

THE METAMORPHOSIS  
*and* OTHER STORIES

Franz Kafka



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Introduction and Notes by Jason Baker  
Translated by Donna Freed



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## **FROM THE PAGES OF *THE METAMORPHOSIS AND OTHER STORIES***

As Gregor Samsa awoke from unsettling dreams one morning, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.

(from “The Metamorphosis,” page 7)

All he wanted to do now was to get up quietly and undisturbed, get dressed, and, most important, eat breakfast, and only then consider what to do next, because, as he was well aware, in bed he could never think anything through to a reasonable conclusion.

(from “The Metamorphosis,” page 9)

During the daytime Gregor did not want to show himself at the window, if only out of consideration for his parents, but he could not crawl around very far in the few square meters of floor, nor could he bear to lie still even at night, and eating gave him scant pleasure, so as a distraction he acquired the habit of crawling crisscross over the walls and ceiling.

(from “The Metamorphosis,” page 29)

The sister played so beautifully. Her face was tilted to one side and she followed the notes with soulful and probing eyes. Gregor advanced a little, keeping his eyes low so that they might possibly meet hers. Was he a beast if music could move him so?

(from “The Metamorphosis,” page 44)

“Alone—do you know what that is?”

(from “The Judgment,” page 57)

Georg stared up at the monstrous specter of his father.

(from “The Judgment,” page 62)

“On a ship the morals change as often as the ports.”

(from “The Stoker,” page 69)

“Guilt is unquestionable.”

(from “In the Penal Colony,” page 100)

This was not the exquisite torture the officer had wished for; this was out-and-out murder.

(from “In the Penal Colony,” page 118)

A false ring of the night bell, once answered—it can never be made right. (from “A Country Doctor,” page 128)

No one was capable of spending all his days and nights keeping watch over the hunger artist, therefore no one person could be absolutely certain from firsthand knowledge that the fast had truly been constant and flawless; only the hunger artist himself could know that, and so at the same time only he could be a satisfied spectator of his own fast.

(from "A Hunger Artist," page 138)

Josephine is the sole exception, she loves music and also knows how to give voice to it; she is the only one, and with her demise music will disappear—for who knows how long—from our lives.

(from "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse People," page 149)

We lead very uneasy lives; each day brings its surprises, anxieties, hopes, and fears; it would be impossible for any individual to bear it all without the constant support of his comrades.

(from "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse People," page 152)

FRANZ KAFKA

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THE  
METAMORPHOSIS  
*and* OTHER  
STORIES

*With an Introduction and Notes  
by Jason Baker*

*Translated by Donna Freed*

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Consulting Editorial Director



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## FRANZ KAFKA

Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883 into a middle-class Jewish household in which he grew up with feelings of inferiority, guilt, resentment, and confinement. He was the eldest of his parents' six children; two brothers died in infancy, and he had three sisters. Franz's domineering father expected his son to take up a profitable business career that would ensure social advancement for the family, as well as a successful marriage promising the same. His mother was submissive to her husband, always siding with him in matters concerning Franz. Toward her son she was alternately fawning and neglectful.

Kafka earned his doctorate in law in 1906 but decided against practicing, to the disappointment of his father. Instead, in 1908 he took a position at an insurance agency, which left afternoons and evenings open for writing, and at which he remained until 1922—two years before his death.

Kafka's literary method follows the logic of dreams and other unconscious processes, and his stories read like allegories without an established point of reference. Kafka's best-known story, "The Metamorphosis" (1915), in which he translated his experience as family breadwinner into a parable of alienation, transformation, and ultimately death, epitomizes his style. During his early writing life Kafka was introduced to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Thomas Mann, and became part of a literary and philosophical circle that included Oskar Baum, Martin Buber, and Felix Weltsch.

Kafka had significant relationships with several women during his brief life, notably Felice Bauer, to whom he became engaged in 1914 and 1917; Julie Wohryzek; Milena Jesenská-Pollack, his Czech translator, with whom he became involved in 1920; and Dora Diamant, a young Polish woman he met a year before his death. Kafka's sporadic literary career was in part fueled by these relationships, which varied in degree of dysfunction, and in which he vacillated emotionally, paralleling his mother's behavior toward him as a boy.

Diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1917, Kafka saw the publication of a limited number of his works during his lifetime, including "The Judgment" (1913), "The Stoker" (1913), for which he received the Fontane Prize in 1915, "The Metamorphosis" (1915), "A Country Doctor" (1919), and "In the Penal Colony" (1919). In 1924 Kafka asked his confidant Max Brod to burn his remaining unpublished manuscripts. Instead, Brod dedicated the rest of his life to the full publication of Kafka's works. Among these are the novels *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926), and *Amerika* (1927). Franz Kafka died on June 3, 1924, near Vienna.



