

# **The Metamorphosis Study Guide**

## **The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka**

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# Plot Summary

The *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka is a dark tale about a man who wakes from disturbing dreams to find he is living a nightmare. He finds that he is lying on his armor-like back. By lifting his head slightly, he can see that his belly is domed and brown, divided into segments by stiff arches. His legs, suddenly so many of them, are so thin and weak in appearance that he can hardly fathom how they would keep him up.

His room, though a bit small by most standards, looks the same as it did when he went to sleep. His material samples still lie on the table. Looking around, he can't see any difference except for himself. He wants to go back to sleep and wake up normal, but he isn't used to sleeping on his back and can't imagine how to get himself over onto his side. He tries unsuccessfully. He keeps closing his eyes, hoping that when he opens them again, he will be himself. It is to no avail. He thinks about his job and how hard it is and considers the fact that were it not for his parents, he probably would have quit some time back. On the bright side however, in five or six years his debt to his boss will be paid, and his life will be his own again. The thought of work has him looking at his alarm clock. When he sees it is already almost seven, he panics. His train leaves in fifteen minutes. Inspired now, he tries to get himself out of bed. In fifteen years, he had never called in a sick day. Strangely enough, he doesn't feel sick now. Hungry, perhaps more so than usual, but he does not feel sick. His mother calls his name through the locked door, and when he answers her, he doesn't recognize his own voice. Before too much time passes, his whole family is outside the door, and he is grateful that he locked it the night before. He tries to tell them he is all right, and that he is getting up right away, but even with careful enunciation, his voice sounds wrong.

The next person to show up is from work. Diligent as always, the chief clerk has arrived to see why he wasn't on the train. He finally manages to roll off the bed, hitting his head as he falls, and his father's voice continues to come through the door. Gregor's sister is sent to fetch a locksmith even as Gregor tries to insist he is coming. He manages to work his way to the door and even to unlock it by grabbing the key with his mouth. When his family finally sees him, they back away fearfully and his life of near isolation begins. The chief clerk shows signs of panic and Gregor knows he needs to stop him before he leaves so he rushes forward as quickly as his new body will allow him, but it isn't quick enough. His father uses a rolled up newspaper and the chief clerk's stick (left behind along with his hat and coat) and drives Gregor back into his room. Nothing Gregor could say had any effect on his father who didn't seem prepared to even give him time to turn around first. Backing up, he finally gets to his doorway, but it is too small to get him back in. He pushes himself hard until he manages to squeeze through, scraping one side of his body against the jam. He realizes that he needs to give them time to get used to the new look, and the door is closed with obvious relief. Gregor sleeps for a time, waking after dark. His whole left side hurts. Beside the door is a bowl of milk with chunks of bread in it. A favorite of his, he goes to it eagerly, only realizing when he gets there that it isn't nearly as nice as he remembers.



In the living room, his family talks in low tones. His sister is the only one who dares come near him, although it is clear that the sight of him still repulses her, so he hides under the bed when she comes. She provides him with a variety of food, and finally figures out that the more rotten the food or fruit, the better he likes it. Grete continues to feed him and clean up after him, but that begins to wear on her after a time as she comes to the conclusion that he will not be changing back into the brother she once knew. Then her attention to him begins to falter. She cleans up after him less, and feeding is sporadic. When Gregor realizes that even she is losing her desire to care for him, a part of him gives up too. He thinks about how he had looked after them, and how he had planned to send her to study music, but none of that mattered now. His life quickly runs its course, and when it does, his family is briefly saddened and then relieved as they begin to live again.



## Section I: Pages 1 - 11

### Summary

Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka is a dark tale about a man who wakes from disturbing dreams to find he is living a nightmare. He finds that he is lying on his armor-like back. By lifting his head slightly, he can see that his belly is domed and brown, divided into segments by stiff arches. His legs, suddenly so many of them, are so thin and weak in appearance that he can hardly fathom how they would keep him up.

As he looks around, everything else appears normal. He hopes that if he closes his eyes and goes back to sleep, he will wake again to find this was all an extension of a disturbing dream. He struggles, but he can't turn over onto his usual side to sleep. So, he thinks about work and the lifestyle he has chosen. Most of the time, he wishes he could quit, but until the debt to his boss is paid, that is not possible. Knowing his train leaves at five, he turns to his alarm clock and is horrified to note that it is almost seven. In fact, the next train leaves in only fifteen minutes. His mother calls him through the door, telling him the time and asking him if he has to go somewhere. Gregor is stunned when he hears himself answer, not recognizing the voice that he uses as even remotely close to the one he'd had before. There is a squeak mixed in with it now and a kind of echo that makes the words unclear. He tries to tell her he is getting up now, but she isn't convinced or doesn't understand despite his attempt to enunciate each word carefully. His sister is the next one to ask him to open the door. He tries to get up, but with so many legs all moving in different directions, he has trouble controlling where he is trying to go. Next, he tries to get his lower half off the bed. Unable to see it, he isn't sure what it even looks like let alone how to control it. Finally, he shoves himself as hard as he can, and when his lower half hits the bedpost, he discovers that it might just be the most sensitive part of him. He tries to get the upper half going. Eventually, he manages to get himself half way out of the bed. He figures that by rocking back and forth he should be able to accomplish his task. The seven o'clock train has already gone. When he hears a ring at the door, he knows without hearing it answered that it is someone from work.

The chief clerk has come to investigate his absence. Now, feeling pangs of conscience, he swings himself out of bed, landing with a muffled thump on the carpet. His sister comes to the door to tell him the chief clerk is there, followed by his father who asks that the door be opened. Then the voice of the chief clerk himself can be heard as he wishes Gregor a good morning. His father defends him, insisting that he has always put the company first, assuring him that Gregor will be up to explain himself directly. He can hear his sister begin to cry. The chief clerk raises his voice and demands to know what is wrong. He wants an immediate explanation, insisting that just that morning he had defended him to his boss. His stubbornness, however, reflected something of a different nature, and his turnover of late had been unsatisfactory at best.



