



Study Guide for Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Genre: Novella: A novella is a written, fictional, prose narrative that is shorter than a novel. The word count for a novella is between 17,500 and 40,000. Other definitions start as low as 10,000 words and run as high as 70,000 words.

Keywords: chronic illness, disability, disease and health, family relationships, illness and the family, individuality, mental illness, suffering

Literary analysis: Marxist approach and psychoanalytic interpretation

Marxist approach: *The Metamorphosis* can be interpreted as a reaction against bourgeois society and its demands. Gregor's manifest physical separation may represent his alienation and inarticulate yearnings. He had been a "vermin," crushed by authority and routine. He had been imprisoned by social and economic demands: "Just don't stay in bed being useless. . ."

Psychoanalytic approach: *The Metamorphosis* prevents the imminent rebellion of the son against the father. Gregor had become strong as a result of his father's failure. He

crippled his father's self-esteem and took over the father's position in the family. After the catastrophe, the same sequence takes place in reverse: son becomes weak, and father kills him.

Symbols:



The Picture of the Woman in Furs: The picture of the woman in furs serves as a symbol of Gregor's former humanity. It is 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.

Food: Food represents the way the members of the Samsa family feel toward Gregor. Grete, the family member Gregor feels closest to, feeds Gregor for most of the story; however, as the family has to go to work, they lose interest in feeding Gregor.

About the Author:



Franz Kafka was born in Prague, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on July 3, 1883. He was the oldest surviving child of Jewish parents. His father, Hermann Kafka, a successful merchant, never was able to appreciate his son's special talents. The strained relationship between father and son became the key element in Kafka's personality and led to lifelong guilt, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence.

He disliked the authoritarian discipline of school life but found pleasure and escape in literature. The English novelist Charles Dickens was a favorite. In 1901, when he was eighteen, Kafka went to the German University in Prague. He studied for a law degree, a course of study approved by his domineering father and one that would lead to a prestigious job, but the young man found the coursework boring. His real interest was in English, and he attended many lectures and readings in his spare time. He began to write short stories and other pieces of fiction.

Soon after graduating with a law degree in 1906, Kafka began working in a government workers' insurance office. Like Gregor Samsa, the main character of *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka still lived with his parents. His work at the insurance office, while dull, did leave some time for Kafka to pursue his interest in English and writing. However, family tensions, the deteriorating health of his parents, and his own self doubts make concentrating on his writing difficult.

In 1912, when he was twenty-nine, Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*. He became engaged to Felice Bauer, but three months later, he broke the engagement because he was worried that marriage and family life were incompatible with his writing.

Kafka wrote many short stories that embodied alienation, search for meaning, and despair of modern life. Kafka's health worsened, and in 1917, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The last years of Kafka's life were marked by periods of intense writing activity, family tensions, unsuccessful love relationships, and worsening health. In 1924, he went to a rest home in Austria, where he died at the age of forty-one.

Vocabulary:

Know these words and write a complex sentence using each word. Make a Keynote for each word writing the definition out, part of speech, an illustration for the word, and the word being used in a complex sentence. Due:_____

brusque [brusk] adj. abrupt; blunt

fathom [fath em] verb to understand

fulminations [ful me na shenz] noun verbal assaults; denunciations

harbinger [har bin jer] noun event that foreshadows a future event

plaintively [plan tiv le] adverb in a mournful manner

ravenous [ra ve nes] adj. extremely hungry

supine [soo pin] adj. lying on the back

vaulted [vol ted] adj. arched

vermin [vur min] noun harmful or objectionable creature, such as a cockroach or rat

Answer the following comprehensive questions. Full credit will only be given to students who restate the question and answer the question in complete sentences. Any questions that have an asterisk (*) must be answered the student's own words, and the student must find a quote from the novella to support his or her answer. Your quote must be in correct parenthetical documentation. Answers to these questions can be found from page 1 to page 19 of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

1*. How does Gregor feel about his job? What evidence in the story reveals his feelings?

2*. What is Gregor's role in his family? Why does he have so much responsibility? How is this role about to change?

3*. What happens to Gregor when he leaves his room to meet the office manager? What does this episode reveal about Gregor's father?

4. From Gregor's point of view, what might be some positive aspects of his metamorphosis into an insect?

5*. What circumstances in Gregor's life might have caused him to feel dehumanized even before the metamorphosis took place?

Chapter 2 of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Write complex sentences with these vocabulary words. Know these words for the quiz. Students will need to create a Keynote using these new vocabulary words. Create an illustration for each word, write the part of speech, write the definition, and write the complex sentence for each word. Due:_____

1. comatose [kom e tos] adj. lacking in vitality or consciousness
2. inveigle [in va gel] verb to lure or induce into taking action
3. pallid [pal id] adj. pale

4. poignantly [poin yenta le] adverb in an emotionally moving manner

5. ruminations [roo me na shenz] noun thoughts; meditations

6. sette [se te] noun seat for two or more persons; love seat

Answer the following comprehensive questions by restating the question and answering the question with complete sentences. To gain full credit, one must also support his or her answers with quotes from the text. These quotes must be put in correct parenthetical documentation.

1*. What does Gregor's father reveal about the family's financial status? What is Gregor's reaction when he learns the truth about their finances?

2*. What is Gregor's response when Grete decides to remove the furniture from his room? What does this response tell you about him?

3* How is Gregor wounded? What symbolic significance might the object that wounds him have?

4. A person changed into an animal, or vice versa, is a common theme of fairy tales. The literary terms for any attribution of human characteristics(or characteristics assumed to belong only to humans) to non-human animals, non-living things, phenomena, material states, objects or abstract concepts is called anthropomorphism. In what ways is *The Metamorphosis* similar to fairy tales you know? In what ways is it different?