## THE WORLD OF FRANZ KAFKA AND “THE METAMORPHOSIS”

- 1846 Fyodor Dostoevsky publishes *The Double* , a work that will greatly influence Kafka’s story “The Metamorphosis.”
- 1850 Charles Dickens publishes *David Copperfield* ; Kafka will imitate the novel’s style in “The Stoker” (1913).
- 1870 Leopold von Sacher-Masoch publishes *Venus in Furs* , which lays the foundation for masochism and has an enormous influence on Kafka.
- 1883 Franz Kafka is born on July 3 in Prague to Hermann and Julie (*née* Löwy) Kafka. The family is Jewish and middle class, and speaks both German and Czech. Franz is the eldest of his siblings; his two brothers die in infancy.
- 1889 Franz begins elementary school at Fleischmarkt. His sister Elli (Gabriele) is born.
- 1890 His sister Valli (Valerie) is born.
- 1892 Franz’s sister Ottla (Otilie) is born; of all his family, Kafka is closest with Ottla, for whom he plays the role of protective older brother.
- 1893 Kafka begins his studies at the German gymnasium in Prague, where he forms a friendship with Oskar Pollak, who will become a respected art historian and introduce Kafka to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. He also meets Czech-born poet, playwright, and novelist Franz Werfel.
- 1899 Kafka reads the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Darwin, Knut Hamsun, Baruch Spinoza, and Jules Verne. He forms a friendship with Hugo Bergmann, who will become a leading thinker in the Zionist movement. Kafka begins writing, although none of this early work survives.
- 1900 The Germans first test the zeppelin.
- 1902 Kafka meets writer and editor Max Brod at Brod’s lecture on the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Brod becomes Kafka’s most intimate friend and eventually his interpreter, translator, biographer, and posthumous publisher. They discuss the works of Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gustave Flaubert, Hermann Hesse, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Thomas Mann, and August Strindberg. Kafka’s literary circle also includes dramatist Oskar Baum, existentialist and influential Jewish thinker Martin Buber, and philosopher Felix Weltsch.
- 1903 Thomas Mann publishes *Tonio Kröger* , a favorite of Kafka’s.
- 1904 Kafka begins writing the surreal story “Description of a Struggle,” his earliest surviving work.
- 1906 Kafka receives a doctorate in law from German-speaking Karl Ferdinand University.
- 1907 Kafka begins writing “Wedding Preparations in the Country,” a novel that he will abandon but that contains the germ of “The Metamorphosis”; both involve the transformation of a human character into a lowly, despised creature.
- 1908 Shunning the practice of law, Kafka secures a position at the semi-governmental Workmen’s Accident Insurance Administration, where he works until his retirement in 1922.

- 1910 Kafka begins to keep a regular diary, a decision that lends discipline and seriousness to his writing. The performances of a Yiddish theater group from Poland captivate and inspire him; he later adopts a dramatic structure for "The Metamorphosis," dividing it into three parts, like acts of a play.
- 1911 By night Kafka does his own writing, and by day he com piles insurance manuals and policies. He develops a friendship with Yiddish actor Isak Löwy; Kafka's father, without knowing Löwy, compares him to vermin, a meta phor that features heavily in Kafka's fiction, especially "The Metamorphosis." Hitherto indifferent to his parents' religion, Kafka studies Jewish folklore and becomes fas cinated by his Jewish heritage, an appreciation that will increase throughout his life. Gustav Mahler's Ninth Sym phony, *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), is performed for the first time.
- 1912 Kafka meets Felice Bauer, from Berlin, when she visits Max Brod's family. An extensive correspondence ensues, in which Kafka attempts to at once woo Felice and keep her at arm's length. He feverishly composes "The Judg ment" in a single September night; of all his literary ac complishments, Kafka finds this the most satisfying. Soon after, Kafka completes "The Stoker," the story of a young German immigrant that later becomes the first chapter of his novel *Amerika*, and "The Metamorphosis," his tale of a man literally and symbolically transformed into an insect. Thomas Mann publishes *Death in Venice* .
- 1913 "The Judgment" and "The Stoker" are published. The sec ond Balkan War begins. Kafka meets Felice's friend Grete Bloch, with whom he corresponds, writing mostly about Felice.
- 1914 Franz and Felice are engaged, but within a month the engagement is broken. Archduke Ferdinand is assassi nated at Sarajevo, setting in motion events that culminate in World War I. After a two-year period of creative ste rility, Kafka writes the parable "In the Penal Colony," followed by "Before the Law," a sketch from his novel in progress, *The Trial* .
- 1915 "The Metamorphosis" is published. Kafka receives the prestigious Fontane Prize for "The Stoker."
- 1916 He writes a series of stories that will be collected and published in the volume *A Country Doctor* (1919).
- 1917 Kafka begins learning Hebrew. He becomes engaged to Felice Bauer a second time; diagnosed with tuberculosis, he ends the relationship. Kafka takes a leave of absence from his job, and his diary entries cease. The Balfour Dec laration approves the establishment of a Jewish national state in Palestine.
- 1918 Kafka studies the metaphysical writings of Johann Wolf gang von Goethe, Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopen hauer, and Leo Tolstoy, and continues his exploration of the Old Testament and Jewish folklore. He writes apho risms based in part of these studies.
- 1919 *A Country Doctor* is published, as is "In the Penal Colony." In the wake of the Treaty of Versailles, the Nazi party is founded in Germany, as is the Fascist party in Italy. Kafka becomes engaged to Julie Wohryzek, the daughter of a worker in a synagogue. Kafka's father objects on social grounds and convinces Kafka to break the en gagement. This action, more than any other, precipitates Kafka's most autobiographical work, "Letter to His Fa ther."

