

Notes on The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka

Context

Now an icon of twentieth-century literature, Franz Kafka entered the world in unexceptional circumstances. His father was an ambitious and bullying shopkeeper and his mother was a wealthy brewer's daughter who married beneath her social rank. He was their first child, born in 1883 in a house in the center of Prague. Five siblings followed, two of whom died young, leaving Kafka the only boy. Kafka had a sensitive disposition and slight appearance, much to his father's distaste. Moreover, Kafka's literary interests—he wrote plays for his sisters and read constantly—did not sit well with his father's practical mindset. Their relationship remained strained throughout Kafka's life, and his father's overbearing and authoritarian personality left its mark on much of Kafka's writing.

At the time, Prague was the capital of Bohemia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Prague boasted a large Jewish population that included the Kafkas, though the family had little daily concern for the faith and rarely attended synagogue. (Kafka regarded his bar mitzvah as a meaningless joke.) Prague's working class majority spoke Czech, while the elites spoke German, the language of the empire's rulers. Kafka knew both languages but was most comfortable with German. Being a German speaker in a predominantly Czech-speaking area and a Jew with little connection to Judaism, Kafka struggled his entire life with a sense of alienation from those around him.

Kafka underwent a rigorous and strict education that placed great emphasis on the classics. In 1901, he enrolled in Charles-Ferdinand University (now known as Charles University), intending to study chemistry but harboring literary ambitions. After two weeks, he abandoned chemistry for law, then switched to German literature, only to return to law. He never liked law, however, and said he chose it because it required the least amount of mental energy. After graduation, he worked for a year in the judicial system before leaving for a job in insurance. He hated his first employer and the long hours, so in 1908 he went to work for Bohemia's Worker's Accident Insurance Institute, where he stayed for the rest of his working life. Kafka claimed he only took the job, which involved evaluating workers' injury claims, because its short hours and decent wages allowed him time and opportunity to write. Despite this attitude, he was evidently a conscientious employee.

While at Charles-Ferdinand University, Kafka befriended Max Brod, another German-speaking Jew interested in literature. Brod encouraged Kafka's writing, and together with Felix Weltsch, a journalist, they formed the nucleus of the "Prague Circle," a group of writers who met regularly to discuss literature and ideas. Brod and Weltsch were deeply invested in Jewish issues and encouraged Kafka in this regard, with mixed success. Kafka developed an interest in popular Yiddish theater, for instance, and tried to learn Hebrew near the end of his life. But he never fully embraced Zionism, and he remained ambivalent toward Judaism. He was more openly interested in anarchism and socialism, though the depth of his commitment to either philosophy remains controversial as he refused to completely align himself with an established worldview. As a result, he cannot be put into a simple political category.

In 1911, Kafka's father pressured him into helping a relative open an asbestos factory. This venture took a severe toll on both Kafka's time and his already weak constitution, leading him to contemplate suicide. But in 1912, Kafka met Felice Bauer, a relation of Brod's through marriage. Kafka fell for Bauer immediately and began writing her passionate letters in which he revealed

many doubts about his abilities. These events broke a creative logjam for Kafka. In September 1912, he wrote the short story “The Judgment” in a single sitting, dedicating it to his new love. And over the course of three weeks that autumn, he wrote *The Metamorphosis*. Brod urged Kafka to publish *The Metamorphosis*, but it took three years of encouragement and negotiation before the story finally made its public debut. In response, Kafka won the Theodor Fontane Prize, a significant German-language literary award. He also began work on a novel, now known as *Amerika*, and published the first chapter in 1913.

In 1913, Kafka went to a sanatorium in Italy to revive his failing health. He continued to write to Felice Bauer, and the two were engaged that year. Though not a virgin, Kafka was extremely uneasy about sex, regarding it as disgusting and a sort of punishment, and his letters to Bauer describe his anguished feelings in great detail. Their engagement ended in 1914. That year, Kafka began work on his novel *The Trial*, which he never managed to complete. In 1917, he and Bauer briefly became re-engaged. Their renewed relationship ended when Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis shortly thereafter. In 1919, Kafka proposed to the daughter of a janitor, sending his father into a rage, but Kafka left her just before the wedding. He next developed a passionate attachment to a married journalist who translated his work into Czech, then he fell in love with Dora Diamant, a volunteer at a tuberculosis clinic. Kafka followed her to Berlin, but his condition worsened and they moved to a clinic near Vienna. On June 3, 1924, unable to eat because of the pain, Franz Kafka starved to death.

