

Notes on *The Metamorphosis*

Questions and issues raised in the novel:

- Has Gregor actually turned into a bug, or is he just acting as though he has?
 - evidence both for and against a literal, physical metamorphosis
 - **evidence for:**
 - reactions of family members and others—e.g. they express extreme horror or disgust and immediately lose hope of communicating with him
 - descriptions of physical actions and sensations seem unambiguous, and there is external (or seemingly external) evidence of his ability to do things that are impossible for a person (e.g. sticking to the ceiling)
 - **evidence against:**
 - the absurdity and strangeness of a supernatural event like this happening in a story like this—no explanation or context for it
 - people's reactions to him sometimes seem inappropriate or surreal (e.g. the roomers smiling when they catch sight of him, as if he is a person behaving strangely rather than an actual giant bug)
 - Gregor's own reactions are sometimes illogical (e.g. on the morning of the metamorphosis, he acts as though it's simply an annoyance that can be dealt with)
 - another possibility: Kafka deliberately left it ambiguous, deliberately presents either ambiguous or contradictory evidence
 - seeks to establish atmosphere of surreality, tension with no easy resolution: suggests that human life is characterized by this kind of existential doubt?
 - erases the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical
 - **evidence for deliberate ambiguity:**
 - nothing specific about his appearance is ever said by the other characters
 - the narration may be an objective description of reality, or it may be a description of Gregor's thoughts and perceptions only—it is designed to work either way
- What is the symbolic/thematic significance of Gregor's metamorphosis?
 - even if it is an actual, physical metamorphosis, it is clearly intended to work on an abstract level as well
 - possible interpretations:
 - an expression of Gregor's feelings about being exploited by his family and looked down upon by those he works for and with—sense of powerlessness, alienation
 - an expression of Gregor's need to escape the stressful routine of his working life; rebellion against the responsibilities imposed on him: Does his subconscious resentment take the form of a kind of fantasy or hallucination?
 - a symbol of the plight of the common man/working man being exploited by others in society who enjoy the fruits of his labor without having to compensate him for it in any way or even expressing appreciation
 - an expression of guilt or self-loathing: for not being able to provide for his family better, or for some other reason?
- What is the symbolic/thematic significance of Gregor's deterioration and death?
 - he suffers from a lack of spiritual nourishment: his life is ruled by work that he does not seem to truly enjoy for its own sake
 - as the novel goes on, the only things that seem to move him are things that have an emotional and spiritual significance, such as the picture on the wall, his desire for some kind of human contact, his attraction to his sister's violin playing
 - this lack of spiritual nourishment is paralleled by his increasing lack of appetite for physical food
 - his physical death is thus a spiritual death caused by a sense of alienation, isolation, and emptiness

Themes and motifs:

- helplessness/desperation
- inability to communicate/alienation/isolation
- confusion/surreality/irrationality
- the transitory nature of love and loyalty
- exploitation of the worker/economic plight of the working class

Notes and observations:

- the atmosphere of surreality and absurdity established from the beginning is one of the primary characteristics of the novel as a whole
 - sense of absurdity conveyed by Gregor's anxiety about work and the manager's impression of him when he obviously has a much greater problem to deal with and can't possibly expect the manager to react to his concerns about work, even if he could be clearly understood
 - Gregor's reaction to the situation is irrational: he seems to accept his condition as a difficult yet simple problem to be dealt with as a practical matter rather than as an existential dilemma or horrifying mystery
- Gregor is apparently used to being exploited and taken for granted by his family and scorned by those he works with—his occasional expressions of annoyance or resentment seem to be subdued or suppressed
- Gregor's extremely self-sacrificing, hard-working, ambitious character is contrasted with the selfish, lazy, spoiled character of the other members of his family: this juxtaposition is perhaps the central quality of the novel in terms of character development
 - the sudden reversal of their positions (from caretaker to dependent and vice versa) is a kind of irony
 - even though Gregor has provided for them for so long, they see Gregor's death at the end as a relief—liberation from the burden of having to care for him and tolerate his presence
 - Is their attitude a reflection of elitist society's attitude toward the working class as a kind of necessary but distasteful burden to be tolerated? (Or the attitude of those who are accepted by society toward its outcasts?)
 - ironically, the burden of caring for Gregor has given the family renewed health, vigor, drive, etc.
- the story reveals a number of negative characteristics of human nature: selfishness, laziness, classism, lack of sympathy, tendency to take things for granted