The Metamorphosis
Advanced Placement in English Literature
and Composition Teaching Unit

Study Guide
Student Copy

Chapter I

1. The first sentence of this story is quite famous in literature. However, over the years since its first translation, many voices in academia have complained that the word “insect” does not fairly translate Kafka’s original meaning. Offer your own interpretation of this debate. Why do many critics dislike the original translation?

2. As Gregor is lying in his bed, he reflects on his situation. He decides that he will not reach any sensible conclusions as to how to proceed until he gets up and gets moving. What reasoning does Gregor use at this point to convince himself that he still may be suffering only from a temporary delusion?

3. How does Gregor’s reference to “harem women” (p. 14) show that he is a bit of a nail, delusional about the outside world, and by extension, his own situation in life?

4. What does the fact that Gregor seems to ignore his physical symptoms in lieu of harping on his psychological hardships say about Gregor as a character?

5. Explain the significance of Gregor’s focusing solely on how his inability to go to work will affect his family, rather than on the fact of his transformation.
6. What is Kafka's angle in treating the transformation with such aloofness? What is the shift of focus attained by this technique?

7. A seemingly insignificant detail is noted in the first chapter when Gregor looks out his window and sees only fog. The hospital that was directly across from his window is no longer visible to him. Interpret this fact in a symbolic light.

8. Comment on Kafka's use of foreshadowing through Gregor's difficulties communicating with words.

9. Kafka often uses language crafted in a peculiar, yet methodical way. His use of round-about ways of saying things is not due to his inability to write clearly, but rather carries with it some intended meaning. In the following sentence: “At the same moment, however, he didn’t forget now and then to remember that the calm and calmest contemplation would be much better than desperate conclusions,” what does the choice of language in this passage serve to illustrate?

10. What is Gregor's interpretation of why the attorney comes to check on him personally, rather than some lesser messenger? How is the choice of limited-omniscient narrator important here?

11. Based on information from the text, explain Gregor's transformation as an objective correlative for his internal state. Then explain his transformation as a symbolic one.
12. What is the significance of Gregor’s legs fighting against each other as he lies helpless on his back?

13. While the attorney is outside, waiting to gain entrance to Gregor’s room, Gregor muses that perhaps at one time, the attorney had also undergone a similar experience. “One had to concede the possibility of such a thing,” Gregor thinks to himself (p. 19).

The narrator then informs us that, “as if to give a rough answer to [Gregor’s] question, the attorney now, allowing his polished shoes to creak, took a few determined steps in the next room” (p. 20).

a. Interpret the attorney’s “rough answer,”’s actions? Take into account Kafka’s description, “allowing his polished shoes to creak.”

b. What is evidenced by Gregor’s assumption that the attorney must have experienced a similar thing? What is Gregor seeking at this point? How does this assumption fit into an Existentialist framework?

14. Interpret the following statement from an Existentialist viewpoint.

If they were startled, then Gregor had no more responsibility and could be calm. But if they took in everything quietly, then he would have no reason to get excited and could, if he hurried, actually be at the train station around eight o’clock. (p. 22-23)

15. After Gregor’s attempts to talk to the attorney through his door, what is the result?
16. Why does this make Gregor “become much calmer?” (p. 23)

17. What does Gregor anticipate as a result of the arrival of either the doctor or the locksmith? What does this say about Gregor’s character?

18. What is significant about the fact that Gregor “no longer trusted himself to discern” whether the noises he was making were intelligible to humans?

19. What is significant about Gregor’s observation that he “didn’t need the locksmith” to open the door? Why is this a case of too little, too late?

20. When Gregor does finally manage to get the door open, what are the actual results? Describe each character’s reaction to Gregor.

21. What is the symbolic significance of the setting details Kafka offers the reader at this point?

22. How does Gregor discover that his myriad feet now suddenly work perfectly in unison to carry his body? What is the significance of this discovery?
23. What is suggested by the fact that Gregor's jaws snap at the sight of the flowing coffee?

24. What sort of comedy could be said to dominate this scene?

25. In what manner does Gregor try to communicate with his father?

26. The father's aggressive voice is described repeatedly as a "hissing noise" which bothers Gregor terribly. How is this description significant?

27. What stops Gregor's retreat into his room?

28. Explain the black humor apparent in Gregor's internal monologue throughout the scene.

29. What is significant about the last line of Chapter I?
Chapter II

1. How does Kafka set the tone for Chapter II? Explain the significance of his choices.

2. What is significant about Gregor's waking up in the nighttime?

3. What, upon discovery, first gives Gregor joy, then causes him distress?

4. What clues at the beginning of Chapter II suggest that Gregor's transformation will continue?

5. What deeply symbolic change in the way things work around the house (the power-structure) has occurred at the outset of Chapter II?

6. What is suggested by this change?

7. What is signified by the fact that Gregor feels anxiety in the room he has inhabited for the past five years?
8. What is shown by the fact that Gregor thinks the father’s not reading aloud to Grete and the mother at his accustomed hour is simply “a custom that, of late, had been entirely abandoned”?

