

# THE METAMORPHOSIS



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Adapted from the story by Franz Kafka

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## THE METAMORPHOSIS

**CLASSIC.** Adapted from the novella by Franz Kafka. Absurd, surreal, nightmarish, complex, illogical, humorous...this play defines "Kafkaesque." Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, wakes up one morning and discovers that he has transformed into a monstrous beetle. His family views his metamorphosis with shame and disgust. Gregor, who is the sole provider for his family, is now unable to work and has become dependent on his family to care for him. Gregor's father and his younger sister, Grete, are forced to get jobs and the family takes in boarders to make up for the loss of Gregor's income. As time goes on, Grete comes to resent her role as Gregor's caretaker and convinces her mother and father that Gregor is a burden that the family needs to rid themselves of once and for all. This adaptation remains true to Kafka's original work and remains one of the most important works of fiction in Western literature.

**Performance time:** Approximately 60-75 minutes.



Franz Kafka, 1910

## ABOUT THE STORY

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is considered one of the most influential writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though he achieved little literary fame during his lifetime. Born and raised in Prague, Kafka spoke Czech but preferred to write in German. Kafka was the eldest of six children and had a troubled relationship with his father, a domineering and demanding shopkeeper who once worked as a traveling salesman. This father-son conflict deeply influenced much of Kafka's writing in which he incorporates themes of alienation, cruelty, authoritarian power, and the absurdity of existence. Today, the term "Kafkaesque" is used to describe that which is surreal, nightmarish, and incomprehensibly complex. Suffering from tuberculosis and unable to eat due to pain, Kafka died of starvation on June 3, 1924. The rest of Kafka's family, except for two brothers who died in infancy, died in the Holocaust. Kafka's most well-known works include his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, his novella *The Metamorphosis*, and his short stories, "A Hunger Artist," "In the Penal Colony," and "The Judgment."

**CHARACTERS****(2 M, 4 F, 4 flexible)**

**GREGOR SAMSA:** A travelling salesman who has suddenly and unexpectedly transformed into a monstrous beetle; resembles a large brown beetle with antennae on his head and several insect legs that wave about; his brown belly is covered with many little white spots and is slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections; male.

**FATHER:** Gregor's unkind, overbearing, distant father who is primarily concerned with money; has bushy eyebrows, piercing dark eyes, unkempt white hair, and a double chin; male.

**MOTHER:** Gregor's quiet, shy mother; wears a blouse and skirt; female.

**GRETE:** Late teens, Gregor's younger sister and his primary caretaker; likes to play the violin but is untalented; wears a blouse and skirt; female.

**CHIEF CLERK:** Gregor's overbearing, distrustful boss; flexible. (Note: If male, wears a suit with highly polished boots, a hat, and an overcoat and carries a cane. If female, wears a blouse and skirt and carries an umbrella.)

**MAID:** Works for the Samsa family as a maid; wears a shabby blouse, skirt, and apron; female.

**TENANT 1, 2, 3:** Temporary boarders living in the Samsas' house who demand order and cleanliness; wear worn clothing and coats; flexible. (Note: If male, they carry walking sticks and have full beards. If female, they carry umbrellas.)

**CHARWOMAN:** An elderly widow who works for the Samsa family; enormous, thick-boned woman with white hair; wears a shabby skirt, blouse, and apron; female.

**NOTE:** For flexible roles, change the script accordingly.

## SETTING

The Samsas' home.

## SET

Gregor's bedroom is SL and the living room/dining room is SR. The two areas are divided by a wall and there is a workable door leading into Gregor's bedroom. There is an exit to the kitchen/bedrooms UCS. The front door is SR.

**Gregor's bedroom at SL.** There is a bed with a headboard and bedposts. There is an alarm clock on a small table next to the bed. A chair sits next to a chest of drawers. The room contains a large area rug, a couch, and a desk with a small chair. There is a chest that contains a handsaw and other tools. A collection of textile samples are spread out on a small table. A picture hangs above the table. The picture, which has been cut out of a magazine and is displayed in a nice gilded frame, depicts a lady wearing a fur hat and fur boa who is sitting upright and raising a fur muff that covers the whole of her lower arm. There is a working window. The door to the bedroom has a key sticking out of the lock.

