Vladimir Nabokov's Lecture on "The Metamorphosis"

Click here to see the first page of Nabokov's teaching copy of 'The Metamorphosis."

Of course, no matter how keenly, how admirably, a story, a piece of music, a picture is discussed and analyzed, there will be minds that remain blank and spines that remain unkindled. "To take upon us the mystery of things"—what King Lear so wistfully says for himself and for Cordelia—this is also my suggestion for everyone who takes art seriously. A poor man is robbed of his overcoat (Gogol's "The Greatcoat," or more correctly "The Carrick"); another poor fellow is turned into a beetle (Kafka's "The Metamorphosis)—so what? There is no rational answer to "so what." We can take the story apart, we can find out how the bits fit, how one part of the pattern responds to the other; but you have to have in you some cell, some gene, some germ that will vibrate in answer to sensations that you can neither define, nor dismiss. Beauty plus pity—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual. If Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" strikes anyone as something more than an entomological fantasy, then I congratulate him on having joined the ranks of good and great readers.

I want to discuss fantasy and reality, and their mutual relationship. If we consider the "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" story as an allegory—the struggle between Good and Evil within every man—then this allegory is tasteless and childish. To the type of mind that would see an allegory here, its shadow play would also postulate physical happenings which common sense knows to be impossible; but actually in the setting of the story, as viewed by a commonsensical mind, nothing at first sight seems to run counter to general human experience. I want to suggest, however, that a second look shows that the setting of the story does run counter to general human experience, and that Utterson and the other men around Jekyll are, in a sense, as fantastic as Mr. Hyde. Unless we see them in a fantastic light, there is no enchantment. And if the enchanter leaves and the storyteller and the teacher remain alone together, they make poor company.

The story of Jekyll and Hyde is beautifully constructed, but it is an old one. Its moral is preposterous since neither good nor evil is actually depicted: on the whole, they are taken for granted, and the struggle goes on between two empty outlines. The enchantment lies in the art of Stevenson's fancywork; but I want to suggest that since art and thought, manner and matter, are inseparable, there must be something of the same kind about the structure of the story, too. Let us be cautious, however. I still think that there is a flaw in the artistic realization of the story—if we consider form and content separately—a flaw which is missing in Gogol's "The Carrick" and in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." The fantastic side of the setting—Utterson, Enfield, Poole, Lanyon, and their London—is not of the same quality as the fantastic side of Jekyll's hydization. There is a crack in the picture, a lack of unity.

"The Carrick," "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," and "The Metamorphosis": all three are commonly called fantasies. From my point of view, any outstanding work of art is a fantasy insofar as it reflects the unique world of a unique individual. But when people call these three stories fantasies, they merely imply that the stories depart in their subject matter from what is commonly called reality. Let us therefore examine what reality is, in order to discover in what manner and to what extent so-called fantasies depart from so-called reality.

Let us take three types of men walking through the same landscape. Number One is a city man on a well-deserved vacation. Number Two is a professional botanist. Number Three is a local farmer. Number One, the city man, is what is called a realistic, commonsensical, matter-of-fact type: he sees trees as trees and knows from his map that the road he is following is a nice new road leading to Newton, where there is a nice eating place recommended to him by a friend in his office. The botanist looks around and sees his environment in the very exact terms of plant life, precise biological and classified units such as specific trees

and grasses, flowers and ferns, and for him, this is reality; to him the world of the stolid tourist (who cannot distinguish an oak from an elm) seems a fantastic, vague, dreamy, never-never world. Finally the world of the local farmer differs from the two others in that his world is intensely emotional and personal since he has been born and bred there, and knows every trail and individual tree, and every shadow from every tree across every trail, all in warm connection with his everyday work, and his childhood, and a thousand small things and patterns which the other two—the humdrum tourist and the botanical taxonomist—simply cannot know in the given place at the given time. Our farmer will not know the relation of the surrounding vegetation to a botanical conception of the world, and the botanist will know nothing of any importance to him about that barn or that old field or that old house under its cottonwoods, which are afloat, as it were, in a medium of personal memories for one who was born there.