## Analysis

Gregor wakes from a terrible dream to an even worse reality. Having gone to sleep as a traveling salesman, he is astonished to wake and find himself transformed into some kind of beetle-like creature. He has an armored shell exterior with many legs that hardly appear able to support the body he is able to see. In fact, he can't even see his lower half, and he has no idea of how to maneuver his new form out of his bed. His next shock comes when he looks at the alarm clock and discovers that he should have been on a train almost two hours earlier. One at a time, his family members come to the door to ask him if he is okay. When he responds the first time, they can tell he isn't by the change in his voice. He is grateful for his habit of locking the door while on the road in his job, now a habit serving him well as it keeps his family out while he assesses his situation and tries to decide what to do.

Finally, he tries to get himself out of bed, but his first attempts are unsuccessful. The situation becomes even more dire when the chief clerk from work arrives to find out why he hasn't come to work. He begins politely enough, but then he insists that Gregor should show himself and explain why he hasn't shown up for work. When Gregor pushes himself, he finally manages to swing himself out of the bed. By now, the chief clerk is losing his patience and becoming insistent.

### Discussion Question 1

What condition does Gregor find himself in when he wakes up in the morning? How does he respond to his condition?

### Discussion Question 2

What is Gregor's largest issue at present and why?

### Discussion Question 3

What does the chief clerk admit to Gregor that he claims he would have told him in private had he been able, but now saw no need to keep his family in the dark?

## Vocabulary

Transformed, illustrated, floundering, strenuous, subordinates, suspicious, excessive, plaintively, enunciating, exceptionally, relaxation, discourtesy, barricade, astonished, incomprehensible, intercede.



## Section I: Pages 12 - 18

### Summary

Gregor insists he'll open the door immediately. He claims that he'd just been dizzy, but he is fine now. He begs the chief clerk not to make his family suffer. He promises to be on the eight o'clock train. Gregor can hear the chief clerk asking his parents if they understood a word of what Gregor said, and his mother insists that Gregor may really be ill and that their delay in getting in to him is causing him further suffering. He manages to use the dresser to haul himself upright, hearing his mother send Anna for a locksmith. Using the chair, he pushes his way to the door and ignoring the damage it causes his mouth, he closes his jaws over the key and turns it, afterward laying his head on the door handle to open the door. When the chief clerk sees him, he backs up. His mother sinks to the floor, and his father covers his eyes and weeps. At this stage, only half his body could be seen, but he reminds the chief clerk that he is a loyal and diligent employee and is now ready to report for work again. He asks him not to go away until he admits that Gregor still has his job. Without saying a word, he moves steadily toward the door. Gregor fears that if the chief clerk leaves in this frame of mind, his job is over. He lets go of the door and pushes himself toward the chief clerk, landing on his legs and feeling surprisingly normal for the first time. With his mother in front of him, he stops himself, swaying from side to side as she backs up away from him, knocking the coffee pot off the table. Gregor tries to calm her. The sight of the coffee flowing makes his jaws snap in the air. Misinterpreting the action, his mother screams, launching herself into her husband's arms. The chief clerk launches himself down the stairs spurring his father into action as well. He grabs the chief clerks' stick and a newspaper and uses them to drive Gregor back to his room, hissing at him. Gregor has difficulty moving backwards but doesn't want to take the time to turn around. Finally, he has no other choice. His father doesn't think to open the second of the double doors and continues to drive Gregor despite the fact that the opening is too narrow. He isn't willing to wait while Gregor gets himself upright again either. Gregor pushes harder, regardless of the damage he does to himself and his father gives him a shove from behind, slamming the door behind him.

### Analysis

Gregor pleads with the chief clerk not to punish his family, assuring him he is fine now and ready to head to work after a brief bout of dizziness. Part of him is curious to see how the chief clerk will respond to what he sees, knowing that if they are shocked, he is absolved of responsibility and can rest, and if they take his new form in stride, he can still probably make the train as promised. When they see him for the first time, all reason and understanding leaves them. The chief clerk has already commented that he sounded like an animal, and nothing in his appearance dispels that notion. He backs up, eager to separate himself from the house as fast as he can. Gregor's mother and father fare no better, sobbing and distressed, no longer insisting he needs medical help.



Gregor sees that the chief clerk intends to leave, and knows he has to stop him or his job will be over but his mother is between them. He tries to explain, and tries to calm them, but since they don't understand him, they aren't comforted by the sounds that come from him. When he advances, they panic further. The chief clerk's pace picks up and he hurries down the stairs while Gregor's father finally snaps out of his shock. He grabs a stick and newspaper to sharply encourage Gregor to return to his room. Still getting used to how to move with his multiple little legs, Gregor struggles to back up, but is unable to do so in a straight line. His father hisses at him, increasing his distress as he does his best to turn himself around and comply with his father's wishes. With only one of the double doors open, Gregor can't fit through unless he is upright, but his father isn't prepared to wait. He gives Gregor a shove from behind, squeezing him through and though he is heavily bleeding at this point, his father slams the door behind him.

## Discussion Question 1

How do Gregor's parents react when they see him for the first time?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Gregor wish that his sister were there, and what did he feel she might have been able to accomplish?

## Discussion Question 3

What injuries does Gregor suffer and how?

## Vocabulary

Barricade, entrusted, incomprehensible, accusations, responsibility, dishevelled, façade, austere, arduous, diligence, prejudice, protruding, prohibition, engrossed, impeding, incapable.





