life, Gregor “wholeheartedly approved” (34). Even after their forsaking him as irreversibly altered, Gregor thinks of his family with “deep love and emotion” (59).
Yet ambivalence persists. At one time, Gregor even threatens, non-verbally, to “fly into the face” (20) of his beloved sister, Grete, when she decides that he would be more comfortable without the trappings of a human existence. As she removes the desk, table, chairs, etc. from his room, Gregor becomes enraged at his family for accepting before he does the full weight of his new circumstances. Perhaps this is because Gregor himself spends the bulk of the story unconvinced that he is in fact changed. He often treats his condition as little more than a lull out of which he will eventually dust himself off and resume his life like normal once he regains the motivation to stand erect. The question now is, Do we believe the transformation? And if it is, in fact, to be considered real “can the monstrous beetle’s human kinsman… really be expected to sacrifice their happiness to an alien form of life?” (Skulsky 6).

A shift away from the church coincided with a shift toward Modernism and Realism. Even in cases of metamorphosis and other fantasy, literature as a whole became less fantastic, more couched in reality. Gregor Samsa’s example, and many later stories of metamorphosis, are able to be viewed as living metaphors, that is to say: metaphors that are extended so far that the comparisons they make actually touch on reality. *The Metamorphosis* begins with fuzzy, indistinct details, but as the action progresses and Gregor becomes more accustomed to his new body, the language becomes “exceedingly vivid, like nightmares or hallucinations, thus contrary to fact” (Kafka, Corngold p. xxiv).

In most cases of modern literature, not only can we question the source of metamorphosis, but the validity of its being real at all. It has been argued that this is the case with the genre of fantasy in
general, for often “we cannot take [fantasy] literally because it has no literal meaning” (Skulsky, 40). Modernisms asks of us this form of question repeatedly. Rather than the didacticisms of older literature, modern times hold the reader accountable to draw his own conclusions. Regarding *The Metamorphosis*, the final decision on Gregor’s transformation rests on the discretion of the individual. Perhaps, though, if we consider the cover of first edition copy [Fig. 1], which shows a man, presumably Gregor, holding his head in his hands in a shadowy room, we see something of what the early readers, or at least the publishers, gleaned from their readings. Never are we actually acquainted with our protagonist in his human form. From the beginning of the story to the end, we follow the life a bug.

Precisely sourcing Gregor’s transformation is a tall order given the relative lack of details given in the text, and while the tenets New Criticism encourage us to view work irrespective of its historical context, doing so with Kafka is impossible. The fiction simply gives us too little to disregard the details of the author. As such, we are forced to read Gregor’s life, as K’s life from *The Castle* (1926), or Joseph K’s life from *The Trial* (1925), as an extension of the author’s own experiences living through a mundane job and under and domineering father. No doubt the complex social position of being a Jew in Prague lent much to Kafka’s feeling of being marginalized.

Regarding Gregor’s metamorphosis, while many of the stimuli come from his environment and social situation, his personal inability to sort out the problems of his life is the inevitable causes his shifting shape. As Gallagher puts it, “authors consistently use metamorphosis to represent a crisis; a moral crisis or religious one, a cultural crisis, an existential crisis of the subject or a mental crisis of the protagonist” (Gallagher 417). We
cannot deny that the change comes from within. Our protagonist is in a state of undeniable crisis, and the argument can be made that this crisis is simultaneously of a moral, religious, cultural, existential and mental sort. If left unaddressed, the small stresses in our lives would gather into an unmanageable pile, a pile that, if ignored, would form a heap around which the routine chores (like getting out of bed) must travel before being tackled. Everything present in our lives would eventually become tainted by the unmanaged stress of the past; nothing in Gregor’s life can escape the gravity of his neglected heap.

As will be elaborated in the section dealing with Atwood’s *Surfacing*, modern metamorphosis is a form of expression. It is a language when, for one reason or another, no other language can be used to express the most important character emotions. Gregor’s metamorphosis is inseparable from his apparently lifelong habit of martyring himself for the sake of his family. The pattern of always putting the needs of his family and firm above his personal needs, of keeping his head perpetually down and plowing through the inequities of life is so entrenched in his personality that he is unable to panic even when panic might be advantageous. He remembers that “thinking things over calmly—indeed as calmly as possible—[is] much better than jumping to desperate decisions” (8). But can we imagine a situation more desperate than being transformed into a gigantic beetle? Despite an early refusal to accept his metamorphosis as reality, the poor man is just as quick to acknowledge it as a new way of life. In living simultaneously as Gregor the man and Gregor the “dung beetle”, he perpetuates a pattern of avoiding decisions. He is, in essence, excusing himself from having to use traditional language as a tool for expression.
As touched on above, the expressive nature of metamorphosis not only includes dialogue between different characters, but within the transformed character himself. In shifting shape, Gregor is in dialogue with two opposed versions of himself. If communication is the transferring of ideas between parties in an attempt to come to mutual agreement, so can we view what our protagonist is going through as a conversation with the hope of eventual understanding. The “dialogue” being spoken about is another way of saying that this metamorphosis is anything by static. Gregor struggles with such debilitating ambivalence that he is caught between two possible futures: remaining the steadfast provider, or following his desire for independence. This struggle is the engine behind the progressive nature of the modern transformation.

Upon waking up, Gregor is in the shape of a “horrible vermin” [ungeheures Ungeziefer], but he is not yet a bug per se. Through free indirect discourse, we are allowed entrance into his thought processes as he reconciles his old mental habits with his new physical shape. By degrees, as he becomes more comfortable with his new body, so does his mind further embrace the voice of what we might term “the negative”. Indeed, it is only after accepting the grotesqueness of his new animal posture that he is provided with his first “feeling of well-being” (11) since waking up. A little later on, the incredible healing ability of this new body is mentioned. Early in the narrative, Gregor suffers his first wound at the hands of his father, a wound which results in one of his spindly legs being rendered temporarily lame. After noticing a remarkably short convalescence period before full use of his appendage is restored, he is impressed. Although hardly a direct comment on the benefits of this mental struggle, in Kafka, where every sentence begs interpretation, it is about as direct a comment as we can get.
As one critic puts it: “In Kafka’s work, as in a dream, symbol is fact” (Kafka, Corngold 162).

The process of metamorphosis continues as Gregor weighs the possibility of “totally [that is to say, willfully] forgetting his human past”, which is an obvious temptation for him. This occurs in the middle section of the story when his ambivalence is nearing the tipping point. In one crucial scene Gregor is frustrated by his family’s attempting to remove all vestiges of his human life from the room that has become his cage. His first reaction, as always, is understanding, but the mood soon shifts when he realizes the consequences, the finality of abandoning humanity. It is now that Gregor accepts Grete, his closest friend, and the rest of his family as a potential threat. They are attempting once again to force his hand while he is striving, futilely, for an autonomous life.