Before he died, Kafka asked Max Brod to destroy all of his writings after his death, but Brod didn't comply with his wishes. Over the course of the 1920s and 30s, Kafka's works were published and translated, instantly becoming landmarks of twentieth-century literature. His emphasis on the absurdity of existence, the alienating experience of modern life, and the cruelty and incomprehensibility of authoritarian power reverberated strongly with a reading public that had just survived World War I and was on its way to a second world war. Today, people use the word *Kafkaesque* to signify senseless and sinister complexity, and Kafka's reputation as one of the most important writers of modern times is undiminished.

Plot Overview

Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, wakes up in his bed to find himself transformed into a large insect. He looks around his room, which appears normal, and decides to go back to sleep to forget about what has happened. He attempts to roll over, only to discover that he cannot due to his new body—he is stuck on his hard, convex back. He tries to scratch an itch on his stomach, but when he touches himself with one of his many new legs, he is disgusted. He reflects on how dreary life as a traveling salesman is and how he would quit if his parents and sister did not depend so much on his income. He turns to the clock and sees that he has overslept and missed his train to work.

Gregor's mother knocks on the door, and when he answers her, Gregor finds that his voice has changed. His family suspects that he may be ill, so they ask him to open the door, which he keeps locked out of habit. He tries to get out of bed, but he cannot maneuver his transformed body. While struggling to move, he hears his office manager come into the family's apartment to find out why Gregor has not shown up to work. He eventually rocks himself to the floor and calls out that he will open the door momentarily.

Through the door, the office manager warns Gregor of the consequences of missing work and hints that Gregor's recent work has not been satisfactory. Gregor protests and tells the office

manager that he will be there shortly. Neither his family nor the office manager can understand what Gregor says, and they suspect that something may be seriously wrong with him. Gregor manages to unlock and open the door with his mouth, since he has no hands. He begs the office manager's forgiveness for his late start. Horrified by Gregor's appearance, the office manager bolts from the apartment. Gregor tries to catch up with the fleeing office manager, but his father drives him back into the bedroom with a cane and a rolled newspaper. Gregor injures himself squeezing back through the doorway, and his father slams the door shut. Gregor, exhausted, falls asleep.

Gregor wakes and sees that someone has put milk and bread in his room. Initially excited, he quickly discovers that he has no taste for milk, once one of his favorite foods. He settles himself under a couch and listens to the quiet apartment. The next morning, his sister Grete comes in, sees that he has not touched the milk, and replaces it with rotting food scraps, which Gregor happily eats. This begins a routine in which his sister feeds him and cleans up while he hides under the couch, afraid that his appearance will frighten her. Gregor spends his time listening through the wall to his family members talking. They often discuss the difficult financial situation they find themselves in now that Gregor can't provide for them. Gregor also learns that his mother wants to visit him, but his sister and father will not let her.

Gregor grows more comfortable with his changed body. He begins climbing the walls and ceiling for amusement. Discovering Gregor's new pastime, Grete decides to remove some of the furniture to give Gregor more space. She and her mother begin taking furniture away, but Gregor finds their actions deeply distressing. He tries to save a picture on the wall of a woman wearing a fur hat, fur scarf, and a fur muff. Gregor's mother sees him hanging on the wall and passes out. Grete calls out to Gregor—the first time anyone has spoken directly to him since his transformation. Gregor runs out of the room and into the kitchen. His father returns from his new job, and misunderstanding the situation, believes Gregor has tried to attack the mother. The father throws apples at Gregor, and one sinks into his back and remains lodged there. Gregor manages to get back into his bedroom but is severely injured.

Gregor's family begins leaving the bedroom door open for a few hours each evening so he can watch them. He sees his family wearing down as a result of his transformation and their new poverty. Even Grete seems to resent Gregor now, feeding him and cleaning up with a minimum of effort. The family replaces their maid with a cheap cleaning lady who tolerates Gregor's appearance and speaks to him occasionally. They also take on three boarders, requiring them to move excess furniture into Gregor's room, which distresses Gregor. Gregor has also lost his taste for the food Grete brings and he almost entirely ceases eating.

One evening, the cleaning lady leaves Gregor's door open while the boarders lounge about the living room. Grete has been asked to play the violin for them, and Gregor creeps out of his bedroom to listen. The boarders, who initially seemed interested in Grete, grow bored with her performance, but Gregor is transfixed by it. One of the boarders spots Gregor and they become alarmed. Gregor's father tries to shove the boarders back into their rooms, but the three men protest and announce that they will move out immediately without paying rent because of the disgusting conditions in the apartment.

