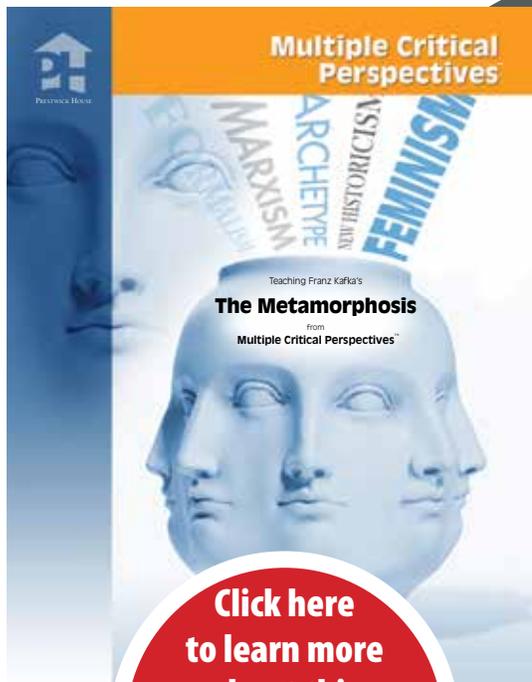




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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Franz Kafka's

## **The Metamorphosis**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

Eva Richardson



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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *The Metamorphosis*

**T**HE *METAMORPHOSIS* IS A NOVELLA describing a young salesman's transformation from human being into giant insect and relating his subsequent experiences within his family circle. The novella builds on Kafka's association with the philosophy of existentialism and has often been characterized as an example of absurdist literature. Like many novellas, *The Metamorphosis* contains elements of satire.

A novella is a work of prose fiction that is generally longer than a short story but not quite as lengthy as a novel. The novella format originated in medieval Italy but did not develop into a definitive literary genre until the late eighteenth century. The novella generally describes one specific event or conflict. (In this case, Gregor Samsa is a traveling salesman who wakes up one morning and finds himself transformed into a grotesque vermin. Following his metamorphosis, Gregor and his family struggle to adjust to the new situation as they try to redefine their individual roles in the family and in society).

Often, a novella presents a psychologically complex scenario or conflict. (Gregor's transformation presents a number of psychological challenges to Gregor and his family. Gregor has to come to terms with his inability to go to work and provide for his family, while his father and mother must adjust their comfortable lifestyle to meet new financial challenges. Gregor's sister undergoes a transformation from caring to domineering as she tries to find her place as a woman at her mother's side within the family.)

*The Metamorphosis* can be considered an existentialist work of literature. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast to other philosophies that attempt to make meaning of the world by proposing a scientific or moral order through which human beings can explain their own identities and environments, existentialists believe that human beings are themselves responsible for creating meaning in their individual lives and the world around them. According to existentialist beliefs, the freedom to create one's own identity and to formulate a framework that can provide meaning in an uncaring world frequently results in feelings of alienation, absurdity, loneliness, and emptiness. (Gregor experiences an existential crisis. He is overwhelmed by the potential for free choice in his life and molds his life according to the expectations of others. His routine and rigorous work schedule as a salesman, coupled with his family's disregard for his personal needs and the sacrifices he quietly makes on their behalf, accelerate his feelings of inadequacy, emptiness, and confusion, and culminate in his metaphorical—and literal—transformation into a grotesque and helpless vermin.)

The philosophy of Existentialism is closely related to the concept of Absurdism, a philosophy that likewise developed in the late nineteenth century. Absurdist literature posits that human beings are confronted by a world that lacks order and meaning, making it nearly impossible for human beings to make

## Psychoanalytical/Freudian Criticism Applied to *The Metamorphosis*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” OR “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