9. Considering the notion of Gregor’s denial in an Existential framework, what does this way of perceiving say about Gregor’s character and his inability to cope with his previous human life?

10. What gives Gregor “great pride” to think back on? Why is this significant?

11. What does Gregor’s pride in taking care of his family say about his character? Why is this significant?

12. What evidence does Kafka provide that Grete, despite her servitude to her brother, is repulsed by him?

13. When does Gregor first begin to accept the effect of his transformation on his family? What does he decide he will do? What is the significance of this decision?

14. What is significant about the fact that Gregor cannot fit himself completely under the couch?
15. How does Gregor interpret his sister’s locking of the door when she leaves his room?

16. What is Gregor astonished to discover about his body? Explain the significance.

17. It is obvious to the reader that the sister locks the door because the family is horrified that Gregor might escape from his room. What kind of irony does this represent?

18. Though Grete still attends to him at this point, how is it suggested that she is becoming frustrated with the job of taking care of Gregor?

19. What does the following sentence from Chapter II tell the reader about Gregor’s attitude toward his family?

“They surely would not have wanted Gregor to starve, but perhaps they couldn’t have endured any experience of his eating other than hearsay; or perhaps sister was trying to save them from what was possibly only a small sorrow, as they had actually suffered quite enough already.” (p. 35)

20. What are we told is the maid’s reaction to “the occurrence” of Gregor’s transformation? Explain the significance of this reaction.

21. The use of the phrase “the occurrence” to describe Gregor’s transformation is an example of what literary device?
22. What had Gregor planned to “formally explain” to his family on Christmas Eve?

23. What are we told about the family’s reliance on, and gratitude toward Gregor, prior to his transformation?

24. Based on the changes that occur in Grete’s attitude toward Gregor and what we are told about the family’s general attitude toward Gregor’s role as a provider, what do you think Kafka wants the reader to think about the relationship between Grete and Gregor, before the transformation?

25. Why are there are always at least two members of the family (other than Gregor) home at once?

26. Why does Gregor “suffer through” his sister’s cleaning up his room and preparing his food dish?

27. What does the sister do with Gregor’s stool after she has noticed Gregor has been moving it under the window? What does this signify?
28. When Gregor hears that the father not only has some money left over from his old business, but that he had also been saving some of the money Gregor had given to him to pay the debt to his old boss, what is Gregor's reaction? What does this illustrate about the relationship between father and son?

Explain the significance of Gregor's reaction in terms of the Existential ideal.

29. Kafka writes on page 39 that Gregor looks out of his window, “Obviously with some sort of memory of the freedom he formerly enjoyed” (p. 39). Why does Kafka include the qualifier, “ly” in this sentence? What does this word choice convey?

30. Where are the first clues offered that Grete may soon change her attitude toward Gregor?

31. Explain the dramatic irony in Gregor’s observation that “a stranger would have thought that [he] had been lying in wait there and had wanted to bite her.”

32. For what reason does Gregor imagine that he catches a “glimpse of gratitude” from Grete?

33. From an Existentialist framework, explain why the fact that Gregor thinks he perceives a look of gratitude from Grete is more important than whether or not she actually offered him any gratitude.

34. Where do we see the parents’ change of attitude about sister’s value?
35. What sorts of details are the parents interested in hearing from Grete? Why?

36. What in Chapter II points to the fact that Gregor is becoming even more insect-like, and detached from human thought and emotion?

37. What is the mother’s opinion of removing the furniture from Gregor’s room? What does she worry it might imply?

38. When his sister and mother come to remove his furniture, Gregor is conflicted. What is the source of this feeling? What does he both long for and fear?

39. Where is it first suggested that Grete may be thinking only of herself in the changes she makes to Gregor’s room?

40. After being rather ambivalent at first, Gregor decides on page 44, that his mother and sister are “robbing him of everything he held dear.” He mentions, specifically, his fretsaw. Why is this object especially meaningful?

41. When Gregor “ventures forth” to save his things, this represents his first self-determined and definitive act in the story since he opened his door in Chapter 1. What object does Gregor choose to protect? Why? What is the result of this action on his part? What does this suggest from an existentialist framework?
42. Where is it first suggested that Gregor may become aggressive? Interpret this sequence as a statement on human behavior.

43. What is the context of Grete's first direct address of Gregor since his transformation?

44. Where are the motifs of isolation and guilt developed in this chapter?

45. The reader is told that the father appears "both furious and glad." What is the reader's word choice here?

46. What does Gregor do as an attempt to pacify his father? What kind of communication is he trying to use? What is the result?

47. Who saves Gregor's life at the end of the chapter?

48. What metamorphosis is described in detail in Chapter II? What is suggested by this metamorphosis that supports a theme of the book?
Chapter III

1. Explain the irony in Gregor’s description of “the dictates of family obligation,” allowing revulsion, one must endure, if nothing else—endure.” (p. 51)

2. Why is Gregor allowed certain new privileges at the outset of Chapter III?

3. Where is Gregor’s rationalization of his treatment by the family (a technique he uses to avoid conflict) evident at the beginning of Chapter III?

