

## Kafka's *Metamorphosis* 2011

*In his personal writings and fiction, Kafka reveals the torment and frustrations of his life: his illness, lack of success in love, unhappiness with his family, resentment of his bureaucratic job and an indifferent or oppressive society, and general feelings of inferiority.*

*His characters' lonely search for the meaning of individual existence in a meaningless or indifferent world reflects Kafka's existentialist views of life. People who are not dependent on older belief systems or institutions have freedom that also brings anxiety and guilt with the responsibility for constructing the meaning of one's own existence. Kafka had no association with Surrealist writers or artists, who saw hidden miracles of existence behind everyday reality. Kafka's works are sometimes called surreal because of his blend of matter-of-fact everyday reality and dream or nightmare images, but his vision of the ordinary person's impossible struggles to control life is quite different from the views of the Surrealists who came after him. Like absurdist writers of the mid-twentieth century, Kafka depicted irrational, anguished people in nightmarish situations, unable to form significant relationships with(in) their environment. Later in the twentieth century, the development of magic realism might also be compared with Kafka's writing, as fantastic events are depicted as if they are a part of everyday reality.*

### Part 1

1. What is the POV of the story? How does it help us understand Gregor's inner reality? Any other stylistic devices Kafka uses? Tone? Humor? Explain.
2. What is the relationship between realism and fantasy in this story? What are some details that make the fantastic story credible?
3. What is the effect of Kafka's matter-of-fact assertion of the bizarre incidents with which the story begins? Give an example.
4. What does the title mean? Why is it the rather than a metamorphosis?
5. How does Kafka keep the way it came to pass from becoming a major issue in the story?
6. When Gregor Samsa wakes up and discovers that he has changed into a gigantic insect, what do his thoughts concern? Is there anything unusual about this reaction?
7. As he rocks himself to get out of bed, what is his chief worry? What does this tell you about his relationship with his family?
8. How does the family react when the chief clerk arrives? What does this tell you about their values?
9. How does Gregor feel about his job? Why does he work there? Does the chief clerk have the right to speak to Gregor as he does?
10. What is the significance of his transformation into an insect rather than into an animal?
11. Gregor's words are no longer understandable. What is Kafka trying to show by this?

12. What are his feelings when the doctor and the locksmith are summoned? What does this suggest about Gregor's need for human companionship? When Gregor finally gets the door open, how do his parents and the chief clerk react? Why?
13. What is significant about the way Gregor's father drives him back into his room? What values or concerns impel the father to act in this way?
14. What is this section saying about the importance of work?

## Part 2

1. Trace Gregor's adaptation to his new body. In what ways do the satisfactions of his life as an insect differ from the satisfactions of his life as a traveling salesman?
2. As Gregor listens to the family discussion about their financial situation, what does he learn? How does he react to this?
3. Is his relationship with his family changing? Is he simply becoming aware of what the relationship has always been?
4. What conflicting feelings does Gregor have about having the furniture taken out of his room? Why does he try to save the picture? What might Kafka's intention be in stressing that it is on this occasion that Grete calls Gregor by his name for the first time since his metamorphosis? Why do his sister and mother decide to move the furniture from his room? How does Gregor feel about this? What does he do? Why?
5. How does this mother react at the sight of Gregor? Not that this is the first time she has directly addressed him. What is her attitude? Explain the attitudes shown in the father-daughter dialogue when Gregor's sister says, "Gregor's broken loose." What does the verb suggest? His father replies, "Just as I expected...." What does he mean? Why does the fact that he is exultant tell us about him?
6. Summarize the apple-throwing scene. Does the father feel threatened? Why does he do this? Can't he see that Gregor is trying to get back to his room?
7. List some details from this section to show Gregor's metamorphosis.

## Part 3

1. As Gregor watches the lodgers eat, he thinks that he is hungry enough, but not for that kind of food. What kind is he hungry for? What kind of starvation afflicts him?
2. After the scene with the lodgers, the sister's true feelings about Gregor surface. What does she say? What are her parent's reaction? What values are evidence here?
3. What draws Gregor out of his room? Is he still more human than insect? Give examples to support your answer.
4. As Gregor dies, how does he feel about his family? Is this alienation natural? Why does Gregor die? THINK PHILOSOPHICAL!!!
5. How does Gregor's condition deteriorate by the end of the story, in his environment and within himself?

