

FRANZ KAFKA
AND
the metamorphosis



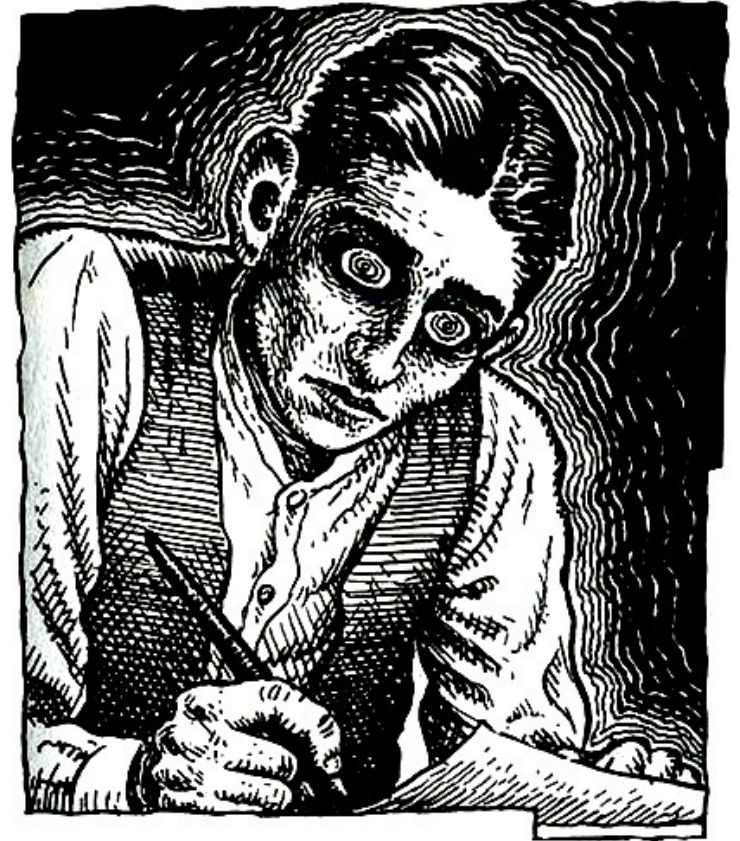
a literary adventure
by morgan daigneault

table of contents

Kafkaesque: Biographical Information.....	3
Under the Couch: Character Analysis.....	4
Literary Criticism.....	5
Significance of The Metamorphosis.....	8
Works Cited.....	9
Fun Links.....	10
Final Exam Questions.....	11

Kafkaesque

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF FRANZ KAFKA



FRANZ Kafka, born July 3, 1883, ranks among the most influential writers of the past century. Although his works were largely unknown during his lifetime, the writing published posthumously has “since been recognized as symbolizing modern man's anxiety-ridden and grotesque alienation in an unintelligible, hostile, or indifferent world” (Ritter).

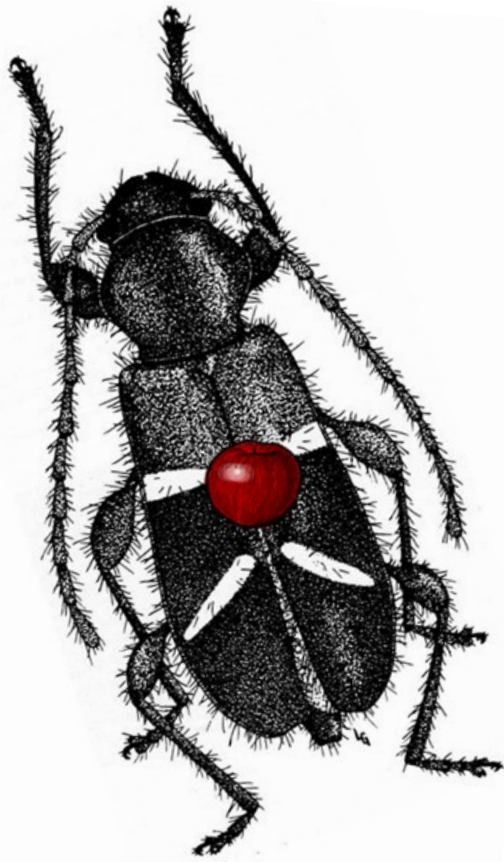
During his childhood, Kafka both loved and feared his parents, particularly his father. Kafka’s father especially disapproved of his quiet demeanor and his pursuits as a writer. Kafka would carry this meekness into adulthood, and he would later hand-write a 45-page letter to his father regarding the intimidation he experienced as a child: “...this feeling of being nothing that often dominates me (a feeling that is in another respect, admittedly, also a noble and fruitful one) comes largely from your influence. What I would have needed was a little encouragement, a little friendliness, a little keeping open of my road, instead of which you blocked it for me, though of course with the good intention of making me take another road. But I was not fit for that” (“Letter to his father”).

