

THE METAMORPHOSIS

by Franz Kafka

Translation by M. A. Roberts

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UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

THE METAMORPHOSIS



F r a n z K a f k a
Translation by M. A. Roberts



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N O T E S

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

F R A N Z K A F K A



FRANZ KAFKA was born to a Jewish family in Prague in 1883. He lived with his family most of his life and believed his father to be unfeeling and domineering. After his two older brothers died, he became the eldest of four children. He had three younger sisters. Kafka obtained a law degree and wrote in his spare time while working for an agency affiliated with the government. His works frequently portray stifling, bureaucratic institutions and oppressive father figures. Although he was engaged twice, he never married; his relationships with women tended to be difficult and troubled. Kafka died in 1924 of the tuberculosis from which he suffered since contracting it seven years earlier.

The Metamorphosis was first published in 1915.



Prague

Kafka's friend Max Brod undertook the job of editing and distributing Kafka's works after his death, defying Kafka's wish that all of his writings be burned. His stories are deeply steeped in existentialism and are rife with symbolism. Because there are many elements in his stories that appear irrational or surreal, the adjective *Kafkaesque* has come to indicate that a situation is absurd or that a character is alienated from others.

Pointers

READING POINTERS

READING POINTERS FOR SHARPER INSIGHTS

TO BETTER APPRECIATE Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, it is essential to understand some of the existentialist ideas and beliefs that influenced his thoughts and that he incorporated into his writings.

Existentialism, a philosophy that became popular during the 19th century, generally asserts that destiny is chosen (rather than predetermined or ordained), that individuals must decide for themselves what they will believe is true, and that the greatest truths (such as the existence of God or the morality of any one act) cannot be rationally determined. Self-sufficiency or independence from other people is another ideal that existentialism extols. This philosophy also generally values the primacy of momentary existence: The only morality is that which is useful at the present time.

Overall, existentialism admits that stark individualism and self-determination will lead to personal anxiety (or *angst*). Complete and total freedom of choice can overwhelm a person who is unhindered by any consideration for the past, for other people, or for the good of society as a whole. This can often lead to the kind of isolation and despair that Gregor experiences in *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor is a type of anti-hero who faces a choice about whether or not to continue upholding the existentialist ideal.

The Metamorphosis is a highly symbolic text; many events, objects, and people represent or illustrate certain other, more complicated, ideas. The plot itself does not make rational sense; it depends entirely on the reader's acceptance of Gregor's transformation. Note that Kafka never answers or even addresses the major question that many readers wonder about the novel: How and why did Gregor become a bug?





1

C H A P T E R I

THE METAMORPHOSIS¹

AS GREGOR SAMSA awoke one morning out of restless dreams, he found himself in bed, transformed into a gargantuan pest.² He lay on his hard, armored back and saw, as he raised his head a little, his domed, brown belly, divided into arched segments; he could hardly keep the bed sheets from sliding from his stomach's height completely to the floor. His numerous legs, lamentably thin in comparison to his new girth, flickered helplessly before his eyes.³

“What has happened to me?” he thought. It was no dream. His room, a proper room for a human being (albeit a little too small), lay still between the four familiar walls. Above the table, upon which a collection of sample cloth goods was spread out in stacks—Samsa was a traveling salesman—hung the picture which he had cut out of an illustrated magazine a little while ago and set in a pretty gilt frame. It depicted a woman who, with a fur hat and a fur boa, sat erect, lifting up in the direction of the viewer a solid fur muff into which her entire forearm had disappeared.⁴

Gregor's glance then turned to the window, and the dreary weather—one heard raindrops falling upon the window ledge—made him quite melancholy. “How would it be if

¹Kafka's title actually translates as *The Transformation*. See glossary note on *Metamorphosis*.

²*Pest/Vermin could also be vermin*. See glossary note on *Pest/Vermin*.

³The description of Gregor's body as rounded may allude to the idea that Gregor, once a weak man, is now even weaker, a non-male, or an asexual creature.

⁴The picture may allude to some sort of sexual confusion as one of Gregor's problems. Note that the lady's fur covering makes her appear almost like an animal. See glossary note on *Mother, Sister*.

I kept sleeping for a little while longer and forgot all this foolishness,” he thought; but this was entirely impractical, for he was accustomed to sleeping on his right side, and in his present circumstances, he couldn’t bring himself into this position. No matter how hard he threw himself onto his right side, he always rolled again into a prone position. He tried it a full hundred times, closing his eyes because he had to avoid seeing the wriggling legs, and gave up trying when he began to feel a slight, dull pain in his side that he had hitherto not felt.