## Section II: Pages 19 - 26

### Summary

It is getting dark when Gregor wakes to find a bowl of sweetened milk with pieces of bread in it. He tries it, but he is surprised that he doesn't like it. He can do little except wait until the door is opened again. Someone tries to enter, but the person doesn't go beyond a peek before closing the door again. Now the keys are on the other sides of the doors. Ashamed, he presses himself under the couch and remains there until early the next morning when his sister comes in. When she sees him at first she is so shocked that she slams the door shut again. Feeling badly about her response, she immediately opens it again. He watches her carefully as she notices the milk he left and takes it away. In its place she brings an assortment of half rotted vegetables, bones covered in a sauce, some cheese, raisins, almonds, and a dry roll. She also provides water in a dish and then hurries back out.

Gregor finds he has no interest in the fresh foods, but he eats the rest with abandon. He can hardly fit back under the couch when he is done. Grete comes back and sweeps up after him. That becomes their new feeding routine. He listens after she leaves for sounds of family life. He can sometimes hear his sister commenting on whether or not he'd eaten. Before the end of the first day, Gregor hears his father open the lock box. He explains the state of their financial affairs. His father is happy to hear that some of the failed business had survived, and he had been smart enough not to squander it. Gregor had hoped that he would be able to send his sister to the music conservatory to study violin, imagining he would make the announcement at Christmas time. Pointlessly, he thinks about those things now. She is still just seventeen, and he can't imagine her having to look for work to help out. He throws himself onto the leather sofa, scratching at it until the sun comes up. Sometimes he pushes a chair to the window and looks out at a world that seems to lose distinction every day. His sister realizes what he is doing and leaves the chair there for him, cracking the window a bit as well. He wishes he could thank her. When she comes in, he hides under the couch and shivers.

### Analysis

Gregor is pleased when he wakes to find that his favorite food has been left inside the door. However, after dipping his head into it, he pulls it out quickly finding the taste less pleasant than he remembered. Disappointed, he peers through the crack in the door, but hears nothing. Feeling ashamed, he crawls under the couch and spends the rest of the night there realizing he has to remain calm and be considerate while his family adjusts to his current condition. When the door opens the next time, it is his sister. She sees the milk he left behind, and she returns with an assortment of foods, some half rotted, to see what he'll eat.



She comes in again some time later to find that the only food he hasn't touched is the fresh food. He even pushes it away because the smell is distasteful to him. She uses a dustbin to clean up, sweeping it all tighter and putting the lid on it before taking it out. Twice a day, she feeds him this way. Occasionally, he hears her make a friendly comment relating to his meals or the fact that he'd left them. For the first two days, all conversation revolved around what they should do now. On the first day, the maid had begged Gregor's mother to let her go, so she had, and now his sister helped his mother with the cooking as well. Gregor is relieved to discover as he listens that his father had saved some money from before the business collapsed, and interest had added up since then. They'd also managed to save some of the money he'd earned and given to them. While it wouldn't last forever, it bought them time now. Still, he worried. He thought about the time his biggest concern had been how to announce that he would send his sister to the music conservatory to study violin. Instead, she is now the only one to care for him, watching to minimize the intrusions to his life and keeping the impact of her presence to a minimum as well.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Who takes over the care of Gregor and how?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Gregor relieved after listening in on his family's conversations?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What are Gregor's largest regrets in the beginning and why?

## **Vocabulary**

Antennae, snuffling, timorous, inedible, compellingly, lethargic, suffocating, emphatically, incarcerated, converted, conservatory, accumulating, enviable, expressive, distinct, inseparably, observant.



## Section II: Pages 27 - 33

### Summary

One day, a month after his transformation, when Grete comes in to tend to him, Gregor is sitting at the window. Instead of following her usual routine of simply opening the window, she backs out and closes the door. He hides himself immediately under the couch, but she doesn't return until midday. It is fourteen days before his mother shows an interest in seeing him again for herself. The opportunity presents itself a short time later. Gregor had become bored and began crawling around the walls and ceiling to entertain himself. Grete notices because of the adhesive his feet leave behind. One day when her father is out, she asks her mother to help her move out some of the furniture to give him more room. Gregor pulls the sheet over himself. After checking, Grete assures her mother it is fine. She comes in, and they begin moving things. Gregor's mother argues that taking it all out might make Gregor feel worse - abandoned even. Grete can only see where he has been and is insistent, but Gregor realizes his mother might be right. They wrestle a heavy chest toward the door. While they are taking a break, Gregor decides to save at least one thing. He positions himself over a picture on the wall. When they return, his mother sees him, screams, and faints. Grete shakes her fist at Gregor and goes to get smelling salts. Gregor tries to go with her to advise her as he once may have, but he is unable to do much. Grete grabs the bottles and goes into Gregor's room, closing the door behind her. Anxious, he crawls over everything until he finally falls onto the dinner table and lies there for awhile. The maid locks herself in the kitchen. When Gregor's father returns and learns what has happened, he is visibly angry. Gregor hurries to his door to show his intentions to return to his room without being driven there, but his father is angry. After several laps of the room, Gregor tires of trying to stay out of his fathers' way, and his father tires of chasing him. Instead, he bombards him with apples. One eventually hits him and lodges in his back causing him pain that almost nails him to the spot. Finally, his sister opens his door while his mother grabs his father from behind and pleads for Gregor's life.

