

World Humanities II
Alec Magnet
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Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Chapters 1 and 2.

As you read the first two chapters of *The Metamorphosis*, please keep the following questions in mind. You do not have to write your answers down. Just use the questions to guide your reading:

- How does Gregor's family react to him after his metamorphosis?
- How does Gregor interpret those reactions? Are his interpretations correct?
- What is Gregor's role in his family before and after his transformation? How does his role change—and how does it not change?

Homework Assignment: As we did with Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," please select one sentence from this reading assignment and explain in a few sentences why it is significant or interesting to you. Have your sentence and explanation ready to hand in at the beginning of next class on Thursday, February 11.

Relevant Literary Term:

Symbol A person, object, image, word, or event that evokes a range of additional meaning beyond and usually more abstract than its literal significance. Symbols are educational devices for evoking complex ideas without having to resort to painstaking explanations that would make a story more like an essay than an experience. Conventional symbols have meanings that are widely recognized by a society or culture. Some conventional symbols are the Christian cross, the Star of David, a swastika, or a nation's flag. Writers use conventional symbols to reinforce meanings. Kate Chopin, for example, emphasizes the spring setting in "The Story of an Hour" as a way of suggesting the renewed sense of life that Mrs. Mallard feels when she thinks herself free from her husband. A literary or contextual symbol can be a setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings. Such symbols go beyond conventional symbols; they gain their symbolic meaning within the context of a specific story. For example, the white whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick* takes on multiple symbolic meanings in the work. The meanings suggested by Melville's whale are specific to that text; therefore, it becomes a contextual symbol. Other works can incorporate such symbols by subtly alluding to it or by discussing it explicitly.

Biography: "My life is hesitation before birth" (1911).

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) Czech-born German writer is best known for his short story *Metamorphosis* (1912) and the widespread familiarity of the literary term Kafkaesque, inspired by his nightmarishly complex and bizarre yet absurd and impersonal short stories.

Franz Kafka was born 3 July, 1883 in Prague, Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, into a Jewish middle-class, German speaking family; his mother Julie, three younger sisters and his successful merchant father Hermann. Hermann owned a shop below where the family lived. He was ill-tempered and disrespectful towards his son's escape into literature and pursuit of writing and proved to be an on-going source of conflict and despair in many of Kafka's works. Kafka became



the eldest and only son when his two brothers died in infancy and, though he rebelled against his father's materialism, he was excruciatingly aware of this role in the family for the rest of his life.

In 1902 Kafka met Max Brod who would become his translator, supporter and most intimate friend. Kafka entered the German University in Prague in 1901 to study German literature and law, receiving his doctorate in 1906. Kafka was to lead a relatively inauspicious life, an exemplary employee with the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague from 1907 to 1922. He would finally gain renown posthumously upon Max Brod's publication of his three major novels, *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* in 1926 and *Amerika* (1927).

In 1911, Kafka was to spend his first of many curative periods in sanatoriums and spas for ill health. He suffered crippling migraine headaches and tuberculosis, along with other ailments. Today, he would also be diagnosed as anorexic:

Kafka rejected his family's eating habits; his nervous stomach forced him to adopt his own diet. In 1912, he became a vegetarian. He abstained "not only from meat, fish, eggs and alcoholic beverages, but also from tea, coffee, chocolate... ('nothing,' he said one day only have in jest, 'is more nourishing than a slice of lemon.')." For a time, Kafka adopted the bizarre dietary teachings of the American Fletcher, which among other things mandated extreme rumination [chewing] , which—at least in Kafka's conscientious application—made the very idea of shared meals impossible. ... Kafka wrote in 1912 that his father "was forced to hide his face behind the newspaper while I ate the evening meal" (Daniel Birbaum and Anders Olsson, *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs: An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism*, 2008, quoting Marthe Roberts, *Kafka's Loneliness*, 1982).

In 1912 he met and became engaged to Felice Bauer from Berlin. In 1912 he finished *The Metamorphosis* his best-known work. From his third-floor room with a view of the Vltava river and the toll bridge crossing it, Kafka worked on *The Metamorphosis*. "I would stand at the window for long periods," he wrote in his diary in 1912, "and was frequently tempted to amaze the toll collector on the bridge below by my plunge."

