

The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka

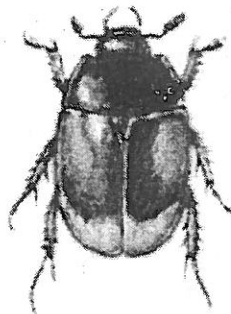
The *Metamorphosis* draws readers into the nightmarish world of Gregor Samsa, a young man who has mysteriously undergone a monstrous transformation. For many readers, Gregor's dehumanizing metamorphosis and subsequent feelings of alienation epitomize the human condition during modern times.

Kafka himself felt that *The Metamorphosis* was one of his more successful achievements, and it is probably his most widely read work today. With the exception of one event, the plot is almost humdrum in its realistic description of family tensions and economic worries. Kafka's clear, straightforward style belies the terror beneath the surface description. The neutral tone of the story also reinforces the feeling that the Samsas are a normal family—with one startling exception. The story never becomes cartoonish because the unreality of the situation is undercut by the realistic treatment of the events.

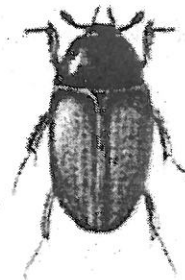
An aspect of *The Metamorphosis* that is frequently overlooked is its humor. Humor is a common response to emotional pain, and laughing in the face of hardship is not unusual. Many readers forget to notice the comical aspects of the story in their search for serious meaning. Kafka's humor is especially apparent in Chapter One, as Gregor makes adjustments to his new life.

As you read this puzzling work, keep in mind that scholars and critics have argued for almost a century about what it means. One reason for Kafka's immense influence and popularity is this openness to many interpretations. Readers can find evidence in *The Metamorphosis* to support a variety of interpretations of the odd, yet heart-breaking, events.

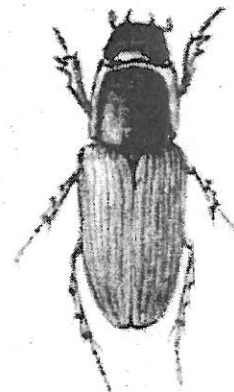
Because Kafka is not the kind of writer who will take you by the hand and lead you to his meaning, you will need to find your way there yourself. On the way, you may learn to look at yourself and others differently—and you certainly will never think of insects in the same way after reading *The Metamorphosis*.



*Sphaeridium
scarabaeoides*



*Cercyon
pygmaeus*



*Aphodius
prodomus*



Did You Know?

The Metamorphosis is generally assigned to a category of fiction known as the **novella**, **novelette**, or **short novel**. Novellas are longer and more complex than short stories but shorter and simpler than novels. Short stories usually contain one major conflict, focus on one major character, and develop one major theme, whereas novels present a much larger fictional world with many characters and episodes. The novella usually focuses on a limited number of characters, a relatively short period of time, and a single chain of events.

The novella form has attracted many of the greatest writers. Among the best-known novellas are Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, and Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. As you read *The Metamorphosis*, ask yourself why Kafka chose to limit the length of his story. How might it have been different if the author had chosen to make it a novel? What might *The Metamorphosis* have lost or gained if it were written in a different form?

Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

The Basic Facts

“My fear . . . is my substance, and probably the best part of me.”

“What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.”

- Born in Prague (at the time part of Austria) in 1883
- He was raised speaking German rather than Czech and as a Jew in a predominantly Christian culture (an outsider and a minority by virtue of his birth)
- Received a very good education at the German National Humanistic Gymnasium and Ferdinand-Karls University (where he received a law degree in 1906)
- Worked at the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institute of Prague for most of his adult life, where his work was highly valued (his supervisors arranged for a draft deferment during World War I)

Family and Relationships

- Lived at home until the age of 33 (his room was virtually identical to Gregor Samsa’s as described in the story)
- Had an extremely difficult relationship with his father, who was demanding and autocratic with his children—his father never approved of his aspirations as a writer
- Had 3 sisters, all of whom died in the Holocaust after his death
- Had many casual, unsatisfactory relationships with women, but preeminently involved with Felice Bauer—was engaged to her four times, but they never married

Relationship To His Art

“Anyone who cannot come to terms with his life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate . . . but with his other hand he can note down what he sees among the ruins.”

“Writers speak a stench.”

“What will be my fate as a writer is very simple. My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all matters into the background; my life has dwindled dreadfully, nor will it cease to dwindle. Nothing else will ever satisfy me.”

“Writing . . . is a sleep deeper than that of death, and just as one would and cannot tear the dead from their graves, so I must not and cannot be torn from my desk at night.”

- His attitude to his work was extremely intense and obsessive—he viewed writing as an unhappy, even loathsome activity, yet felt utterly compelled to pursue it above all else
- His writing is filled with images of physical and emotional self-loathing, arbitrary judgement, incomprehensible misfortune, manipulation by invisible forces
- Reputation hangs on a small, intensely realized body of work: *The Trial*, *The Metamorphosis*, *The Castle*, and a handful of short stories
- Most of his work was not published in his lifetime—he asked his best friend, Max Brod, to burn it after his death, but Brod famously failed to do so