“Oh God,” he thought, “what a strenuous occupation I’ve chosen!⁵ Always on the road, day out, day in. The rigors of the job are much greater than if I were working locally, and, furthermore, the nuisances of traveling are always imposed upon me—the worries about train connections, bad meals at irregular intervals, fleeting human contact that is ever-changing, never lasting, and never expected to be genuine. To the devil with it all!” He felt a slight itching on the top of his abdomen. He slowly pushed himself on his back closer to the bedpost so that he could lift his head more easily, found the itchy area, which was entirely covered with small white spots—he did not know what to make of them—and wanted to feel the place with a leg. But he retracted it immediately, for the contact felt like a cold shower all over him.

He slid back again into his earlier position. “This getting up early,” he thought, “makes one completely idiotic. A man must have his sleep. Other travelers live like harem women.⁶ For instance, when I come back to the inn during the course of the morning to write up the necessary orders, these gentlemen are just sitting down to breakfast. If I were to try that with my boss, I’d be thrown out on the spot.

“Who knows, though—that might not be such a bad thing. If I didn’t hold back for my parents’ sake, I’d have quit ages ago. I would go to the boss and state my opinion out loud from the bottom of my heart. He would’ve fallen right off his desk! He’s a strange sort, sitting up on that desk and speaking down to the employee from on high like that. Moreover, the boss has trouble hearing, and one has to step up close to him. At any rate, hope is not completely gone: once I’ve collected

⁵Gregor’s first thoughts upon waking up as a creature are not even related to his new physical form, but to the state of affairs in his life. He is focusing almost entirely on how much he despises his work. Gregor’s lack of reaction to a physical change as serious as his is certainly atypical.

⁶This statement about harem women is an ironic one. See glossary note on Harem Women.

the money to pay off my parents' debt to him—that should take another five or six years—I'll do it for sure. I'll cut all ties and move on. In any case, right now I have to get up; my train leaves at five.”

He saw the alarm clock over there, ticking on the chest of drawers. “Good God!” he thought. It was half past six, and the hands were going quietly on. It was past the half hour, almost quarter to seven. Shouldn't the alarm have sounded? One could see from the bed that it had been properly set for four o'clock. Certainly it had rung. And was it even possible for one to sleep quietly through the noise that made even the furniture shake?⁷ Now, he certainly hadn't had a peaceful sleep, but apparently it was deep nonetheless. But what should he do now? The next train left at seven o'clock. To catch that one, he would have to make a mad dash; his assortment of wares wasn't packed up yet, and he really didn't feel particularly fresh and active. And even if he caught the train, there was no way to avoid those storm clouds brewing over the boss's head, because the firm's errand boy would've waited for the five o'clock train and reported the news of his absence long ago. He was the boss's minion, without backbone or intelligence.⁸ Well then, what if he called in sick? But that would be extremely embarrassing and suspicious, because during his five years' service Gregor hadn't been sick even once. The boss would certainly come with the doctor from the health insurance company and would reproach his parents for their lazy son, cutting short all objections with the comments from the insurance doctor, who thought everyone was completely healthy but work-shy. And besides, would the doctor in this case be totally wrong?⁹ Apart from an excessive drowsiness after the long sleep, Gregor, in fact, felt quite well and even had an especially strong appetite. As he was thinking all this over in the greatest haste, without being able to make the decision to get out of bed (the clock struck quarter to seven), there was a cautious knock on the door near the head of the bed. “Gregor,” a voice called—it was mother. “It's quarter to seven. Don't you want to be on your way?” The soft voice! Gregor was startled when he heard his voice answering. It was clearly and unmistakably his earlier voice, but in

⁷This is the fifth time Kafka has used the pronoun *one* to refer to people in general. See glossary note on *One*.

⁸The irony of this comment is obvious: Gregor is as much a “minion” of the boss as the errand boy is. See glossary note on *Backbone*.