6. Describe the family's mood after Gregor is dead and disposed of. How does his sister's care of Gregor deteriorate? How does the charwoman treat him? What is Kafka trying to illustrate by this? How does the family help and harm one another?
7. Consider Gregor as a person. What was life like for him before his metamorphosis, at home and on the job? In what ways do you think Gregor was like a "bug" even before his metamorphosis?
8. How is this story a "Kafkaesque" situation? Give examples. See ppt.

### **Philosophical Questions**

1. How does Gregor know that his is human? What is this evidence? Would you believe that you were human on the basis of the same evidence?
2. Why do you think Gregor rules out very quickly that he is not dreaming? Would the story of his metamorphosis have been more philosophically compelling if it were the story of Gregor's dream? Why or why not?
3. What assumptions does Kafka's story make about the relationship between the mind and the body? Do you agree with these assumptions? Why or why not?
4. Look up **Hume** and **Locke** and their views of personal identity and self. Compare and contrast how Locke and Hume would respond to the following question: Is Gregor Samsa still the same person he was prior to his transformation into a dung beetle? Do their responses lead you to be more or less supportive of their notions of personal identity?
5. The chief clerk says, "That was no human voice," upon hearing Gregor speak. Nevertheless, Gregor can speak perfectly well to himself. How would this story be different if Gregor could communicate to others as well as to himself? What role does his inability to communicate effectively with his family play in their opinion of him?
6. It is clear, even from reading just the first third of the story that people do not want to be around Gregor. The chief clerk utters "Oh" at the sight of Gregor, "clapping one hand before his open mouth and slowly backing away as if driven by some invisible steady pressure." His father drives Gregor back into his room with a walking stick and a newspaper. In the final section of the story (which was omitted here), after Gregor has died, the cleaning woman says to Gregor's family, "You don't need to bother about how to get rid of the thing next door. It's been seen to already." Over the course of the story, Gregor has been transformed from the family bread-winner into a "thing" that is simply gotten rid of by the cleaning woman. How would you have reacted to Gregor's transformation if you were one of his family members or friends? Why would you have acted this way? Also, try to give a philosophical account of how and why Gregor was regarded unfavorably by those closest to him.
7. Metamorphosis can be read as an example of quest literature. What is Gregor's quest? Is there more than one? Does he reach his goal? What point is Kafka making in examining Kafka's quest?
- 8.

### *Discussion Topics for Metamorphosis*

**How does each character react to Gregor? Discuss how those reactions help develop each character.**

**Speech—language—is central to the story. When Gregor first tries to speak, he is “terrified” because his “old voice” is mixed with “an irrepressible, painful, squeaking noise” (para.**

**How does Kafka develop this relationship between voice and power (or the lack of both)?**

**As Gregor listens to his sister playing the violin for the lodgers, he is “drawn by the music” (para. 73). Kafka writes, “The music gripped him—was he then an animal? He felt as if he were being guided to the sustenance he had unknowingly desired” (para. 74). How do you interpret this episode?**

**The story has powerfully moving and poignant scenes as well as humorous ones. What examples of humor do you perceive, and how do they contribute to the themes Kafka is developing?**

**Does the story end with an emotionally satisfying resolution? Is it a happy ending? Does Gregor’s life achieve meaning because he sacrifices himself for the family’s greater good? How do you interpret the last scene?**

**This story is divided into three sections, which might be considered chapters. What is the nature of these divisions? Are they chronological or something more complex?**

*Write an outline using quotes and commentary:*

The key to *Metamorphosis* literature is its examination of change. Though careful analysis, consider the kinds of transformations which occur in *Metamorphosis*. In your essay address the nature of the changes as well as the characters that change. Also draw a conclusion about whether Kafka sees the metamorphosis experience as positive, negative, and combination, or neither.