### Analysis

Any hope Gregor has that his sister is becoming accustomed to his new appearance vanishes when she happens to come into his room one day to find him at the window instead of hiding under the couch. Saying nothing, she simply backs out and closes the door, not returning until midday. She is obviously much more uncomfortable than usual. Recognizing her discomfort, he begins to drape a bed sheet over himself to spare her the sight of him. When Grete enlists her mother's help to take the furniture out of the room, he hides himself as usual. His mother begins to express her opinion that perhaps taking his things out was a mistake. She points out that by doing so, Gregor may lose what little memory of his humanity remains. That comment makes Gregor think, and he realizes that she is right. He can't imagine what he had been thinking. He decides to try to save what he can, and when the women take a break, he places himself over a



picture on the wall in order to salvage it, but when his mother sees him, she shrieks and faints. Grete hurries to her, angry with Gregor for showing himself. She goes to get smelling salts. Thinking he can help as he once would have, Gregor follows. Grete gets the bottle and goes back to his room, closing the door and leaving Gregor out. He circles the walls and ceiling anxiously until he falls onto the dining room table while the maid keeps herself locked in the kitchen. When Gregor's father returns and learns what has happened, he is so angry that he chases Gregor around the room. Tiring of that, he bombards him with apples until one actually lodges in Gregor's back. The pain is beyond belief, and he can hardly move. If not for his sister opening the bedroom door for him and his mother grabbing her husband and pleading for Gregor's life, he might have been killed.

## Discussion Question 1

What habit does Grete get into when she looks after Gregor? Where does he usually go when this happens?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Gregor do to entertain himself when boredom becomes an issue? What does he discover he is especially fond of? What mistake does he realize when he hears his mother talking?

## Discussion Question 3

What happens that changes how Gregor's father feels about him? What are the consequences?

## Vocabulary

Burdensome, adhesive, refrained, monotonous, influence, unimpeded, sufficient, perversity, dissuade, assailed, denuded, immobile, oppressed, invariably, protrusions, bombard.



## Section III: Pages 34 - 42

### Summary

The apple remains in Gregor's back as no one dares to remove it. As such, he loses most of his mobility. Because of his physical state, they begin leaving the door open each evening. The evenings are quiet. His father falls asleep in his chair soon after dinner, while his mother sews. His sister learns French and shorthand at night to improve her potential for advancement in her sales job. The household budget shrinks, so the maid is dismissed. A large charwoman is hired to do the heavy work. Gregor's mother does the rest. Gregor learns that his mother and sister have slowly sold off their fine jewelry items, and they begin discussing the fact that the flat is too big for them. But, no one can fathom how to move Gregor into a new place. Gregor can't see the problem. A crate with holes to breathe would suffice. Gregor hardly sleeps for thinking of his family's affairs. His sister becomes more and more indifferent to his needs, barely pushing food into the room. She cares little about whether or not it has been touched. She stops cleaning his room, leaving balls of dust and dirt behind. At the same time, she didn't want anyone else to take up the slack. The charwoman opens his door out of curiosity one day. Without fear, she looks in on him daily from then on. Gregor has all but stopped eating. His family begins using his room to store unused items. Then, they rented a room to three gentlemen. They all had full beards, and they insisted on tidiness. They also brought many furnishings of their own. So, Gregor's room filled even more. At first, Gregor pushed some of it around. Later he just stays immobile, giving up. Though the family ate in the kitchen, the three gentlemen sometimes ate in the living room meaning his door had to be closed as well. The only joy Gregor knows is when his sister decides one day to play the violin again. Listening, he is transported to a time when he thought he'd send her to the conservatory. He creeps slowly forward to her.

### Analysis

As Gregor's mobility is seriously compromised, his family begins leaving his door open at night. He watches as his mother sews, his sister learns French and shorthand, and his father sleeps in his uniform. It seemed that no one had the time or energy to look after Gregor, beyond what was immediately and absolutely necessary. While he was still fed, it was not always on a regular schedule. Care and attention to what he was eating simply evaporated. Grete didn't clean as fastidiously as she once did either. Her efforts were haphazard at best. On the rare occasion that someone tried to help, she became deeply offended, feeling as though the help was a direct assault on her attempts to do the tasks herself, despite the fact that she clearly wasn't doing them. To make matters worse, financial hardships forced the family to rent out a room to three gentlemen who brought a great deal of their furnishings with them. As no other space existed, Gregor's room was used for storage of their redundant items. At first, Gregor would push the items around, amusing himself with placing them elsewhere. However, he soon tired of that as well. After a time, he just stayed immobile. Since the gentlemen who now lived



there were a rather fussy sort, Gregor's door was closed more often than not, and his isolation grew while his desire to live shrank. He ate less, and sometimes not at all. What movements he once made covered him in the dirt, dust, and debris that was no longer cleaned up. His health deteriorated. When his sister began to play the violin again one night, his former self wakened in him once more. With joy that had no bounds, he crept toward the open door, thinking only of gently approaching her. He remembered how he had wanted to send her to the conservatory and how he planned to announce it that Christmas. Now, he had no idea if Christmas had come and gone. Nothing mattered except the great joy the music gave him and his desire to share that joy with her.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What factors contribute to the deteriorating care that Gregor is given?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What parallels can be made between the Samsa's care of Gregor and the way that the disabled in life can sometimes be treated?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is it that gives Gregor a taste of life once more and reminds him of who he once was?

## **Vocabulary**

Revolting, deterioration, obstinate, reproaches, importune, endearments, misfortune, behest, immobile, aggrieved, convulsive, repelled, superfluous, captivate, dissuade.



