

# **The Basic Kafka Study Guide**

## **The Basic Kafka by Franz Kafka**

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# The Metamorphosis, pg. 1 to 25

## The Metamorphosis, pg. 1 to 25 Summary

Gregor Samsa wakes up and discovers that he has been transformed into an insect. He is lying on his back in the bed and unable to get up. He does not find the transformation as worrisome as the idea that he will be late for work. He thinks about sleeping longer and forgetting this nonsense, but he knows he has to get to work. Gregor is the only one who works in the household and supports his family with his job as a salesman. His parents owe money to his boss, and he's working to pay them back. He tries to get up, but is unsuccessful. His sister comes to the door and tries to wake him, and Gregor tries to answer, but his voice comes out strangely. His parents come over and ask what's the matter with him. Gregor continues to try and wiggle himself out of bed, but his efforts are unsuccessful. The chief clerk comes to the house to see why Gregor is late for work. Gregor finally succeeds in rocking himself over, crashing onto the floor. The clerk says that even if Gregor is sick, he should come to work.

The chief clerk admonishes Gregor Samsa for lying in bed and not coming to work. Gregor tries again to speak, but no one else can understand him. Gregor's mother sends his sister, Gretel, to get a doctor, and his sister, Anna, to get a locksmith to unlock the bedroom door. Gregor manages to unlock the door, and his family is shocked at his appearance. Gregor asks the chief clerk to give an account of what he's seen to the office as his excuse for not coming in. However, the clerk flees the home. His father herds him back in his room with a stick. Gregor falls asleep, and when he wakes up he realizes someone has left food for him. However, there is nothing that appeases him and his sister, Gretel, comes in to take it away. She leaves some other items, including semi-rotten food. He is able to eat these, and this becomes a routine. Gregor hides under the couch whenever his sister is in the room.

## The Metamorphosis, pg. 1 to 25 Analysis

In the short story "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa wakes up on a morning like any other, except he has been transformed into an insect. There is no reason given for his transformation. In fact, Samsa is not concerned with how he came to be an insect; rather, he is more concerned about what his family and his boss will think and expends all his energy on trying to hide his situation. However, he cannot do so for long, and his family and boss soon realize that something has happened to him.

The family's initial reaction is one of shock and disgust. They also do not question how something like this could happen, but prefer to ignore Gregor and leave him to his own devices. Only his sister makes the effort to take care of him. His parents want nothing to do with him; and even his sister cannot bear the sight of him. The family takes up a new kind of routine; his sister, Gretel, taking care of the feeding, while his parents do not

come to see him. The family laments their situation, not out of concern for Gregor, but concern for themselves since the chief breadwinner of the family can no longer work.



# The Metamorphosis, pg. 25 to 54

## The Metamorphosis, pg. 25 to 54 Summary

Gregor Samsa spends some of his time listening to his family's conversations in the other rooms. He learns that his father had saved some of the money Gregor had earned, so they have a little to live on. However, Gregor knows his family will soon have to find jobs, which makes him feel very guilty. Gregor wishes he could thank his sister for all that she does for him.

He and his family eventually fall into a routine, where his mother, father and sister talk in the living room at night and leave the door open so Gregor can hear them. One day, Gregor's sister Gretel notices he likes to climb on the ceiling, and enlists his mother to help move the furniture out of the room. Gregor hides under the couch while they are doing this, but Gregor doesn't want them to remove a picture on the wall. He climbs over it to block it, and his mother and sister come back in the room. His sister and mother see him and his mother is very frightened. Gregor's father comes home and chases Gregor back into his room. He throws an apple at Gregor, which sticks in his side.

Gregor's wound seems to remind his family that he is still a member of the family, always leaving the door open so he can watch them in the evenings. His father, mother, and sister have all taken jobs now, and find themselves very tired in the evening. They can't move into a less expensive home because they feel so hopeless dealing with Gregor, even though they could transport him if needed. Gregor begins to miss his family and realize he is a giant burden to them. His sister is sloppy when cleaning his room. Gregor stops eating. The family takes in three lodgers to help pay bills. The lodgers eventually see Gregor and say they are leaving without paying anything. The family says they must get rid of Gregor. A servant woman finds Gregor dead the next day, and tells the family. She gets rid of the body. Gregor's father kicks out the lodgers, and the family goes for a walk. They are disturbed for some time, but eventually they realize they have a new lease on life.

## The Metamorphosis, pg. 25 to 54 Analysis

As he continues to live in the house, Gregor begins to feel more and more like he is a burden on his family. Since he is unable to bring in any money, the rest of his family must all get jobs. His family is very inconsiderate of his condition, continuing to be appalled by Gregor's appearance and refusing to have anything to do with him. They get in an altercation, and his family does seem to feel some remorse for a time. However, it soon becomes clear they are tired of taking care of him. Gregor, now completely depressed, begins to stop eating and eventually wastes away. His family does take some time to consider how Gregor must have been feeling. Eventually,

though, they realize they are free from the burden he represented and look to the future with happier hearts.



# The Judgment

## The Judgment Summary

Georg Bendemann is sitting in his home and has just finished a letter to his friend, who has moved to Russia. His friend is now running a business in St. Petersburg, which is not going well. Georg doesn't know what to write to his friend, since he is too far away to help him. He doesn't know whether he should advise his friend to come home or not, not wanting to insinuate his friend should just give up. His friend has lived in Russia for three years. During that time, Georg's mother had died and he runs his own business, which is doing well. He doesn't let his friend know about his success, or his engagement to a woman named Frieda Brandenfeld. Frieda says she guesses his friend will not come to the wedding, and Georg says he doesn't want to force his friend to come. The letter he has just written, however, does tell about the engagement. He tells his father that he is sending news of his engagement to St. Petersburg.

Georg's father asks him if this friend in St. Petersburg is real. Georg gets embarrassed, and tells his father he needs to take better care of himself. Georg's father says he can't believe Georg would have a friend in St. Petersburg. Georg reminds him about his friend, who moved three years ago. He puts his father to bed. Georg's father says he does know Georg's friend, but Georg has been playing him false all these years. Georg's father says Georg has betrayed his friend, who has also been like a son to Georg's father. His father says the friend already knows all about the engagement, and his friend only reads the father's letter, not Georg's. He tells Georg that he is selfish. His father tells him that his sentence is death by drowning. Georg rushes out the door and throws himself into the river, confessing his love for his parents.

## The Judgment Analysis

At the beginning of the short story, "The Judgment," Georg Bendemann seems like a reliable narrator. He relates the story of his friend who has moved to a distant city and is down on his luck. Georg implies that he himself is doing well; however, he does not want to rub this in his friend's face. He especially does not want his friend to learn about his engagement, but finally decides to write to him about it. Georg's father, however, insinuates that Georg's friend is not real, the first indication that Georg is an unreliable narrator. Georg's father goes on to say that the friend is a better son to him, and Georg has betrayed him all this time. The father seems to have an almost supernatural power over his son, condemning his son to drown, which Georg does immediately. It is for the reader to decide who is the sane one, Georg or his father.





