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**Study Guide**

for

**The  
Metamorphosis**

by Franz Kafka



 **Glencoe  
McGraw-Hill**

New York, New York   Columbus, Ohio   Woodland Hills, California   Peoria, Illinois

# Meet Franz Kafka



*I am separated from all things by a hollow space, and I do not even reach to its boundaries.*

—Franz Kafka, in a letter of December 16, 1911

**F**ranz Kafka was born in Prague, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on July 3, 1883. He was the oldest surviving child of Jewish parents Hermann Kafka, a successful merchant, and Julie Löwy Kafka. Hermann Kafka was an overbearing man who was never able to appreciate his son's special talents. The strained relationship between father and son became the key element in Kafka's personality and led to lifelong guilt, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence.

The young Franz was a good student and popular with his classmates and teachers. Already, however, the boy showed signs of an inward-looking personality and the poor health that was to trouble him his entire life. He disliked the authoritarian discipline of school life but found pleasure and escape in literature. The English novelist Charles Dickens was a favorite.

In 1901, when he was eighteen, Kafka went to the German University in Prague. He studied for a law degree, a course of study approved by his domineering father and one that would lead to a prestigious job, but the young man found the coursework boring. His real interest was literature, and he attended many lectures and readings in his

spare time. He also began to write short sketches and other pieces of fiction.

Soon after graduating with a law degree in 1906, Kafka began working in a government workers' insurance office. Like Gregor Samsa, the main character of *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka still lived with his parents. His work at the insurance office, while dull, did leave some time for Kafka to pursue his interest in literature. However, family tensions, the deteriorating health of his parents, and his own self-doubts made concentrating on his writing difficult. He began to keep a diary and also started work on his novel *Amerika*.

In 1912, when he was twenty-nine, Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*. That same year, he had met Felice Bauer, a visitor from Berlin. Although he was tortured by his usual self-doubts, Kafka became engaged to Felice in 1914. Three months later, he broke the engagement, worried that marriage and family life were incompatible with his writing. Several months later, they became engaged again. In August of that year, Kafka finally moved out of his parents' home. He began work on a novel, *The Trial*, the dark, eerie tale of a man arrested and executed for reasons he never discovers.

The year 1917 was a startlingly productive one for Kafka, during which he wrote about a dozen stories. These stories feature bizarre situations and characters that embody the alienation, search for meaning, and despair of modern life. Kafka's health worsened, and in 1917 he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He took a leave of absence at the insurance institute. He also broke his engagement to Felice a second time. In 1918 he became engaged to Julie Wohrtek, but this engagement, too, he broke.

The last years of Kafka's life were marked by periods of intense writing activity, family tensions, unsuccessful love relationships, and worsening health. In 1922, he was forced to retire from the insurance institute. When he was healthy enough, he continued to write. In 1924, however, he went to a rest home in Austria, where he died at the age of forty-one. During Kafka's lifetime, only a handful of his writings were published.

# Introducing the Novella

*Kafka is important to us because his predicament is the predicament of modern man.*

—British poet W. H. Auden

*Kafka certainly does not provide an interpretation of the world. . . . What he provides is an image of how experience looks when all interpretations are called in doubt.*

—British critic Anthony Thorlby

*It would have turned out much better if I had not been interrupted at the time by the business trip.*

—Franz Kafka, writing about *The Metamorphosis* in his diary

*The Metamorphosis* draws readers into the nightmarish world of Gregor Samsa, a young man who has mysteriously undergone a monstrous transformation. For many readers, Gregor's dehumanizing metamorphosis and subsequent feelings of alienation epitomize the human condition during modern times.

Kafka himself felt that *The Metamorphosis* was one of his more successful achievements, and it is probably his most widely read work today. With the exception of one event, the plot is almost humdrum in its realistic description of family tensions and economic worries. Kafka's clear, straightforward style belies the terror beneath the surface description. The neutral tone of the story also reinforces the feeling that the Samsas are a normal family—with one startling exception. The story never becomes cartoonish because the unreality of the situation is undercut by the realistic treatment of the events.

An aspect of *The Metamorphosis* that is frequently overlooked is its humor. Humor is a common response to emotional pain, and laughing in the face of hardship is not unusual. Many readers forget to notice the comical aspects of the story in their search for serious meaning. Kafka's humor is especially apparent in Chapter One, as Gregor makes adjustments to his new life.