## Section III: Pages 43 - 50

### Summary

A shout from one of the gentlemen causes Grete to stop playing, and they turn to see him pointing at the approaching Gregor. His father attempts to get them to return to their room while blocking their vision of Gregor. Annoyed, they ask for explanations. Grete hurries into the room the gentlemen occupy. One of the men insists that since the conditions in the Samsa's flat are 'repugnant', he is giving his notice immediately. Furthermore, he will not pay for the time already spent. He adds that he will likely pursue some kind of damages and the other two gentlemen immediately add their notices and agreement. They slam the door to their room and Gregor's father collapses in his chair. Gregor, weak from hunger, hasn't moved, but now Grete loses her composure. She insists that something must be done about the monster that her brother has become. In fact, she insists they have to 'get rid of it.' Gregor's father can't help but agree. Grete insists that they have to forget the notion that he is still Gregor. Gregor tries to turn around and go back to his room, but the pain forces him to make jerky movements and to rest frequently. No one makes any effort to help, and he finally manages to cross the distance back to his room. He is hardly inside before his door is closed and bolted behind him. By then, Gregor is unable to move at all. The pain slowly disappears as he sinks to the floor. He finds himself thinking about how he can leave his family, feeling more strongly about it than even Grete. When morning comes, he takes his last breath. The cleaning woman arrives and looks in on Gregor as usual. At first, she doesn't see the change. When she realizes Gregor is dead, she wakes the family, announcing the event. With mixed relief, they look at what is left of Gregor as the three gentlemen come out expecting breakfast to be served. Mr. Samsa tells them to get out. Seeing he is not to be trifled with at that moment, they do. The cleaning woman announces what is now obvious. Their problem of getting rid of Gregor is gone. The Samsa family decides to take the day off together. After writing letters to that effect to their employers, they take a tram to the country. They realize now that their prospects are not so bleak as they can move to a smaller place. Grete begins to come back to life. As her parents watch her, they both come to the conclusion that it might be time to find a nice young man for her. Meanwhile, they simply begin to enjoy life again.

### Analysis

When one of the gentlemen sees Gregor, he interrupts Grete's playing, pointing to Gregor and demanding an explanation. Gregor's father tries to put himself between them and salvage the situation, but the gentlemen see this event as an excuse to get out of paying for services they've already received, announcing they might even pursue damages. Grete loses her composure and insists that the thing that once was Gregor has to leave. His parents lament his inability to understand them. In the background, Gregor laboriously makes his way back to his room. Mr. Samsa is at a loss as to what to do, but as soon as Gregor is in his room, Grete shuts the door and locks it behind him.



Gregor, exhausted from the effort it took to get there, collapses. His pain diminishes as he lies there considering the fact that he must find a way to leave. He feels as strongly about it as Grete, if not more so. By morning, Gregor has taken his last breath. The cleaning woman is the first to discover Gregor is dead. She announces it to the rest of the family, who gather around the lifeless shell. The gentlemen come out of their room for breakfast. However, after the previous evening's performance, Mr. Samsa simply evicts them. The cleaning woman announces the obvious fact that their problems have been solved as she leaves. The Samsas decide to take a day off together, and writing excuses to their employers, they leave the flat together for the first time in many weeks. As they head into the country, they begin to feel a life returning that has been missing for some time.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What do the three gentlemen announce as their intentions? Why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Gregor respond to his sister's outburst and what happens?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does the family feel when they discover him lifeless the next morning, and in what ways does this again parallel how looking after someone who is disabled?

## **Vocabulary**

Repugnant, decisively, deranged, immobile, displacing, persecuting, comprehension, rumination, attributed, martyr, irritably, disconcerted, simultaneously, confirmation.





# Characters

## Gregor Samsa

Gregor is a travelling commercial salesman for a textile company. He is supporting his parents and younger sister Grete. He was once a lieutenant in the army, and a photo of him is on the wall in his uniform with his sword. Gregor wakes to find that he is a dung beetle, although he has no way of knowing that simply by the amount of himself that he can see - the top half and his many legs. He sees himself as some kind of horrible vermin. He has an armor-like back with a brown colored belly which is divided by arches into sections that are stiff and slightly domed. His many legs are thin and wave about in a helpless manner as he lies there. His belly itches and when he looks at it, he can see that it has many little white spots on it. He has no idea what to think of that. He tries to scratch them with one of his legs, but the feeling he gets makes him shudder with cold. He feels well, if not somewhat more hungry than usual, but his usual voice is now unrecognizable to him and to others as he squeaks out an answer to the questions asked of him. His family struggles with a transformation that is apparently permanent. At one point he is shoved hard through a door causing injury. Another time, he is pelted with apples. One of them lodges in his back. It is one of the things that likely leads to his death. His appetite changes, fresh food no longer appealing to him in any way, and he leaves sticky stuff behind him when he walks on the walls or ceilings. He dies in his room, just a shell of himself.

## Grete Samsa

Grete is Gregor's sister and is the only one who is willing to look after him once his metamorphosis has occurred. She begins by bringing him milk with chunks of white bread floating in it, which is something he considered to be a treat before he transformed. Afterward, it held no appeal. Grete is seventeen and until Gregor's transformation, she had enjoyed a life that included sleeping late, dressing in nice clothes, playing the violin, and helping out in the business. Afterward, she found work as a sales person of fancy underwear in a fashion shop, helped out at home, and learned French and shorthand in her spare time. Her care of Gregor wanes as she takes on these other tasks. By the time Gregor dies, she sees him as a monster instead of her brother. She is grateful that he is gone.

## Mr. Samsa

Gregor's father, Mr. Samsa, is a broken man when his business fails. Though healthy, he is an older man who put on weight during his five years without work, becoming clumsy and slow. In his mind, breakfast has always been the most important meal. He is somewhat impatient and rather quick to temper, having no patience whatsoever for the condition that Gregor wakes up in. When Gregor inadvertently frightens them, he



chases him back into his room with a stick and newspaper. Later, through no fault of his own, Gregor frightens Mrs. Samsa. His father pelts him with apples to get him to return to his room - something Gregor was already desperately trying to do. Mr. Samsa struggles with having to return to work full time, finding it so tiring that he usually falls asleep in his uniform right after dinner.