Grete tells her parents that they must get rid of Gregor or they will all be ruined. Her father agrees, wishing Gregor could understand them and would leave of his own accord. Gregor does

in fact understand and slowly moves back to the bedroom. There, determined to rid his family of his presence, Gregor dies.

Upon discovering that Gregor is dead, the family feels a great sense of relief. The father kicks out the boarders and decides to fire the cleaning lady, who has disposed of Gregor's body. The family takes a trolley ride out to the countryside, during which they consider their finances. Months of spare living as a result of Gregor's condition have left them with substantial savings. They decide to move to a better apartment. Grete appears to have her strength and beauty back, which leads her parents to think about finding her a husband.

Character List

Gregor Samsa - A traveling salesman and the protagonist of the story. Gregor hates his job but keeps it because of the obligations he feels to pay off his father's debt and care for his family. He has transformed into a large bug and spends the rest of his life in that state. Although hideous and unrecognizable to others, Gregor retains his some of his inner life and struggles to reconcile his lingering humanity with his physical condition.

Grete Samsa - Gregor's sister. Grete is a young woman on the cusp of adulthood. She initially shows great concern for Gregor, but her compassion gives way to possessiveness and resentment as the effects of Gregor's transformation on her life slowly take their toll.

The father - Gregor's father. The failure of his business has left him exhausted and emotionally broken, and he is forced to return to work again after Gregor's metamorphosis. Despite the beneficial effects his new employment has on him, he expresses considerable hostility toward Gregor.

The mother - Gregor's mother. Frail and distressed, the mother is torn between her love for Gregor and her horror at Gregor's new state. Grete and Gregor's father seek to protect her from the full reality of her son's transformation.

The charwoman - An elderly widow and the Samsa family's cleaning lady. Taken on by the Samsas after their regular maid quits because of Gregor, she is a blunt, honest woman who faces the reality of Gregor's state without fear or disgust.

The office manager - Gregor's boss. Distrustful and overbearing, the office manager insinuates that Gregor has been doing a poor job at work. He flees in terror upon seeing Gregor.

The boarders - Three temporary boarders in the Samsas' house. The boarders greatly value order and cleanliness, and thus become horrified when they discover Gregor.

The maid - The Samsas' original maid. She is terrified by Gregor and begs the family to fire her.

Gregor Samsa

Despite his complete physical transformation into an insect at the beginning of the story, Gregor changes very little as a character over the course of *The Metamorphosis*. Most notably, both as a man and as an insect Gregor patiently accepts the hardships he faces without complaint. When his father's business failed, he readily accepted his new role as the money-earner in the family without question, even though it meant taking a job he disliked as a traveling salesman. Similarly, when he first realizes he has transformed into an insect, he does not bemoan his

condition, wonder about its cause, or attempt to rectify it in any way. On the contrary, he quickly accepts that he has become a bug and tries to go about his life as best he can in his new condition. The narration in the story mirrors Gregor's calm forbearance by never questioning or explaining how or why this odd transformation occurred or remarking on its strangeness. Instead, the story, much like Gregor, moves on quickly from the metamorphosis itself and focuses on the consequences of Gregor's change. For Gregor, that primarily means becoming accustomed to his new body.

In fact reconciling his human thoughts and feelings with his new, insect body is the chief conflict Gregor faces in the story. Despite having changed into an insect, Gregor initially still wants to go to work so that he can provide for his family. It takes him time to realize that he can no longer play that role in his family and that he can't even go outside in his current state. As the story continues, Gregor's insect body has an increasing influence on his psychology. He finds that he is at ease hiding in the dark under the sofa in his room, like a bug would, even though his body won't fit comfortably. He also discovers that he enjoys crawling on the walls and ceiling. But Gregor's humanity never disappears entirely. He still feels human emotions and has strong memories of his human life. As a result, even though he knows he would feel more physically comfortable if his room were emptied of furniture, allowing him to crawl anywhere he pleased, Gregor panics when Grete and his mother are taking out the furniture, such as the writing desk he remembers doing all his assignments at as a boy. In a desperate attempt to hold onto the few reminders he has of his humanity, he clings to the picture of the woman muffled in fur so that no one will take it away. Ultimately he's unable to fully adapt to his new body or to find a new role within his family, which is disgusted by him and ashamed of his presence in the house. Toward the end of the story, he even feels haunted by the thought that he might be able to take control of the family's affairs again and resume his role as the family's money-earner. Despite these hopes, he decides it would be best for the family if he were to disappear entirely, and so he dies much as he lived: accepting his fate without complaint and thinking of his family's best interests.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