As you read this puzzling work, keep in mind that scholars and critics have argued for almost a century about what it means. One reason for

Kafka's immense influence and popularity is this openness to many interpretations. Readers can find evidence in *The Metamorphosis* to support a variety of interpretations of the odd, yet heart-breaking, events.

Because Kafka is not the kind of writer who will take you by the hand and lead you to his meaning, you will need to find your way there yourself. On the way, you may learn to look at yourself and others differently—and you certainly will never think of insects in the same way after reading *The Metamorphosis*.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The novella takes place in an apartment in an unnamed city and unspecified time, although the setting resembles Prague at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*. At the time of Franz Kafka's birth in 1883, Prague was the capital of the kingdom of Bohemia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Today it is the capital of the Czech Republic. The population of the city in 1900, when Kafka was seventeen, was about one-half million people.

Prague has been called a "City of Three Peoples." In Kafka's time, almost all Prague residents were ethnic Czechs who spoke the Czech language. But about 6 percent of the city's population were German speakers. Jews made up about 5 percent of the population, and some of them, as did Kafka's family, spoke German as their first language.

Franz Kafka's double minority status, as a German-speaking Jew in a Christian, Czech-speaking world, had a powerful influence in shaping his personality. Jews and Germans mixed peacefully and actively with the majority Czechs, but they had their own schools, newspapers, publishing companies, organizations and societies, theaters, and cafes. Nevertheless, Prague's German-Jewish minority had a strong influence on the cultural life of the city and included many writers, artists, and intellectuals. Kafka was active in these circles for most of his life.

German-Jewish influence declined sharply, however, following the end of World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian empire was broken up. The

Czech provinces of Bohemia, Moravia, and part of Silesia combined with Slovakia to form the independent nation of Czechoslovakia.

### Did You Know?

*The Metamorphosis* is generally assigned to a category of fiction known as the **novella**, **novelette**, or **short novel**. Novellas are longer and more complex than short stories but shorter and simpler than novels. Short stories usually contain one major conflict, focus on one major character, and develop one major theme, whereas novels present a much larger fictional world with many characters and episodes. The novella usually focuses on a limited number of characters, a relatively short period of time, and a single chain of events.

The novella form has attracted many of the greatest writers. Among the best-known novellas are Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, and Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. As you read *The Metamorphosis*, ask yourself why Kafka chose to limit the length of his story. How might it have been different if the author had chosen to make it a novel? What might *The Metamorphosis* have lost or gained if it were written in a different form?

# Before You Read

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter One

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Think of a situation from a dream you have had that seemed incredibly real at the time but that could not actually happen in real life.

#### Journal

Write a journal entry about your dream. What happened in the dream? What details made it seem real? What feelings did you have while dreaming? Afterward?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to discover how one young man reacts when the world of dreams seems to have intruded upon the real world.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Animals as Characters

*The Metamorphosis* is not the only work by Franz Kafka in which animals play a central, if quite unusual, role. In one story, “Wedding Preparations in the Country,” a man named Raban wants to avoid helping prepare for a wedding. He plots to somehow send his clothed body to the wedding while he himself remains at home in bed, in the shape of a beetle. In another story, “The Burrow,” an animal suffers tremendous anxiety because it cannot convince itself that its elaborate burrow is, in fact, safe. In a third, “Investigations of a Dog,” an especially curious canine alienates himself from the other dogs as he speculates on topics like religion and the supernatural.

Beast parables, in which animals represent people, are an old form of literature dating back to ancient times. However, a curious coincidence may also have played a role in Kafka’s fondness for animal characters. His family name derives from the Czech word for jackdaw (*kavka*), a bird related to the crow and raven. Kafka often includes crows and other black birds in his works as symbols for paternal or authoritarian power.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**admonish** [ad mon’ish] *v.* to scold in a mild manner

