

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Metamorphosis

by Franz Kafka

Written by Michael Fisher

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The Metamorphosis

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student should be able to:

1. Discuss the basic notions that characterize the Existentialist movement in philosophy and literature and how these notions came into existence;
2. Explain how *The Metamorphosis* fits into the Existentialist framework;
3. Discuss the effect of Kafka's choice to begin *The Metamorphosis* with its climax;
4. Show how irony is used to create humor in *The Metamorphosis*;
5. Trace the development of the major theme in this story—metamorphosis of the self through the vehicle of society—as it applies to:
 - Gregor;
 - Sister (Grete);
 - Father;
6. Explain the impact of Kafka's personal experiences on his writing and point out parallels in *The Metamorphosis*;
7. Discuss the novel as a response to the social and political environment of its day;
8. Discuss Kafka's use of the limited-omniscient narrator to bring focus to the absurdity of his characters and their situations;
9. Discuss Kafka's use of absurdity and the grotesque;
10. Respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
11. Respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
12. Offer a personal interpretation of Kafka's message in *The Metamorphosis*, using direct evidence from the text as well as authoritative sources;
13. Discuss the themes of alienation, isolation and uncertainty in *The Metamorphosis* and cite the ways this theme is evidenced in the text;

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Background Information

PARALLELS TO KAFKA'S LIFE

Although it is debatable exactly to what extent the characters in *The Metamorphosis* are drawn directly from Kafka's life, certain parallels cannot be overlooked.

In order to study Kafka's writing, an understanding of Kafka's life can be helpful. It has been suggested, in fact, that Kafka used writing to express ideas he was not able to express in his real life; ranging from social analysis and criticism to feelings of anxiety and inadequacy—in this light, Gregor, Kafka's anti-hero turned “gargantuan pest” in *The Metamorphosis*, can be interpreted as a projection of some of Kafka's darker feelings about himself.

EARLY LIFE

Franz Kafka was born in 1883 to a middle-class, German-speaking, Jewish family in Prague, Bohemia (now the Czech Republic).

Franz was the first born of six children, and before he was six years old he witnessed the deaths of his two younger brothers, leaving him with a keen sense of mortality. Franz had three younger sisters whom he helped a series of governesses and housemaids raise while his parents worked at his father's business as many as 12 hours every day.

Kafka's relationship with his parents was strained; his father was domineering and cold; his mother loving, but non-committal. Despite this, Kafka developed a strong emotional dependence on his family, which would last his entire life. This idea is mirrored in *The Metamorphosis*, in Gregor's dependence on his sister and mother and his acquiescence to his father.

As a youth Kafka did well in school, but struggled against feelings of isolation—in part due to his frail physique and sensitive nature, and in part due to his status as a minority and his inability to identify with the Jewish community. Themes of isolation and alienation would recur in Kafka's writing.

After a largely successful university career, Kafka found employment at a series of insurance companies and wrote in his spare time. He was a social person, but was often left feeling dejected by his failed relationships with women. Many of Kafka's characters would suffer similar difficulties, and the motif of sexual confusion is recurrent in his work.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the title of the story. Include some discussion of the translation and possible interpretations. Does the title apply only to Gregor?
2. How does the fact that Gregor's transformation is introduced so casually affect the tone of the story, and consequently, how it is read?
3. Discuss Grete's transformation throughout the story—from Gregor's acolyte to an independent woman. What will become of her after the window of the novel? What about Gregor's parents?
4. Using evidence from the text, support the theme that life is unpredictable and change happens quickly.
5. Discuss *The Metamorphosis* in an Existential framework. Include themes of alienation, isolation, self-determination, attribution of meaning, etc.
6. Discuss the characteristics of an existential novel that are prominently illustrated in *The Metamorphosis*.
7. Is there a protagonist in this story? Is there an antagonist? Think about these questions in an Existentialist framework and discuss Gregor as an anti-hero.
8. Discuss Gregor's passive adaptation to the massive change he undergoes as an allegory for his life before the "transformation."
9. What, if anything, is Kafka saying about Gregor as a being in this world? Is Gregor's fate his fault, or was he helpless/hopeless all along?
10. Discuss the end of the story in which the family is rejuvenated and possessed of a new hopefulness about their lives. Has Gregor made the ultimate sacrifice for his family? Could Gregor be considered a Christ figure in this sense? Why/ why not?
11. After reading *The Metamorphosis*, what do you infer would be traits possessed by Kafka's ideal human, which are not possessed by Gregor?
12. What is the message of *The Metamorphosis*?
13. Discuss the choice of apples as the weapon that eventually proves lethal to Gregor.
14. Explain how the term "a willing suspension of disbelief," as coined by Samuel T. Coleridge, applies to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