Although the complexities of this progressive metamorphosis are near inexhaustible and beyond the scope and desire of this study, one further piece of evidence of its existence should not be overlooked. If we consider the title that the author chose, we notice an unmistakable intention toward progression. *The Metamorphosis [Die Verwandlung]* as a title connotes a state of change without finality. Kafka, who must have been aware of this, could have chosen “The Metamorphosed” [Die Verwandelt] if he wished us to view this as a static, punitive tale about the perils of the modern world. Instead, he makes a subtle distinction: it is not the world we should fear, but ourselves within the world, for the choices in life are inevitably ours to make. Whether we accept the course chosen for us by family or fate, or whether we have the inner strength to hew a
new path more aligned with our individual interests is the difference between success and stasis.

Much of the criticism on the topic focuses on the social, economic and literary reasons for Gregor’s metamorphosis and their implications, but a back door to approaching this question, so to speak, is too often unopened. We should refrain from asking what the causes of this metamorphosis are because they are myriad; what we should ask is: What would it take for Gregor to shift back to human form? In this way can we tighten the rope not around symptoms, but causes. In a few instances, we are shown glimpses of a possible return to humanity, but all too often they are blurred by the perception of some persecution. Early on, Gregor feels “integrated into human society again” (13) after some small kindness shown to him by his sister. Logically, then, it is unkindness that leads to dehumanization. Later, we are told that Gregor “believed that final recovery from all his sufferings was imminent” just before his family and manager expressed such horror at the sight of him (19). Further on we see him fantasizing about the possibility of a to human life, but it lasts only for a moment:

“Sometimes he thought that the next time the door opened he would take charge of the family’s affairs again, just as he had done in the old days; after this long while there again appeared in his thoughts the boss and the manager, the salesmen and the trainees, the handyman who was so dense, two or three friends from other firms, a chambermaid in a provincial hotel—a happy fleeting memory—a cashier in a millinery store, whom he had courted earnestly but too slowly—they all appeared, intermingled with strangers or people he had already forgotten; but instead of helping him and his family, they were all inaccessible, and he was glad when they faded away.” (47)

Thoughts of superiors, acquaintances and tamped-out courtship shift his attitude back to the negative as quickly as more optimistic thoughts are had. This brand of
metamorphosis is so entrenched with the perceptions of the transformed that we cannot help but hold him at least partly culpable for his sad state of affairs. Gregor feels personally persecuted by an economic system that weighs equally on an entire society. The circumstances of his life are altogether not so unique; it is only his response to them that is unique.

The state of psychological flux that Gregor finds himself in is a secular purgatory. The difference between this purgatory and the Christian one, though, is that he who is stuck in limbo doesn’t seem to know in which direction ascension lies. As a result of this metamorphosis being the product of desire, Gregor is not only uncertain whether he can become human again, but whether or not he wants to. And while the possibility of returning to humanity tantalizes the protagonist and reader throughout the length of the story, we are not made to believe that any such return would be circumstantial, but self-willed. Since it is he who has dug himself into this hole, so must it be he who digs himself out. If continuing the metaphor will be excused, the shovel with which Gregor could ultimately find salvation would be his recognizing the universality of his situation. Kafka approaches the universal through the lens of the purely personal. “Gregor tried to imagine whether something like what had happened to him today could one day happen even to the manager [of his company]; you really had to grant the possibility.” This backhanded optimism, though, proves to be fleeting, and whatever small emotional progress is made in temporarily viewing his situation as essentially common is soon lost by his reverting back to overwhelming pessimism. It seems that nothing but a full change in Gregor’s environment, a change that would have to happen without his intervening at all, is the only thing that could allow him to molt his insect body.
But what Kafka called the “negativity of my time” [das Negative meiner Zeit] is tempered by an undercurrent of hope that persists throughout his writing. Hope is particularly central to the Metamorphosis narrative because hope’s death would indicate a complete and irreversible transformation, a stasis that is not present for the bulk of the story. It is the belief that Gregor can return, and that his family in fact wants him to return, that keeps what little is left of him alive. But after months of struggle and sacrifice, the family finally resolves to deal with the problem of Gregor head-on—by somehow getting rid of him.xviii Only at this point, quite late in the story, is “forgetting his human past” forever revealed to be the certainty that only the heartless could predict at the story’s beginning. Gregor spares his family the trouble of solving the problem by promptly dying of emotional abandonment. Hope, sourced externally, has forsaken him and thus was his metamorphosis complete. Men cannot live in the body of a bug and so Gregor simply dies.

Kafka’s story is a entirely concentrated on the personal struggles of an individual. The relevance of this individual’s plight, though, is universal. How closely aligned the details of Kafka’s own life are to Gregor Samsa’s is one explanation why generations have found this text to be so relatable. Despite its burdensome emotional and psychological content, it is an addicting and easy read. To the author himself, it must have felt more like fact than fiction – more like a personal purge than the fabrication of a story. Undoubtedly, the nature of Kafka’s upbringing, the particular family he inherited and the city in which he lived, was a central motivator for this novel’s creation. The author was witness to the incredible swiftness with which industrialization delineated social boundaries for the new European working class, which he himself was part of.
The growing pains stemming from industry’s rise has left a legacy of social scars. We are now barely two generations removed from the wonton exploitation of human resources for the glorification of economic systems constantly at odds with their competitors. True, intergovernmental and economic rivalries remain, and might be as vicious as ever, but the effect they have on the individuals of the first-world is much different than 100 years ago. No longer are the masses expected to toil endless hours in unventilated factories producing obscure component parts for great machines; no longer is organization an offense that can cause one to lose his job.

Without question, the average worker of today enjoys more rights, more free time, and greater access to high quality goods and services than ever before, yet he is still not free from an immense social weight. Individual desires are still countered by the pressure to produce, to conform to a model acceptable to the progress of something greater than the individual unit, like the family, the country or the corporation.

To claim that this phenomenon of individual stress from a complex social-political structure is new to the world would be impossible, but the overall quickness with which the world is changing is certainly unprecedented. The combination of social pressure added to the rapid restructuring of the work force, particularly at the turn of the last century, created a confusion of allegiance, a crisis of knowing to whom one is responsible: to the family that gives life and nurtures, to the government that keeps society at large functioning, or to the self. One needs only to glance at the literature of the last century to see this in evidence. The search for one’s place has become a dominant theme. Where greater societal entities (e.g. the Church, the nation, the family) used to be the focus of literary energies, the individual now reigns. Patriotic texts have
been replaced by those sympathetic to finding a personal living space within the stretch marks of industrial expansion.

Mass electrification and the invention and distribution of the internal combustion engine are often cited as the starting point of the fin-de-siècle, which as a term is used not only to connote a certain period of time, but also a general social and artistic movement. Teich and Porter follow other researchers by opening their discussion on the period with two chapters entirely devoted to the shifting economy of the time. Without an understanding of the explosive growth of factory sizes, the physical byproducts of industry, or the mechanization of the streets, one cannot fully grasp the how intrusive the new world was on older traditions of small family businesses and close communities.

