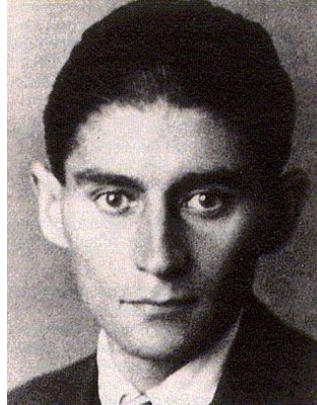


THE METAMORPHOSIS

by Franz Kafka



THE AUTHOR

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was born of Jewish parents in Prague. His father was an ambitious merchant from whom Franz felt little but alienation. He grew up unable to identify with anyone in his environment and convinced of the meaninglessness of human existence. He obtained a doctorate in law and worked briefly for a law firm and later an insurance company, but his true love was writing. He wrote, not for publication or to make a living, but to purge his inner demons. His works were prophetic in the sense that he saw the specter of totalitarianism on the European horizon. Though he died before the dictators arose, his three sisters all perished in concentration camps. Some of his short stories and short novels were published during his lifetime, including his best-known work, *The Metamorphosis*, in 1915. His novels, including *The Trial*, were left unfinished at his death and were published through the efforts of a friend. Kafka died of tuberculosis at the age of 41.

PLOT SUMMARY

Part I

Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, awakes one morning to find that he has been transformed into a giant insect. Though he is surprised, his main concern is that he will be late for work. Soon his parents and sister come to the door of his bedroom to try to wake him up, but when he speaks they can't understand him. The chief clerk arrives from the office and suggests that, if Gregor doesn't get out of bed and come to work, his job might be in jeopardy. Gregor can't afford to lose his job, since he took it in the first place to pay off debts incurred by his father. Meanwhile, he struggles, first to get off the bed, then to maneuver himself to the door, then to get the door open. When he finally opens the door, his family and the clerk are terrified. The clerk flees, and his father drives him back into his bedroom with a stick.

Part II

That night, Gregor wakes up to find a bowl of milk and bread that his sister had brought into his room, but despite his hunger, he finds that he cannot eat what used to be his favorite food. Later, Grete brings in a variety of foods, some fresh and some rotten, and he quickly devours the rotten food but cannot tolerate the smell of the fresh food. When his sister enters his bedroom to bring food or open the window for him, he hides under the sofa to avoid frightening her. Gregor can hear the conversations in the next room. Initially, they are all centered on his condition, but after a month passes, they are mostly about the family's financial condition. Gregor feels guilty for no longer being able to support his family, but he cannot communicate with them, and they assume he cannot understand them, though he can do so perfectly well. Eventually, Gregor realizes that he can crawl on the walls and ceiling, and does so regularly for amusement and exercise, but always hides under the sofa when his sister enters. Grete then decides that her brother would be better off if all the furniture except the sofa were removed from the room so Gregor could be free to move around. This is not what he wants, since the furniture brings memories of his human past, but he can do little to stop them. When Grete and his mother move the furniture, he first tries to save a picture by covering it with his body, but when his mother sees him for the first time, she faints. He then goes into the main room to get out of the way. While he is there, his father returns home. What had been a feeble old man was now a well-dressed and seemingly prosperous bank employee - taking on responsibility for the family's finances had done wonders for his appearance and bearing. When he sees Gregor, however, he first tries to step on him, then flings fruit at him to try to kill him. In the process, Gregor is badly injured despite the efforts of his mother to restrain his father from the violence he intends to his only son.