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Chapter I

1. The first sentence of this story is quite famous in literature. However, over the years since its first translation, many voices in academia have complained that the word “insect” does not fairly translate Kafka’s original meaning. Offer your own interpretation of this debate. Why do many critics dislike the original translation?

2. As Gregor is lying in his bed, he reflects a bit on his situation. He decides that he will not reach any sensible conclusions as to how to proceed until he gets up and gets moving. What reasoning does Gregor use at this point to convince himself that he still may be suffering only from a temporary delusion?

3. How does Gregor’s reference to “harem women” show that he is a bit of a naïf, delusional about the outside world, and by extension, his own situation in life?

4. What does the fact that Gregor seems to ignore his physical symptoms in lieu of harping on his psychological hardships say about Gregor as a character?

Chapter III

1. Explain the irony in Gregor's description of "the dictates of family obligation," whereby he observes: "swallowing revulsion, one must endure, if nothing else—endure."

2. Why is Gregor allowed certain new privileges at the outset of Chapter III?

3. Where is Gregor's rationalization of his treatment by the family (a technique he uses to avoid conflict) evident at the beginning of Chapter III?

4. How does Kafka elicit sympathy for the father in Chapter III?

5. What does Kafka suggest the father's "obstinacy" is a reaction to? Interpret this as a social statement.

6. During evening discussions, what was the biggest complaint of the family?

14. What is Gregor's reaction to the commotion in the living room? Why is it ironic? How is this a symbolic gesture of change?

15. What is Gregor's response to being addressed by the charwoman? What is illustrated by this? Explain the humor inherent in Gregor's reaction.

16. How does the charwoman react to Gregor's attempt to threaten her? What is significant about this interchange?

17. How does Gregor react to his room being made into a junk pile? What is conveyed here?

18. What do the three tenants symbolize in the story?

19. Why does Gregor notice the tenant's chewing?

20. What is ironic about the violin scene?

27. Why is Gregor “too weak to move,” after he is caught by the tenants?

28. After their discovery of Gregor, what do the tenants “declare?”

29. What is significant about the way Grete refers to Gregor when she addresses her parents saying: “we must be rid of it.”

30. Kafka, again uses the phrase, “one,” to refer to the reader, saying, “one could see how, under the sister’s proficient hands, the sheets and pillows from the bed flew into the air and arranged themselves.” What is accomplished by addressing the audience in this removed, anonymous way?

31. What is the mother’s reaction to the agreement between the sister and the father that Gregor must be disposed of? What motif is illustrated here?

32. What is suggested by the use of the phrase “mechanical motion of her hands” to describe the way the sister wipes the tears from her mother’s eyes.

33. In another example of body language, Grete shakes her hand fiercely to indicate her feelings when father suggests the possibility that Gregor might understand what they are saying about him. Why is this gesture significant? What does this show about Grete's feelings toward Gregor?

34. How does sister rationalize her statement that, "The fact that we have believed this for so long is our true misfortune"?

35. How is this ironic? What does it foreshadow?

36. What does the sister say the family would have done if Gregor had chosen to leave on his own? What are the implications of this statement in terms of Kafka's view of society?

37. What is signified by the sister's crying?

38. Explain why Gregor's statement, "in addition, nobody was urging him onwards; it was all left up to him," is significant in an Existentialist framework.