# The Great Wall of China

## The Great Wall of China Summary

The Great Wall of China was built to protect the country from people in the north. However, the blocks of wall in remote lands could be pulled down easily. The narrator remembers how acclaimed the wall was when he was growing up. The narrator was twenty years old when the wall was just beginning to be built. The laborers traveled along, building the wall, and met with much joy at all the villages they came to. The piecemeal building of the wall was one of its biggest problems. He compares the wall to the Tower of Babel, which was never completed. A scholar believes that the wall is the foundation for a new tower. This is only one of many wild ideas at the time. The narrator believes that leaders at that time could have arranged a continuous construction plan, but chose the piecemeal system of construction. However, it is impossible to comprehend why they chose this.

The narrator knows that the Great Wall of China was built to protect them from the people of the north. The narrator is from the southeast of China, and he knows none of the people of the north can reach him there. They have never seen the northerners, and wonders why his countrymen left to far cities to be trained to build the wall. The wall builders know it is not their place to question authority. The people worship the emperor without question. The land of China is so vast, and the people are so small in comparison. The emperor is the human representation of the empire. He tells a parable of the emperor, on his deathbed, sending a message. The messenger cannot fight his way through the entire empire with a message from a dead man. The people will not obey anyone beside the present ruler. It is almost as though there is no emperor.

## The Great Wall of China Analysis

In the short story, "The Great Wall of China", the narrator is an unnamed countryman who discusses the greater meaning behind the building of the wall. The construction of the Great Wall of China seems to be a celebrated event for the villagers who lived along the work site. The narrator believes that the wall would have been built much more easily if it was constructed at once, but they chose to build it bit by bit over the years. The people of China do not question the authority of the emperor, however, and embrace the building of the wall as a great protection for the country. The narrator does make the point, however, that while the emperor does have absolute power, as soon as he dies, that emperor's power is useless. Whoever the current ruler is at the time is the only one the people will listen to. If the next emperor had ordered the destruction of the wall, the people would also blindly embrace this plan.



# A Hunger Artist

## A Hunger Artist Summary

The narrator remarks that in the last few decades, the interest in professional fasting has diminished. Hunger artists used to be quite popular, starving themselves inside a cage as entertainment. Many people in the town used to come see the artist, even selecting permanent watchers to make sure he doesn't eat anything. The watchers make the hunger artist miserable, as he doesn't like that they are suspicious of him. However, no one could truly watch him at all times, but the hunger artist took it as a personal matter of honor that he didn't eat. The artist has fasted up to forty days, but he is not permitted to go beyond that because the crowd loses interest at that point. Doctors check out the artist and announce the results of his fast. The artist doesn't want to stop fasting, however, and finds that the thought of food makes him nauseous.

The people finally make the artist eat a little. The fasting makes him melancholy, and his assistant has to apologize for him when he causes scenes. However, people eventually lose interest in the hunger artist. He travels all over Europe to find an audience, but fasting is no longer in fashion. He joins a circus, but still no one is that interested in his act. He is put at the entrance to the animal cages, and people just pass him by quickly. The hunger artist is disturbed by how quickly the people go by and shies away from their attention. He still fails to catch their interest. The circus overseer forgets about him until he asks about the empty cage one day. The hunger artist says they shouldn't admire his fasting, because he can't help but do it, since he has never found a food he liked. The artist dies, and a panther is put in his cage. Many people stop to look at the panther.

## A Hunger Artist Analysis

The short story, "The Hunger Artist", is a tale about a man who starves himself for the entertainment of others. The man is typically put in a cage and watched day and night to make sure he doesn't eat. At first, he attracts many people, who marvel that someone would put themselves through so much misery. It seems that many of the people are interested because they want to see the man die from starvation. The fascination with death is what draws them to the man. However, people eventually lose interest in all hunger artists, and the man is forced to find work at a circus. People still do not pay much attention to him; instead, they are drawn to bigger and better wonders inside the circus. The hunger artist eventually dies, saying that the only reason he fasted was because he never found a food he liked. The people quickly forget him, even his co-workers, and their attention is soon drawn to the next attraction in the cage.



# The Burrow

## The Burrow Summary

The narrator, a mole-like creature, has completed the structure of a burrow, the remains of an abortive building attempt. The burrow has a fake entrance, with a hidden entrance some distance away. The narrator says he must be able to leave without a moment's notice. There may be robbers tunneling toward him, and a robber may easily become his victim because he knows all of his own tunnels. The narrator is obsessed with the idea that he loves the stillness of his burrow, but that may easily be shattered by any enemy coming at him. He is able to kill small creatures that he finds coming into his burrow. The tunnels are laid out very carefully, and the narrator knows them very well. At the center is a place of refuge, called the Castle Keep, which took much labor to create.

The mole-like creature has created several cells in his burrow, but only one Castle Keep. It is the only place that gives him any comfort when he gets worried about enemies getting into his home. However, because he stores all his food there, sometimes he overeats. He continuously checks the burrow to make sure everything is in order. Sometimes he goes out to the forest, but leaves his home quickly so no one discovers the true entrance. He finds the food and hunting better on the surface.

One day, he begins to hear a strange, constant noise which sounds like someone digging nearby. The creature panics, worried that his home will be invaded, and tries to determine the source of the noise. He cannot decide whether he believes it to be an enemy or another creature who isn't aware his home is there. It begins to drive the creature mad with worry as he tries to figure out the beast's plans. The possibility of invasion completely throws the creature, and he is unable to come up with a plan of action. Instead, he stewes over the idea of the beast getting to his home.

## The Burrow Analysis

The unnamed, mole-like creature that narrates the story, "The Burrow", can be said to have an obsession. The creature's mind is almost fully occupied with thoughts of his home and its safety, and he views it as the one place he can escape from the rest of the world. When he is outside the home, he frequently stops to observe his burrow and ensure that no one can find it or is trying to get at it. Therefore, when he perceives a threat to his burrow, it consumes the creature's whole mind and purpose. The creature tries several methods to determine where the sound is coming from and what the intruder's purpose is, but fails. The creature is unable to deal with the problem and no longer feels safe in the burrow, the one thing that has always been a constant for him. In the end, the creature resigns himself to waiting out the intruder, since he no longer has a manner of recourse.



# Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk

## Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk Summary

Josephine is a singer in a mouse colony. Most of the mice in the colony are dedicated to doing their work to keep the colony going. However, Josephine feels that her contribution to the betterment of the colony is her singing. The mice are, on the whole, not musical creatures, so it is hard to discern how much of an effect Josephine's singing has on them. It is hard to tell if her singing is actually something special, something different from the noises the rest of the mice make. The mice always pipe, but they don't make their piping out to be an art form as Josephine does. Josephine wants to be admired, but she wants to orchestrate that admiration to ensure the mice are giving her their full attention. She likes to sing when the colony is in turmoil, drawing in all of the mice with her singing.

The other mice do not especially love or revere Josephine, but do pay her some type of honor. They take care of her and give her what she wants, in spite of her shortcomings. Although many of the mice are preoccupied with their own work, they still make time for her. Most mice live short lives, both young and old at the same time, and are happy to do their part and work together. Josephine thinks that she is responsible for giving the mice strength when there is danger, but she is the first to run when danger is near. She also believes she should be exempt from daily work because of her singing, but the mice refuse. She claims she has enemies against her. She tries to claim she was hurt at work and cannot sing as long in order to punish the other mice, but this has no effect. When she does this, a few of her supporters beg her to sing, and she puts on a performance, demurring. Josephine finally disappears, and will be not found. However, she had to die someday, a small episode in the mice's collective history.

## Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk Analysis

Josephine the Singer is clearly more important in her own mind than she is in the minds of the other mice. She feels that her talent is something special, and she uses this talent to entertain and captivate the mice. However, the rest of the mice are simple creatures, born to work and get through daily life as easily as possible. It is their nature, though, to be kind to Josephine and give her some special consideration, although it is clear her talent for singing is not dissimilar to the piping the rest of the mice do. Josephine tries to use her singing to get out of doing work like the rest of the mice; instead claiming her singing exhausts her and she needs to rest. However, since the mice's lives revolve around hard work, it is the one wish they are unable to grant her. Josephine takes this out on them by withholding her talent, but the majority of mice seem to understand she is a passing fancy in their overall lives, and hard work will benefit the colony more in the long run.



# A Fratricide, The Next Village, and The Bucket Rider

## A Fratricide, The Next Village, and The Bucket Rider Summary

Schmar, the murderer, takes up his post near the place where the victim, Wese, walks near his office. Schmar carries a weapon, half a bayonet and half a kitchen knife, which he holds in his hand at the ready. Pallas, a private citizen, watches what unfolds without intervening. Mrs. Wese opens her door to listen for her husband, but shuts it when she hears the bell over his office signify he is walking home. Schmar stabs Wese, telling him he will never see Julia again. Pallas cries out to Schmar that he saw it all. Mrs. Wese comes and collapses on her husband. Schmar is led away by police.

(The Next Village) The narrator's grandfather used to say that life is so short that even riding to the next building may be too short a time to live a happy life. (The Bucket Rider) A man is out of coal, and must go to the coal dealer. However, he does not have money, but must beg for coal and show he has none left. He rides to the coal dealer on the bucket, holding the handle. He rides as high as the first story of a house, but not as low as the house doors. He cries for the coal dealer, who is at home with his wife. The dealer says he hears someone calling, but the wife says it is nothing. The man cries that he is there on the bucket and needs coal. The woman comes out, but says she sees nothing. The man cries out that he is now lost, and ascends into the ice mountains.

## A Fratricide, The Next Village, and The Bucket Rider Analysis

"A Fratricide" describes the murder of a man named Wese, but it raises the question, who is the true murderer? While Schmar is the actual murderer, Pallas also can be called an accessory to the murder since he did not call out to warn Wese. He does tell Schmar afterwards that he saw everything, but Schmar does not seem to care now that his goal is accomplished. "The Next Village" is a parable, used to show that life is precious and short, especially a happy life. "The Bucket Rider" describes a man who is trying to get some coal so he can stay alive. The man rides his coal bucket, an impossibility, to the coal dealer, but his wife prevents the man from getting any coal. The man, therefore, must now freeze to death. Another interpretation could be that the man is already dead and dreams this encounter.



# Prometheus, Poseidon, and The Problem of Our Laws

## Prometheus, Poseidon, and The Problem of Our Laws Summary

There are four legends concerning Prometheus. First, he was clamped to a rock for stealing fire from the gods, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver for eternity. Second, Prometheus pressed himself into the rock and became one with it because of the pain. Third, Prometheus himself, the gods, and the eagles forgot his treachery over the years. Fourth, everyone involved grew weary of the affair. The legend only tried to explain the inexplicable.

(Poseidon) Poseidon, the god of the sea, sits at his desk, doing figures. He did not enjoy the work so much as he did it because it was assigned to him. He asks for other work to do, but ends up refusing every other job offered to him. He would get sick if offered a job away from water. Poseidon is most annoyed when he hears how people think he rides the tides and enjoys the ocean, when in fact he sits in his office doing figures.

(The Problem of Our Laws) The narrator says that his kingdom's laws are not generally known, but are instead kept secret by the nobles who rule them. The nobles make the laws based on their own interests, and do not consider the common person when doing so. The laws have been passed down through history; however, some take the view that the law is whatever the nobles do, regardless of the ancient laws. Anyone who would stand up against this would be supported by the people; however, no one would dare to stand up this way.

## Prometheus, Poseidon, and The Problem of Our Laws Analysis

Prometheus is a figure in Greek mythology, who is responsible for bringing fire to humanity after stealing it from the gods. The traditional myth details how the gods, angered at his theft, sentenced him to be clamped to a rock, where his liver would be eaten out by eagles for eternity. In "Prometheus," Kafka describes four possibilities that describe the faith of Prometheus, since he is obviously no longer around in the present day. However, in the end, he knows that it is only a legend, trying to explain something people had no explanation for.

In "Poseidon", the Greek god of the sea is seen as a bureaucrat, thrown into a job he did not want, but cannot bear to leave. In "The Problem of our Laws", the narrator examines the nature of law. Nobles are the ones who make the laws, based on their

own interests, but the common people are the ones who have to follow them. However, the common people need someone to rally around before they can change their situation.



# **A Little Fable, Give it Up, On Parables, and An Imperial Message**

## **A Little Fable, Give it Up, On Parables, and An Imperial Message Summary**

A mouse says that the world is growing smaller every day. The mouse kept running, and the walls started narrowing, and there is only the trap in the corner for him to run into. However, a cat says the mouse only need to change its direction, and eats it.

(Give it Up!) Very early one morning, a man is on the way to the station when he realized the tower clock is saying it is much later than his watch says. The man asks a policeman for the way to the station, since he is not very familiar with the town. The policeman tells him to give it up and turns away suddenly, like if he was laughing.

(On Parables) Many people complain that parables are no use in daily life, since they are metaphorical. Parables are only a way of saying that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and people already know that. However, the cares and struggles of daily life are a real matter.

(An Imperial Message) The Emperor sends a message to a humble servant on his deathbed. He wants the servant to kneel by his bed so he can hear the message. The messenger leaves the palace and sets out on his journey, pushing through the people assembled there; however, he cannot make his way through the crowd. No matter how far he got, there would still be farther to go. No one could fight his way through, especially with the message from a dead man.

## **A Little Fable, Give it Up, On Parables, and An Imperial Message Analysis**

"A Little Fable" is a tale that illustrates how having tunnel vision and not having the initiative to change direction when things look bad can be detrimental. The mouse could have turned earlier and escaped its fate, but proceeded on its course until it was left no choice but to run into the trap or the cat.

"Give it Up!" is a story that describes a man journey to the station, and the unhelpful cop he stops to ask the time. The cop tells him to give it up, unwilling to help a traveler. The short piece, "On Parables", discusses the meaning of parables. Most people believe parables are only nice stories, and can't teach morals, since most people are more concerned with the real matters they encounter during daily life. "The Emperor" describes the futility of a man to deliver a message from the emperor who has just died. When the emperor dies, he is no longer the absolute monarch, so his words mean nothing to the people after his death.





# **A Country Doctor, The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel, and Paradise**

## **A Country Doctor, The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel, and Paradise Summary**

A country doctor needs to go to see a seriously ill patient, but his horse has just died. A servant girl who has been looking for a horse comes back, but has not found one. The doctor kicks the door of an uninhabited pig sty, and the door flies open, revealing horses and a carriage. A strange man helps the doctor get the horses ready, but says he is staying behind with the servant girl. The horses move at a superhuman speed to get to the patient's home. He greets his patient's parents and goes to see the boy. He feels badly for sacrificing the servant girl. At first, he thinks the boy is well, but sees the boy has an open wound. The doctor is stripped by the people and laid in bed next to the boy. The people chant that if he doesn't heal them, they'll kill him dead. The doctor tells the boy his wound is not that bad, then the boy lies still. He grabs his clothes and jumps through the window to the horses, expecting a fast ride home. His fur coat gets caught on a hook on the coach. However, the horses move slowly and the doctor cannot reach his coat.