- 1920 Kafka meets the Czech writer Milena Jesenská-Pollak, with whom he becomes romantically involved. Milena translates several of Kafka's works into Czech. She ends the affair in August.
- 1921 Kafka starts writing the stories that will be collected in the volume *A Hunger Artist* (1924), centered on the difficult ties an artist faces in coming to terms with human society. While seeking to restore his health at the Tatra Mountains sanatorium, Kafka meets Hungarian medical student Robert Klopstock, who becomes his friend and physician.
- 1922 The insurance agency grants Kafka's request for early retirement.
- 1923 Kafka meets Dora Diamant, a Jewish socialist twenty years his junior. He moves to Berlin with her, hoping to devote himself fully to writing. Kafka asks Dora's father for her hand in marriage but is rejected based on a rabbi's counsel, perhaps because of his deteriorating health.
- 1924 *A Hunger Artist* is published. Kafka's rapidly declining health and his lack of money force him to return to living with his parents, a humiliating experience for him. He dies on June 3 in an advanced stage of tuberculosis of the throat in a sanatorium in Kierling, near Vienna. His last words to Robert Klopstock are "Kill me, or you are a murderer." Before his death, Kafka asks Max Brod to destroy all of his unpublished manuscripts.
- 1925 Disregarding Kafka's request, Brod begins publishing his friend's work, starting with the first of Kafka's three unfinished novels, *The Trial*.
- 1926 Brod publishes *The Castle*, an account of the futile efforts of a man to be recognized by the authorities.
- 1927 Max Brod publishes *Amerika*, an immigrant's adventures in a baffling new country.
- 1933 The Nazis ban Kafka's work and hold public burnings of his books.
- 1940 Grete Bloch, who had met Kafka in 1913, claims to be the
- 1942 mother of his child, a boy who died at age six and about whom Kafka had known nothing. The Nazis remove Franz Kafka's sisters Elli and Valli and their husbands to the Lodz ghetto in Poland, where they die.
- 1943 Kafka's sister Ottla, because of her marriage to an "Aryan," is exempt from Nazi deportation. Disdaining the preferential treatment, she divorces her husband and chooses to be led away; she ultimately is taken to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, where she dies.
- 1944 Grete Bloch is beaten to death by a Nazi soldier. Milena Jesenská-Pollak dies at the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück, in Germany.
- 1952 Dora Diamant dies in London.
- 1960 Felice Bauer dies in America.

## INTRODUCTION

FRANZ KAFKA'S FICTION DOESN'T make sense. Kafka was no doubt aware of the resulting awkwardness, and perhaps he hoped to hide from future readers when he asked his confidant Max Brod to destroy all his unpublished manuscripts upon his death. Kafka's writing is on the one hand specific and realistic, and on the other incomprehensible. His literary puzzles resemble the unreal landscapes and structures of M. C. Escher's drawings and lithographs. Actually, Escher's imagery offers a useful way to visualize Kafka's literature. As if leading the reader up and down endless staircases of logic, Kafka focuses on multiple dualities at once, all of which crisscross in three dimensions. Rather than a linear argument, Kafka writes a spiral one, which often makes readers dizzy, if not seasick. Interestingly, metamorphosis was one of Escher's favorite subjects, and three of his most famous woodcuts share this title with Kafka's novella. Metamorphosis, Anthony Thorlby argues, is the theme implicit in all Kafka's prose ("Kafka's Narrative: A Matter of Form"; see "For Further Reading"). Kafka's content is somehow incongruous with his form, and as a result, the language must either undergo a metamorphosis itself to accommodate his pen, or perish—and sometimes it does both. At its best, Kafka's prose is re-formed into a new mode of signification; at its worst, his words are deformed, depleted, meaningless. In striving to fit his impossible situations into the feeble vehicle of language, Kafka knowingly embarks on a failed enterprise. He attempts to express the inexpressible.

The metamorphosis of his writing, Kafka's real accomplishment, takes readers to a place at once familiar and unfamiliar. Intrigued by this immediacy, critics have celebrated Kafka for his "universality." This flattery overreaches perhaps, but the term "universal" was not picked by accident. Kafka's fiction examines a universe largely unexplored in the literature preceding him, one full of implications that venture into the remote regions of human psychology. It's a universe with different rules than those governing our reality. And there's no map.

But Kafka's universe nonetheless resonates deeply with who we are and who we've become. Early readers who hailed Kafka's universality had never seen their lives in books, and they had only dimly recognized the "Kafkaesque" as an unnamed thing. Kafka was among the first to describe bourgeois labor and its degrading impact on the soul. In his fable "Poseidon," Kafka even portrays the god of the sea as consumed with tedious, never-ending paperwork. Kafka brings to mind a vocabulary of images—an endless trail of meaningless forms to be filled out, a death apparatus to rival Poe's pendulum, a man wearing a bowler hat, a gigantic insect. Thanks to interpretations like Orson Welles's film version of *The Trial*, Kafka's universe has expanded to include rows of office desks, oppressive light, and snapping typewriters. Kafka understood the trajectory of bureaucracy, and his literature predicts the nightmarish corporate world we live in today.

Kafka's fiction, though concrete in its particulars, suggests an array of interpretive possibilities. "The Metamorphosis" alone has inspired Catholics to argue a case of transubstantiation, Freudians to extrapolate Gregor's castration by his father, and Marxists to infer the alienation of man in modern society. Kafka's descriptions vacillate between realism and allegory—a narrative style best described as parabolic. But unlike a traditional parable with an easy moral, Kafka's parables resist successful comprehension.