**brusque** [brusk] *adj.* abrupt; blunt

**fathom** [fath’əm] *v.* to understand

**fulminations** [ful mə nā’shənz] *n.* verbal assaults; denunciations

**harbinger** [här’bin jər] *n.* event that foreshadows a future event

**plaintively** [plān’tiv lē] *adv.* in a mournful manner

**ravenous** [ra’və nəs] *adj.* extremely hungry

**supine** [sōō pin’] *adj.* lying on the back

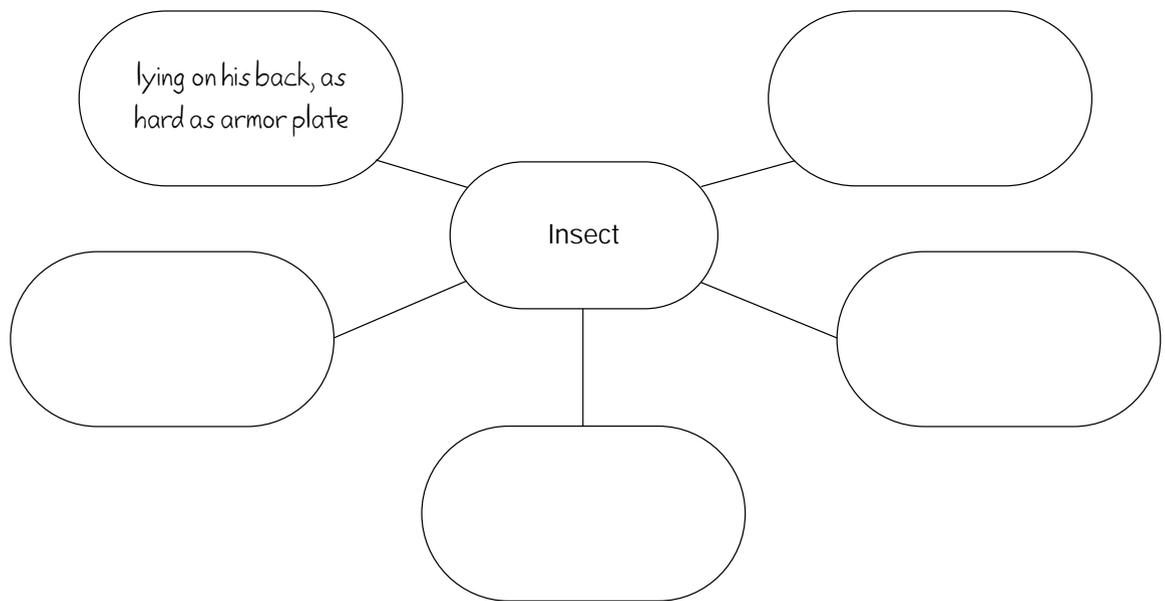
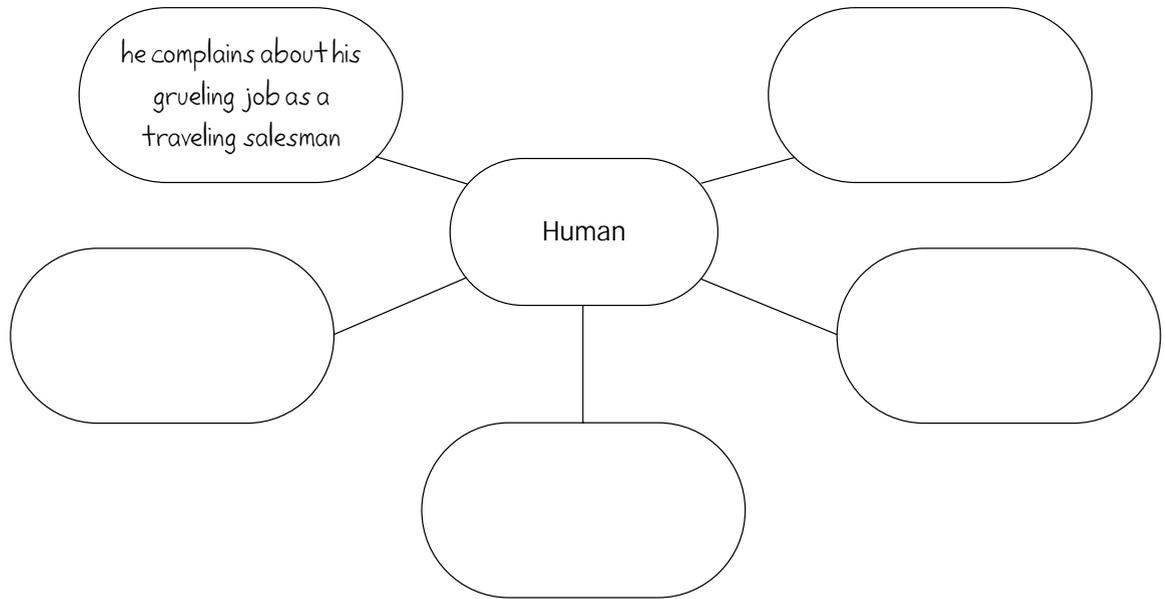
**vaulted** [vol’təd] *adj.* arched

**vermin** [vûr’min] *n.* harmful or objectionable creature, such as a cockroach or rat

# Active Reading

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter One

In the first chapter of *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka portrays Gregor as a dual being, both human and insect. For example, Gregor must figure out how his new body functions and learn how to use his legs and turn over. At the same time, he has the thoughts and feelings of a human being. As you read, use the word webs below to note words, phrases, and other information about Gregor's two "selves."



