

The Metamorphosis

by Franz Kafka · Language: EN

Summary by booksummaryai.com — <https://booksummaryai.com/country/en/the-metamorphosis>

Overview

The Metamorphosis tells the story of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. The narrative follows his physical and emotional decline as he struggles to adapt to his new body while his family—his father, mother, and sister Grete—react with horror, shame, and eventually neglect. Gregor, who had been the sole breadwinner, becomes a burden confined to his room, and the family gradually shifts from pity to resentment. The story is a stark exploration of alienation, identity, and the dehumanizing effects of modern work and family obligation.

Kafka's novella is not a fantasy adventure but a bleak, matter-of-fact account of absurdity. The central arc moves from Gregor's initial concern about missing his train to his slow physical deterioration, his family's growing indifference, and his eventual death from a wound and starvation. After his death, the family feels relief and a renewed sense of purpose, symbolizing their liberation from the burden he represented. The Metamorphosis matters because it captures the existential dread of being useful only as long as one is productive, and it questions the nature of love, duty, and humanity. Its influence on literature and philosophy is immense, making it a cornerstone of modernist and existentialist thought.

Key Takeaways

- Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect is a metaphor for the alienation and dehumanization that can result from a life of relentless work and family obligation.
- The family's reaction to Gregor's metamorphosis reveals that their love was conditional on his usefulness as a provider, not on his humanity.
- Grete, Gregor's sister, initially shows compassion but eventually becomes the one who insists that the insect is no longer Gregor and must be gotten rid of.
- Gregor's death is not a tragedy but a relief to his family, who immediately feel a sense of renewal and hope for the future.
- The story challenges readers to consider what makes a person human—appearance, productivity, or intrinsic worth—and how society treats those who no longer fit in.
- Kafka's use of a matter-of-fact tone for an absurd event highlights the irrationality of modern life and the lack of meaning in routine existence.

- The apple thrown by Gregor's father, which lodges in Gregor's back and causes a festering wound, symbolizes the family's rejection and the physical manifestation of their hostility.
- The ending, where the family takes a tram ride and notices Grete's beauty, suggests that life goes on and that the family is ready to move forward without Gregor.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

Gregor Samsa wakes up transformed into a giant insect. He is more concerned about missing his train than his physical state. His family and the chief clerk come to check on him, and when he finally opens the door, they are horrified. The chief clerk flees, and Gregor's father drives him back into his room with a cane and a newspaper, causing Gregor to injure himself on the door frame.

Chapter 2

Gregor adjusts to his new life, staying in his room. His sister Grete brings him food, first offering milk and bread, which he no longer likes, then rotting leftovers. She begins to clean his room, but Gregor starts hiding under the sofa. One evening, his mother and sister move furniture out of his room, and Gregor, in a panic to save a picture on the wall, crawls onto it. His mother faints, and his father returns and throws apples at him, one of which lodges in his back, causing a serious wound.

Chapter 3

Gregor's wound festers, and he becomes weaker. The family takes in three lodgers to earn money, and they use Gregor's room as a storage space. One evening, the lodgers hear Grete playing the violin and ask her to play. Gregor, drawn by the music, crawls out and is seen by the lodgers, who give notice. Grete then tells her parents that they must get rid of the insect, insisting it is not Gregor. Gregor, understanding, crawls back to his room and dies early the next morning. The family feels relief, and after a day of rest, they take a tram ride, noticing Grete's youthful beauty and planning for her future.

Themes

- Alienation and isolation
- Dehumanization through work
- Family obligation and betrayal
- Identity and transformation
- Absurdity of existence
- The burden of the other

Notable Quotes

- "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin." — The opening line of the novella, establishing the premise of Gregor's metamorphosis.
- "He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections." — Gregor's first description of his new body, emphasizing his insect-like appearance.
- "I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me." — Gregor's internal thought, expressing his isolation and inability to communicate his human feelings.
- "He must go, cried Gregor's sister, that's the only thing, Father. You must just try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor." — Grete's declaration to her parents that the insect is no longer her brother, marking the family's final rejection.
- "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin." — An alternative translation of the opening line, often quoted in English editions.
- "He was still occupied with this distressing thought, when he heard his mother's voice, softly calling: Gregor, come in, we have been expecting you." — A moment before Gregor reveals himself, showing the family's initial attempt to maintain normalcy.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Metamorphosis about?

The Metamorphosis is about Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who wakes up one day transformed into a giant insect. The story follows his struggle to cope with his new body while his family, initially dependent on him, gradually rejects him. It explores themes of alienation, dehumanization, and the conditional nature of love and duty within a family.

Is The Metamorphosis worth reading?

Yes, it is a short but profound work that has influenced countless writers and thinkers. Its exploration of existential themes, absurdity, and human relationships remains relevant. The novella is a cornerstone of modernist literature and offers a unique, unsettling perspective on the human condition. It is a quick read but leaves a lasting impact.

How does The Metamorphosis end?

Spoiler: Gregor dies from a wound and starvation after his family neglects him. His death is met with relief. The family, freed from the burden, takes a tram ride, and his parents notice Grete's beauty and vitality, suggesting they are ready to move on and find new hope for the future.

Who should read The Metamorphosis?

Anyone interested in existential literature, modernist fiction, or works that challenge conventional narratives. It is also valuable for readers who enjoy exploring themes of alienation, identity, and societal expectations. Students of literature, philosophy, and psychology will find it particularly rewarding, but its universal themes make it accessible to all.

How long does it take to read The Metamorphosis?

The Metamorphosis is a novella of about 22,000 words. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 90 minutes to read. However, many readers take longer to absorb the dense themes and symbolism, so plan for 1.5 to 2 hours.