The Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka
“The life which is unexamined is not worth living.”
Socrates
Did Gregor Samsa examine his life?
Franz Kafka depicts the separation and alienation of modern man.
Kafka delineates a distorted world—one of anxiety and bitterness.
This disturbing world is reflected in the various novel covers shown below.
What is *Metamorphosis*? *Metamorphosis* is a novella written in 1912 by Franz Kafka.

**Novella:**

* Longer, more complex than short stories
* Focuses on a limited number of characters and events
WHAT QUESTIONS DOES THIS DISTURBING NOVELLA ADDRESS?

- Is this only a psychological transformation of the mind?
- Is this an actual physical transformation?
- Is this an inner struggle that has manifested itself in both a physical and psychological change?
Gregor vacillates between two spheres: rationality and irrationality.
Why does Gregor appear to take the transformation with equanimity?
How would you react if you could not awaken from a nightmare?
When we “transform,” do we lose our original identity?
In his morphing, what has Gregor escaped from?
Is the beetle Gregor’s innermost self? Is it time for this self to confront Gregor?
Is the “metamorphosis” a rejection of all responsibility?
Is this a story of anxiety?
Is this story humorously disturbing?
How does guilt permeate the novella?
Is it pointless to attempt to analyze this novella?
Grotesque or Black Humor

- Characterized by the ludicrous or the incongruous
- Characterized by distortion and is bizarre and outlandish
- Characterized by absurdity
- An aspect of the Theatre of the Absurd
- Uses sardonically humorous effects derived from mordant wit or grotesque situations that deal with anxiety, suffering or death
- Tone is often one of resignation, anger or bitterness.
FRANZ KAFKA

- 1883 – 1924
- Born in Prague
- German, Czech and Jewish heritage
- Father – Hermann Kafka
- Mother – Julie Lowy
- Eldest of six children
- Kafka dies of tuberculosis at 41.
- His literary works are considered some of the finest of the 20th century.
Yes, Kafka was afraid of his father. In a letter of almost 100 pages, Kafka delineates the following points; however, his father never read the letter.

- “{You raised me} with vigor, noise and a hot temper.”
- “As a father you have been too strong for me—and for that I was much too weak.”
- “This feeling of being nothing that often dominates me comes largely from your influence.”
- “You really only encourage me in anything when you yourself are involved in it.”
- “I was weighed down by your mere physical presence…I was skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad…I felt a miserable specimen.”
“From your armchair you ruled the world.”
“Your opinion was correct, every other was mad.”
“For me you took on the enigmatic quality that all tyrants have whose rights are based on their person and not on reason.”
“What was always incomprehensible to me was your total lack of feeling for the suffering and shame you could inflict on me with your words and judgments.”
“...it is fundamentally impossible for you to talk calmly about a subject you don’t approve of or even one that was not suggested by you; your imperious temperament does not permit it.”
“I became completely dumb, cringed away from you, hid from you...”
“Your extremely effective rhetorical methods...were abuse, threats, irony, spiteful laughter and self-pity.”
“You have always reproached me (either alone or in front of others since you have no feeling for the humiliation of the latter, and your children’s affairs were always public).”
“Between us there was no real struggle; I was soon finished off; what remained was flight, embitterment, melancholy, and inner struggle.”

“You turned in me to mistrust of myself and perpetual anxiety about everything else.”

“You struck closer to home with your aversion to my writing.”

“Your method of upbringing {instilled in me} weakness, the lack of self-confidence, the sense of guilt…”

“It is the general pressure of anxiety, of weakness, of self-contempt.”

“In my writing I have made some attempts at independence, attempts at escape—I must choose the nothing.”

“And there is the combat of vermin, which not only sting but suck your blood in order to sustain their own life… and that’s what you are.”