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# Responding

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter One

### Personal Response

Do you have sympathy for Gregor? If so, why and at what times? If not, why not?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. How does Gregor feel about his job? What evidence in the story reveals his feelings?

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2. What is Gregor's role in his family? Why does he have so much responsibility? How is this role about to change?

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3. What happens to Gregor when he leaves his room to meet the office manager? What does this episode reveal about Gregor's father?

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# Responding

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter One

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. From Gregor's point of view, what might be some positive aspects of his metamorphosis into an insect?

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5. What circumstances in Gregor's life might have caused him to feel dehumanized even before the metamorphosis took place?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Analyze Style

Russian author Vladimir Nabokov once commented that the straightforward style of *The Metamorphosis* is in "striking contrast to the nightmare of the tale." Review your answer to the **Focus Activity**. Then, in a few paragraphs, describe the style of the novel, and explain how the style enhances the nightmarish quality of the work.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

Some readers of *The Metamorphosis* have proposed that Gregor is actually insane and only believes that he has been transformed into an insect. Evaluate this interpretation with your group. What evidence can you find in the text to support or refute this interpretation? Be prepared to share your thoughts with other groups.

##### Learning for Life

Imagine that you are an investigative reporter for the *Prague Daily News* and your editor has just told you of a tip about a strange occurrence at an apartment building nearby. You hop a streetcar and enter the building to get the scoop. You are met at the door by a wildly babbling office manager of a fabric firm. Write a list of interview questions you would ask him and the residents of the apartment where the odd occurrence appears to have taken place. Then answer your questions in the roles of Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, Grete, and the office manager.



Save your work for your portfolio.

# Before You Read

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Two

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Do you think people ever hope to be punished for something they have done, said, or even thought? How might this wish lead people into a form of self-punishment?

#### List It

Working with a partner, make a list of the kinds of situations in which people might consciously or unconsciously wish to be punished. Discuss why this feeling might exist and what the results are likely to be.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to discover whether Gregor's situation may be a form of self-punishment.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Franz Kafka and "Isms"

Kafka's fiction is so rich and ambiguous that his short stories and novels can be interpreted in many different ways. Because of these many different interpretations, his work has been "adopted" by different schools of critics as especially appropriate to their beliefs and theories. Ultimately, no one way of interpreting Kafka seems broad enough to stand alone.

The early nineteenth-century movement known as *expressionism* was based on the belief that inner reality, or a person's thoughts and feelings, are more important than the "objective" reality outside the person. In short, the response of an individual is more important than the object or situation that causes the response. Expressionist writers, painters, and other artists tend to portray this inner reality through the use of symbolic rather than realistic characters, exaggeration, distortion, nightmarish imagery, and fantasy. Expressionism grew out of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh and the dramas of Swedish playwright August Strindberg. It was most popular in Germany in the early 1900s.

Another movement that has claimed Kafka as one of its own is *surrealism*. Surrealism, or "super realism," developed in France in the early 1900s as a reaction to realism and stressed the power of the imagination and dreams over conscious control. Surrealist painters like Salvador Dali depicted objects as they could never appear in reality, such as his famous drooping watches.

Another philosophical, religious, and artistic movement that has its modern roots in France and Germany is *existentialism*. Although it dates to the early 1800s, existentialism gained its most popular form in the writings of French writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in the years following World War II. While existentialism has many different forms, one of its most important elements is a belief that people are "created" by the experiences they undergo. It is action and making choices that give life meaning. Many existentialists did not believe in God, but rather felt that human beings were free to make their own moral choices in life.