(The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel) A scholar said he had determined the Tower of Babel was doomed to fail because of a weakness in the foundation. The scholar proposes the Great Wall as a suitable base for a new Tower of Babel. It is not clear if the scholar believes an actual tower should be built, or he is referring to it being a spiritual part of the tower. Human nature will always try to exceed its bonds.

(Paradise) The expulsion from Paradise has eternal significance, and therefore it is possible we are actually there, even without knowing it. Paradise was not destroyed when man was thrown out, which is lucky because if man had not been thrown out, Paradise probably would have had to be destroyed at some point. Both God, who said eating from the Tree of Knowledge would cause death, and the serpent, who said it would make man equal with God, were right. Man ended up mortal, but had the capacity to become like God.

## **A Country Doctor, The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel, and Paradise Analysis**

The short story, "A Country Doctor", makes a point to describe how people put their faith in doctors to cure them, but do not value them beyond that. The doctor sacrifices his servant to a strange man so that he may reach a sick patient in time. The family only wants the boy cured, and doesn't care about the doctor. The doctor manages to comfort the patient in his final moments and then tries to leave as quickly as possible. However,

his journey home is not nearly as comfortable, signifying the obstacles doctors must overcome to treat their patients.

In "The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel", the narrator discusses some scholar's thoughts at that time on the two structures. The narrator believes human nature will always push people to overcome natural limits and strive for more. In "Paradise", the narrator expands the idea that Paradise has not been lost, but may have been destroyed if Adam and Eve hadn't been kicked out.



# **The Tower of Babel, The Pit of Babel, Abraham, Mount Sinai, and Before the Law**

## **The Tower of Babel, The Pit of Babel, Abraham, Mount Sinai, and Before the Law Summary**

If the Tower of Babel could have been built with no one actually going up it, it would have been fine with God. (The Pit of Babel) The speaker is digging a underground passage because his station in life is too high. (Abraham) Abraham is a man of spiritual poverty, who is upset at his perceived uniformity of the world. The speaker can imagine another Abraham, who was more than ready to sacrifice his son, but had to take care of things around his home. Another Abraham, perhaps, was willing to make the sacrifice, but didn't believe he and his son were worthy of it. (Mount Sinai) Many people prowl around Mount Sinai, but none use the straight road that would straighten them out.

(Before the Law) A man comes to a doorkeeper and begs admittance to the Law. The man asks if he will be let through in the future, and the doorkeeper says it is possible, but not now. The man thinks about pushing past the doorkeeper, but the doorkeeper warns him he and the other doorkeepers are very powerful. The man sits on a stool and waits for years, trying to bribe the doorkeeper, but it doesn't work. As the man eventually dies, he asks the doorkeeper why, although many try to know the law, only he has come to that door. The doorkeeper says the door was only for him, and shuts the door when the man dies. A person named K. asks a priest to explain the story, believing the doorkeeper tricked the man. The doorkeeper takes his job and his orders very seriously, the priest says. The story is open to interpretation, but some believe the doorkeeper is the one who is deluded, because he does not have a clear idea of what he guards.

## **The Tower of Babel, The Pit of Babel, Abraham, Mount Sinai, and Before the Law Analysis**

"The Tower of Babel" puts the idea out there that the only reason God had a problem with the Tower of Babel and made the builders all speak different languages is because man had presumed too much. God was displeased that man would try to reach the heavens. The Pit of Babel, something no one has ever tried to do, makes the point that while humanity will try to strive for more, they won't try to strive for less than their station in life. In "Mount Sinai", the narrator uses a metaphor to describe how people will talk about and expound on the Ten Commandments, but won't actually follow them themselves in their daily lives. The short story, "Before the Law", is another parable with an explanation of sorts. The doorkeeper knows his duty is to keep the man out until the

man can ask the right question, which the man does not do until he dies. The priest and K. discuss how the story is open to interpretation.



# **The Coming of the Messiah, The Emperor, The Cell, The Tiger, Couriers, and My Destination**

## **The Coming of the Messiah, The Emperor, The Cell, The Tiger, Couriers, and My Destination Summary**

The Messiah will only come when he is no longer needed, the day after his arrival, when faith becomes individualized. (The Emperor) A man did not believe the emperor was descended from the gods. This caused as much of a problem as a drip going the opposite way from an ocean. (The Cell) A person finds himself in a cell, with several doors that only open onto rock walls; one that opens onto an adjoining room, and another onto a royal apartment. The person says he doesn't have to go back again.

(The Tiger) A tiger was taken to an animal trainer to see if he was tame. The animal trainer looked at the animal alone; the animal looked at its new surroundings and fell asleep. (Couriers) Some people were given the choice to be kings or couriers; the way children would, they all chose couriers. Now they run around with meaningless messages, but cannot end their lives because of their oaths of service. (My Destination) A man gives an order for his horse to be brought to him, but gets it himself when the servant doesn't understand. The servant suggests he take provisions, but the man says his journey is long enough that he will drop dead if he doesn't, and that is a fortunate thing.

## **The Coming of the Messiah, The Emperor, The Cell, The Tiger, Couriers, and My Destination Analysis**

"The Coming of the Messiah" puts forth the idea that the second coming of Jesus is a useful threat and will be used as long as there are people behaving shamefully. Jesus will only come again when the threat of his coming is no longer needed. In "The Emperor," one man did not believe the emperor was descended from the gods. However, such an idea cannot change anything when most people believe he is. In "The Cell," the narrator finds himself with several choices, although each has implied traps of its own. "The Tiger" tells of an animal trainer who was working to tame an animal; however, the tiger was not impressed by the trainer or its new home. In "Couriers," the narrator shows how without a ruler, people will just run wild and have no order. However, if they had made the opposite choice to be kings, it would have been with the same results, since kings need subjects to be effective. In "My Destination", the narrator is clearly disturbed and wants to end his life, but without taking active action to do it.



# Letter to His Father

## Letter to His Father Summary

Franz Kafka writes that his father, Hermann Kafka, recently asked why Kafka maintains he is afraid of him. Kafka said he will try to answer, but it will be incomplete because he is, as he says, afraid of his father. His father has worked hard his whole life, without asking for thanks, but Kafka feels he should have given him some gratitude instead of hiding in his room with books, and not visiting his father. Kafka wishes his father had been related to him some other way, because then they might have gotten along better. Kafka was a timid child, not enough like the strong, dominant man who was his father. His father wanted to bring him up a strong boy, but Kafka's nature rebelled against his father's methods of instruction. He thinks his father should have focused on encouragement more than humiliation.

However, Kafka doesn't think his father's methods were that bad, and would have been helpful in bringing up a child who was more like his father. His father was overpowering, made abusive threats, and his word was final; he was not interested in negotiating with Kafka. However, there were small, good moments Kafka had and witnessed with his father that make up for it. Kafka's sister, Elli, is the only one who succeeded in breaking away from her father's influence. His sister, Valli, is the only one Hermann Kafka truly likes, and he does not like the third sister, Ottla, at all. Ottla and her father have almost no contact, and do not get along at all. Because of his father's influence in their lives, Kafka does not want to start a family of his own and is unable to get married. He does not entirely blame his father for this, but rather blames himself. However, his nature has only been formed by his father's.