Later in life, Kafka was often weak from illness, and his declining health eventually forced him into retirement from his employ at an insurance institute. He spent his remaining days in a Vienna sanatorium, continuing to write until he died on June 3, 1924; his tuberculosis made swallowing so painful that he simply gave up trying to eat, and succumbed to starvation.

Kafka’s writing is distinguished in that it often deals with themes of isolation and persecution, but at times it also exhibits a surrealist humor. So pervasive is this style that the eponym “Kafkaesque” has entered the literary lexicon, indicative of his lasting influence. This term is used to describe writing, ideas, or thoughts that have a distorted, surreal, or even nightmarish quality to them (“Kafkaesque”).

under the couch

THE TRAGEDY OF GREGOR SAMSA



GREGOR Samsa, the main character of “The Metamorphosis,” is quite a tragic figure. The name “Samsa” is actually a play on Czech phonetics and, at the time the story was written, could be translated literally as “I am alone” (Bloom). Indeed, Gregor is alienated from his family – certainly after his transformation, but arguably even before his metamorphosis into a giant, unrecognizable beast.

Working as a traveling salesman, Gregor exists to support his family. He deems his family unable to contribute to the household income and thus is the sole provider for their comfortable lifestyle. Due to Gregor’s salary, the family can even afford a maid and a cook, effectively removing all responsibility from their lives. In this way, Gregor is alienated from his family even before the transformation. While Gregor works a job that he despises, his family idles around the apartment. After the transformation, the roles are reversed. Gregor can no longer support his family, and so the task of caring for Gregor falls upon them. Still, he remains alienated from his loved ones, but for different reasons, the most obvious of which is that he is now a grotesque vermin.

The theme of isolation often elicits sympathy from the reader. Gregor is aware that his condition is repulsive and frightening, and he often tries to shield his family from his unpleasant form: “he draped the sheet on his back and dragged it over to the sofa ... and placed it in such a way so as to conceal himself completely ... and Gregor believed he caught a grateful look...” (Kafka 704). Readers are often disturbed as well by the harsh treatment Gregor receives from his family, even though the transformation was beyond his control.

Gregor is undoubtedly driven by his love for his family. Before the transformation, he worked hard so that Father, Mother, and Sister could live pleasant lives. Gregor even had plans of sending his sister to a music conservatory to study the violin. It tears Gregor apart that he is unable to tell Grete of his intentions, and this seems to be a constant torment to him under his new and terrible circumstances. Unfortunately, despite his intentions, Gregor’s love for his family seems to have harmed them more than helped them. Once Gregor becomes helpless, the others are forced to cook, clean, and find jobs to support themselves. Gregor watches as his loved ones transform before him into productive members of society, undergoing a metamorphosis of their own.

Literary criticism

METAMORPHOSIS OF THE METAPHOR



“ Kafka writes on December 6, 1921: ‘Metaphors are one among many things which make me despair of writing. Writing’s lack of independence of the world, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming himself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair.’ ... This situation does not suggest the renunciation of writing, but only the clearest possible perception of its limitations, a perception which emerges through Kafka’s perplexity before, and despair of escaping, the metaphor in the work of art.