One final movement that has claimed Franz Kafka is *Freudianism*, a theory of psychology based on the ideas of Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud. 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's complex relationship with his own father and the ways in which he addressed their strained relationship in his fiction have especially appealed to Freudians.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**comatose** [kōm'ə toz'] *adj.* lacking in vitality or consciousness

**inveigle** [in vā'gəl] *v.* to lure or induce into taking action

**pallid** [pal'id] *adj.* pale

**poignantly** [poin'yənt lē] *adv.* in an emotionally moving manner

**ruminations** [rōō'mə nā'shənz] *n.* thoughts; meditations

**sette** [sə tē'] *n.* seat for two or more persons; love seat

# Active Reading

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Two

Through Gregor's reactions to different events, we learn more about him and about the ways in which he is changing. Use the chart on this page to keep track of some of the events that reveal the changes he is undergoing and your thoughts about the meaning of these events.

Event	What We Learn
He doesn't like milk anymore.	He prefers garbage; his tastes have become more insect-like.

# Responding

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Two

### Personal Response

What parts of the story, if any, did you find humorous? Explain.

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. What does Gregor's father reveal about the family's financial status? What is Gregor's reaction when he learns the truth about their finances?

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2. What is Gregor's response when Grete decides to remove the furniture from his room? What does this response tell you about him?

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3. How is Gregor wounded? What symbolic significance might the object that wounds him have?

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# Responding

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Two

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. A person changed into an animal, or vice versa, is a common theme of fairy tales. In what ways is *The Metamorphosis* similar to fairy tales you know? In what ways is it different?

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5. What words would you use to describe Kafka's style? Does his writing remind you of other books you have read, music you have heard, or films you have seen?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Analyze Character

In this part of *The Metamorphosis*, we learn much about Gregor's sense of guilt. Review your answer to the **Focus Activity**. Then, in a few paragraphs, analyze the causes and effects of Gregor's guilt. If you wish, organize your analysis around the following questions: Why does Gregor feel guilty? What events caused the guilt, and how does it affect his relationships with other family members? Be sure to present details from the novella to support your evaluation.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

As Franz Kafka knew from his own life and as portrayed in *The Metamorphosis*, families possess the power to both improve and injure the psychological well-being of their members. In your group, discuss the ways that the Samsa family benefit and harm each other, citing examples from the text. Then, use the family in the novella, along with examples from real life, to create a set of ten important rules for creating and maintaining a healthy family life. Finally, grade the Samsa family on how well they follow your group's rules.

##### Art Connection

Choose an episode from this part of the novella and draw a cartoon of it. Among the scenes you might choose are Gregor eating his rotten food, hiding under his couch, listening at the door or looking out the window, hanging from the ceiling, clutching his picture, or fleeing from his father's attack. Use details from the text in your cartoon. Describe your work to the class. Display the drawings as you read the novella.



*Save your work for your portfolio.*

# Before You Read

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Three

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Caring for a sick or elderly relative can be stressful. What advice might you give to someone who is a caregiver?

#### Sharing Ideas

Discuss with a partner some of the stresses of being a long-term caregiver, and brainstorm ways to relieve these stresses.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to discover the effects on the Samsas of caring for Gregor.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Fathers and Sons

One figure looms over *The Metamorphosis*, especially in the third chapter. Many critics believe that the commanding figure of Mr. Samsa is the literary personification of the real-life figure who dominated Franz Kafka's life—his father, Hermann Kafka. Hermann Kafka was in many ways the exact opposite of his slender, shy, and thoughtful son: large, authoritarian, forceful, gruff, obsessed with his clothing business, and emotionally distant. The father also scoffed at his son's interest in literature and helped end his engagement to a woman from a socially inferior family.

In a famous letter to his father, written in 1919 but never delivered, Franz Kafka discusses their relationship. He claims that he felt as though he could not possibly live up to his father's expectations of him. As you read this section of the novella, think about how the relationship between Kafka and his father might have influenced Kafka's portrayal of the father and son in *The Metamorphosis*.

#### Did You Know?

When Kafka was already ill with the tuberculosis that would soon kill him, he asked his good friend Max Brod to destroy all his unpublished writings after his death. These writings included his great novels and many of his stories. Brod decided against following the wishes of his friend. As a result, Franz Kafka's writings were published, and Kafka became one of the most admired writers of the twentieth century.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**apathetic** [ap'ə thet'ik] *adj.* indifferent; unresponsive

**bailiwick** [bā'lə wik'] *n.* person's area of expertise, authority, or work

**harry** [har'ē] *v.* to harass or torment

**impelled** [im peld'] *adj.* driven to take action

**perusal** [pə rōō'zəl] *n.* detailed analysis

**quizzically** [kwiz'ikəl] *adv.* in a puzzled manner

**vouchsafe** [vouch sāf'] *v.* to grant or give

**windfall** [wind'fōl] *n.* unexpected gain

# Active Reading

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Three

As the title *The Metamorphosis* suggests, the characters in the novella undergo significant changes in their lives. Use the table started on this page to make notes about changes that each character undergoes.