## Letter to His Father Analysis

Franz Kafka had a complicated relationship with his father, Hermann Kafka, and in a letter to his father, he tries to explain why their relationship has been strained all these years. Kafka and his father are clearly very different people, who value different things and have opposing goals in life. Therefore, throughout his childhood, Kafka felt stifled by his father, who had a clear idea of how children should be raised and did not take Kafka's personality into account. This animosity has laid the foundation for the relationship as adults. Kafka says he would have been better equipped to deal with his father if he had been a different relation, such as an uncle or cousin, not the primary male influence in his life. Hermann Kafka also has a strained relationship with his daughters, especially Ottla, who has never gotten along with her father. Overall, the letter paints Hermann Kafka as a difficult man to deal with, who, although not a bad person, always stuck to his beliefs, to the detriment of his relationship with his children.



# Reflections on Pain, Sin, Hope and the True Way, The Wish to be a Red Indian, The Truth about Sancho Panza, and The News of the Building of the Wall

## Reflections on Pain, Sin, Hope and the True Way, The Wish to be a Red Indian, The Truth about Sancho Panza, and The News of the Building of the Wall Summary

Kafka writes several aphorisms, which are original thoughts or observations. For example, he says that the two cardinal sins are laziness and impatience, for which humanity was driven out of Paradise. Impatience is probably a bigger sin, since impatience got humanity kicked out and prevents it from going back. In another, he says that true knowledge comes to those who desire death and are ready to move on to the next life. Others are more inscrutable, such as one that says a cage went in search of a bird. He also discusses the devil, saying once someone makes room for the devil, it doesn't matter if they believe in him, and the devil cannot be paid in installments. The physical world is the evil in the spiritual world, and what we call evil is only a necessary moment in our development. He also discusses sex and love, and other matters, such as a child grows up, so do we grow through the stages of suffering.

(The Wish to be a Red Indian) The narrator says that if only one were an Indian, riding a horse, shedding the spurs and reins, and saw the land was heath before the horse's neck and head were already gone. (The Truth About Sancho Panza) Sancho Panza, a character in the novel Don Quixote, was able to divert his master from himself by treating him with chivalry and respect, and therefore found entertainment in their quest. (The News of the Building of the Wall) The narrator remembers standing on the bank of a river with his father when a boatman comes to them and talks to his father. The narrator and his father return home to dinner, where the father tells his son a great wall is going to be built to protect the emperor.



## **Reflections on Pain, Sin, Hope and the True Way, The Wish to be a Red Indian, The Truth about Sancho Panza, and The News of the Building of the Wall Analysis**

Franz Kafka uses his writing to think about life and try to work out some of the mysteries of existence. Some of the quick thoughts or observations he has made are collected in this book as an example of the things that weigh on Kafka's mind. He is preoccupied with sin, especially original sin. For example, he seems to feel that writing is pleasurable, but anything that's pleasurable is a sin. This gives some insight into his mind and allows greater appreciation of the rest of his work. In "The Red Indian", Kafka creates a vibrant visual image of an Indian riding his horse and becoming one with his surroundings. In "The Truth About Sancho Panza," Kafka takes the legend of Don Quixote and examines how his sidekick and valet, Sancho, must have felt about watching his master. "The News of the Building of the Wall" is a well detailed story describing the moment a young boy learned about the wall being built. The wall, mentioned several times in different stories, is clearly an important historical event to Kafka.





# **A Report to an Academy and Selections from Diaries, 1911-1923**

## **A Report to an Academy and Selections from Diaries, 1911-1923 Summary**

The narrator addresses the academy, giving an account of the life he lived as an ape. He can't tell them as much as they want to know, since he was an ape five years ago. The first thing he learned was to give a handshake. He was captured and wounded during a hunting expedition on the Gold Coast. He passed out, and later regained consciousness aboard a steamer. For the first time in his life, he found himself trapped with no way out. The ship's crew, however, was very kind and kept him calm, so he didn't try to escape. He began to imitate the crew, smoking a pipe and spitting and drinking. Once he gets better at drinking, he shows off to the crew and says the word, "Hallo!" He eventually becomes educated through visiting with many teachers and has become cultured. He says he has achieved what he has set out to achieve.

(Selections from Diaries, 1911-1923) In the selections from his diary, beginning Feb. 19, 1911, Kafka writes the random thoughts and ideas that occur to him. Kafka writes in his diary that he is happy he can stay up until 2 a.m. and get much work done. He says he could have loved his mother more love if the German pronunciation of the mother, "Mutter," is a little comic. He reminisces about his family, especially the women in it. He also discusses the stories he is working on, such as the Judgment, and what happens around him as he is writing. He ponders over how to get down on paper things from the tremendous world in his head, as well as the meaning of life. He also talks of his courtship with Felice Bauer. He and Felice have a tumultuous relationship. His talent as a writer overwhelms him, and becomes his primary reason for being. He feels trapped in his life, putting forth the idea that everything is imaginary and life is a cell. He is a very emotional person, sometimes suffering breakdowns. The conflicting thoughts in his head and his need to understand almost constantly overwhelms him. However, he also writes of lighter things, such as a hotel who incorrectly has his name as Joseph.

## **A Report to an Academy and Selections from Diaries, 1911-1923 Analysis**

In "A Report to an Academy", Kafka again describes a transformation, but not a physical one. The ape that speaks to the Academy started life as an ape in the jungle. However, through his interactions with man, he has become educated and cultured. The ape describes his attempts to imitate the crew of the ship that transferred him from the jungle. By some unknown scientific miracle, the ape is able to speak, and once he is transferred, finds himself a number of teachers. The ape is not boastful about this, but says he is simply there to make a report. Like the earlier short story, "The

"Metamorphosis", the transformed being does not express shock or debate his condition, but rather accepts it as fact and does his best to move on.

(Selections from Diaries, 1911-1923) Kafka uses his journals as a way to keep track of his thoughts and ponder his emotions, as well as discussing his views on life. He shows that the act of writing is a troubling one, since it overwhelms him and prevents him from having meaningful relationships with those around him. The diary serves as a sounding board for Kafka.



# **Selections from Letters to Milena, Selections from Letters to Felice, and Selections from Letters to Friends**

## **Selections from Letters to Milena, Selections from Letters to Felice, and Selections from Letters to Friends Summary**

Franz Kafka writes to Milena Jesenka-Pollak, a writer he befriends. He describes what he thinks her husband is like, and describes him as a likeable person. The last time they met, her husband received many calls while they were at a coffee house, and Franz says he likes to imagine the person on the other line dozing in between calling her husband. He also discusses being Jewish, saying Jews like himself are anxious because they are always threatened with danger. He also sends her the letter he has written to his father, Hermann Kafka, saying someday he may have the courage to give it to him. He tells her he most enjoys her letters where she acknowledges his fears but tries to dissuade him from them. He calls it an illness, but she doesn't understand it. Overall, he shows a fondness for her and her way of thinking.

(Selections from Letters to Felice) Franz Kafka writes to Felice Bauer, a woman he was engaged to twice but never married. He says he doesn't feel well if he isn't writing, and has sacrificed much for his craft. He used to feel that she was intimately associated with his writing, and he drew inspiration from her, but that has changed. He lays out his schedule to show her how his days revolve around writing. Although he spends most of his first letter discussing these matters, he says it is still possible for two people to get to know each other through these flashes of character. In his next letter, he tries to make her understand that he believes marriage will make him, as a person, disappear. He also writes to Felice's father, stating his case and asking if he believes marriage is right for them. He continues to go back and forth on the issue, but when he contracts tuberculosis in 1917, he knows he is going to die soon and puts up a barrier between them. He knows he will never be well again.