This volume has as its parentheses Kafka's two best-known parables, "A Message from the

Emperor” and “Before the Law.” They both illustrate Kafka’s near-nauseating ability to describe infinite regress. “A Message from the Emperor” checks any firm interpretation with its simple but devastating phrase “or so they say” (p. 3) in the opening line, which calls into question the tale’s validity, as if the account is rumored. Additionally, the “you,” the second person, has dreamed the whole thing up (p. 3). This second piece of information not only contradicts the first, it turns the parable on its head—why would someone, especially “you,” which seems to refer to the reader, dream up something so unnecessarily complicated, especially when it concerns something as momentous as an emperor’s message? This “you” can stand for Kafka himself—a writer who saw an infinite corkscrew of obstacles spiraling before him, and yet felt compelled to record his own deliberate steps. “Before the Law” also features an Inferno-like layering and again pits an unsophisticated character against an implacable system, unknowable in its complexity. Though the man from the country never recognizes it, his defeat by the Law, capital L, is a foregone conclusion. The Law’s only purpose is to shut out the man and, in so doing, to destroy him.

Kafka’s parables are epitomes of his larger works (“Before the Law,” though published first on its own, is actually part of *The Trial*). Their shortness only concentrates the reader’s perplexity. Robert Wenniger claims that Kafka’s father engendered in Kafka a disparity between language and meaning. In fact, silence was Kafka’s typical response to his father. By writing incomprehensible texts, Wenniger argues, Kafka assumes the role of the father, an authorial position over the reader (Wenniger, “Sounding Out the Silence of Gregor Samsa: Kafka’s Rhetoric of Dyscommunication”). This leaves the reader confused and vainly searching for meaning. Of course, Kafka shares this privilege with many of the world’s great writers, whose work is often a challenge to interpret. In “On Parables” Kafka writes, “Parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already” (*The Complete Stories*, 1971, p. 457).

In Kafka’s formulation, the parable is used by the sage to gesture toward something larger than, or invisible to, himself. The need to make this gesture is innate. But the parable dissolves the moment we understand it; the gesture would not be beyond language if it could be defined. We lose in parable the moment we pin things down to an accessible meaning. Realizing it is impossible to discuss or interpret Kafka without losing in parable is the first and perhaps only step we can take.

Kafka’s parables not only fall apart once we interpret them, they are impossible to put into practice. If anything, his parables guarantee the failure not only of his characters, but of readers wishing to abstract any lessons applicable to their own lives. Failure, it seems, is Kafka’s true subject. To get at this conundrum, we must explore discretely the dichotomies Kafka himself conflates—dreams versus reality, idleness versus work, vermin versus human, child versus adult. For Kafka, each of these antagonistic pairs represents an authorial relationship. It is possible to lump the lowly—dreams, idleness, vermin, child—on one side, and the authority figures—reality, work, human, adult—on the other. But ultimately this equation is too simple, for Kafka himself fails to pick a side. He calls both sides into question and finds them equally detestable. Unbraiding Kafka’s authorial relationships is the only way to find out why.

Dreams—and, perhaps more importantly, nightmares—held a singular influence over Kafka and his writing. Kafka’s nightmares are so natural, so convincing, that they creep into the reader’s mind almost subliminally. He metamorphoses reality into a new, insidiously darker one,

often within a single sentence. In “The Judgment,” Georg’s father throws at him an old, unfamiliar newspaper (p. 64), an actual object that evidences a deception, staggering in its elaborateness—Georg’s father has been feigning his infirmity, only pretending to read his newspapers, for years! In “The Metamorphosis,” Kafka speeds time ticklessly: “It was half past six and the hands were steadily advancing, actually past the half hour and already closer to three quarters past” (p. 8). Later, the head clerk arrives at the Samsa flat to investigate Gregor’s tardiness, *at the moment of his tardiness*. Even if Gregor’s absence from work was judged grave enough to send the head clerk himself, the event remains absurd. Somehow, the head clerk would have had to foresee Gregor’s lateness and taken an early train to show up at the flat just minutes after Gregor should have been at his office desk.

In “A Country Doctor,” the sudden, ominous appearance of the groom is punctuated by his mysterious knowledge of the maid’s name and his tacit intent to ravish her. Following this, the doctor is whisked away in his newly harnessed trap, as if beyond his control, completely unable to assist his maid, who locks herself in the house: “I hear my front door splinter and burst as the groom attacks it, and then my eyes and ears are swamped with a blinding rush of the senses. But even this lasts only a moment, for, as if my patient’s courtyard opens just outside my gate, I am already there” (p. 124). The ten-mile distance between the doctor’s village and his patient’s house, the reality that precipitated the need for strong horses in the first place, evaporates.

Nightmare-turned-reality is the power of “The Metamorphosis.” Gregor Samsa is a different animal, a unique figure even among canonical supernatural tales. Without the permanence of Gregor’s monstrous form, we would be left with something like the absurd comedy of Gogol’s “The Nose,” in which Kovalyov’s nose leaves his face to prance about the town disguised as a state councillor but in the end returns to its proper place unchanged. Without Gregor’s inimitable subjectivity, we would be left essentially with the horror of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the painting of Dorian becomes monstrous while Dorian himself remains ageless, until the fey moment when the two destroy each other, leaving only a moral behind.