⁹Gregor is conceding that his condition is as much mental as it is physical.

it was intermingled, as if from below, an irrepressibly painful squeaking, which left the words positively distinct only in the first moment and distorted them in the next moment, so that one didn't know if one had heard correctly. Gregor wanted to answer in detail and explain everything, but in these circumstances he confined himself to saying, "Yes, yes, thank you mother. I'm getting up right away." Because of the wooden door, the change in Gregor's voice was not really noticeable outside, so his mother calmed down with this explanation and shuffled off. However, as a result of the short conversation, the other family members became aware that Gregor was unexpectedly still at home, and already his father was knocking on one side door, weakly but with his fist. "Gregor, Gregor," he called out. "What's going on?" And, after a short while, he urged him on again in a deeper voice: "Gregor! Gregor!" At the other side door, however, his sister knocked lightly. "Gregor? Are you not well? Do you need anything?" Gregor directed answers at both sides: "I'm almost done." He made an effort with the most careful articulation and by inserting long pauses between the individual words to remove everything remarkable from his voice. Father turned back to his breakfast. However, the sister whispered, "Gregor, open the door—I beg you." Gregor had no intention of opening the door, but congratulated himself on his precaution, acquired from traveling, of locking all doors during the night, even at home.

First, he wanted to get out of bed quietly and without disturbance, get dressed, above all to have breakfast, and only then consider further action, for—he noticed this clearly—by thinking things over in bed he would not reach any sensible conclusions. He already remembered that he had often felt a light pain in bed, perhaps the result of some awkward sleeping position, which later turned out to be purely imaginary when he stood up, and he was eager to see how his present fantasies would gradually fade away. That the change in his voice was nothing other than the onset of a real chill, an occupational illness of commercial travelers—of that he had not the slightest doubt.¹⁰

It was very easy to throw aside the blanket; he needed only to push himself up a little, and it fell by itself. But to continue

¹⁰This is, perhaps, the closest that Gregor ever comes to examining his own situation. He is convinced that his condition is an illusion or a temporary illness.

Glossary

Backbone

The *backbone* in this story is also a symbol of the human ability to remain upright and to determine one's own destiny. As a traveling salesman, Gregor was figuratively spineless, but now that he is a bug, being without a spine is a physical actuality. Note also that the apple thrown by the father sticks in Gregor's back, making him even more spineless.

Communication

It becomes apparent at one point in the text that Gregor suddenly cannot communicate with or like other human beings. This inability is one trait that cuts him off from his family and the rest of the humans in the story. Existentialists generally agree that their beliefs isolate them from other people, making communication difficult.

Father

The father frequently displays his dual nature: He tries to put on a show of strength, but in reality, he is almost as weak as the mother. He is imposingly large, as was Kafka's own father, but is emotionally unable to maturely cope with the new Gregor. His father's clothing is at one point called a *uniform* (German: *die Uniform*) but later is referred to as *livery* (German: *Livreeokkes*), an antiquated word that recalls the clothing a medieval serf worn while serving his or her master.

Also note that Kafka almost always uses the pronoun *the* instead of *his* when referring to Gregor's family ("the father" instead of "his father" or "Gregor's father"). This word choice isolates Gregor even further from his family by subtly implying that he is not intimately associated with them.

Fretsaw

There is little in the novel to show that Gregor has done anything with his fretsaw other than create the ornate frame for the picture of the woman. The mother states at one point that this is his only hobby, which indicates that Gregor has few or no interests outside work. The one object to which he pays attention is the picture of the woman cut from a magazine, which he has put in the frame that he had spent a great deal of time creating.

Vocabulary

abstained – chose to go without

acrid – sharp, unpleasant, or caustic

albeit – even though, although

arbitrary – without basis; subjective

articulation – the effort put forth to pronounce words

asphyxiation – death from lack of air; strangulation

attenuate – to diminish gradually

auspicious – promising; apparently favorable

congealed – thickened or hardened

conservatory – a school that trains students in one of the fine arts

conspicuous – noticeable, obvious

contemplation – thought; consideration

copious – abundant or numerous

credenza – a bookcase, sideboard, or buffet

cut any ice with <someone> – [colloquial] to not make any impression on somebody

differentiate – to distinguish; to see differences

diminutive – very small or tiny

emaciated – thin from lack of nourishment

exuberant – enthusiastic; visibly glad

fervor – great enthusiasm

foresight – the ability to predict or anticipate the future

frugality – miserliness; ability to save money

hitherto – up to this point

immaculate – spotlessly clean or pure

incessant – without stopping; never-ending

indispensable – necessary; unable to live without

indistinguishable – difficult to tell one item from another

inexorable – unable to be stopped