**Living room/dining room at SR.** There is a small dining table with four chairs and a sideboard that sits against one wall. Near the table is a settee with a small side table. On one wall is a photograph of Gregor when he was a lieutenant in the army. In the picture, he has a sword in one hand and a carefree smile on his face.

## SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

**Scene 1:** Morning.

**Scene 2:** Late that evening.

**Scene 3:** Early the next morning.

**Scene 4:** Two months later.

**Scene 5:** One month later.

**Scene 6:** Evening.

**Scene 7:** Early morning.

**Scene 8:** Early spring.

**Scene 9:** End of March, 3 a.m.

## PROPS

Bedding	high stiff collar and gold
Coffeepot	buttons. The cap has the bank's
Coffee cups	gold monogram on it.)
Newspaper	Red apples
Gas lamp	Fruit bowl
Dish or bowl filled with milk	Sewing kit
with pieces of bread	Fancy underwear
floating in it	Lamp
Rag	Book
Old newspaper with rotten	Pen
vegetables, bones, moldy	Balls of dust/filth
cheese, bread, raisins and	Assorted household items
almonds on it	including a kitchen dustbin and
Dish of water	miscellaneous furniture
Broom	3 Napkins
Trash bin	3 Forks
3 Plates of breakfast food	3 Knives
Receipt or document	Dish of meat
Small cash box	Bowl of potatoes
Bed sheet	Violin
Handsaw	Sheet music
Assorted tools	Music stand
Bottle of smelling salts	Nightgown, for Mother
Assorted glass medicine	Pajamas, for Father
bottles	Blanket
Blue uniform that would be	Women's hat with an ostrich
worn by a bank employee,	feather, for Charwoman
for Father. (Uniform has a	



## SOUND EFFECTS

Drops of rain hitting a windowpane	Fake blood
Clock ticking	Sound of hurried steps
Alarm clock striking seven	Sound of door being carefully shut
Doorbell	Sound of breaking glass
Loud thump	Clock striking ten
Brown fluid (A.1. steak sauce or Worcestershire sauce can be used.)	Morning light streaming through Gregor's window
Sound of key turning in lock	Sound of heavy rain striking windowpane
Sound of a deadbolt lock snapping back	Violin music (can be live or prerecorded)
Strong draught of air	Clock tower striking three

"YOU MUST JUST TRY  
TO GET RID  
OF THE IDEA  
THAT THIS IS GREGOR.  
THE FACT THAT  
WE'VE BELIEVED IT  
FOR SO LONG  
IS THE ROOT  
OF ALL OUR TROUBLES."

—GRETE

## SCENE 1

(AT RISE: *The Samsas' home. Gregor's bedroom, morning. In bed, Gregor awakens from troubled dreams and discovers he has transformed into a cockroach/beetle. He is lying on his back. He lifts his head a little so he can see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding is hardly able to cover his belly. His many insect legs wave about helplessly as he looks about and realizes he isn't dreaming.*)

GREGOR: *(To himself.)* What's happened to me? *(Turns and looks out the window. Drops of rain can be heard hitting the windowpane. Sadly.)* How about I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense? *(Tries to turn over and sleep on his right side but can't get into that position. He shuts his eyes and tries to throw himself hard onto his right side several times, but each time, he rolls back to where he was. One of his legs hurts and he rubs it. Sighs.)* Oh, my! What a strenuous career it is that I've chosen...travelling day in and day out. Doing business like this takes much more effort than doing your own business at home, and on top of that, there's the curse of travelling...worries about making train connections, bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know anyone or become friendly with them. To heck with it! *(Itches his belly and pushes himself slowly up on his back toward the headboard so that he can lift his head. He sees that his belly is covered with lots of little white spots. He tries to scratch his belly with one of his legs but as soon as his foot touches his belly, he shudders and then slides back into his former position.)* Getting up early all the time...it makes you stupid. You've got to get enough sleep. Other travelling salesmen live a life of luxury. For instance, whenever I go back to the guesthouse in the morning to write out the contract, these gentlemen are always still sitting there eating their breakfasts. I ought to try that with my boss. I'd get kicked out on the spot. But who