Instead, we arrive at a story that cannot claim the supernatural as one of its elements. The mystery of “The Metamorphosis” emerges in one of the most famous, and most variously translated, lines in Western literature—its first: “As Gregor Samsa awoke from unsettling dreams one morning, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (p. 7). This is marvelously funny. Instead of waking up from a nightmare, Gregor wakes up into one. Reality, the only balm for bad dreams, is significantly less reassuring when you wake up hideously disfigured. But in Kafka’s fiction, the rational and the irrational intertwine menacingly. Often these irrational elements spring from the minds of his characters and manifest themselves physically. Ideas are metamorphosed into reality, with little effort on the characters’ parts. Here Gregor’s idea, originating in his “unsettling dreams,” has followed him into the real world. The echo and confirmation of this reality comes in the second paragraph: “It was no dream” (p. 7). Unlike Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who, after transforming several times, wakes up, Gregor’s most bizarre adventure is real, and has only just begun.

Kafka treats the bed, representative of both illness and idleness, as the birthplace of these irrational ideas. The first sentence introduces Gregor not only in his nightmarish form but also ensnared in his bed, as if caught in the grips of tangling irrationality. Gregor spends most of the first section of “The Metamorphosis” trying to extricate himself from his bed: “in bed he could never think anything through to a reasonable conclusion” (p. 9). In viewing the chaos of his legs

waving in the air, Gregor tells himself “that he could not possibly stay in bed and that the logical recourse was to risk everything in the mere hope of freeing himself from the bed” (p. 10). By escaping, he hopes to shut out the irrationality of his new form and return to his old self. We learn that Gregor was unrelentingly reasonable as a human; the head clerk booms through the door, “I have always known you to be a quiet, reasonable man and now you suddenly seem to be indulging in rash eccentricities” (p. 14). For a brief second, Gregor even entertains simply sleeping it off (p. 7) or resting in bed in hope of a cure (p. 10). Here he employs a reverse logic, an irrational hope that the bed will magically restore his “unquestionable state” (p. 11). It does not. In fact, Gregor’s human form isn’t restored once he’s free from bed either. But his irrational belief that it would be was itself generated in the bed. This divides Kafka’s universe into the irrational—dreams, notions deriving from the bed—and the rational—reality, working, family. The surreality of Kafka’s fiction consists in his constant traffic between these two realms.

In Kafka’s story “Wedding Preparations in the Country,” Eduard Raban fantasizes about splitting into two forms: one, to remain in bed all day, dreaming; the other, to go forth and conduct the business of the world. Interestingly, Raban envisions the “bed” form as a large beetle, the worldly self as the shell of his human form. Raban thinks to himself,

I would pretend it was a matter of hibernating, and I would press my little legs to my bulging belly. And I would whisper a few words, instructions to my sad [human] body, which stands close beside me, bent. Soon I shall have done—it bows, it goes swiftly, and it will manage everything efficiently while I rest (*Complete Stories*, p. 56).

Kafka differentiates the two tales by treating Raban’s splitting as “pretend,” and Gregor’s transformation as real. But in truth, Gregor invents his transmutation just as Raban invents his. The metamorphosis does not happen *to* Gregor. It’s something he consciously—or perhaps more aptly, subconsciously—wills upon himself. Gregor thinks of himself as “condemned to serve” (p. 11), as trapped. When Gregor makes his first appearance before his family in his changed form, he reveals his total willingness to give up his job: “If they were shocked, then Gregor was no longer responsible” (p. 15). This passage betrays Gregor’s premeditation and points to the idea that Gregor *wanted* to change into a monstrous vermin—something incapable of working in an office. While not consciously desirous of his new form, he’s sentient of his situation and very much in control. Of course, in attempting to shirk his responsibilities and escape the confines of the office, the lonely hotel rooms, and his family’s flat, Gregor confines himself even further; his room becomes his sole domain, and eventually even it metamorphoses into a storage closet.

Kafka’s metaphor of a man’s transformation into vermin is unique not only because the change comes from the man himself, but also because it critiques modernity and the impossibility of living functionally within it. In this sense “The Metamorphosis” stands as one of the greatest indictments against work ever written. Gregor’s impetus to transform reflects the illogicality of working life, the impossibility of sustaining a work ethic. After the novella’s fantastic first sentence, Gregor searches for clues that might explain his newfound condition. After ignoring the overwhelming evidence of his new body after the briefest of perusals, Gregor looks about his room. Out his window, he perceives dreary weather, which causes him to feel “quite melancholy” (p. 7). It is typical Kafka for a man, who has most recently discovered he occupies the form of a monstrous vermin, to feel saddened by the weather. But this melancholic whim extends beyond Kafka’s humor and points to Gregor’s chronic dread of mornings. It’s a prelude to his vitriolic damnation of working life:

“Oh God,” he thought, “what a grueling profession I picked! Traveling day in, day out. It is much more aggravating work than the actual business done at the home office, and then with the strain of constant travel as well: the worry over train connections, the bad and irregular meals, the steady stream of faces who never become anything closer than acquaintances. The Devil take it all!” (pp. 7-8).

Gregor does not mince words: grueling, aggravating, strain, worry, bad—all followed by an imprecation. Deeper still, the diatribe is prompted by a “faint, dull ache” (p. 7) in his side. How telling that Gregor, who has so recently lost his familiar, human form, should notice an ache and immediately think of his job. Whether this pain merely reminds him of the rigors of labor or is a soreness actually caused by it, Gregor innately associates work with pain.

