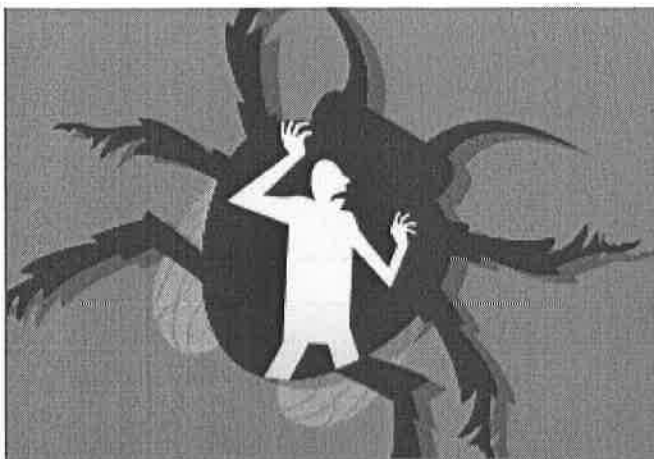


NAME: \_\_\_\_\_



# The Metamorphosis

Author  
Franz Kafka

Year Published  
1915

Original Language  
German

## THEMES

### 1 What Makes a Man Less Than Human?

Traveling salesman Gregor Samsa never misses his morning alarm. One day, however, he awakens late and finds himself transformed into a bug-like creature. His catastrophic transformation derails his career, life, and family. As he lives out his life trapped in a small room, readers wonder: Is he still Gregor?

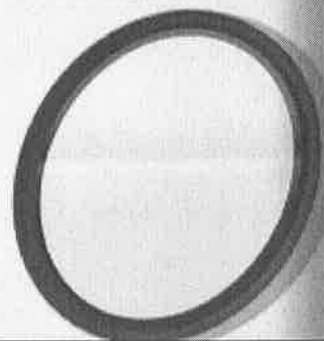
#### 2 Family Ties

The emotions of Gregor's family range from love and compassion to resentment and horror.



#### 3 Mind & Body

Though Gregor no longer looks human, his thoughts stay the same, revealing a disconnect between mind and body.



#### 4 Alienation in Modern Life

Gregor's transformation may seem absurd, but it represents feelings of isolation that are all too real.



## Author



**FRANZ KAFKA**  
1883–1924

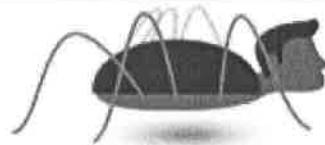
Kafka grew up in a middle-class Jewish family, working for an insurance company and living with his parents most of his life. Many of his unconventional stories were published posthumously against his wishes, and today the term *Kafkaesque* is used to describe the bizarre and fantastical.



*When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.*

Narrator, Part 1

## Motifs



### 1 Transformation

Gregor and his family members undergo major changes.



### 2 Subterfuge

There's more here than meets the eye, with Mr. Samsa hiding money and exaggerating illness.



### 3 Livelihood

Money and livelihood are the chief concerns of the Samsa family.