THE ABSURDITY OF LIFE

Beginning with its first sentence, *The Metamorphosis* deals with an absurd, or wildly irrational, event, which in itself suggests that the story operates in a random, chaotic universe. The absurd event is Gregor's waking up to discover he has turned into a giant insect, and since it's so far beyond the boundaries of a natural occurrence—it's not just unlikely to happen, it's physically impossible—Gregor's metamorphosis takes on a supernatural significance. Also notable is the fact that the story never explains Gregor's transformation. It never implies, for instance, that Gregor's change is the result of any particular cause, such as punishment for some misbehavior. On the contrary, by all evidence Gregor has been a good son and brother, taking a job he dislikes so that he can provide for them and planning to pay for his sister to study music at the conservatory. There is no indication that Gregor deserves his fate. Rather, the story and all the members of the Samsa family treat the event as a random occurrence, like catching an illness. All these elements together give the story a distinct overtone of absurdity and suggest a universe that functions without any governing system of order and justice.

The responses of the various characters add to this sense of absurdity, specifically because they seem almost as absurd as Gregor's transformation itself. The characters are unusually

calm and unquestioning, and most don't act particularly surprised by the event. (The notable exception is the Samsas' first maid, who begs to be fired.) Even Gregor panics only at the thought of getting in trouble at work, not at the realization that he is physically altered, and he makes no efforts to determine what caused the change or how to fix it. He worries instead about commonplace problems, like what makes him feel physically comfortable. In fact, the other characters in the story generally treat the metamorphosis as something unusual and disgusting, but not exceptionally horrifying or impossible, and they mostly focusing on adapting to it rather than fleeing from Gregor or trying to cure him. Gregor's family, for example, doesn't seek out any help or advice, and they appear to feel more ashamed and disgusted than shocked. Their second maid also shows no surprise when she discovers Gregor, and when the boarders staying with the family see Gregor they are mostly upset that Gregor is unclean and disturbs the sense of order they desire in the house. These unusual reactions contribute to the absurdity of the story, but they also imply that the characters to some degree expect, or at least are not surprised by, absurdity in their world.

THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN MIND AND BODY

Gregor's transformation completely alters his outward appearance, but it leaves his mind unchanged, creating a discord, or lack of harmony, between his mind and body. When he first gets out of his bed after waking, for instance, he tries to stand upright, even though his body is not suited to being upright. He also thinks of going to work, despite the fact that he can't by any means do so, and when Grete leaves him the milk at the beginning of Part 2, he is surprised to find he doesn't like it, even though milk was a favorite drink when he was human. In essence, he continues to think with a human mind, but because his body is no longer human, he is unable at first to reconcile these two parts of himself.

As Gregor becomes accustomed to his new body, his mind begins to change in accordance with his physical needs and desires. Yet he's never able to fully bring his mind and body into harmony. Gregor gradually behaves more and more like an insect, not only craving different foods than he did when he was human, but also beginning to prefer tight, dark spaces, like the area under his sofa, and enjoying crawling on the walls and ceiling. (Through these details, the story suggests that our physical lives shape and direct our mental lives, not the other way around.) But Gregor's humanity never disappears entirely, and he feels conflicted as a result. This conflict reaches its climax when Grete and the mother move the furniture out of Gregor's room. Gregor initially approves of the idea because it will make his room more comfortable for him physically. Without furniture, he'll be able to crawl anywhere he pleases. But realizing that his possessions, which represent to him his former life as a human, provide him emotional comfort, he suddenly faces a choice: he can be physically comfortable or emotionally comfortable, but not both. In other words, his mind and body remain opposed to one another. Gregor, unable to relinquish his humanity, chooses emotional comfort, leading him to desperately cling to the picture of the woman in furs.

THE LIMITS OF SYMPATHY

After Gregor's metamorphosis, his family members struggle with feelings of both sympathy and revulsion toward him. Grete and the mother in particular feel a great deal of sympathy for Gregor after his change, apparently because they suspect some aspect of his humanity remains despite his appearance. This sympathy leads Grete initially to take on the role of Gregor's caretaker—she even goes so far as to try to discover what food he likes after his change—and it

leads the mother to fight with Grete over moving the furniture out of Gregor's room since she holds out hope that he will return to his human form. Even the father, who shows the least sympathy of the family members toward Gregor and even attacks him twice, never suggests that they kill him or force him out of the house. Instead, he implicitly shows compassion for Gregor by allowing the family to care for him.