The ritualized actions listed in Gregor’s exclamatory account of his job give the impression of a thoroughly regimented life-style. Because we never know Gregor in his human form, we have to piece him together after the fact. It seems Gregor’s human self was like most of us at some point or another—weak, afraid, submissive to corporate and familial pressures. He lacks the space for creativity, and even irrationality. Immediately upon his awakening, Gregor’s gaze falls upon the illustration of a woman that hangs in a frame he carved with his fretsaw. The pride and enthusiasm he has for his gilt frame is evident, and it resurfaces when he protects it from his sister and mother (p. 33) in their unwitting attempt to strip away the only proof that Gregor was once human. The picture represents Gregor’s single creation—or in Marxist terms, the one product he is allowed to keep. For Gregor, work precludes the possibility of creation; in the life of a traveling salesman, the gilt frame is the exception rather than the rule.

But why go to the trouble of changing into a monstrous vermin? Why didn’t Gregor just quit his job? For Gregor this was impossible: “If I were not holding back because of my parents, I would have quit long ago” (p. 8). A loyal and loving son, Gregor feels obligated to pay off his parents’ debt. Simply quitting would betray that loyalty. After his transformation, Gregor overhears his family discuss their bleak financial situation and feels “flushed with shame and grief” (p. 27). He despairs of the prospect of any one of his family members, especially his sister Grete, working to make ends meet. Gregor blames himself for spoiling the quiet life he had previously provided for them. He knows firsthand the impersonality, the lifelessness of modern labor, and he shudders at the thought of his family experiencing it.

The family members do indeed get jobs, and as they do so, they complete the reversal of Gregor’s metamorphosis. The transformation of Gregor into vermin, and his resulting abdication of the breadwinner role, forces the Samsa family to transform *from* vermin. The family members, who have lived parasitically off Gregor, change into tired, silent, and empty people who more and more resemble the pre-insect Gregor. They must work even when they are at home to accommodate their three boarders, and thus they degrade into obsequious servants. Eventually the sister is resolute in her decision that Gregor must be gotten rid of: “We all work too hard to come home to this interminable torture” (p. 46). Here, because the family’s day is filled with the torment of working, the additional strain of Gregor becomes unbearable. Their inability to disengage from work in the evening deprives them of the only possible respite from labor, and life without some kind of rest is torture. The worst irony is that taking care of the verminous Gregor is a filthy chore. Gregor, by escaping work, has not only forced his former dependents into labor, but has *become* work: disgusting work that only his disgraced family can perform.

Kafka returns again and again to the idea of vermin—the revolting nomads who communicate



like birds in “An Old Leaf,” the dehumanized, emaciated hunger artist, the strange mouse people, among whom even Josephine barely distinguishes herself, and the man from the country in “Before the Law,” who by the end holds the fleas in the doorkeeper’s fur collar above himself. Max Brod actually refers to “The Metamorphosis” as Kafka’s “vermin story” (*Franz Kafka: A Biography*, 1960, p. 18). Additionally, Kafka regularly inserts *himself* in his fiction, giving his characters names like K. Some critics have even connected the two short *as* of Samsa with the identical vowel construction of Kafka. Vermin is in the eye of the beholder, and Kafka clearly sees a self-resemblance.

For Kafka, thinking about vermin was a way to understand the universe, and his own place in it. “A Message from the Emperor” begins by describing “you” as the emperor’s “single most contemptible subject, the minuscule shadow that has fled the farthest distance from the imperial sun” (p. 3). The “you” lives in shadow like a rat or a cockroach. Further, this shadow darkens against the authorial source of light, “the imperial sun.” The lowliness of vermin is created by a hierarchy, at the top of which is an amorphous, omnipotent authority. Kafka’s short parable “The Emperor” echoes this idea: “When a surf flings a drop of water on to the land, that does not interfere with the eternal rolling of the sea, on the contrary, it is caused by it” (*The Basic Kafka*, 1979, p. 183). Interestingly, Kafka again chooses a laborer to play the role of vermin.

In Kafka’s universe authority and vermin are natural enemies, and each gives rise to the other. In “Letter to His Father,” Kafka addresses himself in the voice of his father, Hermann:

There are two kinds of combat. The chivalrous combat, in which independent opponents pit their strength against each other, each on his own, each losing on his own, each winning on his own. And there is the combat of vermin, which not only sting but, on top of it, suck your blood in order to sustain their own life (*Dearest Father*, p. 195).

Herr Kafka represented the ultimate figure of authority for Franz, who here accuses himself of operating on the level of vermin. Moreover, this passage lashes out against the inequality intrinsic to an authorial relationship. Kafka’s suspicion of authority governs every word he writes. Throughout his life Kafka committed himself to many things—intellectualism, vegetarianism, teetotaling, Judaism, a string of women—but his subscription to each of these was never total. Once Kafka came to regard any philosophy as nothing more than a system of rules to be enforced, a dogma both bigger and smaller than himself, he withdrew from it.

In Kafka’s story “A Report to an Academy,” the narrator, who five years previous had occupied the form of an ape, has been transformed into a human. In this tale it is difficult to draw a black line between the narrator’s two selves; the differences are subtle. The narrator’s tone implies that his gradual transformation from an ape into a human represents an improvement. But Kafka questions this authorial status of humans. Driven by the desire to escape his cage, the ape observes his observers; the narrator writes, “it was so easy to imitate these people” (*Complete Stories*, p. 255). Thus Kafka diffuses the differences between animals and humans. In so doing, he extends the reader’s natural sympathy for human characters to include vermin, and applies the reader’s natural aversion to vermin to humans instead. In Kafka’s fiction, it is possible for humans and vermin to function as mutual metaphors, and though the dichotomy between vermin and human remains, it becomes increasingly difficult to choose a side.