### Activity One

#### Evaluating the Image of the "Monstrous Vermin" as an Outward Manifestation of Gregor's Internal State

1. Copy and distribute the following worksheet.
2. Next, have students review Chapter I, paying particular attention to word choices associated with Gregor's character prior to, and following, his metamorphosis.
3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups and ask students to take detailed notes on word choices associated with descriptions of Gregor's new appearance, comparing these with descriptions of his character and mind-set. (For example, in the first paragraph of the novella, readers learn that Gregor's legs are "pathetic" and "flickered helplessly.")
4. Each pair or small group should note significant descriptive word choices on their activity sheets. The activity sheet should include specific references relating to Gregor's appearance or behavior.
5. Reconvene the class, and have students present their findings to the other groups.
6. Generate a class discussion about the image of the vermin as an outward manifestation of Gregor's psyche, using the following questions:
  - Which word choices used to describe Gregor's appearance following the transformation can be considered to have positive connotations? Which word choices can be considered to have negative connotations?
  - What do the word choices associated with Gregor's insect-like appearance reveal about his potential for self-control?
  - What do the word choices used to describe Gregor's appearance and behavior reveal about his personal reaction to his surprising transformation?
  - Why did Kafka choose to transform Gregor into a "monstrous vermin" instead of a different animal or creature? What notions about insects do readers bring to the text based on their cultural upbringing? In what way does the text reinforce or confront these preconceived notions?

## Marxist Approach Applied to *The Metamorphosis*



### Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea was called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated production, not in the hands those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theories by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

#### Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, ideologies



## Activity One

### Examining the Demands Placed Upon the Worker in A Capitalistic Society

1. Divide the class into small groups, and ask each group to review Chapter I, noting the following key ideas discussed in this chapter.
2. Each group should be prepared to share notes relevant to their assigned idea with the rest of the class.
  - Gregor's responsibilities as an employee in his firm.
  - the Samsa family's expectations with regard to Gregor's work ethic and his role within the family.
  - the head clerk's description of Gregor's duties within his firm.
3. Reconvene the class, and have each group share their notes.
4. Then, use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion about the conflict between Gregor as an employee, the head clerk as a representative of the employer, and the family as an example of the desire for upward social mobility:
  - What reasons does Gregor cite for having stayed at his firm longer than he intended to?
  - What role does debt play with regard to Gregor's work ethic?
  - What is the connection between the image of the vermin and Gregor's role as an employee as depicted in Chapter I? What qualities of the working class does the vermin image convey?
  - How does Gregor's employer measure Gregor's value as a worker? How does the Samsa family measure Gregor's value for his family? How does Gregor measure his own value as a member of his family, as an employee, and as an individual?
  - Why are Herr and Frau Samsa intent on telling the head clerk that Gregor lives for his work? What are their motivations for representing Gregor as a man dedicated to his work?
  - What do the head clerk's accusations against Gregor (with regard to recent cash payments) reveal about his own role in Gregor's firm? About his personal and professional relationship with Gregor as a colleague and supervisor?
  - Why is Gregor's inability to go to work quickly perceived as a medical emergency?
  - Does the chapter reveal any deliberate refusal or hesitation on Gregor's part to report to work? Why or why not?
  - What are the consequences of Gregor's not going to work for himself and his family?

## Feminist Approach Applied to *The Metamorphosis*

### Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.



## Activity One

### Examining Grete's Transformation Within the Family Circle

1. Divide the class into small groups.
2. Assign either Chapter I or Chapter II to each group. As they review their assigned chapter, have the students take notes on descriptions of Grete's character, behavior, and attitudes as they change throughout each chapter. For example, in Chapter II, Grete leaves milk and bread in Gregor's room because she remembers that this was his favorite food. Later, readers learn that Grete wants to "perform...heroically on his behalf." In Chapter III, Grete "refuses" to "pronounce [her] brother's name in front of this monstrosity."
3. Reconvene the class, and have each group share their notes with the rest of the class. Then, use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion:
  - Why does Grete at first exhibit great concern for Gregor?
  - What effects does Gregor's transformation have on Grete's duties and responsibilities within the family circle? What roles must Grete fulfill once the maid and cook have quit?
  - What kind of power does Grete have within the family at the beginning of the novella, immediately following Gregor's transformation? How does Grete's power change over time, and why does it change?
  - How does Grete's relationship with her mother change after Gregor's transformation? Why?
  - Why does Grete gradually neglect her cleaning duties in Gregor's room?
  - Why does Grete want to remove all furniture from Gregor's room? What does her decision reveal about her desire to control Gregor? To emasculate Gregor?
  - To what degree, and under what circumstances, does the Samsa family represent a patriarchal, or traditional household? In what sense does it diverge from a patriarchal family model?