(Selections from Letters to Friends) Franz Kafka writes to his friend, Oscar Pollak, and discusses his belief that people should only read books that wound and stab them, that make them feel. To Max Brod, he writes that Jews find themselves drawn to the German language, perhaps because of German literature. He also believes that some Jews write in German because they can leave their Jewishness behind them. To Max Brod, he writes at a later date about how writing sustains him, but it only sustains a sleepless life of heartache. Life is unbearable when he doesn't write, and at night, he believes the sweet feelings he sometimes gets from writing is only a reward from the devil. A writer dies, and continually mourns himself. Dying will be no different from life for him. He



refers to the writer as the scapegoat of all mankind, and says it is impossible to enjoy sin without guilt.

## **Selections from Letters to Milena, Selections from Letters to Felice, and Selections from Letters to Friends Analysis**

Franz Kafka corresponds with his friends through letters, the primary means of communication in the early twentieth century. His correspondence ranges in tone, depending on who he is writing to. When he writes to his friend, Milena Jesenka-Pollak, he is able to discuss sensitive matters, such as the meaning of being Jewish. Milena seems to understand Franz, and is close enough to him to give him advice. When he writes to his sometime-fiance, Felice, he is much more open and emotional. The main problem in their relationship is that Kafka isn't able to put a woman before his writing. He tries to make Felice understand how important writing is to him; and although at the beginning of their relationship he was about to equate her and his work, his work has again become more important. Towards the end of his correspondence with her, he realizes that he cannot be the man for her when he is not only emotionally sick, but physically sick as well. When writing to his other friends, Oscar Pollak and Max Brod, he is able to discuss deeper issues in a more straightforward manner. He expounds upon his theory that death will be no different from life, and writing must be sinful if it is so enjoyable.



# Characters

## Franz Kafka appears in Various

Franz Kafka is the author of the writings included in the book, "The Basic Kafka." He was born in 1883 and grew up in Prague, then part of Austria-Hungary, with his middle-class, Jewish family. He was the son of Hermann and Julie Kafka, and the brother of Valli, Elli and Ottla Kafka. He died at age 40 in 1924 of tuberculosis. Kafka was a very influential writer and contributed much to Western literature. He never married, but was engaged twice to Felice Bauer, but their relationship ended before he contracted tuberculosis in 1917. The collection of Kafka's work included in "The Basic Kafka" ranges from short stories, to very brief parables or thoughts, to letters to his friends and family members. Through the letters, we get a clear idea of Kafka's relationship with those around him and his personal feelings and views. For example, it is clear in his letter to his father that Franz and his father never got along.

## Gregor Samsa appears in The Metamorphosis

Gregor Samsa is a character in the short story, "The Metamorphosis." At the beginning of the story, Gregor wakes up to discover he has been turned into an insect, without explanation. He first tries to deal with his situation, hoping it will go away before anyone discovers him. Gregor has been working to keep the family afloat and pay off his father's debts. However, he is unable to do so and loses his job when his boss catches sight of him. His family is horrified by him, but his sister, Gretel, finds a way to take care of him so the family can live in relative peace. Although Gregor does not try to cause problems for his family, they find that life with Gregor as an insect is not an easy matter, and they soon come to resent him. Gregor does not get angry at his family, but takes their displeasure personally and allows himself to waste away. The family is sad for how they treated him, but eventually recover themselves and embark on a new life.

## Gregor Samsa's Father appears in The Metamorphosis

Gregor Samsa's father is a character in the short story, "The Metamorphosis." He is disgusted at his son's transformation and tries to protect the rest of the family from his son. Since Gregor is no longer able to work to pay off his father's debts. Gregor resents his son for no longer bringing money into the household.

## Gregor Samsa's Mother appears in The Metamorphosis

Gregor Samsa's mother is a character in the short story, "The Metamorphosis." She seems to still love her son as much as possible, but cannot face the sight of him as an insect. When she does see him, the whole family ends up in hysterics and Gregor feels badly.



## **Gretel Samsa appears in The Metamorphosis**

Gretel, Gregor Samsa's sister is a character in the short story, "The Metamorphosis." She is the only one who attempts to take care of Gregor, but she also eventually ends up resenting him. She must also take a job once Gregor is unable to work.

## **Anna Samsa appears in The Metamorphosis**

Anna, Gregor Samsa's sister is a character in the short story, "The Metamorphosis."

## **The Chief Clerk appears in The Metamorphosis**

The chief clerk is a character in the short story, "The Metamorphosis." Gregor Samsa works for him to pay off his parents' debts.

## **Georg Bendemann appears in The Judgment**

Georg Bendemann is a character in the short story, "The Judgment." He writes to a friend in St. Petersburg about his life. When his father confronts him about his ulterior motives in doing so, Georg drowns himself.

## **Frieda Brandenfeld appears in The Judgment**

Frieda Brandenfeld is a character in the short story, "The Judgment." She is engaged to Georg Bendemann.

## **Georg Bendemann's Father appears in The Judgment**

Georg Bendemann's father is a character in the short story, "The Judgment." He does not believe his son has a friend in St. Petersburg.

## **Georg Bendemann's Friend appears in The Judgment**

Georg Bendemann's friend is a character in the short story, "The Judgment." Georg writes him letters, at his new home in St. Petersburg.

## **The hunger artist appears in The Hunger Artist**

The hunger artist is a character in the short story, "The Hunger Artist." He ends up starving himself to death when hunger artistry goes out of fashion and no one cares to see him anymore.



## **The Mole-like Creature appears in The Burrow**

The mole-like creature is the narrator of the short story, "The Burrow." He is obsessed with the safety of his home.

## **Josephine appears in Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk**

Josephine is the singer in a mouse colony in "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk." She believes her talent to be most important to the mice colony.

## **Hermann Kafka appears in Letter to his Father**

Hermann Kafka, Franz Kafka's father is the recipient of a letter from Kafka, detailed in "Letter to his Father."

## **Valli, Elli and Ottla Kafka appears in Letter to his Father**

Valli, Elli and Ottla Kafka are the sisters of Franz Kafka and the daughters of Hermann Kafka.

## **Schmar appears in A Fratricide**

Schmar is a murderer in the story, "A Fratricide." He murders Wese.

## **Wese appears in A Fratricide**

Wese is the victim in the story, "A Fratricide." He is murdered by Schmar.

## **Pallas appears in A Fratricide**

Pallas is a witness to a murder in the story, "A Fratricide." He sees Schmar murder Wese.

## **Mrs. Wese appears in A Fratricide**

Mrs. Wese is the wife of Wese in the story, "A Fratricide."



## **Poseidon appears in Poseidon**

Poseidon is the god of the sea and is featured in the short story, "Poseidon."

## **Prometheus appears in Prometheus**

Prometheus is a mortal who stole fire from the gods and is featured in the story, "Prometheus."

## **The doctor appears in A Country Doctor**

The doctor is the main character in the story, "A Country Doctor." He goes to treat a patient.

## **Abraham appears in Abraham**

Abraham is the subject of the short story, "Abraham," and a figure in Christianity.

