

KAFKA'S

The Metamorphosis

Famous First Sentence

- The first line of the story is one of the most famous in all of literature.
- In Modern literature, critics are trying to interpret this line. Writers are trying to imitate it.
- Kafka is radical in that he breaks with traditional, Aristotelian format. The climax occurs in the first line.
- The rest of the story is denouement.
- Kafka uses realist techniques to deal with *rather unusual* circumstances.
- This is no science fiction. It is a literal story.

No One is stunned!

- Both Gregor and his family are not surprised by his transformation, only annoyed.
- He emerges from his room three times during the story, each time creating a family disaster.
- In the end, he is abandoned by his family. The servant woman sweeps Gregor into a dustpan and the father, mother and Grete go on picnic in the country.
- The entire story is treated by the narrator as if this could be something that happens in any family.

Should we read this as metaphor?

- Gregor likes being a bug. How does this play into symbolism and metaphor?
- Gregor leaves real bug slime and the room smells like rot. The metaphoric reading is hard when Gregor is treated as a real bug. It happens over and over again. Gregor makes us read this as a literal story.
- Yet, we look for a parable in this story.

Ways to Read Meaning into the Story

- Expressionist story—a direct representation of reality doesn't actually describe how we experience the world. Objects are to be taken as expressions of our inner world. Think of Munch's "The Scream."
- Marxism—Gregor's transformation shows how unsatisfying work affects the worker. Modern men and women are alienated. Gregor transforms himself to escape from his job. Gregor is already an insect inwardly.
- Freudian—Kafka's own relationship with his father is reflected in Gregor's family relationship. This might be an Oedipal fantasy. Kafka had read Freud before writing the story. Father tries to kill the son who comes between mother and him. Father needs to kill son to restore order in the family.

Ways to read the Story, Continued

- Existentialism – a thing has no predetermined essence, but forms his essence by pure will. Gregor must take responsibility for changing his world and changing himself. Somehow, Gregor's choice was to become a dung beetle. Now he must make that work for him, or not.
- Critique of the Modern World—this story represents the modern world and how events in society affect the individual.
- The individual is run by systems of power, including the family, that he never really understands.
- The individual gets lost in bureaucracy in a “Kafkaesque” situation. He gets lost in the machinery.
- Gregor could represent the outcast and what happens to those who are not like the others in our modern world.

Where is God?

- God seems impersonal and distant. Perhaps this is a parable about the modern world, where life becomes incomprehensible, and values change away from the family. The institution that no longer makes sense is the family, not large bureaucracies.
- Gregor becomes an “it.”
- Grete is now becoming an object to be married off.
- No one thinks of Gregor.

The Ending of Story—Two explanations

- Because family never sees Gregor's reality in modern life, he dies. The family is never affected by whatever makes Gregor a vermin. They move on as if nothing happens.
- While Gregor is a bug, which is unpleasant, he also loses his daily cares. His reality changes drastically. He wins the battle of fighting society while the family loses out on his income, etc. He wins and loses at the same time. Yet, Gregor's inner life is preserved throughout the story.
- Does Gregor “win” or does his family “win”?