## **Mrs. Samsa**

After Grete, Gregor's mother is the first to express any interest in Gregor after his transformation. An elderly woman, she suffers from asthma. It is an effort for her to just get around on most days. Despite that, she takes on sewing jobs at night, Mrs. Samsa misses Gregor, and she tries to see him two weeks after his transformation. However, her family stops her. When she inadvertently sees him on the day that she helps Grete move furniture around in Gregor's room, she faints. Still, when her husband is pelting Gregor with apples later, she stops him, begging him not to kill Gregor.

## **Charwoman**

Hired after the rest of the staff have been excused, the Charwoman is merely there to do what heavy things the Samsas are unable to. She is a large woman with thick bones, and her hair is white and flaps around her head. The elderly widow isn't repelled by Gregor when she sees him. Instead of chasing him or running from him, she stands there, amazed. With what passes for affection, she calls him the 'old dung beetle'. She is the woman who discovers that Gregor is dead and tells the rest of the family. When she has confirmed that this is what they'd prayed for, she leaves them to their 'grief'.

## **Three Gentlemen**

Not gentlemen at all, these three men are eager to use any excuse to get out of paying their bill for services rendered and time spent in their rented room at the Samsas' home. When anything happens that is out of the ordinary, they immediately announce their intention to either sue for damages, give their notice, refuse to pay for the time they've spent already, or all of the above. When Gregor dies, they insist on breakfast being served, and Mr. Samsa throws them out.

## **Chief Clerk.**

The Chief Clerk is a man who shows up from Gregor's workplace when Gregor misses his train and doesn't arrive at work on time. When he hears Gregor speaking for the first time, he announces that Gregor sounds like some kind of animal. When he finally catches sight of Gregor, he can't clear out of the apartment fast enough, despite Gregor's efforts to make him stay and understand.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Dung Beetle

The 'horrible vermin' that Gregor Samsa finds himself transformed into one morning.

## Textile Samples

A collection of samples that is on the table that Gregor as a travelling salesman used in his job.

## Picture

Taken out of an illustrated magazine, this picture is in a gilded frame on the wall. It contains a house and a woman in a fur hat and boa, raising a fur muff. This is the one item that Gregor later tries to salvage as Grete and his mother begin emptying his room.

## Alarm Clock.

Sitting on his desk, the alarm clock is a symbol of the life Gregor leads. It rings each morning to get him up to go to work.

## Train.

Gregor gets to work each morning by riding the train when he is in town.

## Violin

Grete plays the violin. Gregor hopes to send her to the conservatory to study.

## Couch

Gregor hides under the sofa as his sister tends to his feeding and cleaning his room.

## Bed Sheet.

Gregor uses a bed sheet to cover himself when he realizes that his appearance still repulses his sister.



## **Clerk's Stick.**

Mr. Samsa uses a clerk's stick to chase Gregor back into his room after he frightens his mother.

## **Sweetened Milk and Bread**

Gregor enjoyed sweetened milk and bread until his transformation.

## **Apples**

Gregor's father threw apples at him to get him to go back into his room after he arrived home to find that his wife had been frightened by Gregor. One of the apples lodges in Gregor's back and festers there, likely contributing to his eventual death.

## **Tram**

The Samsa family took a tram to go out for the day after they discovered Gregor dead in his room.

## **Letters**

The Samsa family wrote letters to their respective employers when they wanted the day off after Gregor's death.



# Settings

## Gregor's room

A small bedroom, Gregor's room is where he will spend most of the rest of his life after his transformation.

## Living Room

Gregor's parents and sister like to sit in the living room at night. For a time, the living room is the area that Gregor could see when his door was left open.

## Couch

Gregor hid under the couch in his room when his sister came in to drop off food or clean.

## Conservatory

Gregor wanted to send his sister to study violin at the conservatory.

## Window

Gregor would push a chair to the window in order to look outside.

## Charlottenstrasse

Charlottenstrasse is the street where the Samsons live. Gregor's window faces this street.



# Themes and Motifs

## Ability vs Disability

The perception that the able bodied have of the disabled is a complicated one as is revealed in the story *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. In it, he describes a man who had taken over the financial support of his family after the family business failed. It was a job he took seriously, and he diligently pursued advancements in order to provide his family with everything they needed and more. Since all was provided for, his family needed to do little more than simply survive from one day to the next. When Gregor Samsa returns home from his most recent road trip as a traveling salesman, he wakes in his room to discover that everything has changed. Eventually, he realizes that he has been transformed into a dung beetle. Suddenly, it takes all of his efforts simply to get out of bed. This he must accomplish while his family and his company's chief clerk wait at the door, questioning his health and summoning doctors and locksmiths to their aid. Gregor manages to get himself out of bed and to the door where he is able to turn the key and open the door. When his family takes sight of him for the first time, they are repelled as is his chief clerk who quickly backs away and leaves the apartment. Gregor, with his mind only on keeping his job, strives to stop the man, but to no avail. Gregor's father uses both a stick and a newspaper to push him back into his own room. Then, he shuts the door quickly. So begins Gregor's life of isolation. His inability to work now puts added strain on the rest of the family. Though they once lazed about, doing as they pleased from one day to the next, they are now faced with working in order to survive. In fact, now the caregiver has become the one who needs the care.