Character	Changes
Gregor	seems to give up hope of becoming human again
Grete	has started working as a salesgirl, learning French and shorthand
Mr. Samsa	wears his bank uniform at home, as if always ready for duty

# Responding

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Three

### Personal Response

How did you respond to the ending of *The Metamorphosis*? What other endings might the story have had? Explain your answer.

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Why, do you think, has Grete's attitude toward Gregor changed? You may want to consider some of the issues you addressed in the **Focus Activity**.

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2. Who comes to live with the Samsas? What might be the significance of these new characters? Why did Kafka not give them names or other individual characteristics?

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3. How does Gregor respond to his sister's violin playing? What might Kafka be implying about Gregor by describing this reaction?

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# Responding

## *The Metamorphosis* Chapter Three

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. The narrator strongly implies that Gregor starves himself to death. What other forces might have led to Gregor's death?

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5. What effect does Gregor's metamorphosis ultimately have on his family? What does this effect suggest about his relationship with his family?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Analyze Meaning

The word translated as *vermin* in the first sentence of *The Metamorphosis* is *Ungeziefer* in the original German. As Kafka probably knew, *Ungeziefer* derives from a Middle High German word meaning “an unclean animal not suited for sacrifice.” What meaning do you think this word conveys about the nature of Gregor's metamorphosis? Do you think that his death can be seen as a sacrifice in any sense? In a few paragraphs, explain why or why not.

### Extending Your Response

#### Literature Groups

Many critics have pointed out that *The Metamorphosis* has elements of the **parable**, a story that illustrates a moral lesson. With a group of classmates, review the novella and discuss what moral lesson or lessons *The Metamorphosis* might illustrate. Then present your conclusions to other groups in your class.

#### Dramatic Monologue

Kafka's narrative point of view in *The Metamorphosis* is called **limited third-person**. He tells us Gregor's thoughts and feelings only. We do not learn what the other characters are thinking or feeling unless they show us by their words or actions. In fact, much of the novella is a kind of interior monologue of Gregor's thoughts and feelings, told by the narrator. This style has the effect of making Gregor's inner reality seem more important than what actually occurs in the world around him. Choose one of the *other* characters and create a dramatic monologue based on his or her reactions to the events of Chapter Three. Present your monologue to the class, and lead a discussion afterwards about what you chose to include.



Save your work for your portfolio.



# from Letter to His Father

Franz Kafka

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

What causes conflicts between human beings? How can conflicts be peacefully resolved?

### Background

It would, perhaps, be difficult to find a father and a son who were more different from each other than Hermann and Franz Kafka. Hermann was robust, outgoing, and domineering. Franz was frail, introspective, and insecure. Given the differences between them, it is not surprising that they were often at odds. When Franz was in his thirties, he wrote his father a letter in which he analyzed their strained relationship. The selection is from the opening passage of the letter.

## Responding to the Reading

1. According to Kafka, what is the purpose of the letter? What other purposes might the letter serve?

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2. What does Kafka see as the major cause of the conflicts between him and his father? The major effects?

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3. Describe the tone of the letter. How might this tone help fulfill the stated purpose of the letter?

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4. **Making Connections** What parallels do you see between Kafka's relationship with his father and the father-son relationship portrayed in *The Metamorphosis*?

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## Learning for Life

Conflict management experts have developed a number of ways to resolve conflicts peacefully. With a partner, use library or Internet resources to research conflict management techniques. Take notes and use them to perform a role play or to create a poster or brochure that helps your classmates learn a technique that you find useful.

# from *Letters to Felice*

Franz Kafka

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

What parts of the writing process do you find challenging? Why?

### Background

In 1912, when Franz Kafka was working on *The Metamorphosis*, he wrote several letters to his fiancée, Felice Bauer. (The couple eventually broke off the engagement.) The letters “lift the veil” from the writing process and give insight into the struggles that Kafka experienced while he was writing the story.