Part III

The severity of Gregor's injury makes the family feel sorry for him, to the extent that they leave the door to his room open in the evening so he can hear their conversation, which doesn't amount to much. All three are now employed - Father as a bank messenger, Mother doing sewing in the home, and Grete working in a shop - but still their income is insufficient, so they take in three lodgers. Gradually, Gregor comes to be more and more neglected. His room is no longer cleaned except at the whim of the charwoman, Grete shows little concern for feeding him, and the bedroom is gradually filled up with castoffs the lodgers want removed from their quarters. Gregor now rarely eats or sleeps, and he becomes progressively weaker; the rotting apple thrown by his father is still lodged in his back. One night, Grete begins to play her violin (Gregor had previously hoped to raise the money to send her to the Conservatory), and the lodgers ask if she would play for them. As she plays, Gregor, transfixed by the music, creeps into the room to be near his sister. When the lodgers see him, they immediately announce that they will leave the next day, and that they will pay nothing for the time they have spent in such an unsavory establishment. Grete then argues that the situation cannot continue, and that for everyone's good Gregor must be disposed of. Gregor then creeps back into his room and dies. The next morning, the charwoman finds the corpse, and after announcing the death of the "monster," disposes of the remains. The lodgers now want to stay, but Father throws them out. Gregor's parents and sister then go for a holiday in the country, happy that they will now do quite well by moving into a smaller apartment. They even hope to find Grete a good husband in the near future.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Gregor Samsa - The protagonist of the story, he is a traveling salesman who awakes one morning to find that he has turned into a giant insect, totally alienated from his family and the world around him.
- Grete - Gregor's seventeen-year-old sister, she is kind to him and takes care of him after his transformation despite the fact that she is repulsed by his appearance. Ultimately, she rejects him and convinces her parents that he must leave.
- Father - He is a harsh man who wants no contact with his transformed son. He himself is transformed by having to take responsibility for the family finances, but ultimately brings about Gregor's death by throwing fruit at him.
- Mother - She loves Gregor, but is shielded from contact with him by the rest of the family.
- Chief clerk - Gregor's boss, he arrives to find out why Gregor has not come to work and threatens him with loss of his job. He flees the house when the transformed Gregor emerges from his bedroom.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect.” (Part I, p.64)

“Did he really want this warm room of his, so comfortably fitted with old family furniture, to be transformed into a cave, in which, no doubt, he would be free to crawl about in all directions, but only at the price of rapidly and completely forgetting his human past at the same time?” (Part II, p.89)

“Was he an animal, that music could move him so? It seemed to him as if the way were opening towards the unknown nourishment he craved.” (Part III, p.102)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Analyze the responses of Gregor Samsa's three family members to his transformation into a giant insect in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. How do the responses of the three people give the reader insight into their characters? Do these insights correspond with what we see as they interact with one another and with the minor characters in the story?
2. Discuss the choice of narrative voice in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Why does the author choose a third person point of view? Is the narrator omniscient? If not, what are the limitations of his perspective?

3. Some critics of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* view the transformation of the protagonist as symbolic rather than literal. In other words, Gregor doesn't *really* turn into an insect; the insect is a metaphor for the life he lives and his relationships to those around him. If this is true, what do we learn about Gregor's life and relationships? What could have caused him to find himself in such a deplorable state?
4. Some critics (and perhaps the author himself) have viewed Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as an absurdist comedy. What understanding of the nature of human life would predispose someone to find this story funny? What would such a response indicate about the state of mind of the reader?
5. Discuss the view of human communication set forth in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Does the author believe that meaningful human communication is possible? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the story.
6. Discuss the actions and reactions connected with Grete's violin performance in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. What does this incident suggest about the role of music and its power in human life?
7. Discuss the problem of alienation as it is presented in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Is Gregor Samsa unique in his alienation from the surrounding world, or does Kafka intend him to serve as a symbol of all humankind? Support your conclusion with details from the story.
8. Because Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is such a straightforward narrative with no explanatory prose whatsoever, critics over the years have sought in it a multitude of symbolic interpretations, including Freudian (Gregor's relationship to his father), Marxist (the meaninglessness, monotony, and oppression associated with Gregor's job), and biographical (Kafka's relationship to his family is thought to be pictured in the interactions shown in the story). Choose one of these interpretations and critique it, telling the extent to which you think it a credible reading of the narrative.
9. To what extent may Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* be read as a critique of twentieth-century materialism? Give special attention to the behavior of the members of the family and the minor characters in response to Gregor's transformation.
10. To what extent does Gregor Samsa change after his transformation in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*? Does he grow in self-understanding or in comprehension of his family or his world? In what ways? Be sure to use specifics to support your arguments.
11. In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, what is the significance of the fact that Gregor Samsa reacts calmly and with little surprise to his transformation into an insect? What does this imply about his life before the story begins? What does it imply about his self-image?

12. In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, how do the changes in Gregor's room reflect the progress of the narrative? Discuss the significance of these changes and relate them to the major themes of the story.
13. Discuss the ending of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Is the reader left with a sense of hope or hopelessness? Support your conclusion with details from the story.
14. In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, is Gregor an admirable character? Why or why not? Would you have liked to make his acquaintance before his transformation? Afterward, assuming communication would have been possible?
15. Compare and contrast the picture of the meaninglessness of life found in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Be sure to consider both the ways life is pictured in the stories and the solutions proposed by the authors, if any.
16. Compare and contrast the treatments of conformity in Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. What do the two authors believe to be the consequences of living a life dedicated to conforming to the desires of others? Use specifics from the stories to support your arguments.