In the beginning, Gregor's sister Grete is attentive, despite still being repelled by the sight of him and fearful of any close contact. Gregor is no longer able to communicate in traditional form, but his mind remains intact as he seeks for ways to make his current condition easier for his family to take. For example, when he realizes that his sister still has trouble with the mere sight of him, he uses the bed sheet to cover himself so as not to offend her. Grete is forced to take employment along with the rest of the family in order to keep up what Gregor had been doing on his own. Increasingly tired, her care of Gregor fades, and resentment fills the place where sympathy and pity used to reside. She finally admits to her family that she thinks Gregor is merely a bane of their existence and that as far as she is concerned, they should find a way to divorce themselves from him. When Gregor dies shortly afterward, they are at first blush saddened by the loss of him. However, they quickly recover and treat themselves to a day out.

The sad truth here is that while Gregor worked to pay the bills for the family, the family did little or nothing, allowing him to carry the full weight of responsibility on his shoulders. Once he became disabled, suddenly they found that they had it within them to carry on jobs and survive despite his income ending. As such, they were not as helpless as they perceived themselves to be before Gregor himself was unable to work. The disabled became abled when the abled became disabled.



## The Importance of Communication

When Gregor becomes unable to work, essentially disabled by his new form, he not only does what he can to minimize the shock to his family, but he also keeps a positive outlook on life. He spends his time thinking about his family's situation, worrying about their survival, and monitoring their progress as much as is possible. He is grateful for his sister and her ministrations to his needs, noticing all of the little things that she does for him despite her general feelings of repulsion towards him, but wishes that he could convey his gratitude to her when she goes out of her way to figure out what he'd like to eat, where he spends his time, and how he amuses himself. His inability to communicate however becomes his undoing in more than one instance. When his sister discovers that he is using the walls and ceilings to travel around for amusement, she decides it would benefit him to remove all the furniture. His mother comments that by doing so, they may inadvertently cause him to forget who he was and lose what is left of his humanity. Gregor agrees with her and decides that he must try to save some of his things. The only thing he can really hold onto is a photo on the wall, and he covers it with his body to keep them from taking it away. By doing so, he terrifies his mother, causing her to faint. Had he been able to communicate, he could have simply told his sister that his mother was correct and that he would like to keep some items. He also could have told her that he was only trying to help when he left the room, following her to the other room to get smelling salts, but instead, she shuts him off from his room. The end result is that when his father returns, he is chased back into his room, and winds up with an injury to his legs and side as he is pushed into his room. When he creeps out to hear his sister playing the violin, he again causes distress and winds up with an apple lodged in his back as a result when his father chases him into his room.

## Dealing With Death

When Gregor dies, the family grieves momentarily. In their minds, their family member died on the day that he transformed, despite the efforts that Grete made to make him comfortable at home. Much like life with a severe disability, Gregor's condition was one that there was no returning from, and it didn't take long before they reached the limit of their tolerance for his condition. Instead of recognizing that he was still the same son/brother that he had always been, he became the monster in the way. He was a problem that they didn't know how to solve. When his death came, they were briefly saddened. However, they were mostly relieved and glad that he was no longer the anchor around their necks either physically or mentally.



# Styles

## Point of View

The story *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka is a story told entirely from the perspective of the main character, Gregor Samsa. Gregor is a traveling salesman, peddling textiles to support his family after a failure in his parents' business caused them to close their doors for good. Since then, Gregor has struggled to increase his standings at work in order to provide for his parents and his sister, Grete. The story begins when Gregor wakes in his bed, unable to get out as normal, and in fact, discovering that everything has changed. He finds to his horror that he has somehow been transformed into a beetle like creature, unable to see much beyond his segmented stomach and many feet sticking in the air. At first, he hopes he can just return to sleep and wake again to find that this is all a bad dream and nothing more, but he is unable to turn over as normal and return to sleep. Then he notices that he has somehow overslept his alarm, and is late for work. He struggles to get himself out of bed, but even that requires a great deal of planning and forethought as he tries to get his many legs to obey the commands that he used to use on just two. His mother comes to the door to inquire as to whether or not he is alright, but when he hears himself trying to answer her, he realizes that she likely won't understand him. It causes a dilemma as he struggles harder to get up, knowing that the problems will escalate the longer he remains there. He manages to get to the door eventually, but not before his chief clerk from work shows up, and his sister is sent to get the doctor. He finally turns the key and opens the door, but his problems only escalate from there. The chief clerk from work takes one look of him and does his best to get out of the building as quickly as he can. Gregor tries to stop him, searching for a way to convey that he is still able to do his job, but all he succeeds in doing is further terrifying his family, who promptly chase him back into his room and shut the door. He spends the remainder of his short life unable to communicate his feelings or the fact that he is more than the bug that he is housed in.

## Language and Meaning

The story *Metamorphosis* was originally written in German and then translated to English by David Wyllie. David does a terrific job with this translation, making the transition seamless as he manages to convey Kafka's tale of transformation of Gregor Samsa from traveling salesman to dung beetle. While the transformation is impossible, it is not difficult to see the parallels that Kafka was trying to portray. Despite it being translated to English from a European language, it still holds onto the struggle faced by Gregor's family as they discover that he is no longer the son or brother that he formerly was. For his parents, this transformation is horrifying. They are repulsed by his current state and have no way of reminding themselves of who he is at first. After just over a month, Gregor's mother softens and realizes that if her daughter can care for Gregor, she can bring herself to face him as well. But, her family stops her. Then Grete, Gregor's sister, discovers how he is amusing himself and enlists her mother's help to





move furniture out of the room to give him the space she believes he longs for. At first excited by the prospect, Gregor changes his mind when his mother brings up the fact that by removing these items, he will likely lose even more touch with his identity. He realizes that she is right, and he makes a valiant effort to keep at least one item - a picture on the wall - by covering it with his body. His mother catches sight of him and faints. Gregor earns his sister's anger for revealing himself. As time passes, Grete tires of looking after Gregor, and his care slips into obscurity. She barely puts food out for him and by the time he finally dies, it is with the great relief of the entire family. The parallels drawn by Kafka between Gregor's transformation and the transformation of the abled to disabled is obvious.