Eventually, however, the stresses caused by Gregor's presence wear down the family members' sympathy, and even the most caring of them find that their sympathy has a limit. One of those sources of stress is Gregor's appearance. Grete is so upset and revolted by the way he looks that she can hardly stand to be in the room with him, and his mother is so horrified when she sees him as she and Grete are moving his furniture that she faints. In addition, Gregor's presence is never forgotten in the house, causing the family members to feel constantly uncomfortable and leading them to speak to each other mostly in whispers. Moreover, the fact that Gregor cannot communicate his thoughts and feelings to them leaves them without any connection to his human side, and consequently, they come to see him more and more as an actual insect. All these factors combined steadily work against their sympathy, and the family reaches a point where Gregor's presence is too much to bear. Significantly, it is Grete, the character to show the most sympathy toward Gregor, who decides they must get rid of him.

Alienation

Perhaps the greatest consequence of Gregor's metamorphosis is the psychological distance it creates between Gregor and those around him. Gregor's change makes him literally and emotionally separate from his family members—indeed, from humanity in general—and he even refers to it as his “imprisonment.” After his transformation he stays almost exclusively in his room with his door closed and has almost no contact with other people. At most, Grete spends a few minutes in the room with him, and during this time Gregor always hides under the couch and has no interaction with her. Furthermore, he is unable to speak, and consequently he has no way of communicating with other people. Lastly, Gregor's metamorphosis literally separates him from the human race as it makes him no longer human. Essentially he has become totally isolated from everyone around him, including those people he cares for like Grete and his mother.

But as we learn over the course of the story, this feeling of estrangement actually preceded his transformation. Shortly after waking and discovering that he has become a bug, for example, Gregor reflects on his life as a traveling salesman, noting how superficial and transitory his relationships have become as a result of his constant traveling. Later, Gregor recalls how his initial pride at being able to support his family faded once his parents began to expect that support, and how he felt emotionally distant from them as a result. There is also no mention in the story of any close friends or intimate relationships outside his family. In fact, the alienation caused by Gregor's metamorphosis can be viewed as an extension of the alienation he already felt as a person.

Motifs

METAMORPHOSIS

The Metamorphosis depicts multiple transformations, with the most significant and obvious example being Gregor's metamorphosis into an insect. Though Gregor's physical change is complete when the story begins, he also undergoes a related change, a psychological

transformation as he adapts to his new body. Grete experiences her own transformation in the story as she develops from a child into an adult. (In fact, in zoology the word metamorphosis refers to a stage in insect and amphibian development during which an immature form of the animal undergoes a physical transformation to become an adult.) At the beginning of the work, she is essentially still a girl, but as she begins to take on adult duties, such as caring for Gregor and then getting a job to help support her family, she steadily matures. In the story's closing scene, her parents realize she has grown into a pretty young woman and think of finding her a husband. The scene signals that she is now an adult emotionally and also physically, as it describes the change her body has undergone and echoes Gregor's own physical change.

The family as a whole also undergoes a metamorphosis as well. Initially, the members of the Samsa family appear hopeless and static, owing to the difficulties resulting from Gregor's transformation as well as their financial predicament. But over time they are able to overcome their money problems, and when Gregor finally dies and the family no longer has to deal with his presence, all the family members are reinvigorated. As the story closes, they have completed an emotional transformation and their hope is revitalized.

Sleep and Rest

References to sleep and rest, as well as the lack of sleep and rest, recur throughout *The Metamorphosis*. The story opens, for instance, with Gregor waking from sleep to discover his transformation, and Part 2 of the story begins with Gregor waking a second time, in this instance late in the day after the incident in which his father drove him back into his room. He quickly crawls under the sofa in his room to rest, and he spends a great deal of the story beneath the sofa either resting quietly or anxious and unable to rest. Moreover, Gregor describes how his father used to while away the day in bed or dozing in his armchair, and after the father resumes working, he often refuses to go to bed in the evenings and instead falls asleep in uniform in his chair. Toward the end of the work, as Gregor's health declines he stops sleeping almost entirely until finally he dies.