5. What words would you use to describe Kafka's style? Does his writing remind you of other books you have read, music you have heard, or films you have seen?

Chapter Three of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Write complex sentences with these vocabulary words. Know these words for the quiz. Students will need to create a Keynote using these new vocabulary words. Create an illustration for each word, write the part of speech, write the definition, and write the complex sentence for each word. Due:_____

1. apathetic [ap e thet ik] adj. indifferent; unresponsive
2. bailiwick [ba le wick] noun person's area of expertise, authority, or work
3. harry [har e] verb to harass or torment
4. impelled [im peld] adj. driven to take action
5. perusal [pe roo zel] noun detailed analysis
6. quizzically [kwiz i kel le] adverb in a puzzled manner
7. vouchsafe [vouch saf] verb to grant or give
8. windfall [wind fol] noun unexpected gain

Answer the following comprehensive questions by restating the question and answering the question with complete sentences. To gain full credit, one must also support his or her answers with quotes from the text. These quotes must be put in correct parenthetical documentation.

1. Why, do you think, has Grete's attitude toward Gregor changed?

- 2*. Who comes to live with the Samas? What might be the significance of these new characters? Why did Kafka not give them names or other individual characteristics?

3*. How does Gregor respond to his sister's violin playing? What might Kafka be implying about Gregor by describing this reaction?

4. The narrator strongly implies that Gregor starves himself to death. What other forces might have led to Gregor's death?

5. What effect does Gregor's metamorphosis ultimately have on his family? What does this effect suggest about his relationship with his family?

Take the on-line quiz on which character from Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* are you?

Writing Assignment

After finishing Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, each student is to take the position of one of the characters from *The Metamorphosis* and write about the metamorphosis from that character's perception. You can take the perspective of Grete and write a letter to Gregor about your feelings as Grete about the whole metamorphosis. As Grete, how did your role in the household affect Gregor? You can take the voice of the mother writing a letter to Gregor, or you can take the voice of Gregor writing to either his father, mother, or Grete. You cannot take the voice of Gregor to his father as I have written a sample essay so that you have a benchmark to the type of writing I am expecting. Think about the following questions to help you write a power letter from the perspective of one of the characters:

*What would you do differently, or would you do nothing differently? What would you say to Gregor if he was alive?

*Do you feel sorry and ashamed for how you treated him, or is it still a relief that he is gone?

*How do you feel as this character reflecting back upon the whole experience of the metamorphosis?

Make sure that your letter uses specific details from the novella to add to piece. Of course, I am looking for complex sentence structure and strong vocabulary. Please follow the rubric and read over the essay I wrote so that you know what the target is for an "A." The letter must be at least two pages long, double spaced, and 12 font. Anything that does not fit this criteria WILL NOT be graded.

Ms. Peters' Sample Letter of the Metamorphosis from the Father's perception

Dearest Gregor,

As I look back upon our last days together, I see myself, not only after your metamorphosis but also before your metamorphosis, as a parasite. Not only did I feed off you, but my actions toward you were also insect-like, cold, and empty of love. I mirrored an insect!

Gregor, I relied on you to support me and my debts. When you metamorphosed, I relied on you to remain in that bug-state so that I would be the one in power. I wanted to feel empowered again because deep down I was humiliated after the failure of my business. Yes, I was at first happy that you resumed my place as bread-winner and

leader of the family; however, when you metamorphosed into a degrading creature, it was my chance to reverse our relationship. I became powerful again.

When you opened the door that foggy grey morning, I felt as if you were playing a trick on me. I now see your metamorphosis as an act of liberation from your meaningless job, the family's debts, and the obligation to support me. You had sacrificed your life, hopes, and dreams to care and support us. Yet despite of all that you did for the family, I was not content with your sacrifices. Gregor, there was more money in the household than you knew about; I was able to work! You knew the our family life was a lie, and therefore, the monstrous aberration you became threatened to expose that lie. I realize now you intended through the metamorphosis to break from the family, from society, and from my sergeant-style parental authority; however, inwardly you were still dependent on me for love and approval, a love I never demonstrated to you.

You were so isolated, I reflect upon your torment as you locked yourself behind your bedroom door each night. Looking and waiting for fatherly love that I never showed you. All that echoed from behind your door was a voice of discipline.

The metamorphosis relinquished your power in the family and your self-worth in my eyes. Every strengthening of my position resulted in a weakening of you. I needed to build myself up through the fall of you. You needed my care, love, and support to break from your bug-state, but all I did was take power from you keeping you in your bug-state. I left you to keep yourself alive through your inner struggle while I hungered for power in the family and outside of the family. I do not care about the filthiness, decrepitude or the circumstances of power as long as I can enforce power and obtain power in society.

Instead of offering guidance and support to my son, I became a power-hungry rival and an angry dispenser of my justice. Three times you attempted to emerge from your room to assert yourself as a responsible human being. Twice, I violently drove you back, enforcing your own tendency toward withdrawal and seclusion.

I had two choices: To destroy you, or love you as the insect. If I would have loved you, I would have broken through the shell of the insect, and my son would have been reborn, enabling the lost soul to discover a new relationship with me. Love was put to the test my means of an object of disgust. Because I did not show love or compassion to you, my son, you remained in the bug-state of indecision which brought you great despair. You died from my parasite-like behavior. I was the true bug!

Because of your charitable love towards your family, you are elevated to a higher state of fulfillment. You have found your liberation from society, from my unkind heart, and from the shell of a bug that surrounded a beautiful essence of my son, Gregor Samsa.

Forgive me,

Your Father

Written by Ms. Peters

