

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* Socratic Seminar Ticket

1. Discuss Gregor's relationship with his family (parents and sister) and the role these relationships play in helping to create the environment of the novella. How do the relationships shift? What do these shifts signify? How do they create meaning? **To what and to whom does the "metamorphosis" of the title refer? How do the shifting roles of protagonist and antagonists change the meaning created by the story?**
2. Gregor's mysterious transformation seems to be rooted in both his odious work life and his dysfunctional family relationship. In his essay, "Kafka's "Metamorphosis:" Rebellion and Punishment," Walter Sokel argues a Freudian interpretation: "Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis resembles both types of "accidents" described by Freud, those in which a person satisfies his suppressed hostility by "accidentally hurting someone else, and those in which he hurts himself ... the metamorphosis accommodates Gregor's conflicting needs, the need to rebel [against his work and his boss], and the need to suffer punishment for this rebellion [vague, pervasive sense of guilt toward his family]. Above all, by being an unconscious process, the metamorphosis protects him from self-knowledge ... Therefore, the metamorphosis appears as an utterly mysterious, inexplicable event. The author, however, by letting us see Gregor's feelings of revolt at the opening of the story (after which they are repressed and extinguished in guilt and fear) has given us a key to the mystery of the metamorphosis. Kafka's work seems like the expressionist illustration of an "accident" that is not a true accident according to Freud" (6). **Consider this excerpt from Sokel's essay and argue using specific evidence from the text the degree to which you accept or reject elements of his Freudian interpretation that Gregor is somehow complicit in his situation.**
3. Gregor's death can be viewed from multiple critical perspectives. A Biblical approach to the story may suggest that Gregor is a sacrificial martyr who died to relieve human suffering and forgive sin; a feminist approach could suggest that Gregor has evaded his familial obligations to force his burden onto his sister to take over support of the family; a Marxist reading may argue that Gregor's work has dehumanized him so thoroughly that even his physical body has been inevitably transformed; a human rights or psychological approach may yield still more interpretations for the role Gregor's death plays in the story. **Which perspective(s) do you find most compelling and why? What do they suggest is the meaning of this unusual story?**
4. The last word of the first line is sometimes translated as bug, cockroach, or insect, but Kafka intended it to be "vermin." Definition for vermin: "Vermin is a term given to animals which are considered by humans to be pests or nuisances, most associated with the carrying of disease. Disease-carrying rodents and insects are the usual examples but the term can also apply to larger animals, on the basis that they exist out of ecological balance with their environment." **Why did Kafka leave the term abstract? What other elements are left unexplained? Why do you think Kafka left so much unexplained? What effect does this ambiguity have on your reactions to the entire novella?**