## **The Doorkeeper appears in Before the Law**

The doorkeeper is a character in "Before the Law."

## **K. appears in Before the Law**

K. is a character in the short story, "Before the Law." It could represent Franz Kafka.

## **Felice Bauer appears in Various**

Felice Bauer is a woman who Franz Kafka dated in his real life. They were engaged twice but never married, breaking off the engagement several years before his death.

## **Milena Jesenka-Pollak appears in Letters to Milena Jesenka-Pollak**

Milena Jesenka-Pollak is a writer and friend of Franz Kafka.

## **Oscar Pollak appears in Selections from Letters to Friends**

Oscar Pollak is a friend of Franz Kafka.





## **Max Brod appears in Selections from Letters to Friends**

Max Brod is a friend of Franz Kafka.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Austria-Hungary appears in Various**

Austria-Hungary are two countries in Europe who shared a monarch at the time Franz Kafka was living in the early twentieth century.

### **Prague appears in Various**

Prague is a city which was in Austria-Hungary and is now the capital of the Czech Republic. Franz Kafka grew up there with his family.

### **The Great Wall of China**

The Great Wall of China is a wall built along the northern border of China.

### **The Castle Keep appears in The Burrow**

The Castle Keep is the center of the mole-like creature's home in the short story, "The Burrow."

### **Russia appears in The Judgment**

Russia is a country in Asia and Europe.

### **St. Petersburg appears in The Judgment**

St. Petersburg is a city in Russia.

### **Caucasus appears in Prometheus**

Caucasus is the place where Prometheus was clamped to a rock for stealing fire from the gods.

### **Mount Sinai appears in Mount Sinai**

Mount Sinai is the mountain in biblical times where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.



## **The Tower of Babel**

The Tower of Babel was built in biblical times, intended to be a tower that would reach to heaven. However, God was annoyed at the audacity of man and made the tower workers all speak different languages so no work could get done.

## **Paradise appears in Paradise**

Paradise is the Garden of Eden, in the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

## **The Gold Coast appears in A Report to the Academy**

The Cold Coast is a place in Africa where the ape is found in "A Report to the Academy."



# Themes

## Isolation

Many of the protagonists in Franz Kafka's short stories are men who are isolated from others, and the prime example can be found in the short story, "The Metamorphosis." In this story, the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, finds himself transformed into an insect with no explanation. His condition cannot be rectified, and he immediately loses his job. His family members are afraid of him, and he becomes shut up in his room almost all the time. He spends his days alone, only able to listen to his family and hear news of the outside world through the door. Gregor is not only physically isolated from his family, but emotionally. His family makes no real effort to understand his condition, and eventually come to hope that Gregor will die. Once Gregor hears this, he stops eating and allows himself to waste away. Another example of an isolated man can be found in the story, "A Hunger Artist." The hunger artist knows that his craft has gone out of fashion, but that is the only thing he knows how to do. Although he spends his days sitting in a cage, trying to entertain people, no one is interested in him and the people only pass him by on their way to better attractions. While others are around, the artist is still physically isolated in his cage, and emotionally isolated from them because of their indifference.

## Writing as Sin

Taking Kafka's personal writings under examination, such as his letters to his friends and his diaries, it seems that the external struggle of his life is his attitude toward writing. Kafka cannot stop himself from writing. It is the one thing that he holds above all other, and his one true obsession. He eschews his family and his fiancée for it when necessary. However, the pleasure he gets from the act of writing is marred by the guilt he feels over it. Kafka doesn't believe that anything so enjoyable as writing could possibly be more than a sin. Therefore, even when he is enjoying the act of it, he cannot get over the guilt he feels about it. He feels as though it brings him closer to the devil, yet he can't bring himself to stop doing it. His obsession with writing is clear in his letters to his friends, especially to his friend Max Brod. In his letters, Kafka says that writing sustains him, but it only sustains a sleepless life of heartache. Life is unbearable when he doesn't write, and at night, he believes the sweet feelings he sometimes gets from writing is only a reward from the devil. Therefore, writing is almost a living death to him; and he expands upon this by saying a writer already knows what death feels like. It is clear that Kafka is a tortured genius, and his ability to over analyze situations like this are what make him a classic writer.

## Human Nature

Many of Kafka's pieces in the book, "The Basic Kafka," are based upon aphorisms or morals. He spent much of his writing career capturing his original thoughts, or pondering



over parables, to discover what he can and make others think about human nature. For example, in the story, "The Tower of Babel," Kafka says that if the Tower of Babel could have been built with no one actually going up it, it would have been fine with God. In this passage, he is saying that God only had a problem with the human desire to reach the heavens, not the tower itself. However, it is human nature to try to overcome our bonds and achieve more than we are able to. In "The Coming of the Messiah," Kafka asserts that Jesus will only come when he is no longer needed. This indicates that people need to believe in the Coming to keep themselves in check, but once everyone falls into line, there will be no need for Jesus to threaten humankind with the apocalypse. Kafka uses animals as characters in his stories to examine interaction between others to make a point about relationships and human nature. For example, in the story, "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," he discusses the symbiotic relationship between Josephine, who thinks her talent sustains the mice colony, and the rest of the mice, who view Josephine's singing as a sideline to the advancement of their colony and line. This technique adds more interest to the reader, and allows comparison between the type of animal he's chosen, that animal's typical characteristics, and the characteristics of humans.



# Style

## Point of View

The writings of Franz Kafka, collected in "The Basic Kafka," are primarily told from a first or third person point of view. For the more traditional short stories that Kafka writes, he primarily relies on a third-person limited narrator, meaning the reader only has access to the narrator's thoughts about the action. For example, in "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa is the primary focus, and we see his interactions with his family only through his own eyes. This technique allows the reader to get a better impression of Samsa's inner feelings about his family's treatment of him. Some of his shorter parables and stories also use this type of narration. However, in other short stories, such as "The Burrow," Kafka uses a first person limited narrator, who tells the story in his own words but does not have access to the thoughts of others. In a story such as this one, using a first person narrator allows the reader to feel closer to the mole-like creature and understand his thought processes as he battles with the invasion of his burrow. Finally, the last third of the book includes Kafka's personal writings, such as his diaries and letters, and are told in his first person point of view, either to himself or the recipient of his letter. These writings can be considered a nonfiction personal narrative, typically written in the first person.

## Setting

The settings in Franz Kafka's short stories, overall, aren't as important as the message he is conveying in each story. As he writes, he rarely gives concrete settings for the reader to draw from, concentrating on the meaning in the story. For example, in the first story, "The Metamorphosis," Kafka keeps the description of the settings brief. He only makes reference to the fixtures in Gregor Samsa's bedroom as needed, to show how Gregor as an insect crawls over the walls and hides under the furniture. He does not make a clear reference to a country or city where the action takes place, and this is true for many of his stories. In stories like "The Burrow," however, the action revolves completely around the setting, a series of tunnels where a mole-like creature lives. Some of his other writings, including those on the Tower of Babel and the Great Wall of China, do focus on physical places and what they mean to people. However, Kafka's primary goal in his writings is to examine human nature and the interactions people have. His focus is to investigate the reasons people do the things they do, and how they react. In the latter quarter, Kafka's personal writings are introduced, so these are also more about Kafka's inner thoughts, not about telling a story with a proper setting.