Gregor Samsa plays host to the conflict between vermin and human in that he does not disown his mind as he does his body. Throughout the novella, he retains his human consciousness, memory, and ability to understand human speech and intentions. Because of his residual human

perception, Gregor never sees his armor-plated form as even *potentially* liberating; instead his inhabitation of an insect's body is tortured and guilt-ridden. Wilhelm Emrich argues that the impersonal nature of modern life prevents Gregor from recognizing the freedom of his "pre-human" form (commentary in *The Metamorphosis*, Bantam edition, 1972). Instead Gregor views it as monstrous, alien, and other. During Gregor's initial reconnaissance of his room, he seeks solace from his former humanity; his gaze falls upon his work samples, his desk, his gilt frame. He all but ignores his new, unsightly form. Gregor hungers obsessively for the explainable; his absolute need to hurry off to work represents a severe form of denial, itself a human tendency: "What if I went back to sleep for a while and forgot all this foolishness" (p. 7). He courts rationality out of an obligation to his former self. But his feigned, humanlike demonstrations are silly: trying to stand upright, speaking to his parents and the head clerk, returning to work.

Upon seeing his unpacked samples, Gregor admits to himself that he does not feel "particularly fresh and energetic" (p. 8), an absurd notion for a man-size insect to ponder. He presumes the change in his voice to be caused by a severe cold, "an ailment common among traveling salesmen" (p. 10). But Kafka does not let Gregor off so easily. By positioning the head clerk at the bedroom door, Kafka keeps the reader from believing in Gregor's self-delusion. Upon hearing Gregor speak, the head clerk says, "That was the voice of an animal" (p. 15). Gregor's metamorphosis is real, and his efforts to deny it are frail.

In "Wedding Preparations" by contrast, Raban dreams of frittering away his days in bed. His weightless disposition comes from his ability to indulge in his irrational side. The pre-vermin Gregor would have considered such an activity frivolous. Before his transformation, Gregor never gave in to distractions other than fretsawing. He stayed home each night and busied himself constantly, "reading the paper or studying train schedules" (p. 12). Kafka himself worked at the same job all his life. At his office, he wrote tracts such as "On Mandatory Insurance in the Construction Industry" and "Workers' Accident Insurance and Management." In the evenings Kafka remained cloistered in his room, where he worked on his various manuscripts. By contrast, Gregor has no such dedication; he's learned to suppress his personality, to submit unconditionally to authority. As the head clerk has it, Gregor's reasonableness derives from not indulging in "rash eccentricities" (p. 14). In fact, Gregor champions himself for his impersonal habit of locking the doors at night (p. 9). For Kafka, an oppressive rationality and the human experience, at least within the modern bourgeois value system, are synonymous. Gregor, who is fluent only in rationality and is loyal to the human social ideal, is tortured by his insectival state.

Consequently, Gregor fails to see that he's capable of conscious irrationality. The metamorphosis seems a mistake, a wrong turn, a trap out of which the only escape is death. Walter Sokel goes so far as to say that Gregor's true form is death (commentary in *The Metamorphosis*, Bantam edition, 1972). Perhaps in this light Gregor's insect form represents a slow death, a chronic, fatal illness. Kafka saw his tuberculosis as a liberation; interestingly, he called it "the animal." Further, Kafka found his passages on death to be his most compelling pieces of writing. But "The Metamorphosis" is more than a tale of suicide. For if Gregor is ultimately dead in the first sentence, what is the point of reading further? There must be a glint of hope for his salvation—and there is. If Gregor is capable of turning himself into a monstrous vermin, then he can change back. He just doesn't want to.

It is guilt—that most revolting of all human sentiments—that prevents Gregor from embracing

his insect form. Out of guilt, Gregor chooses not to relinquish his role of family provider. Though he laments his obligation, he never gives it up. In the final section, Gregor considers “the idea that the next time the door opened he would take control of the family affairs as he had done in the past” (p. 39). Rather than the absurdity of Gregor’s earlier denials, here Kafka focuses on Gregor’s ability to puzzle out his situation. There is an implied agency, as if Gregor truly possesses the ability to snap out of his state and return to his old self. Whatever his decision, he can’t help but fail. His escape is ultimately doomed by his utter devotion to his family, which never diminishes. The guilt brought on by Gregor’s newfound inability to provide for his family—financially and emotionally—prevents him from attaining any sort of liberation. Perhaps recognizing this conundrum, Gregor chooses to remain an insect. Though both conditions are unlivable, he prefers vermin life to human; it’s the lesser of two tortures.

Kafka’s story “The Burrow” concerns a character who inhabits the space *between* human and vermin. Though the narrator differentiates himself from the “field mice” (*Complete Stories*, p. 326) and “all sorts of small fry” (*Complete Stories*, p. 327) that occupy his burrow, he uses his unspecified but presumably human body in an animal fashion. He pounds the tunnel walls firm with his forehead (*Complete Stories*, p. 328); he fights and kills rats with his jaws (*Complete Stories*, p. 329). Yet the burrow itself, which the narrator dubs “Castle Keep,” is the result of deliberate, extensive planning and constant maintenance. Further, the burrow’s effectiveness and impregnability inspire the narrator’s dreams: “tears of joy and deliverance still glisten on my beard when I awaken” (*Complete Stories*, p. 333).