4. How does Kafka elicit sympathy for the father in Chapter III?

5. What does Kafka suggest the father’s “obstinacy” (p. 52) is a reaction to? Interpret this as a social statement.

6. During evening discussions, what was the biggest complaint of the family?

7. What does Gregor “understand” about the causes of the family’s woes? What is illustrated by his projection?
8. What makes the wound in Gregor's back begin to “hurt anew”? (p. 53)

9. Why does Kafka include the following sentence: “and, when Gregor was once more in the darkness, the women, mingling their tears or tearless, stared at the table.” (p. 53)

10. After Gregor is locked away in his room, what is conveyed by his memories of the people from his former life?

11. Where is a change in Gregor’s attitude toward his family’s care for him evident in Chapter III?

12. How does he try to display his feelings? What is the result?

13. What happens when the mother decides to take on the task of cleaning Gregor's room?

14. What is Gregor's reaction to the commotion in the living room? Why is it ironic? How is this a symbolic gesture of change?

15. What is Gregor’s response to being addressed by the charwoman? What is illustrated by this? Explain the humor inherent in Gregor's reaction.
16. How does the charwoman react to Gregor's attempt to threaten her? What is significant about this interchange?

17. How does Gregor react to his room being made into a junk pile? What is conveyed here?

18. What do the three tenants symbolize in the story?

19. Why does Gregor notice the tenant's chewing?

20. What is ironic about the violin scene?

21. Interpret the father's uniform as an objective correlative. What does the uniform represent symbolically?

22. What is accomplished by the rhetorical question on page 60, in which Gregor asks, “Christmas had already gone by?”

23. Where is body language again featured as a form of communication in Chapter III? (Note: This time Gregor is the interpreter of the body language)
24. What is Gregor's response to his sister's violin playing?

25. While entranced by the music, Gregor fantasizes about having his sister all to himself in his room, "of her own free will." He imagines himself defending her, and kissing her exposed neck (p. 60).

What is implied here about Gregor's feelings toward his sister?

26. What are the tenants' reactions to Gregor? Is this a case of unreliable narrator? What does this detail add to the story?

27. Why is Gregor "too weak to move,"

lare?"

29. What is significant about the way Grete refers to Gregor when she addresses her parents at the bottom of page, 61, saying: "we must be rid of it" (p. 61).

30. On page 60, Kafka, again uses the phrase, "one," to refer to the reader, saying, "one could see how, under the sister's proficient hands, the sheets and pillows from the bed flew into the air and arranged themselves." What is accomplished by addressing the audience in this removed, anonymous way?
31. What is the mother's reaction to the agreement between the sister and the father that Gregor must be disposed of? What motif is illustrated here?

32. What is suggested by the use of the phrase “mechanical motion of her hands” to describe the way the sister wipes the tears from her mother's eyes on page 63.

33. In another example of body language, Grete shakes her hand fiercely to indicate her feelings when father suggests the possibility that Gregor might understand what they are saying about him. Why is this gesture significant? What does this show about Grete's feelings toward Gregor?

34. How does sister rationalize her statement that, “The fact that we have believed this for so long is our true misfortune” (p. 62)?

35. How is this ironic? What does it foreshadow?

36. What does the sister say the family would have done if Gregor had chosen to leave on his own? What are the implications of this statement in terms of Kafka’s view of society?

37. What is signified by the sister's crying on page 62?
38. Explain why Gregor's statement, “in addition, nobody was urging him onwards; it was all left up to him,” (p. 63) is significant in an Existentialist framework.

39. Explain the significance behind the wording of Gregor's death scene in an Existential framework: “Then, apart from his will, his head sank down completely, and his last breath streamed weakly out of his nostrils.” (p. 64)

40. We are told that Gregor's contemplation of his resolution to disappear put him into a state of "vapid and peaceful contemplation" (p. 64). Explain the significance of this statement to the major theme of the story.

41. What literary technique is employed by the appearance of the charwoman after the description of Gregor's death scene?

42. Interpret the choice of language in the following sentence: “The married Samsa couple sat upright in their marriage bed and had to force themselves to overcome their fright of the servant before they understood her announcement” (p. 65). How does this illustrate the differences between the Samsas and their servant?

43. Explain the use of the motif of lightness and darkness surrounding Gregor's death scene.
44. After the announcement of Gregor’s death, Grete emerges from her bedroom fully clothed, “as is she hadn’t slept at all,” (p. 65) What is the significance of this detail?

45. Comment on the resolution of the story in which, following Gregor’s death, there is a great sense of relief, and the tone brightens.

46. Interpret Grete’s reaction when she notes of Gregor’s body: “look how emaciated he was” (p. 65).

47. Interpret the addition of the butcher’s assistant coming up the stairs at the end of the story. We are not told why, but what might this suggest? Why might Kafka have included this unqualified detail?