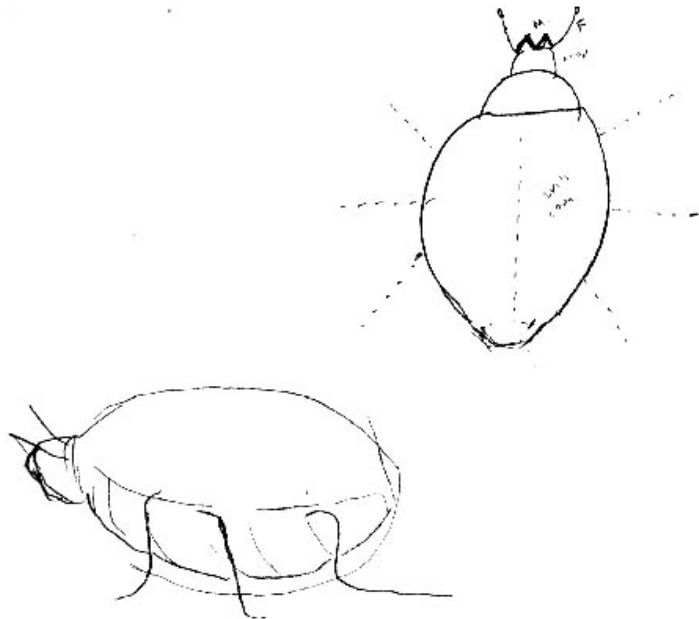
Franz broke off his engagement to Felice in July of 1914, undergoing a particularly nasty scene in a hotel with Felice, her sister Erna, and Grete Bloch, but nevertheless continued writing to her. He had a few other short, generally tortured relationships with women, most significantly with Milena Jesenská-Pollak, the wife of his friend Ernst Pollak. As with Felice, these affairs were largely carried out by sending each other letters through the mail. Sexually, he apparently oscillated between an ascetic aversion to intercourse, which he called "the punishment for being together," and, especially when young, promiscuity. He had numerous affairs and one-night stands with barmaids, waitresses, shopgirls, and prostitutes.

Kafka's lack of confidence and personal misgivings about his work caused him to request that all his unpublished manuscripts be destroyed. His friend, biographer and literary executor Max Brod didn't obey his wishes. On 3 June 1924, Franz Kafka died from complications of tuberculosis.

From Vladimir Nabokov's lecture on *The Metamorphosis*:

“Next question: what insect? Commentators say cockroach, which of course does not make sense. A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small. He approaches a cockroach in only one respect: his coloration is brown. That is all. Apart from this he has a tremendous convex belly divided into segments and a hard rounded back suggestive of wing cases. In beetles these cases conceal flimsy little wings that can be expanded and then may carry the beetle for miles and miles in a blundering flight. Curiously enough, Gregor the beetle never found out that he had wings under the hard covering of his back. (This is a very nice observation on my part to be treasured all your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know that they have wings.)

“Further, he has strong mandibles. He uses these organs to turn the key in a lock while standing erect on his hind legs, on his third pair of legs (a strong little pair), and this gives us the length of his body, which is about three feet long. This brown, convex, dog-sized beetle is very broad. I should imagine him to look like this:



“In the original German text the old charwoman calls him Mistkäfer, a "dung beetle." It is obvious that the good woman is adding the epithet only to be friendly. He is not, technically, a dung beetle. He is merely a big beetle. (I must add that neither Gregor nor Kafka saw that beetle any too clearly.)”

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is considered to be one of the great novelists of the twentieth century. Nabokov wrote his first nine novels in Russian, then rose to international prominence as a master English prose stylist. His novel *Lolita* (1955) was ranked at #4 in the list of the Modern Library 100 Best Novels by the Modern Library. He taught literature at Cornell University.

His career as an entomologist was equally distinguished. During the 1940s, as a research fellow in zoology, he was responsible for organizing the butterfly collection of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. The genus *Nabokovia* was named after him in honor of this work, as were a number of butterfly and moth species.