MONEY

Because of the failure of the father's business and the debts that resulted, money is a chief concern for the Samsa family, and consequently it appears as a frequent topic in Gregor's thoughts and in the conversations of the family members. Gregor's chief concern after discovering he's become an insect is that he'll lose his job, which we quickly learn he took solely as a means of earning money for his family. The office manager also implies while checking on Gregor that Gregor's boss suspects him of stealing money from the firm. Then, shortly after Gregor awakes at the beginning of Part 2, he overhears the father explaining the family's financial situation in detail to the mother and Grete. Later, the father and Grete both take jobs to make up for the loss of Gregor's income, and the family even takes in a few boarders as a means of bringing in extra money, which results in an argument about money after the boarders discover Gregor.

Symbols

THE PICTURE OF THE WOMAN IN FURS

Mentioned right at the outset of the story, the picture of the woman in furs serves as a symbol of Gregor's former humanity. Exactly why the picture, which shows a woman wearing a fur hat, a

fur boa, and a thick fur muff that covers her arms, originally attracted Gregor is never made clear (though it could be that it embodied Gregor's desires—the presumably attractive woman may be sexually alluring while the furs she wears could signal wealth to Gregor). But Gregor's strong attachment to it does not derive from the content of the picture so much as from the fact that he put it on his wall when he was still human. He clings to it in panic when Grete and the mother are clearing out his room because, as he looks around the room in desperation, he sees it as one object from his former life that he can save. The content of the picture is irrelevant at that moment. It acts foremost as a reminder that a human lived there and chose that object to frame and display.

THE FATHER'S UNIFORM

The uniform the father wears for his job symbolizes the father's dignity, as well as Gregor's shifting feelings of pity and respect for him. Throughout the story, we see the father primarily from Gregor's point of view. We learn about the failure of the father's business, for example, from Gregor's thoughts as he overhears the father explaining the family's financial situation, and through Gregor we gain a picture of the father as a shiftless and depressed man whom Gregor appears to feel sorry for but not necessarily respect. But when Gregor runs out of his room in Part 2 and sees the father for the first time in weeks, Gregor's opinion of the father changes. This shift is most evident through Gregor's description of the father's uniform, which gives the father an air of dignity: Gregor notices the "smart blue uniform with gold buttons," and thinks the father looks to be "in fine shape," suggesting the father's self-respect has been restored, and with it Gregor's respect for him.

As the story continues, however, the father again declines—apparently from the pressure of living with Gregor—and in the evenings Gregor watches him sleep in his uniform, now dirty and covered with grease spots. As a result, the dignity the uniform conveyed to the father deteriorates, and Gregor again looks at him with pity. (Notably, there is also a picture in the house of Gregor in uniform. It is an army uniform, and in the picture Gregor smiles, "inviting one to respect his uniform and military bearing.")

FOOD

Food represents the way the members of the Samsa family feel toward Gregor. Notably, it is Grete, the family member Gregor feels closest to, who feeds Gregor for most of the story. At the beginning of Part 2, she leaves milk and bread for him, showing sympathy and consideration for him after his transformation, particularly as milk was one of his favorite foods when he was human. When she sees he hasn't drunk the milk, she goes so far as to leave a tray of various foods out in order to discover what he now likes. Eventually, however, the work suggests that the family loses interest in feeding Gregor. One night, after the borders have moved in, the charwoman leaves his door open, and able to see everyone gathered, he watches as his mother feeds the borders. The scene causes Gregor to feel a great deal of resentment, and he thinks that he is starving while the borders stuff themselves, suggesting that as the members of the Samsa family have lost their sympathy for Gregor, they have stopped taking the same interest in feeding him. Significantly, the father inflicts the injury in Gregor's back with an apple, and this wound appears to weaken Gregor and contribute to his death.

Important Quotations Explained

1. One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin.

This quotation, one of the most famous opening lines in modern literature, introduces the subject matter of *The Metamorphosis* and indicates how that subject matter will be treated throughout the story. The line has a notably flat, matter-of-fact tone that doesn't remark on the oddness of the incident. On the contrary, the line treats Gregor's change as though it were an ordinary event, and it never raises the issue of how or why Gregor undergoes his metamorphosis, implying that the change has occurred without any particular cause or for any particular reason. In doing so, it creates a sense that the world we see in the story is inherently purposeless and random, rather than rational and ordered, and that such events are to some degree to be expected. Thus the opening line exemplifies the idea of absurdism, which asserts that humans exist in an irrational, chaotic universe beyond our full understanding.