Great hoards of people filing in from the fields packed the cities of Europe and America with an eagerness to get involved in the excitement of change. Little were they prepared for top-down tendency of business to marginalize individual needs for the benefit of the production. Artistic output from this period reflects the stresses that a revolutionized work environment, a longer work-day and the degradation of the urban environment had on the new generation. The overwhelming ennui and a self-marginalizing pessimism that literature, music and the fine art of the day exhibited was the logical result of a feeling felt unanimously among contemporaries.

The explosive progress of science created a gap between that which one could see and what one could understand. Similar to the early days of Christianity, we could no longer rely on our physical senses to determine what should be perceived as real, but were made to rely on faith in our scientists, our new priests, to understand an increasingly complex world. Powerful gas engines were en route to making horses obsolete.
Unexplainable wires came together to provide light overhead. The layman knew not how these things worked and quickly forgot the old methods that they replaced. If we can think about faith in terms of something quantifiable, it is not wonder that the new technological progress directly weakened people’s relationship to the Church, for how much faith, that is to say how many units of faith, did we have to split among all those things we were meant to believe without seeing? Add to that the fact that this entirely new race of machines was the child of man (and not God), which replaced the crown of “Creator” onto our heads, it is no surprise that the old God suffered such a blow.

Where Science had its true edge, though, is that we could physically witness its fruits in the machines that are built; we were witness to the process of creation. Unfortunately, though, few had a genuine understanding of the processes that allowed these machines to function, so while our faith shifted from the intangibility of God to something more tactile, the object of our faith remained as something beyond the comprehension of the layperson. “It was in the Romantic period, certainly, that writers became aware of this dissociation, for Milton or ever Gray do not appear to feel themselves cut off from the world of science” (Lyons 220). The first step in isolating literary examples of this feeling is to hone in an individual city. Prague is as good an example as any in representing fin-de-siècle anxieties.

At the turn of the last century, Prague was an aggressive town, a social petri dish where the ideas of the larger Central European cities went to germinate. Artistic output, especially literary output, was so extensive that Pragers abroad would often be facetiously asked who their publisher was and how many books they’d written (Stach 73). Indeed it seemed as though everyone in Prague was an author of something. But a
disproportionate fraction of these writings came from the small German-speaking population inhabiting the dense city center, or *innenstadt*. Predominantly Jewish, this population comprised about 5-10% of the city’s entire roll call.

While they were indeed quite a marginalized minority, they were not subjected to the traditional role of a minority. It is true that they were politically subordinate by virtue of being outnumbered in the conduits that enacted legal change, but this small group was financially and socially powerful. Jews owned many of the city’s largest business and held many important posts even in Czech-owed companies. In fact, it was not uncommon for entire management teams to speak German amongst themselves. German-speaking Jews had recourse to German schools and universities, German arts councils, and German theaters to such an extent that one need not leave the *innenstadt* in order to live a full life. And while it is important to note that Jews had held a fairly similar position in Prague for quite a long time before its industrial revolution, the mass migration of gentiles from the fields to the city gave the Jews a proportionately greater influence over the city’s original population.

During the industrial revolution, laws against Jews slowly began to relax, yet “the immediate effect of liberal political reform in Prague had been Czech nationalist domination of municipal politics. Faced with a burgeoning *völkisch* ideology on the one side, and a Czech nationalism that was as anti-Semitic as it was anti-German on the other, the generation under discussion was decentered: it was a post-liberal generation without alternatives” (Spector 4).

This de-centralization of Czech society, the shift toward a slightly more empowered Jewish minority created predictable tensions in the Czech capital in general,
but also other less intuitive tensions within the Jewish community itself. By the time of the *fin-de-siècle*, the Jewish ghetto had been almost entirely demolished and all but the most orthodox and the poorest Jews had been integrated into the larger platform of the city. No longer were they forced, *de facto*, to dwell within the physical ghetto, but, a “sociological ghetto” (Anderson 35) remained in which Jews were relegated as “others” in a community in which several generation had already been born and died.

Jewish self identity, as all self identity of the era, was becoming ever more conflated with its surroundings so that to identify oneself as a Jew in Prague was nearly as vague as calling oneself a foreigner. The Jewish diaspora into the rest of the city and its environs was only half of the problem of a destabilized Jewish identify; the other half resulted from an estrangement of Jews from their religion. This second problem isolated the new generation from the previous one. While Franz Kafka’s father’s generation maintained a dialogue with their religious beliefs, Kafka’s generation largely ignored them. The threadbare community of Jews that existed in Prague were indeed still linked by their religious background, but ever decreasingly by a common cultural background. “Within the larger sociological ghetto of the Jews, who were shunned by the Czechs as ‘Germans’ and the Germans as Jews, the isolation of the individual in Prague at that time developed a prototype of modern alienation” (Anderson 35). Young writers therefore banded together, creating what Max Brod termed The Prague Circle or *Der Prager Kreis* in his autobiographical account of his involvement with the movement, which was a loose consortium of writers who dwelled on similar themes of social disintegration and individual incompleteness. This focus group of individuals, and particularly Kafka because his well-documented personal struggles⁹⁹, embodies the struggles outlined
above. A study of their literary output amounts to what could be an extremely complete study of fin-de-siècle self-consciousness. Kafka, as far and away the most widely read of his generation as well as one of the most exported writers in modern history, will be the lens through which we now view the new expression of consciousness that developed as a result of the new economic conditions.

Kafka was a deeply troubled man, a neurotic and a hypochondriacally. He suffered from a brand of alienation unlike that which has been discussed so far, thus will his brand of metamorphosis be shown to be equally new. At the same time dominated by the cultural schisms that his generation was heir to, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he was filled with a persistent self-loathing. As a result, his writings are as singular as his personality has come to be renowned. The compounding of his social background with his individual particularities is precisely why his writing is so representative of an early example of modern self-consciousness. And acquaintance with Kafka the man, as opposed to Kafka the author, will aid in an understanding of this connection.

The masses of letters that he is survived by comprises the bulk of his literary corpus, and it is here where we are able to become familiar with him as a man beset by emotional crises. Extremely prolific in his correspondences, especially during the productive years of his early literary achievement, it was not uncommon for Kafka to write several multipage letters in a single day, while at the same time working long hours at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute and adding to his creative projects by night. It would not be a brazen to suggest that at least part of the stress from which Kafka constantly suffered was the result of the “impossible” level of productivity that he held
himself to. A striving for personal, professional and above all artistic perfection dominates the letters he sent to those closest to him.