knows...maybe that would be the best thing for me. If I didn't have my parents to think about, I'd have given him my notice a long time ago. I'd have gone up to the boss and told him just what I think...tell him everything. Let him know just what I feel. He'd fall right off his desk! And it's a funny sort of business to be sitting up there at your desk, talking down at your subordinates from up there, especially when you have to go right up close because the boss is hard of hearing. *(Sighs.)* Well, there's still some hope. Once I've got the money together to pay off my parents' debt to him – another five or six years, I suppose – that's definitely what I'll do. That's when I'll make the big change. First of all, though, I've got to get up. My train leaves at five. *(Looks over at the ticking alarm clock resting on a chest of drawers and realizes it is 6:45 and he is late for work. Alarmed.)* Goodness! Didn't the alarm clock ring? *(Picks up the clock and looks at it.)* I set it for four o'clock. It certainly must have rung. What should I do now? The next train leaves at seven. If I were to catch that train, I would have to rush like mad and my samples aren't packed. And even if I catch the train, I won't be able to avoid my boss's anger as the office assistant will report me as not being on time. The office assistant is the boss's man...spineless and with no understanding. *(Slight pause.)* What if I report sick? That would be extremely suspicious since in 15 years of service I have never once been ill. My boss will certainly come around with the doctor from the medical insurance company, accuse my parents of having a lazy son, and accept the doctor's recommendation not to make any claim as the doctor believes that no one is ever ill but are just lazy. And what's more, he will not be entirely wrong in this case.

*(Gregor thinks about what to do. Mother enters UCS, her hair still disheveled from bed, and cautiously knocks on Gregor's door.)*

MOTHER: *(Through the door, calls.)* Gregor, it's quarter to seven. Don't you have to go to work?

GREGOR: *(Enunciating very carefully and putting long pauses between each word.)* Yes, Mother, yes, thank you. I'm getting up now.

*(Mother shuffles off UCS. Voices are heard offstage UCS. Father enters UCS and knocks on Gregor's bedroom door gently with his fist.)*

FATHER: *(Through the door, calls.)* Gregor! Gregor, what's wrong?! *(Gregor doesn't respond. Warning tone, calls.)* Gregor! Gregor!

*(Grete enters UCS and approaches Gregor's bedroom door.)*

GRETE: *(Through the door, calls.)* Gregor? Aren't you well? Do you need anything?

GREGOR: *(Enunciating very carefully and putting long pauses between each word.)* I'm ready, now.

*(Father sits at the table and begins to eat his breakfast that Mother has served. Grete tries to open Gregor's door but finds that it is locked.)*

GRETE: *(Through the door, stage whisper.)* Gregor, open the door. I beg you.

GREGOR: *(To himself.)* The first thing I want to do is to get up in peace without being disturbed, to get dressed, and most of all, to have breakfast. Only then will I consider what to do next. I have not the slightest doubt that the change in my voice is nothing more than the first sign of a serious cold, which is an occupational hazard for a travelling salesman. *(As Gregor tries to push himself up, he realizes he has no arms or hands but little legs that continuously move in different directions and which he has difficulty controlling. He tries to get the lower*