Although the opening line is narrated in the third person, it also reflects Gregor's own attitude toward his change. Gregor never attempts to determine why or how he transformed into a bug. Instead, he appears to accept the change as an unfortunate incident, like an accident or illness, and doesn't get particularly upset about it. In fact, after his transformation he continues to think about relatively normal subjects, like his family's financial situation and his own physical comfort. Consequently, Gregor himself embodies this absurdist point of view exemplified in the opening line. He is the victim of an evidently purposeless and random metamorphosis, which he treats as though it were not completely unusual, suggesting he at least somewhat expects the world he lives in to be an irrational and chaotic place.

2. At that time Gregor's sole desire was to do his utmost to help the family to forget as soon as possible the catastrophe that had overwhelmed the business and thrown them all into a state of complete despair.

The narrator recounts these details about Gregor and the family in Part 2, as Gregor overhears the father explaining the family's financial situation to Grete and the mother. The failure of the father's business five years earlier essentially created the family dynamic that we see at the beginning of the story and explains Gregor's vital role in the family. Because the business failed, the father no longer works, and he appears depressed and lethargic. One early image we have of the father comes from Gregor, who thinks of him lingering for hours over his breakfast and dozing off during the day. Gregor, meanwhile, feels responsible for the family's wellbeing as its only source of income. This fact explains why his greatest concern after his transformation is whether he will be punished or fired for not going to work on time, despite the fact that he greatly dislikes his job.

These circumstances play a significant role in Gregor's feelings of alienation. Because of his job, which requires that he travel constantly, Gregor cannot develop relationships, and so he has no close friends. As the mother tells the office manager when he comes to check on Gregor, Gregor spends most evenings in the house reading the newspaper or checking the train timetables. Moreover, Gregor's feelings of alienation from his parents also stem from the family's financial circumstances. When he first started earning money to support the family, his parents showed a great deal of gratitude, which Gregor enjoyed. But as Gregor and the parents became accustomed to the new family dynamic in which Gregor was now the breadwinner, the parents' gratitude gradually diminished and Gregor no longer felt the same feeling of joy in providing for them. The text says he only remained intimate with Grete, suggesting that he and his parents grew apart as a result.

3. Did he really want the warm room, so cozily appointed with heirlooms, transformed into a lair, where he might, of course, be able to creep, unimpeded, in any direction, though forgetting his human past swiftly and totally?

This quotation, which occurs in Part 2 as Grete and the mother empty Gregor's room of furniture, marks the climax of Gregor's struggle to reconcile his human past with his new life and physical form. Gregor's transformation alters his body, but it leaves his thoughts and feelings intact. But shortly after the metamorphosis, Gregor's thoughts and feelings start to change according to the physical demands and urges of his new body. Gregor finds that he feels comfortable in the cramped, dark space beneath his sofa, for instance, and he enjoys crawling on the ceiling. These changes imply that his mind is adapting to his new body, and that he is becoming an insect psychologically as well.

But Gregor still retains his human memories and emotions, such as his desire to take care of his family. As a result, he feels pulled in opposing directions by the insect and human sides of himself, and this inner conflict reaches its height when he is forced to choose whether he wants his room emptied of furniture. On the one hand, not having furniture would allow Gregor much more freedom to crawl over the floors and walls, which would make him physically more comfortable. On the other hand, his possessions serve as physical reminders of his human life, and keeping them would allow him to preserve what humanity he has left, making him feel more comfortable psychologically. In other words, Gregor must choose between appeasing his insect side or his human side. Gregor decides to appease his human side, and he clings to the picture of the woman in furs as a reminder of his human life.

4. "He must go," cried Gregor's sister, "that's the only solution, Father. You must just try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we've believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble."

Grete says these words to the father toward the end of Part 3 after Gregor inadvertently reveals himself to the boarders, and the quotation marks a turning point in the family's view of Gregor's humanity as well as in the level of sympathy they feel for him. To this point in the story, the Samsa family has struggled to determine how much of Gregor's humanity remains. Physically Gregor has changed completely, and since he is unable to speak, the family has no way of knowing whether his mind remains intact. The mother, most notably, has held onto the belief that Gregor will eventually return to his old self, and she uses this reasoning to argue against moving all the furniture out of Gregor's room. The father appears to be uncertain one way or another. He feels pity for the bug after attacking it, but when Grete says they must get rid of it, he mostly questions whether the bug might be able to understand them, suggesting he is unsure of his own feelings on the matter. Grete, however, has gradually lost faith that any humanity remains in the bug at all, and she indicates that she no longer thinks of it as Gregor.