“Impossible”, as Reiner Stach notes in the second of his three biographies on the Kafka, is a word that the author inked so often, particularly in his letter writing, as to be given disproportionate importance to other strong adjectives. Often, the explanation for this impossibility serves only to further alienate the author from the letter’s recipient by way of making his complaints unclear. A vague fear of being understood, of his highly developed rhetorical skills actually conveying that which prompted him to live night and day by his pen, is the paradox of being Franz Kafka. Cynthia Ozick’s “The Impossibility of Being Kafka” is indispensable in understanding this. True closeness, to himself, his family, the women in his life or his literary cohorts was something that would plague him lifelong. In fact, so long as he questioned the possibility of closeness, as long as he strived to find a level perfection in the world that has never existed, he was destined to live quite alone.

He spent the bulk of his short life in the Prague’s innenstadt. At one time he stood with his Hebrew teacher surveying from his classroom window the layout of city and noted that, between his childhood home (where is slept most of the nights of his life), his father’s fine goods and clothing shop, the German school, and the German university, he had spent the overwhelming majority of his life within the space of just a few small city blocks. This feeling of being perpetually pent would figure highly throughout the writings of his career. Indeed, “[H]is relationship to Prague served as a paradigm for his relation to the world in general” (Anderson 78). An inability to escape from his city, his
family and his physical and mental ill-health would translate to the bleak symbols so prevalent in his writing. The question of family is one of particular interest.

A large, loud man with a preconceived idea of how his son should tow the family line, Herman Kafka was the source of much of his son’s angst. Kafka the younger lived in the shadow of what he perceived as his father’s uncompromising demands, and although the exact extent of this domineering is the subject of some dispute, undisputed is Kafka’s perception of his entire existence being subject to scrutiny. Kafka’s incessant wavering on the details of his desires, his near constant squabbles with the women in his life, and his dramatic outbursts railing against the things that others hardly noticed contributed to his gaining the reputation in his family as someone desirous of an unsustainable level of attention. The family business required all hands on deck for most of the day and into the night. It was not uncommon for the youngest daughter, Franz’s closest and most consistent confidante, Ottla, to spend as much as 12 hours in the shop from an early age. The lines of communication disrupted by the incidentals of life and perhaps a reluctance to spend precious free time dealing constantly with the dramatic troubles of an over imaginative relative, Kafka was left to stew with his feelings of otherness. When he did try to communicate, which was done almost exclusively via letters, his rhetorical skill was unmistakable; but at the same time his practiced vagueness left the reader either unable or unwilling to comprehend him. Perhaps the most widely read and oft cited correspondence is a hundred-and-three-page letter known as the Brief an den Vater or Letter to his Father. Written in 1919, this letter details the reasons for Kafka’s “fear” of his father as well as his inability to fully articulate himself. It begins:

Dearest Father,
You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for
the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete...

Kafka is ever moving inward in his attempts to express himself outwardly. No doubt this emotional stress contributed to the physical frailness that further limited his mobility. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, which would eventually cause his death at the age of 40, Kafka was never without the reminder that escape was not only financially unjustifiable and generally unsanctioned, but also a possible health risk. Punctuated by a host of rather serious medical scares, Kafka’s life seemed to him one lived not by his leisure, but by the restrictions imposed upon him by the circumstances of his birth. All of these conditions contributed to the highly negative, internal nature of his writing.

The early readers of Kafka commonly painted him as an anomaly of imagination; they supposed that he had no literary predecessors to speak of, that he, in essence, created a new sort of literary style all his own. Nothing could be more wrong. To assert that Kafka’s imaginative power alone provided the fodder from which his unbelievably pure, almost entirely temporally and geographically isolated texts were born is a misunderstanding of the author’s social and political awareness in general and a misunderstanding of how the world works at large. xx Kafka was the son of his place and time as much as any other artist, or any other person for that matter. His almost deification, the distancing of him from being a normal man in support of his literary genius separates him from him most impressive talent: the ability to relate societal problems through the lens of the purely personal. Kafka strives not for perfection through laboriously created structures, but via simplicity. That he is often so highly credited is simply a testament to his technical effectiveness and it is only later scholarship
that has placed Kafka among other brilliant young men that were the products of their generation.

But the misinterpretations of Kafka’s can be blamed on no one but the artist himself, as he consciously set up barrier after barrier between his own convictions and those to whom his wished to communicate. It will be shown that these barriers are what produced the memorable self-conscious metamorphosis in his most famous work.

Though the Modernism of Kafka predates the Realism that we have come to accept as the dominant genre of our time, the two fields share DNA, so to speak. After all, as Robert Alter puts it, “literary realism is a tantalizing contradiction of terms” (Alter p. x). The novel, as a relatively new genre, is the vessel in which this new self-consciousness resides, and the truly self-conscious novel is one that “systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality” (Alter p. x). I don’t think it would be out of bounds to extend this definition to include short fiction as well, including Kafka’s novellas. Perhaps the semi-hysterical fits of laughter that Kafka is famous for having worked himself into while reading excerpts of his Metamorphosis to his literary circle is the best indication of the “artifice” mentioned above. And although Alter focuses specifically on author (as opposed to character) self-consciousness, which explains his referencing writers to the tune of Joyce, the questions he raises are the same as ours: What is so inexplicable that a single character voice cannot adequately explain? Why do we feel the need for this doubling? Alter also brings up the concept of the modern city, the cityscape itself and the hordes of people that make the individual essentially anonymous. He notes that “in the authorial voice of the nineteenth-century
novels, one notices above all a confident mastery of the chaotic metropolis, a mastery
reflected in the vigorously ordered, reiterative structures of rhetoric through which the
scenes are reported. In Joyce, on the other hand, as attention turns inward to the
movements of the protagonist’s mind, what we become aware of is that the flux of the
city scene and that the great ebb and flow of life it implies are too vast and confusing
really to be contained coherently by any single finite mind…” (Alter 141).

One way of dealing with the largeness of this sort of problem is to create two
characters out of a single one. The fracturing of a human into a totally new entity
complete with different physical limitations, thus a different worldview, lends the power
of two minds to deal with a solitary issue. That these modern characters remain human
by virtue of transformation’s actual impossibility is crucial. Essentially, what we create
in modern fiction when we have our characters transform is a monologue in the shape of
a dialogue; we have a character communicating with himself, but in such a way that he
can simultaneously be totally convinced of one reality and at the same time entirely
skeptical. This meta-language takes the concept of character ambivalence to entirely new
levels as it disallows the reader from judging two characters for the faults of one and vice
versa. Character doubling will resurface in the next section’s discussion of Margaret
Atwood’ writing.
Women’s literature traditionally lives in the conflict between full-citizenship and denizenship. It is this quasi-acceptance that makes such literature a ripe breeding ground for examples of metamorphosis. In Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1971), the author takes on this complex theme directly and with remarkable skill. She does wonderfully in exhibiting the plight of the community of women through the lens of an individual. Her protagonist is so conscious of her status as social subordinate that her only avenue to full self-awareness is the rejection of her community. When this proves insufficient she quickly rejects herself.