## Main Characters



**Mr. Samsa**

Gregor's hostile father; a broken man forced to return to work

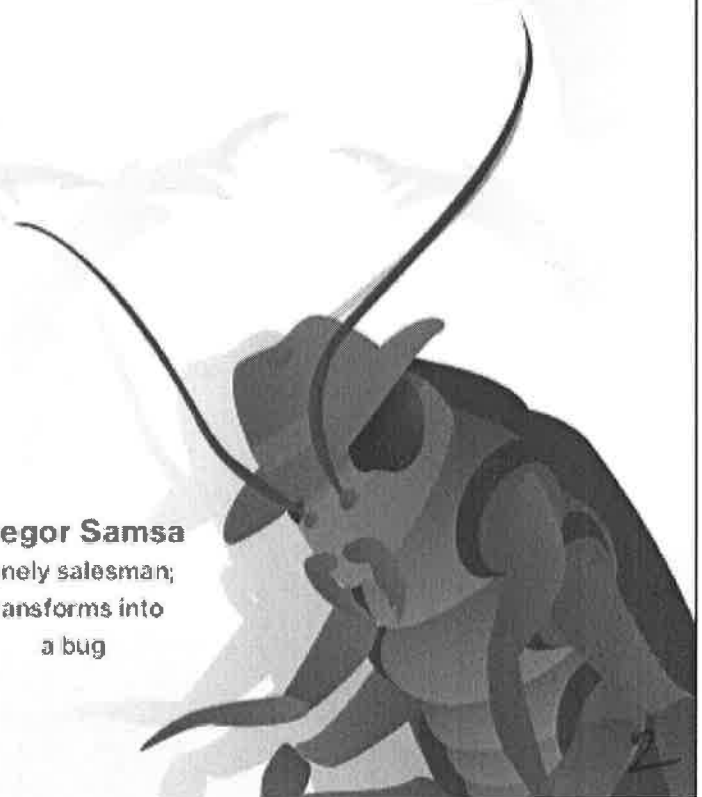


**Mrs. Samsa**

Gregor's troubled, weak mother; disgusted by her son's appearance

**Gregor Samsa**

Lonely salesman; transforms into a bug



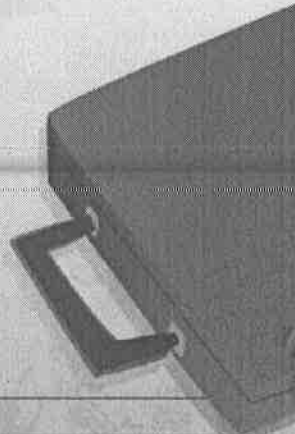


**Grete Samsa**  
Aspiring violinist;  
pities and then resents  
her brother, Gregor


**Charwoman**  
Practical, blunt;  
performs duties with  
no fear of Gregor





**Office Manager**  
Critical, demanding;  
runs when he sees  
Gregor as a bug




**The Metamorphosis**  
by the Numbers


 **3**  
Rents the family  
takes in to stretch  
their shrunken  
budget


 **15**  
Years in which the  
main character has  
not missed work

 **31**  
Kafka's age when he  
moved out of his  
parents' home

 **1938**  
Year in which the  
term *Kafkaesque*  
first appeared in an  
article by poet Cecil  
Day-Lewis

 **Symbols**

**1**  **Woman in Furs**  
Gregor clings to the framed  
advertisement of the woman in furs,  
a symbol of lost beauty and the  
superficiality of modern life.

**2**  **Vermin**  
The vermin symbolizes  
dehumanization, an inability to fit in,  
and perhaps even Kafka himself.

**3**  **Uniforms**  
In Gregor's photo and on his father,  
uniforms lend an air of importance to  
the wearer.

# Meet Franz Kafka



*I am separated from all things by a hollow space, and I do not even reach to its boundaries.*

—Franz Kafka, in a letter of December 16, 1911

**F**ranz 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 Hermann Kafka, a successful merchant, and Julie Löwy Kafka. Hermann Kafka was an overbearing man who was never 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.

The young Franz was a good student and popular with his classmates and teachers. Already, however, the boy showed signs of an inward-looking personality and the poor health that was to trouble him his entire life. 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 literature, and he attended many lectures and readings in his

spare time. He also began to write short sketches 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 literature. However, family tensions, the deteriorating health of his parents, and his own self doubts made concentrating on his writing difficult. He began to keep a diary and also started work on his novel *Amerika*.

In 1912, when he was twenty-nine, Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*. That same year, he had met Felice Bauer, a visitor from Berlin. Although he was tortured by his usual self-doubts, Kafka became engaged to Felice in 1914. Three months later, he broke the engagement, worried that marriage and family life were incompatible with his writing. Several months later, they became engaged again. In August of that year, Kafka finally moved out of his parents' home. He began work on a novel, *The Trial*, the dark, eerie tale of a man arrested and executed for reasons he never discovers.

The year 1917 was a startlingly productive one for Kafka, during which he wrote about a dozen stories. These stories feature bizarre situations and characters that embody the alienation, search for meaning, and despair of modern life. Kafka's health worsened, and in 1917 he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He took a leave of absence at the insurance institute. He also broke his engagement to Felice a second time. In 1918 he became engaged to Julie Wohrtek, but this engagement, too, he broke.

The last years of Kafka's life were marked by periods of intense writing activity, family tensions, unsuccessful love relationships, and worsening health. In 1922, he was forced to retire from the insurance institute. When he was healthy enough, he continued to write. In 1924, however, he went to a rest home in Austria, where he died at the age of forty-one. During Kafka's lifetime, only a handful of his writings were published.

# Introducing the Novella

*Kafka is important to us because his predicament is the predicament of modern man.*

—British poet **W. H. Auden**

*Kafka certainly does not provide an interpretation of the world. . . . What he provides is an image of how experience looks when all interpretations are called in doubt.*

—British critic **Anthony Thorlby**

*It would have turned out much better if I had not been interrupted at the time by the business trip.*

—**Franz Kafka**, writing about *The Metamorphosis* in his diary

*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*.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The novella takes place in an apartment in an unnamed city and unspecified time, although the setting resembles Prague at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*. At the time of Franz Kafka's birth in 1883, Prague was the capital of the kingdom of Bohemia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Today it is the capital of the Czech Republic. The population of the city in 1900, when Kafka was seventeen, was about one-half million people.

Prague has been called a "City of Three Peoples." In Kafka's time, almost all Prague residents were ethnic Czechs who spoke the Czech language. But about 6 percent of the city's population were German speakers. Jews made up about 5 percent of the population, and some of them, as did Kafka's family, spoke German as their first language.

Franz Kafka's double minority status, as a German-speaking Jew in a Christian, Czech-speaking world, had a powerful influence in shaping his personality. Jews and Germans mixed peacefully and actively with the majority Czechs, but they had their own schools, newspapers, publishing companies, organizations and societies, theaters, and cafes. Nevertheless, Prague's German-Jewish minority had a strong influence on the cultural life of the city and included many writers, artists, and intellectuals. Kafka was active in these circles for most of his life.

German-Jewish influence declined sharply, however, following the end of World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian empire was broken up. The

Czech provinces of Bohemia, Moravia, and part of Silesia combined with Slovakia to form the independent nation of Czechoslovakia.

### 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?

CONNECTIONS TO  
THEME/MOTIFS/SYMBOLS

CONNECTIONS TO  
MODERNISM