## Structure

Metamorphosis is a short story that is told in three parts. The entire story is only fifty pages in length with the parts labelled in Roman numerals. The sections each average sixteen pages in length. The first section introduces Gregor Samsa and his family. It gives a brief overview of Gregor's life as a traveling salesman in the textile industry, and then his waking up from a night of disturbing dreams and his transformation into a beetle. The section reveals his problems with mobility as he wakes lying on his back, with his many legs in the air. His family tries to rouse him as he is already late for work and when Gregor's chief clerk arrives to check why he wasn't on the morning train as usual. Gregor manages to roll himself off the bed, and get over to the dresser where he pulls himself to his feet in order to get to the door and unlock it. When the chief clerk sees him he flees and Gregor tries to stop him to explain that he is still able to do his job, but that really isn't the case. Instead, his father grabs a stick and his newspaper and uses them to shoo Gregor back to his room. When Gregor tries to get through the door, he discovers that his back is too broad when he is down on his feet, so when he gets stuck, his father shoves him mercilessly from behind until he pushes him through. In the second section, Gregor takes stock of what he is now, and who he is. His sister steps up and begins feeding and caring for him, learning the things he likes by trial and error. Things go along well for a while, and Gregor begins to hope that his sister will get used to the sight of him, but that isn't the case. She is still repulsed by him so he hides himself when she comes in to clean and to feed him. He begins to use the walls and ceiling as places to go, exercising and enjoying the weightlessness of hanging, and when Grete notices, she endeavors to clear the room of furniture. Gregor's mother helps but when she catches sight of Gregor, she faints and Gregor's father is so angry when he returns that he begins to chase Gregor around the room, pelting him with apples - one of which lodges in his back. In the third section, Gregor begins to deteriorate. He stops eating, and his family loses any hope that he will return to normal. Grete's care is gradually reduced until it is a mere shadow of what it was. Eventually, Gregor expires. The family, though sad for the loss of Gregor, are glad to be rid of the dung beetle that was a part of their lives. They take the opportunity to go out as a family and try to enjoy themselves.



## Quotes

What's happened to me?

-- Gregor. (Section I: Pages 1 - 11 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Gregor's comment when he first begins to realize that something is very different about him this morning. He is still trying to reconcile the fact that this is not a continuation of the disturbing dreams he was having.

Gregor, the chief clerk has come round and wants to know why you didn't leave on the early train.

-- Gregor's Father. (Section I: Pages 1 - 11 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Gregor's father is trying to impress upon him the importance of not only answering them, but opening the door so that they can assess his condition and determine a course of action.

Did you hear the way that Gregor spoke just now?

-- Chief Clerk (Section I: Pages 11 - 18 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** When the chief clerk from Gregor's employer makes this statement, it confirms for Gregor what he already suspects. His voice has changed as well as his body. It also tells him is that it has changed so much that they will have difficulty understanding him at all.

It's quite possible for someone to be temporarily unable to work, but that's just the right time to remember what's been achieved in the past and consider that later on, once the difficulty has been removed, he will certainly work with all the more diligence and concentration.

-- Gregor (Section I: Pages 11 - 18 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Once Gregor has his door open, he quickly tries to convince the chief clerk that everything is fine and that given just a few minutes to get himself together, he is more than willing to resume work. Gregor is afraid of losing the job that supports his entire family.

He's enjoyed his dinner today.

-- Grete (Section II: Pages 19 - 26 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Gregor's sister Grete reports back to her parents after each contact with Gregor, trying to give them some normalcy and indirect contact with their son. She is unable to give them feedback beyond his eating habits.

Let me go and see Gregor, he is my unfortunate son!

-- Gregor's mother. (Section II: Pages 26 - 33 paragraph 19)



**Importance:** Gregor's mother finally gets over the horror of what she had seen on that first day. Since it appears that Gregor will not be 'getting better' any time soon, she comes to the conclusion that if her daughter can see to his needs every day, she could find a way to tolerate his appearance herself for the sake of who he was, eager for any sign of possible improvement.

You can come in, he can't be seen.

-- Grete (Section II: Pages 26 - 33 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This is the first time Gregor's mother has approached Gregor's room in over two weeks. Until now, she hasn't had the courage to so much as go in the room, even though Gregor is particularly sensitive to the feelings of others and happy to hide himself away if necessary.

Just as I expected, just as I always said, but you women wouldn't listen, would you.

-- Mr. Samsa (Section II: Pages 26 - 33 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** Gregor's father's reaction when he comes home from work to find that his wife had fainted as a result of seeing Gregor on the wall protecting a picture is a vindication of what he believed would one day become an issue if his wife continued to insist on seeing Gregor.

Look at the old dung beetle there.

-- The Charwoman (Section III: Pages 34 - 42 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** This is relative because the Charwoman is the only one that never exhibited any fear where Gregor was concerned.

Aren't you coming any closer then?

-- The Charwoman (Section III: Pages 34 - 42 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Again, the Charwoman faces Gregor off, holding up a chair when Gregor tries to approach her.

On the contrary, would the young lady not like to come in and play for us here in the room, where it is, after all, much more cosy and comfortable?

-- One of the three Gentlemen (Section III: Pages 34 - 42 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** One of the three gentlemen acknowledging the skill with which Grete plays violin and it is also her playing that brings Gregor out to her.

I don't want to call this monster my brother, all I can say is: we have to try and get rid of it.

-- Grete (Section III - Pages 43 - 50 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This quote by Gregor's sister exemplifies how they are all feeling. Despite the fact that Gregor has transformed through no fault of his own, they are divorcing

themselves from him because they do not understand his situation or realize that he is still fully cognitive.