*Surfacing*’s relatively simple plotline is muddied by a complex, frightening psychological portrait of a woman divided. Well before any transformation occurs the novel broadly employs the rhetorical motifs of dislocation of the corporal self and the inadequacy of language. Linking these is the trauma that the unnamed narrator suffered only a few years prior to the action of the story. In *Surfacing*, amputation serves as metaphor for abortion. The ignoring of this trauma has in essence created long-term emotional numbing in the narrator’s life, the result of which alienates her from a normal human existence. She eventually becomes so far dislocated from her own emotions that neither common societal rules nor her mother tongue make logical sense to her. She is utterly alone and aware of it; solace to her seems a remote idea, unattainable in the form of life she has been living.

On top of the distressing abortion, the narrator has also recently lost both of her
parents in separate incidents. The mother’s death and the abortion take place before the action of the story begins; the father’s mysterious disappearance, during it. A guarded first-person narrative circles around the protagonist’s personal details for the bulk of the novel using the historical present, a technique which removes the narrator from any responsible storytelling. In the end, we are left with little more than questionable truths, like a document barely saved from fire. But while the details are fated to remain cloudy, the larger idea of her trauma and its consequences are bluntly dealt with. Essentially, the death of her entire family coupled with her practiced avoidance of dealing with the stresses in her life has left her poised for a psychological breakdown. A history of being relegated as less important, or at least less prepared to deal with her problems, by virtue of being a woman serves to make the shock of eventually coming to terms with her trauma that much more potent. She intimates constantly that her womanhood is both a physical and social disadvantage.

In order to work through her ordeal and wade back to any semblance of normalcy, she must first go deeper inward, forgetting not only gender, but species and logic. She shuns language as she shuns materialism: each implies a meaning beyond its intended purpose. She embraces what she calls "the other language" (Atwood 194), which can best be described as instinct incarnate, communication without words and even without recipient, expression without intention. By renouncing what she perceives to be all forced rules, she distills her emotions, synthesizing that which she has been unable to communicate even to herself.

Much of the text of the novel is virtually unquotable due to its calculated obscurity, the overall mystery of the story serving as a mirror for the confusion of the
protagonist’s emotional growth. The earlier section is peppered with instances of suppressed expression, which are early hints of the narrator’s habit of emotional seclusion and on which the psychological plot builds. She has important bits of information to share, but keeps these things to herself for fear of being misunderstood, and while the recent events of her life are unclear, the shadow of her upbringing is never far from sight.

She is a woman of the woods, having grown up geographically isolated, thus differently than the city friends of her adulthood. As the novel traces a path back to a simpler time, so does the narrator strive for a simpler existence—at first, the relative safety of a life in the forest; eventually, a form of existence so distant that it exists only in theory. Her physical isolation is matched only by her self-promoted emotional inaccessibility. The metamorphosis she will eventually undergo gestates in this mire. In fact, the twin themes of physical and emotional loneliness intertwine themselves in the novel so seamlessly as to make discerning the lines between them a chore. In her own hyperbolic words, the protagonist claims her childhood being spent in the remote Canadian wilderness has left her “socially retarded” (51) in terms of city skills. In essence, her returning to the northern wilderness after years of avoiding her family life is like traveling back in time.

Eventually, the she and her companions arrive at the quiet family cabin. While laying in bed in her old home, abandoned by the deaths of her parents, her eyes settle on an heavy leather coat left hanging on a nail in the wall. It belonged to her mother. “Dead people’s clothes should be buried with them. I turn over and shove Joe [her boyfriend] against the wall so I can curl up” (51). Family catharsis leads to emotional isolation,
physical isolation and a self-willed cocoon posture.

Even those people she considers closest (her boyfriend and another couple she brought with her) are far from able to provide the kind of support that someone in her position would require. It is as if each character inhabits his or her own emotional vacuum; their vapid individual concerns seem always to take precedence over the health of the group. The narrator is not excluded in this generalization; through virtually unlimited access to her thoughts and thought process, we can say that very seldom does she recognize the psychological damage she is clearly causing her friends. Even in instances when she does notice a possible impact and decides to alter her actions, it is always with the ulterior motive of self-preservation. She speaks of her own emotional inadequacy as the result of a lesson barely learned; “What to feel was like what to wear, you watched others and memorized it” (142).

The constant attempt to reconcile her stunted emotional growth with her adult life leads to a difficulty in distinguishing between authenticity and imitation. Often, characters from her past, those who have lived life-long in the small village near her family cabin, are subtly accused of being shams, of being cheap simulations of rural living simply because they have welcomed some small technological advances into their lives since the time she was last there. What is obvious to everyone but the character herself is that it is not they who no longer belong in this environment, but she. In part, the metamorphosis in Surfacing is the psychological manifestation of her statelessness. She feels at home nowhere which leads to a disassociation with all physical objects.

As the story progresses, she begins to allude to her past trauma more frequently, but always in a sideways manner. The deeper we read into the novel, the deeper we find
ourselves muddled in the narrator’s semi-conscious thoughts. She is half-aware of the looming disaster, but does little to avoid it. Rather, a full breakdown seems almost welcomed. There is a middle-step, though, between attempting to rationalize her emotional state and her eventual metamorphosis: the shift in language from terse, sarcastic jabs to more reaching poetics. Before rejecting language altogether, she attempts to elevated it to a degree that would allow her to purge that which hurts her. While the narrator is able to physically communicate more after this change, her words are muddier. The reader only half understands the meaning behind the text, and gets the sense that the speaker is as much in the dark as anyone else. Here, in the recesses of memory, her language becomes more esoteric and her metaphors more oblique. Eventually every physical thing she sees encourages her painful past to surface. This is the path to the utter rejection of the self.

After the careless killing of a bird by strangers, she projects her own inefficient technique of dealing with her emotional burdens onto the transgressions of others: “A part of the body, a dead animal. I wonder what part of them the heron was, that they needed so much to kill it” (152). Her delusion extends so far that she even begins to associate with an amputee at a local store. The woman’s “main source of power was that she had only one hand” (29). She convinces herself that lady, who is obviously the victim of an accident, must have willingly relinquished her hand just as she herself has ostensibly willing relinquished her unborn baby. A pattern of delusion and self-negation is highlighted through the language of dehumanization. It seems the longer she spends in her childhood environment, essentially the past, the less she identifies with the woman she actually is. She complains about “the knob at the top of our bodies” (95) and its
physical distance from the rest of the physical self; she blames the separation between mind and body on this distance. The complaint that there is something “essential missing” (175) is recurring.

“No hints or facts, I didn’t know when it had happened. I must have been all right then; but after that I’d allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. At school they used to play a joke, they would bring little boxes with cotton wool in them and a hole cut in the bottom; they would poke their finger through and pretend it was a dead finger.” (138)

Regressive, childish language becomes more prominent as she inches closer toward a head-on collision with her emotional emergency. We find her recollecting childhood anecdotes and schoolyard songs to help assuage the grownup trouble she finds herself in. This offers help in the form of a Band-Aid, but her wound is far too severe for such inadequate therapies and she knows it. Despite her desire to feel like a normal part of society, she refuses to accept that she herself is root of the problem. The specter of ambivalence remains a constant torment. A total acceptance of responsibilities does not come until near the very end of the novel, and this coincides with our main focus: the total rejection of the corporal self.