## Responding to the Reading

1. According to the letters, what obstacles did Kafka have to overcome to write *The Metamorphosis*?

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2. In his letter of November 24, Kafka says that “the more I write . . . the more I free myself. . . .” How might writing help someone feel free?

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3. During the writing process, Kafka sometimes seems dissatisfied with the way his story is turning out. In your opinion, can writers objectively judge the quality of their own work? Why or why not?

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4. **Making Connections** What insights into *The Metamorphosis* do the letters provide?

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## Personal Writing

In your journal, jot down your thoughts about the process that you follow when you write. What aspects of writing are easy for you? What aspects do you find challenging? What are your strengths as a writer? Your weaknesses? How might you improve your writing?

# Duration of Childhood *and* Portrait of My Father as a Young Man

Rainer Maria Rilke

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Recall a time when you looked at old photographs of a parent or other family member. What did you notice? How did you feel?

### Background

Author Rainer Maria Rilke once confessed that he felt like a misfit when he was young. His family sent him to military school, and he felt miserably out of place there. At an early age, he began writing about his feelings and experiences, and by the age of nineteen he had published his first collection of poems. Rilke went on to become one of the most influential poets of modern times.

## Responding to the Reading

1. In “Duration . . .,” what words and phrases does the speaker use to describe childhood? What do these words and phrases suggest about this time of life?

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2. Describe the child’s relationship with his family. Does the family help or hinder him?

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3. What do the details in “Portrait . . .” tell you about the father? About the son’s feelings as he looks at his father’s photograph?

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4. What does the speaker mean when he says that the photograph is “quickly disappearing”? Why might he describe his hand as “more slowly disappearing”? What tone do these descriptions create?

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5. **Making Connections** Compare the family in “Duration of Childhood” with the family in *The Metamorphosis*. What similarities can you find in the way each family treats the son?

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## Art Connection

Which poem did you like better? How would you illustrate it? Draw a picture or create a collage that illustrates an aspect of the poem that you find interesting or significant.

# Gaston

William Saroyan

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Recall a time when you grew to like someone or something that you had previously disliked. What caused your change of heart? Was the change permanent?

### Background

William Saroyan was a prolific American author whose stories appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and other popular magazines. After publishing several short story collections, he turned his storytelling talents to the theater and wrote several successful plays, most notably the award-winning *The Time of Your Life*. His many novels include *The Human Comedy* (1943) and *Mama, I Love You* (1956). In his works, Saroyan often portrays the problems of eccentric, good-hearted characters.

## Responding to the Reading

1. At the beginning of the story, the father is described from his young daughter's point of view. What does she think of him? Why does he seem like such a stranger?

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2. What does the father do to change his daughter's opinion of the insect that they find in the peach? What makes the daughter lose sympathy for the insect?

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3. At the end of the story, why does the father feel "a little . . . like Gaston"?

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4. **Making Connections** What parallels can you find between the father in "Gaston" and Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*?

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## Science Connection

What type of insect might Gaston have been? What does this insect actually look like? Use library resources or the Internet to research insects that burrow in fruit. Then present a brief oral report about the "real Gaston" to your class.

# from *Notes from the Underground*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Greek philosopher Socrates (470–399 B.C.) is reported to have said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Do you agree with this philosophy? Why or why not?

### Background

Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky is considered to be among the greatest novelists of all time. Years before the advent of modern psychological theory, Dostoyevsky examined the human psyche and proclaimed that “in every man a demon lies hidden.” His highly influential novella *Notes from the Underground* (1864) probes the psychological demons that haunt a nameless man.

## Responding to the Reading

1. What did the speaker in *Notes from the Underground* do for a living? Why did he leave his job? Describe where and how he lives since he left his job.

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2. What does the speaker mean when he says that “to be too conscious is an illness”? What “opposite elements” seem to torment him?

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3. The speaker says that he has tried but failed to become an insect and that a man of consciousness “genuinely thinks of himself as a mouse and not a man.” What do these statements suggest about the speaker’s opinion of himself? Why has he taken refuge in the “underground”?

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4. **Making Connections** What themes do *Notes from the Underground* and *The Metamorphosis* have in common?

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## Internet Connection

What do the critics have to say about *Notes from the Underground*? What do students have to say? Surf the Internet to find out more about Dostoyevsky and his famous story. If you wish, post questions on a Web site bulletin board devoted to the author. Present your findings in a brief oral report to your class.