*part of his body out of the bed, but it is too hard to move. Almost in a frenzy, he carelessly shoves himself forward with all the force he can gather and hits hard against the lower bedpost. He is in a lot of pain. He tries to get the top part of his body out of the bed by carefully turning his head to the side. He manages this easily and the bulk of his body eventually follows slowly in the direction of his head. Gregor stops pushing himself forward. It takes him much effort to get back into the same position he had been earlier. He finally does so. He sighs and once more watches his legs as they struggle against each other. The alarm clock strikes seven.) Seven o'clock, already. It is not possible for me to stay in bed. (Looks toward the window. It is still raining and foggy outside.) Seven o'clock, and there's still a fog like this. (Lays quietly a while longer, breathing lightly.) Before it strikes quarter past seven, I'll definitely have to get out of bed. And by then, somebody will have come around from work to ask what's happened to me, as they open up at work before seven o'clock. (Now sticking half way out of the bed, Gregor begins rocking back and forth, attempting to swing the entire length of his body out of bed.) If I fall out of bed this way and keep my head raised, I can probably avoid injuring myself. My back seems to be quite hard, and probably nothing will happen to it if I fall onto the rug. But it will make a loud noise, which even through the door would probably raise concern if not alarm. How simple everything would be if somebody came to help me. Two strong people—my father and the maid—would be more than enough. They would only have to push their arms under the dome of my back, peel me away from the bed, bend down with the load, and then be patient and careful as I swing over onto the floor, where, hopefully, my little legs will find a use. Should I call for help? (Thinks.) That's right. The door is locked. (Gregor smiles and looks at the alarm clock.) Ten past seven. (Doorbell. Gregor freezes and remains still except for his legs, which dance and move lively about.) That'll be someone from work. (Pause. He listens. All is quiet. Hopefully.) They're not opening the*

door. (*Maid enters UCS. Gregor hears her firm footsteps approaching the front door SR. Maid opens the door, revealing the Chief Clerk. Gregor hears the Chief Clerk and Maid exchange words of greeting. To himself, annoyed.*) Why do I have to be the only one condemned to work for a company where they immediately become highly suspicious at the slightest shortcoming? Are all employees, every one of them, louts? Is it really not enough to let one of the trainees make enquiries—assuming enquiries were even necessary? Did the Chief Clerk have to come himself? And did they have to show my whole innocent family that I am so suspicious that only the Chief Clerk can be trusted to have the wisdom to investigate?

(*Upset, Gregor swings himself with all his force and falls out of bed onto the floor, causing a loud thump. Annoyed and in pain, he turns his head and rubs it against the rug.*)

CHIEF CLERK: (*To Maid, indicating the thump heard from Gregor's room.*) Something's fallen down in there.

(*Chief Clerk puts his cane on a chair along with his hat and overcoat, and approaches Father, who is at the table. Father and Chief Clerk converse in hushed tones.*)

GRETE: (*Through the door, stage whisper.*) Gregor, the Chief Clerk is here.

GREGOR: (*Stage whisper.*) Yes, I know.

(*Father gets up from the table and approaches Gregor's door.*)

FATHER: (*Through the door, calls.*) Gregor, the Chief Clerk has come around and wants to know why you didn't leave on the early train. We don't know what to say to him. And, anyway, he wants to speak to you personally, so please open

up this door. I'm sure he'll be good enough to forgive the untidiness of your room.

CHIEF CLERK: *(Through the door, calls.)* Good morning, Mr. Samsa.

*(Mother enters UCS with her hair still disheveled despite the Chief Clerk being there.)*

MOTHER: *(To Chief Clerk, indicating Gregor.)* He isn't well.

FATHER: *(To Chief Clerk but speaking through the door so Gregor can hear.)* He isn't well, please believe me. Why else would Gregor have missed the train? The lad only ever thinks about the business. It nearly makes me cross the way he never goes out in the evenings. He's been in town for a week now but stayed home every evening. He sits with us in the kitchen and just reads the paper or studies train timetables. His idea of relaxation is working with his handsaw. He's made a little picture frame. It only took him two or three evenings. You'll be amazed how nice it is. It's hanging up in his room. You'll see it as soon as Gregor *opens* the door. Anyway, I'm glad you're here. We wouldn't have been able to get Gregor to open the door by ourselves. He's so stubborn, and I'm sure he isn't well. He said this morning that he is, but he isn't.

GREGOR: *(Enunciating very carefully and putting long pauses between each word.)* I'll be there in a moment.

CHIEF CLERK: *(To Mother and Father.)* I hope it's nothing serious. But on the other hand, I must say that if we people in commerce ever become slightly unwell, then—fortunately or unfortunately—we simply have to overcome it because of business considerations.

*(Father impatiently knocks on Gregor's door.)*

FATHER: *(To Gregor, calling through the door.)* Can the Chief Clerk come in to see you now?