As in Kafka’s Metamorphosis, expression is central in the conflict of Surfacing, though the latter deals more overtly, more ontologically with language. The subject of communication is referenced early with bird sounds being likened to miscellaneous urban din. Their “rudimentary language” (48) is lauded for its offering a sense of clarity; the idea is that fewer words would inevitably lead to fewer miscommunications, easier
expression among communities. As the story progresses, the contemplation of speech becomes ever more tangled with the concept of a physical existence. When she eventually achieves total physical solitude, away from her companions, away from anything that can serve as a mirror, she attempts to visualize herself as she exists at that moment, but the “the language is wrong”. Her isolation has rendered her untranslatable, ineffable. Recalling Thomas Nagel’s essay, he posits that “[r]eflection on what it is like to be a bat seems to lead us […] to the conclusion that there are facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in a human language. We can be compelled to recognize the existence of such facts without being able to state or comprehend them” (Nagel 4). It is in this murky area in which our narrator is coming to exist and in which her eventual metamorphosis takes place.

The language of amputation and deformation undermine any small social progress the narrator attempts to make. In her words, “the knob at the top of our bodies” is simply insufficient in dealing with the multiple stresses from which she is suffering. She obsesses over what she believes to be her transgressions; she relives endless variations of a past so convoluted she can hardly relate it; she disassociates herself from that past. She disassociates herself from herself, her entire body feeling “awkward… like an aqualung or extra, artificial limb.” It is this outer, corporal detachment that ushers in the self-removal from interior. Traditional sentence structure begins to break down into disjointed thoughts, ambivalent interpretations of developing events. “I touched him on the arm with my hand. My hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm. Language divided us into fragments, I wanted to be whole” (187). The attempt itself is abortive, but it signals a last-ditch effort on the part of the narrator to reconnect with her humanity before
renouncing it entirely. Language after the transformations is less poetic and actively attempts to approach meaninglessness. Take this later example:

“The forest leaps upwards, enormous, the way it was before they cut it, columns of sunlight frozen; the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for longer moments.

Animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place”

(236. Punctuation and format Atwood’s own)

The paradox is in using words to express their own uselessness.

The destroying of all ties to her humanity, the shedding of the “husks” (230) imported from the city to the vestal forest means only her temporary salvation. Her desire to be “innocent as plankton” (230) is obviously untenable as no human life is ever without its difficulties or regrets. And though this is a calculated, willful relinquishing of everything it means to be human, we are forced to ask one of the primary questions of metamorphosis studies: Exactly how far does this character actually get from her humanity?

Perhaps rebranding this transformation would aid us in viewing it in a new light. We might be justified in calling it, and instances like it, protomorphosis in that the transformed seeks not to change shape physically, but to revert back to an simpler incarnation of life. What we must keep in mind, though, is that the desire to be inert, or plantlike, may be valid, while its actual happening impossible. This is, in fact, the hallmark of new metamorphosis; it is at once deeply psychological, entirely internal and
essentially impossible.

Atwood’s example is just one among many. Another novel treats similar themes in a similar way. Jenefer Shute’s *Life Size* (1992) features a protagonist suffering from severe anorexia and body dysmorphia. She nearly kills herself in attempting to break away from the white noise of her body’s other functions. Her self-proclaimed goal is a deeper connection with her consciousness; “Soon, everything will be willed … One day I will refine myself to the bare wiring, the irreducible circuitry of mind” (Shute 240). By starving herself, the systems in her body essential for maintaining life begin to shut down one by one until she can no longer live without the aid of machines and full-time nurses. Seemingly unaware, or at least unconcerned, of the risks inherent in malnutrition, she persists in her goal of becoming pure thought without a corporal component. “Stripped down, this brain is closer to the surface” (256). In striking likeness to Atwood’s character, Shute’s views her body as little more than clothing, material accessory to the prime functions of life: simply existing. And, as in the case with *Surfacing*, Realism prevents any actual metamorphosis from occurring. Rather what we see in both examples is a willful, self-motivated, internal desire to shed the body in an effort to reconcile a physical existence with the complex emotional arena in which modern literature lives.

From the tone of both stories we can draw no other conclusion other than this kind of transformation is not happening literally. The characters haven’t become some obscure fourth-dimension entities, but remain human. As Gallagher says, “[i]n the 19th and 20th Centuries, writers are no longer tied to describing the transformations of a human being but can […] concentrate on a more psychological portrait of a woman” (Gallagher 14). Gone is the old motif of external forces acting punitively upon an
individual causing her metamorphosis. In fact, no longer does literature allow for physical transformation at all. The reason character’s like the *Surfacing*’s protagonist retain their human form is because they live in a purely real world, one where change of shape cannot exist. The closest they can achieve to physical transformation is the mental rejection of their bodily vessel. The narrator demolishes all human comforts (clothes, personal items, shelter) as a first step to emotional freedom, but this journey is fated to go only this far.

    We must not, however, condemn modern metamorphosis as useless. Instead, it should be viewed as something like a complex rite; it is at once baptism and confession. By liberating herself from herself, *Surfacing*’s narrator is given license to express (so to speak) that which has tormented her. She is purified, or at the very least reset. Eventually, she herself realizes that the type of transformation desired is impossible, but she is not shamed for this. Simply put: she feels better as a result of the process.

    As is common in stories of realistic transformation, the emotional purge of her metamorphosis creates a sort of boomerang-effect. By breaking down, she is now in a place where she can begin to become reacquainted with traditional language and her corporal self. “For us it’s necessary, the intercession of words”, she eventually concedes. The internal desire to forsake the physical is eventually overcome by an external awareness, a knowledge that she exists in a system much larger than herself. Beginning with this small level of comfort, the protagonist heads slowly away from crisis. The refocused self-awareness that her metamorphosis has granted her is a tool for her success.
Self-consciousness, in parlance of modern English, though, is no longer synonymous with "awareness" alone, but also carries negative connotations. Being self-conscious is akin to being too internal. Someone suffering from self-consciousness is someone so locked into himself that he has alienated himself from his surroundings. The argument could easily be made that this is linked the technological progress that began to effect our world so greatly only a few generations ago. Think about the mass production and (mass consumption) of clothing made to make us feel individual, thus collectively less relatable as an example.

*Fin-de-siècle* pessimism certainly lives on in a world increasing complicated by the explosion of technology. Finding one’s own place, that is to say the place of the individual among the heap of increasingly individualistic individuals of the modern world, creates intensely emotional stresses that breed modern metamorphosis.

