

The Metamorphosis by Kafka

“When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from unquiet dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect.”

This, very likely the most famous first sentence in modern literature, begins Kafka’s masterpiece.

The Metamorphosis

Franz

Kafka



FRANZ KAFKA

- Began writing at an early age, but destroyed most of his childhood works
- Extremely critical of his own work
- Never satisfied
- Had to be encouraged by his friend and fellow writer, Max Brod, to continue writing
- Kafka did not think that “The Metamorphosis” was worth publishing

FRANZ KAFKA

- At the end of his life, he felt very negative about his work
- Instructed Brod to burn all his manuscripts
- Brod ignored him
- *The Trial* and *The Castle* were published posthumously, thanks to Brod
- Both these works are considered masterpieces

The Metamorphosis by Kafka

- Kafka's best-known story
- First published in 1915 in German
- "*Die Verwandlung*"
- Written over the course of three weeks in 1912
- First translated into English in 1936

The Metamorphosis by Kafka

- The haunting story of a man transformed into an insect has attracted numerous commentators
- They all agree on the high quality and importance of the story
- They disagree on what it means
- Freudian, Marxist, religious, and existentialist interpretations have been proposed

The Metamorphosis by Kafka

- Debate over whether Gregor Samsa symbolizes the human condition
- It is generally agreed that story portrays a world that is hostile and absurd
- **Major themes:** father-son antagonism, alienation at work, isolation, self-sacrifice

The Metamorphosis by Kafka

- The story is praised for its symmetrical, three-part structure
- Black humor
- Symbols are sometimes puzzled over
- What makes the story memorable is the central situation of man-turned-insect and the image of him on his back, helpless

Style (Point of View)

- Third person, but for the most part limited to Gregor's point of view
- His thoughts and feelings are presented
- Most of the events are seen through his eyes
- The point seems to present a picture of Gregor and the world as he understands it

Style (Point of View)

- This does NOT mean that all of Gregor's judgments are to be accepted
- On the contrary, Kafka uses irony and black humor to indicate that Gregor is at times misled
- For instance, in thinking that he can still go to the office or that his family is putting his interests first

Point of view

- The point of view changes at the end
- It becomes simply impersonal third-person narration, remaining on the outside of the characters
- There is a good reason for this

Setting

- Very constricted setting; almost all the events take place in the Samsa house, mostly in Gregor's room
- Reflecting the fact the Gregor is essentially a prisoner
- Small room and unclean toward the end
- Gregor can see outside, but he sees an overcast sky, rain, fog, and a gray hospital building
- The setting only changes at the very end

Structure

- Three parts
- Each part ends with Gregor being forced back into his room

Question / Prompt

- When Gregor is trying to explain to the chief clerk that he is not feeling well, he says we often “have to overcome a slight indisposition out of regard for the business.” In other words, “No pain, no gain.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
- The chief clerk comes to Gregor’s house and accuses him of “neglecting his business duties.” The statement is untrue. Gregor is appalled that someone would even consider this possibility and tries to defend himself through his bedroom door. Has anyone ever unjustly accused you of something you didn’t do? Compose a letter to that person describing your feelings about the false accusations.

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- Gregor feels a great deal of gratitude toward his sister for the kindness she showed him after he changed into a bug, but he couldn't express it properly.

Symbolism

- Basic definition: when something is represented by or stands for something else.
- Symbolism is the concretization of an idea in an object or person representing that idea. --Ayn Rand
- According to Rand, a symbol should be legible; otherwise the form is a contradiction in terms.

Symbols

- Kafka uses some obvious and not so obvious symbols in the story
- Obvious: Gregor's furniture. His mom's reluctance to move it because of its association with his human past. To remove it is to declare symbolically that Gregor is no longer human

Symbols

- Not so obvious:
 - The recurrent use of the number 3 (three parts to the story, three doors to Gregor's room, three lodgers, three other family members)
 - The fact that Gregor's father insists on wearing his uniform (unclear)
 - Also unclear is the picture of a carefree Gregor in a lieutenant's uniform. Does it suggest that he once had a more satisfying existence, before becoming stuck in his boring job?

The Metamorphosis by Kafka

Gregor wakes up from “troubled dreams” and realizes he has been transformed into “an enormous bug.” At first he believes that it is all a dream but after he sees his newly formed body and insect-like legs, he realizes it is real. Have you ever wished you could be transformed into something or someone else?

Describing who or what you would transform into and why.

Gregor says, “If it weren’t for my parents I would have quit [my job] long ago. I would have walked right up to the boss and let my heart out to him.” Have you ever been so dissatisfied with your job that you wanted to tell your boss that you quit? What stopped you?



“Kafkaesque”

- ❖ Kafka’s influence on twentieth-century literature is profound.
- The word “*kafkaesque*” has passed into the literature to describe an unsettling, disorienting, nightmarish world that is both fearful and menacing in its ambiguity and complexity.

“Kafkaesque”

- His haunting, disturbing, and sometimes grotesque images COMBINED with his struggling but ultimately defeated heroes, defined an age where an alienated man questioned and grappled with meaning and justice, but is denied answers.



Question / Prompt

- **Gregor wants to save something in his room just as his sister and mother are removing everything from his previous life as a human. If you could only save one thing that you now have because of a fire or something else just as destructive, what would you save? Write in your journal, explaining what you would save and why it has such meaning to you.**

OR

- **Gregor's thoughts often return to the times when he was still human. Although he enjoys reminiscing about his past life, it is also very painful for him. Write a journal entry about a time or incident or person you would like to forget because of the pain it causes now, but, on the other hand, you don't want to forget it because of the joy it brought you at the time.**

The Metamorphosis as Allegory

- Prevalent view → allegory
- Allegory: a story in which each character or event stands for something else.
- Characters are used to teach a moral meaning about life.
- Characters in allegory are symbolic and their actions reveal truths about human existence.

Let's examine the layers

- Alienation and isolation are at the core of Gregor's transformation.
- The existential element of the story is reinforced by the futile search for meaning in the world.
- Finally, as an allegory, the other characters add to the meaning. (Grete and father, for example.)

Title

- Consider the ambiguity in the title.
- Attention of family transfers.
- How?

Consider this quote

- To be an exception or in the minority is the original social sin. When in society any group of men characterized by anomalous tastes or racial or social heredity is denounced as “vermin,” there will always be one group that from then on will see nothing but the other’s rottenness, and another fraction within the scorned group that will think and act as if they had truly been transformed into vermin. *-Paul Landsburg*

Allegorical Messages

- **Isolation, whether by choice or not, dehumanizes and brings about a kind of spiritual death.**
- **Dysfunctional family dynamics can destroy an individual.**
- **Meaningless work keeps an individual from living an authentic life.**
- **In an existential world, the search for meaning is futile.**
- **The stress of caring for others can affect your health and well-being if you allow it to.**