GREGOR: No. (*Awkward silence. Grete begins to cry. To himself.*) So why does my sister not go and join the others? She probably only just got up and has not even begun to get dressed. And why is she crying? Is it because I have not gotten up and have not let the Chief Clerk in? Because I am in danger of losing my job, and if that happens, my boss will go after our parents with the same demands as before? There is no need to worry about things like that yet. I am still here and have not the slightest intention of abandoning my family. No one would seriously expect me to let the Chief Clerk in if they knew the condition I am in. It is only a minor discourtesy and a suitable excuse can easily be found for it later on. It's not something for which I can be fired for on the spot. It would be much more sensible to leave me in peace instead of disturbing me with all this talking and crying. But the others don't know what is happening. They are worried.

(*Pause. Gregor just lies on the rug.*)

CHIEF CLERK: (*Through the door, calls louder.*) Mr. Samsa, what is wrong? You barricade yourself in your room, give us no more than "yes" or "no" for an answer. You are causing serious and unnecessary concern to your parents and you fail...you fail to carry out your business duties in a way that is quite unheard of. I'm speaking here on behalf of your parents and of your employer and really must request a clear and immediate explanation. I am astonished...quite astonished. I thought I knew you as a calm and sensible person, and now you suddenly seem to be showing off with peculiar whims. This morning, your employer suggested a possible reason for your failure to appear. It's true... (*Awkward pause.*) ...it had to do with the money that was recently entrusted to you, but I came near to giving him my word of honor that that could not be the right explanation. But now that I see your incomprehensible stubbornness, I no

longer feel any wish whatsoever to intercede on your behalf...and nor is your position all that secure. I had originally intended to say all this to you in private, but since you cause me to waste my time here for no good reason, I don't see why your parents should not also learn of it. Your performance has been very unsatisfactory of late. I grant you that it's not the time of year to do especially good business. We recognize that, but there simply is no time of year to do no business at all, Mr. Samsa. We cannot allow there to be.

*(During the following, Gregor crawls over to the chest of drawers.)*

GREGOR: But, sir, I'll open up immediately. Just a moment. I'm slightly unwell...an attack of dizziness. I haven't been able to get up. I'm still in bed now. I'm quite fresh again now, though. I'm just getting out of bed. Just a moment. Be patient! It's not quite as easy as I thought. I'm quite all right now, though. It's shocking...what can suddenly happen to a person! I was quite all right last night. My parents know about it, perhaps better than me. I had a small symptom of it last night already. They must have noticed it. I don't know why I didn't let you know at work! But you always think you can get over an illness without staying at home. Please, don't make my parents suffer! There's no basis for any of the accusations you're making. Nobody's ever said a word to me about any of these things. Maybe you haven't read the latest contracts I sent in. I'll take the eight o'clock train. These few hours of rest have given me strength. You don't need to wait, sir. I'll be in the office soon after you, and please be so good as to tell that to the boss and recommend me to him! *(Gregor is now at the chest of drawers and is trying to stand upright. To himself.)* I really do want to open the door...really do want to let them see me and to speak with the Chief Clerk. The others are being so insistent, and I am curious to learn what they will say when they catch

sight of me. If they are shocked, then it will no longer be my responsibility and I can rest. If, however, they take everything calmly, I will have no reason to be upset, and if I hurry, I really could be at the station in time to catch the eight o'clock train.

*(Gregor tries to stand, bracing himself against the chest of drawers a few times but each time he just slides down. He finally gives himself one last swing and stands upright. He lets himself fall against the back of a nearby chair and holds tightly to the edges of it with his little legs.)*

CHIEF CLERK: *(To Father and Mother.)* Did you understand a word of all that? Surely, he's not trying to make fools of us?

MOTHER: *(In tears.)* Oh, God! He could be seriously ill and we're making him suffer. *(Calls.)* Grete! Grete!

GRETE: Mother?

MOTHER: You'll have to go for the doctor straightaway. Gregor is ill. Quick, get the doctor! Did you hear the way Gregor spoke just now?

CHIEF CLERK: *(Indicating Gregor's voice, calmly.)* That was the voice of an animal...

FATHER: *(To Maid, shouts.)* Anna! Anna! *(Clapping his hands. Maid enters.)* Get a locksmith here, now!

[END OF FREEVIEW]