Transformation exists in popular media all around us. Bodily dissociation is rampant in the lyrics of pop songs, blockbuster films, the fine arts and literature. Norwegian painter Odd Nerdum famously mixes apocalyptic themes with amputees, merging economic and governmental pessimism with the frailty of flesh. Billy Corgen of mid-1990’s fame sang the lyrics “My reflection in the mirror / Is no connection to myself” in a song appropriately titled “Zero”. Self-negation, self-alteration and personal change are central themes of modern art, yet in the context of Realist literature, the usual vehicle for such change, metamorphosis, is drastically different from older variants. Realism hardly allows for the shifting of one body into another except for cases that already exist in nature, such as caterpillars into butterflies. While metamorphosis is still very much alive in realistic art, due to the increased focus on self-consciousness, is exists
now more in metaphor than in fact. In the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) the image of a moth is set against the transexuality of the disturbed killer. The psychological torment of his not feeling at home within the body is the engine of his metaphorical metamorphosis.

Even outside the context of art, metamorphosis, largely as a result of one technology or another, exists in force. Already mentioned was man’s attempting to change a great ape into something more closely associated with a human by giving it human language skills. Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), the kind of technology that allows the popular EZ-Pass or FasTrak cards to electronically collect transportation tolls, has be miniaturized to a scale implantable within the human body, effectively mechanizing flesh. And although the kind of mechanization, or what we might term *mechamorphosis*, that has been popularized by film (think Terminator, Robocop, Star Wars, etc.) is still a distance away, few among us would argue that this is not the direction that we are heading. Already, wearable technology in the form of Google Glass and related consumer products is becoming commonplace.

Modern literature reflects this trend toward bodily dissociation, but its corpus is so vast that approaching it as a whole is a near impossible task. Rather, we would be best to select a single genre that could satisfy as a representative for the rest. Generally speaking, modern literature is the story of oppression, and lines are typically drawn along visible borders: color, creed, location, gender, etc.. While the specific oppressions across demographic groups are bound to vary, the simple fact that they are oppressed is important to us, metamorphosis breeds in crisis. In the interest of picking something assessable and roundly studied, women’s literature will suit our purpose. It exists across
If we question why women often dye their hair, we touch on similar stimuli as fictional characters. *In Minding the Body: Women Writers on Body and Soul*, one contributing author writes about her lifelong preoccupation with hair color. Although she had been otherwise uninteresting in fashion, she had always dyed her hair unnaturally black—that is to say, until a moment of self-realization. Upon finally thinking about this habit in the context of metamorphosis studies, she came to the conclusion that she had repeatedly alter her appearance for the instant of shock that it would give her upon first seeing the fresh stain each time—because, at that moment, when she would turn and see a new version of herself, it was with irrational hope that this would finally bring about a lasting change in her life. This is, in essence, an anecdote about a real-life woman attempting to alter her inner self via the external, a tactic which few in the modern era would claim to be effective or healthy (Taetzsch).

A woman’s place in the modern world in a tricky one. Simultaneously she is expected to be an equal engine of commerce and a lovely piece of furniture. This double standard has existed, essentially, since the beginning of the second-wave feminist movement and is unlikely to be eradicated in the near future. And while most women accept these circumstances simply to be the way the world functions, many are keenly aware of the psychologically damaging nature of living a double life. Since Realism’s removal of true metamorphosis, this “doubling” is what we are often left with. In
Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) we see a woman struggling with something analogous to Gregor Samsa’s problem, yet the restrictions of Realism prevent an actual shift of shape from occurring. Still metamorphosis survives, often in the form of an unusual shifts in a character’s mental state. To understand these shifts we must address the modern social expectations of women and their origins.

Perhaps no single piece of American literature in the last one-hundred years has done more to shape the place the modern woman than Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* (1942). In this polemic piece of non-fiction, Wylie purports to trace the history of women and their reliance on men as well as other “problems”. According to him, entire generations of men had been essentially duped by women into believing that it was their responsibility to provide housing, food and safety for a sex that couldn’t do so for itself. By injecting his text with several articles of newspeak (e.g. *momism*, *Cinderellaism*, *gynocracy*), he essentially created a new language of sexist accusations. In the newspeak of our own day, we might call this *victim-blaming*. Misogynistic language, while always a part of society, was now further indoctrinated into the corpus of modern thought by virtue of the mass dissemination of literature. Take the following passage:

“The road to hell is spiral, a mere bend in the strait and narrow, but a persistent one. This was given torque, and most men are up to their necks in it now. The devil whispered. The pretty girl then blindfolded her man so he would not see that she was turning from a butterfly into a caterpillar. She told him, too, that although caterpillars ate every damned leaf in sight, they were moms, hence sacred. Finally, having him sightless and whirling, she snitched his checkbook. Man was a party to the deception because he wanted to be fooled about Cinderella, because he was glad to have a convenient explanation of mom, and also because there burned within him a dim ideal which had to do with proper behavior, getting along, and, especially, making his mark. Mom had already shaken him out of that notion of being a surveyor in the Andes which had bloomed in him when he was nine years old, so there
was nothing left to do, anyway, but to take a stockroom job in the
hairpin factory and try to work up to the vice-presidency. Thus the
women of America raped the men, not sexually, unfortunately, but
morally, since neuters come hard by morals.” (Wylie 190)

In the wake of the second great war, as entire cities were nearly wiped off the map
and millions of families suffered loss of life, faith in both government and God was
waning. This absence of faith led to a deluge of intellectual production that offered
readers new winners to wreath and losers to shame. Surrogates for old belief systems
became necessary in order to stem the emotional bleeding of entire societies. Comments
like those offered above were delivered at such a time and in such a parlance that they
garnered millions of sales and were reprinted dozens of times in as many languages in the
space of only a few decades. Regarding Wylie’s work specifically, it is not easy to tell
whether people read *Generation of Vipers* because they believed it to be correct or simply
for the shock-value of his opinions, but we can say with confidence that his ideas of
subversively dominant women filtered into the psyches of millions leaving lasting
impressions. Millions of copies were sold.

Feminist backlash did much to counter the effects of these cultish opinions, but
the struggle between the two sides has never been settled. Even today, while women are
ostensible equals in western society, the reality of the matter is quite different: women
still enjoy a sort of Barbie doll we-can-do-it-too sphere that undermines itself. As long as
women are forced to prove that they can "do it, too", they will always be half a peg
behind male dominance. It is here where the struggle of Margret Atwood’s character
resides, and here that is a ripe breeding ground for modern metamorphism.
VII – A Short Summary

The way we approach metamorphosis in the context of modern literature compared to antique examples differs greatly. In part, this due to the nature of individual characters. Characters are inevitably created by authors, so often a study of the author and the circumstances of the society in which the author wrote is indispensible. This is especially so in the case of classical and medieval literature, where we are not often allowed very much access to individual character thought, thus are unable to complete the kind of deep character analysis that is the hallmark of modern literary criticism. So in this study I have had to rely on a significant amount of historical context rather than information presented in primary sources alone. By taking the political, theological and historical temperature of individual texts, we are able to expose a general externalization of the factors that motivate metamorphosis. Characters in older literature do not transform as a result of their unhappiness with their social situations, but because of external, punitive action taken by powerful agents. Especially in the Middle Ages, a lack of artistic freedom disallowed the exploration of internal strife, thus disallowed the self-willed transformation of modernity.