The logic that gives rise to Castle Keep is one twisted by absolute isolation. It is the logic of both fantasy and ignorance, a child’s uninformed rationale. In fact, the burrow is much like a child’s fort—but one inhabited by someone driven insane with fear. The narrator’s incessant calculations and preparations become increasingly insular, until his mind is saturated with a baseless paranoia. This compulsively cogitative yet ultimately ignorant perspective is much like the psychology of Dostoevsky’s underground man. By the end of “The Burrow” the narrator’s mind no longer resembles human consciousness at all, but instead a fight-or-flight, animal mentality.

The rift between child and adult roles is at the heart of “The Metamorphosis.” Gregor, like the narrator of “The Burrow,” possesses the mentality of a child. In Kafka’s universe the child is the least authorial figure, and therefore can be likened to vermin. It is natural for Gregor’s parents and the head clerk to speak to Gregor condescendingly through the door. It’s almost as if they regard Gregor as throwing a childish fit. Later, the family, led ferociously by the father, forces Gregor into his room like a naughty child. And Gregor, for his part, has no interest in adult matters. He loathes his profession. He has no intention of finding a companion; the only woman in his life, besides his sister and mother, is the pin-up girl in the gilt frame. When Gregor looks around his room, Kafka, again with excruciating humor, describes it as “a regular human bedroom” (p. 7)—as if Gregor’s room would be decorated to the tastes of a monstrous vermin. But the precise phrase in the original German, *kleines Menschenzimmer*, implies that it resembles a child’s room.

Gregor, like Georg Bendemann of “The Judgment,” is typified by his familial relationships. (The other “son,” Karl Rossmann of “The Stoker,” differs because we meet him on his trip to America—he’s on his own.) Both Gregor and Georg are confined to their parents’ homes as adults. Adult children regularly slip into childhood roles when visiting their parents. But for

Kafka's characters, this stunting is not temporary. Kafka himself lived with his parents until a year before his death, and right before he died he was forced to return because of his tuberculosis. Living for so long in proximity to his parents made Kafka feel like a child—the same child he was prior to his physical and literary development. These developments vanished before his parents, who remained relatively unchanged—they even outlived him!—and whose authorial position over him was total. Walter Benjamin once described a photograph of Kafka in which Kafka's "immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape" ("Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death"). Thomas Mann wrote about Kafka in much the same way—painting a man with "large dark eyes, at once dreamy and penetrating" and an "expression at once childlike and wise" (commentary in *The Castle: The Definitive Edition*). The only difference is that Mann was talking about Kafka's final portrait, and Benjamin was looking at a picture of Franz taken when he was six years old. Kafka never grew up.

Kafka's suffocation as an adult child leaves its trace on Gregor and Georg, who each suffers a child's frustration at having no say, yet finds himself in a caretaker's role fraught with responsibility and guilt. Each is sentenced to death by his parents. Gregor's devotion to his parents and his sister forces him to interpret the family's grievances as a condemnation, whereas Georg's judgment is about as direct as you can get. And, hauntingly, Gregor and Georg each carries out his own sentence. The adult child—another of Kafka's fusions of different states—is little prepared for the world. Even Eduard Raban's fantasy of splitting into two selves in "Wedding Preparations" is a child's attempt at evasion: "Can't I do it the way I always used to as a child in matters that were dangerous?" (*Complete Stories*, p. 55). The answer to Raban's question is no. Kafka's characters, regardless of how much agency they possess, are doomed to fail. As Kafka writes in "A Message from the Emperor," the messenger's arrival "could never, ever happen" (p. 3).

If we think of Gregor as having a child's mentality, it is natural to sympathize with him—especially if we see him as trapped in the role of family provider. This sympathy is not altogether different from what we feel toward Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, that supreme victim of child labor. Yet this sympathy does not hold, for it is always followed by a repulsion toward Gregor's physical ity: "A brown fluid had come from his mouth, oozed over the key, and dripped onto the floor" (p. 16). Kafka further complicates matters by writing "The Metamorphosis" in the third person. This mode of narration allows for Gregor's death at the end, which confirms definitively that the metamorphosis was not a hallucination or a dream. But though the narrative follows Gregor's awareness, we always have enough room to reevaluate how we feel about him.

Some of our sympathy falls to the sister, and even to the feeble parents—none of whom are fit to work. But ultimately we remain loyal to Gregor, especially because his family forsakes him. His sister stops tending to him (p. 40) and locks him in his room (p. 48); his mother faints upon seeing an enormous insect clinging to the wall (p. 33); the father, in brief, subjects him to every abuse imaginable. At the expense of Gregor's sacrifice, the sister, at the end of the story, stretches her arrogant body and gets the liberation Gregor longed for. Under Gregor's care first, and then her parents', the sister enjoys a healthy childhood, one leading to physical and mental development, and one in which she isn't trapped. Yet our loyalty to Gregor extends even beyond his death, and his sister's cheery success story offers but a bitter pill.

In the pivotal scene of "The Metamorphosis," Gregor's sister begins to play her violin. Listening to her music, Gregor "felt as though the path to his unknown hungers was being