Kafka’s ‘counter-metamorphosis’ of the metaphor in *The Metamorphosis* is inspired by his fundamental objection to the metaphor. This is accomplished ... through the literalization of the metaphor. But is this true? What does it mean, exactly, to literalize a metaphor?”

- STANLEY CORNGOLD, “METAMORPHOSIS OF A METAPHOR”

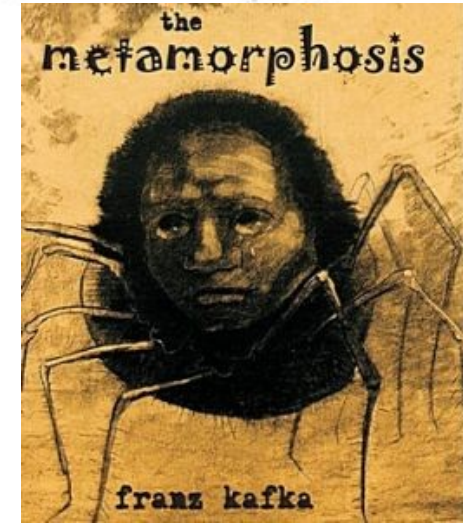
IN “Metamorphosis of the Metaphor,” Stanley Corngold analyzes Kafka’s literalization of metaphorical language in *The Metamorphosis*. What Corngold finds to be important in metamorphosis is the undefined and ongoing nature of the metaphor’s literalization: Gregor is not just *like* a bug, but he actually *is* a bug. According to Corngold’s analysis, the beginning of *The Metamorphosis* recounts Gregor’s transformation from a young man into a giant, detestable vermin. But in doing so, this transformation also metamorphoses a common figure of speech. In other words, “*The Metamorphosis* originates in the transformation of a familiar metaphor into a fictional being literally existing as this metaphor” (Corngold). The text offers and invites different perspectives and interpretations of the nature of Gregor’s change. For the cleaning woman who visits Gregor’s room, the transformation is complete; for her there actually is no metamorphosis, but only the indisputable presence of a large beetle. The way Gregor’s family treats their mutated son, in contrast, appears to be ambiguous and shifting, partly because they are unable to communicate with him. The only “real” Gregor they know is the one who existed before the sudden transformation. However, readers can discern that Gregor – the human Gregor – is still somehow present, because the narration derives from Gregor’s consciousness.

Literary criticism

THE IMPERSONAL NARRATOR OF THE METAMORPHOSIS

“When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning out of restless dreams he found himself in his bed transformed into a monstrous bug.’ From this moment the narrator identifies himself almost completely with Gregor, sees and hears through his eyes and ears, and accepts the truth of his metamorphosis as the victim himself must. Except in the coda of the last few pages ... almost everything we know is passed on to us via the consciousness of Gregor. To his thoughts we have direct access, the others we know as Gregor sees them through the open door and overhears their conversation.... while the narrator’s standpoint is determined by the consciousness and concern of the character Gregor and he usually is concerned only to make Gregor’s feelings and intentions evident, he also sometimes demonstrates a more independent purpose...

- ROY PASCAL, “THE IMPERSONAL NARRATOR OF *THE METAMORPHOSIS*”



ROY Pascal, in his analysis of *The Metamorphosis*, poses a question to readers: “Why, if the supreme function of the narrator is to communicate to the reader the chief character’s view and judgment and his world, without the corrective of an authoritative evaluation, does this narrator still retain some independence of function?” (96). The narration in the story, while serving primarily as a conduit for Gregor’s own thoughts, will occasionally falter, allowing what appears to be the unknown narrator’s own insights to surface. Several examples are offered explaining these deviations, the first example extracted from the second paragraph of the story: “‘What has happened to me?’ he thought. It was no dream” (Kafka 688). The passage goes on to describe Gregor’s immediate surroundings: “His room, a proper human room – albeit a little too small – lay calmly between its four familiar walls” (Kafka 688). The quotation marks around “What has happened to me?” are meant to distinguish Gregor’s thoughts from the “facts” that follow, a description of Gregor’s bedroom. Pascal points out that this distinction between narrator and character does not necessarily hold. “It was no dream” must have been a conclusion of Gregor’s rather than the narrator’s, even though it was not indicated by quotation marks. And though the description of Gregor’s room seems to come from the narrator, it is interjected with insights that could only have meaning if they came from Gregor (“albeit a little too small”). Although the narration remains inconsistent throughout the story, Pascal concludes that it nevertheless serves the story well: “Different readers will feel these variations in the narrative perspective with different intensity. But all would agree that, if there is any inconsistency in the structure, it impairs hardly at all the power of the work” (99).