A second major difference between transformation the likes of which exists in older examples and Modernism and Realism lies in the reality of the transformations, which also has its root the evolving self-consciousness of characters. The sanctioning of wider artistic latitude led to a refocusing of authors’ attentions — attentions inevitably aimed at the internal, the type of personal crises that modern characters find themselves in. Yet we are forced to question the validity of all metamorphosis in Realist literature.
due to actual transformation’s impossibility in the real world. The paradox is that characters in recent times dwell in environments more representative of the actual universe than that those described by Ovid or Dante, yet still often desire (and achieve) bodily escape. This is explainable by the doubling of characters due to individual ambivalence, a crisis of two sides of one character, two personalities that can’t agree locked inside one corporal vessel. The division of a single character requires some type of language to reconcile the crisis. Metamorphosis in modern literature can be defined as a replacement for more traditional types of expression. The ineffectiveness of traditional language is often an integral motivator.

A return to skepticism in fin-de-siècle Europe was the moment in modern history in which the individual became the lens through which authors began to focus their intellectual explorations. An escape, so to speak, from the dominating social mandates of the Church can be credited for more modern character-centric literature. But with the slow exit of the church came the new power of economics. It was during this period, when the importance of the individual was becoming increasingly sidelined by the social products of industrial expansion, that metamorphosis developed into an internal, willful escape from external problems.

Yet older tenets of antique metamorphosis still exist in the modern world in certain instances. Reinterpretations of classical mythology abound in both public and private spaces, most often in the form of painting and sculpture. Standing today in Brookville, New York is a massive gateway to the Planting Fields Arboretum, the former estate of insurance and railroad executive William Robertson Coe. Atop the two towering gate buttresses is a pair of familiar statues. One depicts a half-dressed, half-
shocked female form. With one hand she is anxiously trying to cover her naked top, with the other, she is reaching for her quiver and arrows. Her face shows contempt. The opposite figure is a horned man, ineffectually attempting to cover his face while being attacked by dogs. Though he stands erect, the viewer anticipates his collapse. This is Actaeon and Diana and this is a warning against trespassers: Let he who disrupts my privacy be punished.

The intellectual disciplines in which Ovidian ideas have been echoed throughout time are myriad. The debt modern literature owes the antique is the same of predecessor to progeny. Draper partially repeats Ovid’s sentiments of incessant mutability while summarizing the political history of the world:

“We should remember that Nature in her operation aims at the universal, and never spares individuals, but uses them as means for the accomplishment of her ends. It is, therefore, for us to submit to Destiny, cultivation, as the things necessary to virtue, knowledge, temperance, fortitude, justice. We must remember that every thing around us is in constant mutation; decay follows reproduction, and reproduction decay, and that it is useless to repine at death in a world where every thing is dying. As a cataract shows from year to year an invariable shape, though the water composing it is perpetually changing, so the aspect of Nature is nothing more than a flow of matter presenting an impermanent form. The universe, considered as a whole, is unchangeable. Nothing is eternal but space, atoms, force. The forms of Nature that we see are essentially transitory, they must all pass away.” (Draper 23)

Through the study of metamorphosis, we approach questions of placement; first, the placement of man in the context of complex theological systems; next, the placement of the individual against smaller societies, like the family or the community. The history of one leads necessary to the other. The binding force among all tales of transformation is a certain distancing of humans from humanity. It is essentially an exercise in reverse engineering; we try to understand what defines us as human by bringing a human life
through simpler incarnations of existence. Of course there are no simple answers to existential questions, yet there is solace in knowing that literature though the ages questions us in similar ways.
1 Norse gods, like many gods of world lore, were endowed with super-human powers but carried themselves in humanoid bodies.
2 Relative to how overwhelmingly popular the genre is now-- of course, science-fiction as existed for ages. Lucian's *True History* comes to mind.
4 Skulsky points to Cadmus (Book III). "Come to me, my wife, come to me, wretched as you are, and while something is left of me, touch me; take my hand while it is a hand, while the serpent has not taken possession of all of me". We might term this complete metamorphosis, or even death, due to the extent to which the human is lost.
5 As far as we know, that is to say.
6 While amebae or insects might also serve as excellent examples, some might question the validity of their having consciousness.
7 Jove once transformed himself into a shower of gold in order to impregnate Danae.
8 "Self-love" is used here in lieu of a more accurate definition. A close reading of the myth suggests a much more psychological and emotional attachment to the image seen in the pool. Narcissus does not fall in love with himself, or merely his image, but with his image as something other than a reflection of his own existence. Narcissus is in true love with something he perceives to understand his own circumstances: the isolation and loneliness that is heir to unrivaled talent. For the purposes of this example, though, the simplified term "self-love" will suffice.
9 In this way, Daphne can be compared to Actaeon.
10 Although Horace enjoyed wealth and station, it is not to sat that his life was entirely free from stress. The fallout from the Battle of Actium and surrounding wars threatened his life and property in a very real way. That said, he was always in very close contact with, and very supported by, the highest ranks in all times of his adult life. For more, refer to Armstrong's chapter “The Young Horace”.
11 It might be important to note that Maecenas, who is very often invoked in Horace's poems, was not only one of the poet's closest lifelong friends and benefactors, but was also one of the richest and most powerful men in the Empire. He was the direct descendent of two separate lines of Etruscan kings, which gives a new shine to the term "old money".
12 In fact, it would not be until 2008 when his sentence would be officially annulled.
13 This being the tale of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, although Caroline Walker Bynum argues that, while they are similar in action, they carry very different implications.
15 That is to say: metamorphosis scarcely exists outside of fantasy in classical examples. As will be shown later on, modern literature no longer requires fantasy as an essential element for metamorphosis to occur.
16 One need only look to the medieval obsession of relic-worshiping or the devil's née Poseidon’s trident as evidence of this.
17 If we can safely call it a metaphor, that is.
It is relevant to know that Grete, the young sister in whom Gregor has repeatedly found strength, is the agent of this eventual rejection.

Kafka was a compulsive letter writer. He found a much freer and more logical voice in this medium compared to speech.

An exploration of Kafka’s sources can be found in Mark Anderson’s introduction and Michael Müller’s more complete “Kafka, Cassanova, and The Trial”, both found in Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics, and the Fin de Siecle.

Although the earliest novels, even metamorphic novels (like Apulius’ The Golden Ass), have existed for 2000 years, the novel’s dominance as an art form is only a few centuries old.

In 1903, Austrian author Otto Weniger published his Sex and Character, which might be called an earlier European variation on a theme.
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