Do you note any parallels between these quotes and Gregor’s relationship with his father?
Is Gregor a beetle?
Is Gregor experiencing a mental breakdown?
Is Gregor changing one identity for another?
EXPRESSIONISM

- Early 19th century movement based on the belief that inner reality, or a person’s thoughts and feelings, are more important than the object or situation that causes the response
- Expressed through symbolic characters, exaggeration, distortion, nightmarish imagery and fantasy
- Grew out of paintings of Vincent van Gogh

Edward Munch
*The Scream*
“Super realism” developed in France in the early 1900s as a reaction to realism. It stressed the power of the imagination and dreams over conscious control. Surrealist painters like Salvador Dali depicted objects as they would never appear in reality, such as his famous drooping watches.
EXISTENTIALISM

- People are created by the experiences they undergo.
- It is action and making choices that give life meaning.
- Human beings are free to make their own choices in life.
- A philosophical, religious, and artistic movement that dates to the early 1800s.
Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung

FREUDIANISM

- A theory of psychology
- Freud believed that every human action is influenced by the unconscious mind.
- Early experiences, such as one’s relationship with one’s father, have a profound effect on the development of the unconscious.
- Kafka experienced complex relations with his own father.
The strange tale begins...
(with art by Luis Scafati)
The *metamorphosis* occurs in the early morning hours during the short period of sleep and one’s daily mundane routine. The climax of the novella occurs in the first sentence of the story: “When Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams one morning, he found that he had been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug.”
“When Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams one morning, he found that he had been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug.”
“He lay on his back, which was hard as armor, and, when he lifted his head a little, he saw his belly—rounded, brown...His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his girth, flickered helplessly before his eyes.”
“Gregor shoved himself slowly to the door, using the chair; once there, he let it go and threw himself against the door, holding himself upright against it—the balls of his little feet contained some sticky substance—and rested there from his exertions...he prepared to turn the key in the lock with his mouth...”
“Gregor’s father…seized the chief clerk’s walking stick…gathered up a big newspaper from the table and, stamping his feet, began to drive Gregor back into his room by brandishing the walking stick and the paper. No plea of Gregor’s helped…The father urged him back, uttering hisses like a savage.”
“A basin stood there, filled with milk in which little slices of white bread were floating...he didn’t at all like the milk...he devoured the cheese, the vegetables and the gravy...he didn’t like the fresh food, he couldn’t even endure its smell...”
“They had grown used to it (Gregor’s earnings)…they accepted the money gratefully…but no particular warm feelings were generated any longer. Only his sister had still remained close to Gregor all the same, and it was his secret plan---because she could play the violin soulfully—to send her to the conservatory…”
“{Gregor would} lean against the window…the liberating feeling he always used to experience when looking out the window. With each passing day his view of things at only a slight distance was becoming increasingly blurry…”
“{Gregor} realized that the sight of him was still unbearable for her...and that she probably had to exercise terrific self-control not to run away at the sight of even the small portion of his body that protruded below the couch...”
“She ran into the adjoining room to fetch some medicine to revive her mother from her faint; Gregor wanted to help, too...he, too, ran into the adjoining room, as if he could give his sister some advice...she got a fright when she turned around; a bottle fell on the floor and broke; a splinter wounded Gregor in the face, and some kind of corrosive medicine poured over him.”
“It was an apple; another flew at him immediately afterward; Gregor stood still in fright; to continue running was pointless, because his father had decided to bombard him. One that flew right after it (apple) actually penetrated Gregor’s back.”
“And yet the sister was playing beautifully. Gregor crawled a little bit further forward, keeping his head close to the floor in hopes of making eye contact with her. Was he an animal if music stirred him that way?”
“Gregor, attracted by the playing, had ventured out a little further and already had his head in the parlor...he was also completely covered with dust...’Mr. Samsa!’ the gentleman in the middle called to his father. ‘In view of the disgusting conditions prevailing in this apartment and family, I am giving up my room...and I won’t pay a thing for the days I’ve lived here.’”
“’We have to try to get rid of it,’ the sister now said to her father. ‘It’s got to go... that’s the only remedy.’”

“He recalled his family with affection and love... Then his head voluntarily sank down altogether, and his last breath issued faintly from his nostrils.”
Actor Tim Roth portrays Gregor Samsa in the 1987 movie *Metamorphosis*. Physically, he remains human, but what is transpiring in his convoluted mind?
Tim Roth in the 1987 movie
Tim Roth
Many people find themselves conflicted in this modern age. They are torn between freedom and responsibility to both society and to family. It is within this conflict that guilt often arises, and oftentimes one’s reaction is to escape. Perhaps we should remember Polonius’s words in *Hamlet*.

“This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”