Literary criticism

TRANSFORMING FRANZ KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS



“Traditionally, critics of *Metamorphosis* have underplayed the fact that the story is about not only Gregor's but also his family's and, especially, Grete's metamorphosis. Yet it is mainly Grete, woman, daughter, sister, on whom the social and psychoanalytic resonances of the text depend. It is she who will ironically ‘bloom’ as her brother deteriorates; it is she whose mirror reflects women's present situation as we attempt to critique patriarchal dominance in order to create new lives that avoid the replication of invalidation.

- NINA PELIKAN STRAUS, “TRANSFORMING FRANZ KAFKA’S *METAMORPHOSIS*”

THE article “Transforming Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*,” by Nina Pelikan Straus, focuses on gender analysis of text, especially in the task of deciphering Grete’s role in the story. Straus ruminates on the fact that while thousands of analytical works have been published about Kafka’s stories, nearly all of them have been authored by men. Straus concludes that, as a result, there has been a lack of important discussion of feminist studies of *The Metamorphosis*. The article suggests that while many readers and critics tend to focus mostly on Gregor, the family and Grete’s transformations are equally as important to interpretation. Straus draws parallels between Grete and Gregor’s roles in the story, pointing out that their labors were both exploited – Gregor’s work exploited by the rest of the family, and Grete’s efforts to care for Gregor exploited by the parents. “Although it is clear that Grete's labor, like her brother's, is exploited, and that she rises, as it were, from the ashes of Gregor's grave,” Straus writes, “few readers have been struck with surprise or horror at this transposition”(par. 6). Straus theorizes that readers are not concerned with Grete’s transformation because her role has been overshadowed by the paradigm of male alienation. In addition, Straus proposes the idea that Grete effectively serves as a “replacement” for Gregor, exchanging a son for a daughter. Gregor, once the sole provider for the family, is now resigned to inactivity and submission associated with the female role. “As a gigantic insect, Gregor exchanges responsibility for dependency, while Grete exchanges dependency for the burdensome efficiency and independence that Gregor formerly displayed” (Straus, par. 7). Delving deep into the gender connotations, Straus suggests that what resonates most in this brother-sister dynamic are the relations of men and women – the man’s desire to be a woman, and the woman’s desire to be a man.