Moreover, the family has lost sympathy for the bug as they have become less certain that anything of Gregor remains and as the bug has become a greater burden to them. While Grete initially took care of Gregor just after his transformation, even taking his feelings into account in trying to determine what food he likes and moving the chair to the window for him, she has stopped caring for Gregor entirely by this point. In fact, the family begins using his room as a storage closet without any concern for Gregor's comfort, suggesting they have hardly any sympathy remaining for Gregor at all. When Gregor reveals himself to the boarders, causing the boarders to say they're leaving without paying rent, Grete finally decides they must get rid of Gregor. Without any faith that the bug is still Gregor, and with Gregor now costing the family more money, her sympathy runs out. The parents weakly object, but with only a little effort Grete

appears to convince them of her point of view, indicating that they also feel little sympathy for Gregor by this point.

5. Lapsing into silence and communicating almost unconsciously with their eyes, they reflected that it was high time they found a decent husband for her. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions that at the end of their ride the daughter was the first to get up, stretching her young body.

These final lines of the work suggest that the two other notable metamorphoses we see besides Gregor's—that is, the family's change from despairing to hopeful and Grete's change from a girl into a woman—are complete. The family as a whole undergoes a drastic psychological change in the story, indicated in the "new dreams" mentioned in the final line. Because of the failure of the father's business, the family appears hopeless and hampered by debt at the beginning of the work. But as the family members must find employment after Gregor's transformation, they begin to save money and create opportunities for themselves. They appear not to realize that their lives are improving until the end of the story, when they talk on the train as they head out to the countryside. At that point, each recognizes that he or she has a job that will likely lead to better opportunities in the future, and they realize that with Gregor dead, they can move into a smaller apartment, which will save them money. In the final lines of the story, they become a genuinely hopeful and happy family.

The other notable transformation referred to in the quotation is Grete's change from a girl into a woman. Grete begins the work basically still a child with no responsibilities. But as she begins caring for Gregor and working to help earn money for the family, she matures psychologically. She becomes more outspoken within her family, for instance, and she has the responsibilities of an adult. The last lines of the story, in which her parents realize that she's grown into a pretty young woman and think of finding her a husband, signal that she is now physically mature as well. In other words, she has become an adult, and she embodies the hopes of her parents as she begins this new stage of her life. The last image of the story is Grete stretching, suggesting that she is emerging after a period of confinement, much like an insect emerging from a cocoon after its metamorphosis into a mature adult.

Key Facts

full title · The Metamorphosis

author · Franz Kafka

type of work · Short story/novella

genre · Absurdism

language · German

time and place written · Prague, 1912

date of first publication · 1915

publisher · Kurt Wolff Verlag

Narrator · The narrator is an anonymous figure who recounts the events of the story in a flat, neutral tone.

Point of view · The narrator speaks exclusively in the third person, focusing primarily on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of Gregor Samsa. The narrator only describes events that Gregor sees, hears, remembers, or imagines from the actions around him.

Tone · The narrator's tone is flat and unchanging, describing even the most outlandish events in a neutral fashion.

tense · Past tense

setting (time) · Unspecified, though references to trains and streetcars suggest the late-nineteenth century or early twentieth century

setting (place) · The Samsa family's apartment in an unspecified city

protagonist · Gregor Samsa

major conflict · Gregor Samsa struggles to reconcile his humanity with his transformation into a giant bug

rising action · When Gregor Samsa wakes up inexplicably transformed into a giant bug, he must handle the consequences in terms of his understanding of himself and his relationship with his family

climax · Unable to bear the thought that all evidence of his human life will be removed from his room, he clings to the picture of the woman in furs, startling Grete and the mother and leading the father to attack him

falling action · Gregor, injured in the father's attack, slowly weakens, venturing out of his room once more to hear Grete play the violin and dying shortly thereafter

themes · The absurdity of life; the disconnect between mind and body; the limits of sympathy; alienation

motifs · Metamorphosis; sleep and rest; money

symbols · The picture of the woman in furs; the father's uniform; food

foreshadowing · Gregor is seriously injured after he leaves the room a second time and he stops eating and sleeping, foreshadowing his eventual death; the family gradually takes less interest in Gregor, foreshadowing their decision to get rid of him