## Language and Meaning

Franz Kafka is an educated man living in Prague, part of Austria-Hungary at the time he was alive. He is a cultured man, and this is reflected in his writing. The words he uses



are proper and diverse, allowing him to create layers of meaning in each of his stories. Kafka is born to a German-speaking, Jewish family, so his upbringing has most likely affected his speech and writing patterns. Also, since he was not a native English speaker, his work had to be translated and some of his intended meaning may not transfer as well. Kafka is able to create individual voices and specialized tones for each of his stories. The narrators of his stories, especially those told in the first person, generally are represented as educated people. A term called Kafkaesque refers to the writings of Kafka and his surreal tone and sense of impending danger that permeates many of his story, as well as his personal writings. The tone in his personal writings, including his diaries and letters to friends, changes depending on how familiar he is with the person he is writing to. For example, he is without reservation when he writes in his diary, but his letters to his fiancée show a much different and less contemplative personality. However, in all of his work a desperation to understand the world as well as human nature is quite evident.

## Structure

The stories and diary entries included in "The Basic Kafka" have an interesting format. The novel is loosely broken down into two parts. The first includes short stories that range in size from more than 50 pages to just one sentence. The works appear to be arranged in no particular order, with the short story "The Metamorphosis" leading the novel. That story was most likely chosen because it is the most famous of Kafka's stories. Other longer short stories include "Josephine the Singer, or the Mousefolk" or "The Burrow." Kafka has also written several smaller pieces that could be thought of as parables. These are basically fictional, but are written in a way to impart a certain, direct meaning for the reader. Some of these shorter pieces also discuss historical or literary figures, such as Prometheus, Poseidon and Don Quixote. The latter quarter of the book includes aphorisms written by Kafka, as well as diary entries and letters to friends. These are nonfiction pieces written directly by Kafka, and weren't intended for publication. Pairing these two types of writings allows the reader to see the influence of Kafka's actual life, and how his innermost thoughts and emotions, affect the stories he writes.



## Quotes

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."

The Metamorphosis, p. 1

"At the same time he did not forget meanwhile to remind himself that cool reflection, the coolest possible, was much better than desperate resolves."

The Metamorphosis, p. 6

"He stayed there all night, spending the time partly in a light slumber, from which his hunger kept waking him up with a start, and partly in worrying and sketching vague hopes, which all led to the same conclusion, that he must lie low for the present and, by exercising patience and the utmost consideration, help the family to bear inconvenience he was bound to cause them in his present condition."

The Metamorphosis, p. 20

"The serious injury done to Gregor, which disabled him for more than a month — the apple went on sticking in his body as a visible reminder, since no one ventured to remove it — seemed to have made even his father recollect that Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape, and ought not to be treated as an enemy, that, on the contrary, family duty required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience."

The Metamorphosis, p. 36

"Then his head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last faint flicker of breath."

The Metamorphosis, p. 50

"And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body."

The Metamorphosis, p. 54

"So Georg confined himself to giving his friend unimportant items of gossip such as rise at random in the memory when one is idly thinking things over on a quiet Sunday."

The Judgment, p. 57

"That's why he hasn't been here for years, he knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself, in his left hand he crumples your letters unopened while in his right hand he holds up my letters to read through!"

The Judgment, p. 65

"And through the window the reflected splendors of divine worlds fell on the hands of the leaders as they traced their plans."

The Great Wall of China, p. 71





"Our leaders know us. They, absorbed in gigantic anxieties, know of us, know our petty pursuits, see us sitting together in our humble huts, and approve or disapprove the evening prayer which the father of the household recites in the midst of his family."  
The Great Wall of China, p. 73

"... 'because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else.' These were his last words, but in his dimming eyes remained the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he was still continuing to fast."  
The Hunger Artist, p. 90

"I must have a way of leaving at a moment's notice, for, despite all my vigilance, may I not be attacked from some quite unexpected quarter?"  
The Burrow, p. 91

"My burrow takes up too much of my thoughts. I fled from the entrance fast enough, but soon I am back at it again. I seek out a good hiding place and keep watch on the entrance of my house — this time from outside — for whole days and nights. Call it foolish if you like; it gives me infinite pleasure and reassures me."  
The Burrow, p. 100

"Josephine is the sole exception; she has a love for music and knows too how to transmit it; she is the only one; when she dies, music — who knows for how long — will vanish from our lives."  
Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk, p. 128

"So the people look after Josephine much as a father takes into his care a child whose little hand — one cannot tell whether in appeal or command — is stretched out to him."  
Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk, p. 134

"The bliss of murder! The relief, the soaring ecstasy from the shedding of another's blood! Wese, old nightbird, friend, alehouse crony, you are oozing away into the dark earth below the street."  
A Fratricide, p. 147

"Poseidon became bored with his sea. He let fall his trident. Silently he sat on the rocky coast and a gull, dazed by his presence, described wavering circles around his head."  
Poseidon, p. 154

"Any party which would repudiate, not only all belief in the laws, but the nobility as well, would have the whole people behind it; yet no such party can come into existence, for nobody would dare to repudiate the nobility."  
The Problem of Our Laws, p. 156

"Always expecting the impossible from the doctor. They have lost their ancient beliefs; the parson sits at home and unravels his vestments, one after another; but the doctor is supposed to be omnipotent with his merciful surgeon's hand."  
A Country Doctor, p. 164



"The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last."

The Messiah, p. 182

"Dearest Father: You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you."

Letter to His Father, p. 186

"For me, you took on the enigmatic quality that all tyrants have whose rights are based on their person and not on reason."

Letters to His Father, p. 192

"One cannot pay the Evil One in installments — and yet one perpetually tries to do it."

Reflections on Pain, Sin, Hope and the True Way, p. 238

"Until then I had had so many ways out of everything, and now I had none. I was pinned down. Had I been nailed down, my right to free movement would not have been lessened."

A Report to An Academy, p. 248

"Despite my having legibly written my name to the hotel, despite their having correctly written to me twice already, they have Joseph K. down in the register. Shall I enlighten them, or shall I let them enlighten me?"

Selections from Diaries, 1911-1923, p. 265

"Such a writer is continually staging such a scene: He dies (or rather, he does not live) and continually mourns himself."

Selection from Letters to Friends, p. 293

## Topics for Discussion

The short story "The Metamorphosis" details the effects of Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect but does not give an explanation for this change. Why do you think this is? Is it effective story-telling?

The short story "The Metamorphosis" details the relationship between Gregor Samsa and his family. How do these relationships progress from before his transformation to the end of his life? What do their interactions say about the characters of his mother, father, and sister?

In his writings, Franz Kafka uses several short pieces or parables that illustrate one major point. Is this effective? Why or why not? Does the brevity of these selections draw the reader's attention to the main point or detract from it? Why or why not?

How do Franz Kafka's writings examine human nature? For example, in stories like "The Problem of Our Laws" and "The Emperor", what does he imply about the relationship between rulers and their subjects?

Franz Kafka relies heavily on biblical and ancient Greek mythology in his writings. How does his examination of these ancient figures and stories shed light on human nature in the time he is writing?

Franz Kafka writes a heavily detailed letter to his father, Hermann Kafka, examining their relationship since Kafka was a child. How might his father respond to this letter? Consider what Kafka says about his father's character in the letter.

What does Franz Kafka mean when he compares the act of writing to sin? How does his viewpoint color his emotions and affect his relationship with others?