the metamorphosis

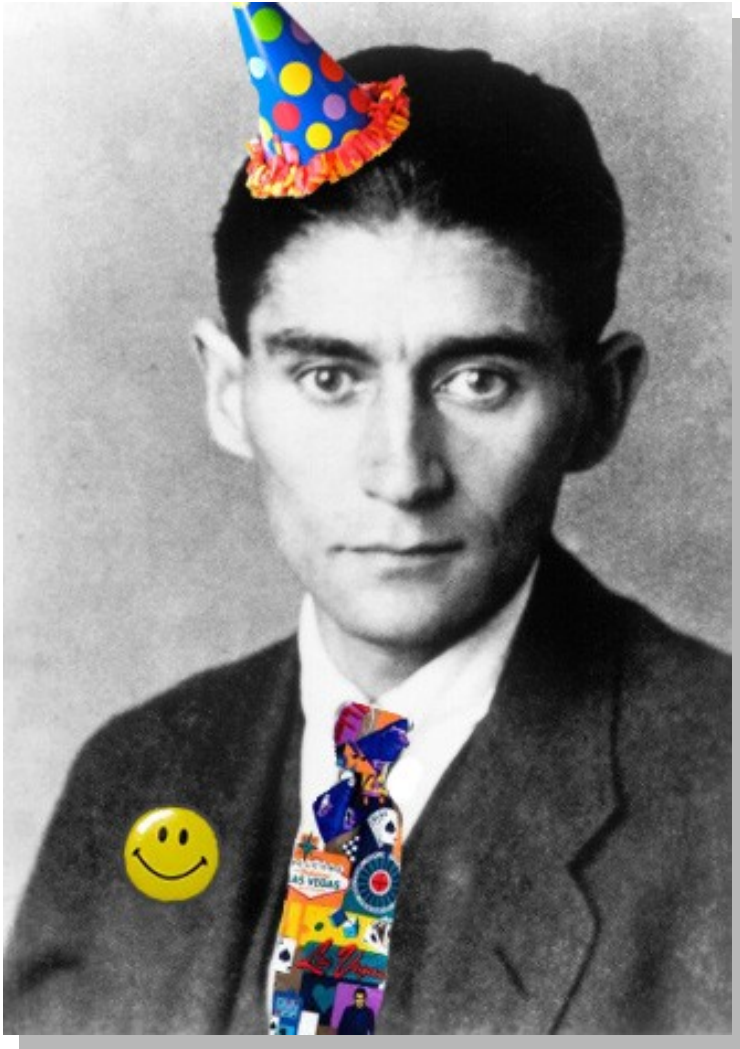


THE work of Franz Kafka, particularly *The Metamorphosis*, is an important addition to any class which surveys fictional texts. Composed of many complexities, *The Metamorphosis* is rich with a variety of literary interpretations. This story in particular is a large piece of the Kafka puzzle, opening a window into the mind and childhood of the author. The text also has a timeless quality to it, remaining powerful and relevant to this day. Kafka often guides readers into accepting the extraordinary or improbable as a part of reality, which incites the reader to seek meaning and explanation beyond the words provided. The story takes the reader outside his or her comfort zone and inspires emotions ranging from sadness to pity to anger. Each character goes through a unique transformation, and no actions or thoughts are presented without significance. Observing these metamorphoses, the reader can also reflect on various transformations they have undergone in their own lives. With complex narration, compelling characters, and striking themes, *The Metamorphosis* provides ample opportunity for discussion and interpretation.

works cited

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988. Print.
- Corngold, Stanley. "Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*: Metamorphosis of the Metaphor." *Mosaic* 3.4 (1970): 91-106. *Gale Cengage, eNotes.com*. Web. 12 April 2010.
- Kafka, Franz. "The Metamorphosis." *The Story and Its Writer*. Ed. Ann Charters. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 687-721. Print.
- "kafkaesque." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster Online, 2010. Web. 10 April 2010
- "Letter to his father." Schocken Books Inc., kafka-franz.com. March 2010. Web. 10 April 2010.
- Pascal, Roy. "The Impersonal Narrator of *The Metamorphosis*." *Modern Critical Interpretations: Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988. 95-104. Print.
- Ritter, Christopher D. *Franz Kafka*. Bohemian Ink, March 2009. Web. 10 April 2010.
- Straus, Nina Pelikan. "Transforming Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*." *Signs* 14.3 (1989): 651-67. *Gale Cengage, eNotes.com*. Web. 12 April 2010.

Fun Links



The Onion

[“Prague’s Franz Kafka International Airport Named World’s Most Alienating Airport”](#)

Home Movies

[“Franz Kafka Rock Opera”](#)

Final Exam Questions

1. In *The Metamorphosis* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, both Gregor Samsa and Ivan Ilych must come to terms with how they lived their lives and face their mortality. Compare and contrast each character's attitude toward life, and how they cope with their journeys toward death.

2. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor and Grete both undergo dramatic changes. Compare and contrast how the two siblings transform as the story progresses. What do you think their respective transformations represent?