So here we have three different worlds—three men, ordinary men who have different realities—and, of course, we could bring in a number of other beings: a blind man with a dog, a hunter with a dog, a dog with his man, a painter cruising in quest of a sunset, a girl out of gas— In every case it would be a world completely different from the rest since the most objective words tree, road, flower, sky, barn, thumb, rain have, in each, totally different subjective connotations. Indeed, this subjective life is so strong that it makes an empty and broken shell of the so-called objective existence. The only way back to objective reality is the following one: we can take these several individual worlds, mix them thoroughly together, scoop up a drop of that mixture, and call it objective reality. We may taste in it a particle of madness if a lunatic passed through that locality, or a particle of complete and beautiful nonsense if a man has been looking at a lovely field and imagining upon it a lovely factory producing buttons or bombs; but on the whole these mad particles would be diluted in the drop of objective reality that we hold up to the light in our test tube. Moreover, this objective reality will contain something that transcends optical illusions and laboratory tests. It will have elements of poetry, of lofty emotion, of energy and endeavor (and even here the button king may find his rightful place), of pity, pride, passion—and the craving for a thick steak at the recommended roadside eating place.

So when we say reality, we are really thinking of all this—in one drop—an average sample of a mixture of a million individual realities. And it is in this sense (of human reality) that I use the term reality when placing it against a backdrop, such as the worlds of "The Carrick," "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," and "The Metamorphosis," which are specific fantasies.

In The Carrick" and in "The Metamorphosis" there is a central figure endowed with a certain amount of human pathos among grotesque, heartless characters, figures of fun or figures of horror, asses parading as zebras, or hybrids between rabbits and rats. In "The Carrick" the human quality of the central figure is of a different type from Gregor in Kafka's story, but this human pathetic quality is present in both. In "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" there is no such human pathos, no throb in the throat of the story, none of that intonation of "'I cannot get out, I cannot get out,' said the starling" (so heartrending in Sterne's fantasy A Sentimental Journey). True, Stevenson devotes many pages to the horror of Jekyll's plight, but the thing, after all, is only a superb Punch-and-Judy show. The beauty of Kafka's and Gogol's private nightmares is that their central human characters belong to the same private fantastic world as the inhuman characters around them, but the central one tries to get out of that world, to cast off the mask, to transcend the cloak or the carapace. But in Stevenson's story there is none of that unity and none of that contrast. The Uttersons, and Pooles, and Enfields are meant to be commonplace, everyday characters; actually they are characters derived from Dickens, and thus they constitute phantasms that do not quite belong to Stevenson's own artistic reality, just as Stevenson's fog comes from a Dickensian studio to envelop a conventional London. I suggest, in fact, that Jekyll's magic drug is more real than Utterson's life. The fantastic Jekyll-and-Hyde theme, on the other hand, is supposed to be in contrast to this conventional London, but it is really the difference between a Gothic medieval theme and a Dickensian one. It is not the same kind of difference as that between an absurd world and pathetically absurd Bashmachkin, or between an absurd world and tragically absurd Gregor.

The Jekyll-and-Hyde theme does not quite form a unity with its setting because its fantasy is of a different type from the fantasy of the setting. There is really nothing especially pathetic or tragic about Jekyll. We enjoy every detail of the marvelous juggling, of the beautiful trick, but there is no artistic emotional throb involved, and whether it is Jekyll or Hyde who gets the upper hand remains of supreme indifference to the good reader. I am speaking of rather nice distinctions, and it is difficult to put them in simple form. When a certain clear-thinking but somewhat superficial French philosopher asked the profound but obscure German philosopher Hegel to state his views in a concise form, Hegel answered him harshly, "These things can be discussed neither concisely nor in French." We shall ignore the question whether Hegel was right or not, and still try to put into a nutshell the difference between the Gogol-Kafka kind of story and Stevenson's kind.

In Gogol and Kafka the absurd central character belongs to the absurd world around him but, pathetically and tragically, attempts to struggle out of it into the world of humans—and dies in despair. In Stevenson the unreal central character belongs to a brand of unreality different from that of the world around him. He is a Gothic character in a Dickensian setting, and when he struggles and then dies, his fate possesses only conventional pathos. I do not at all mean that Stevenson's story is a failure. No, it is a minor masterpiece in its own conventional terms, but it has only two dimensions, whereas the Gogol-Kafka stories have five or six.

Born in 1883, Franz Kafka came from a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, Czechoslovakia. He is the greatest German writer of our time. Such poets as Rilke or such novelists as Thomas Mann are dwarfs or plaster saints in comparison to him. He read for law at the German university in Prague and from 1908 on he worked as a petty clerk, a small employee, in a very Gogolian office for an insurance company. Hardly any of his now famous works, such as his novels *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926) were published in his lifetime. His greatest short story "The Metamorphosis," in German "*Die Verwandlung*," was written in the fall of 1912 and published in Leipzig in October 1915. In 1917 he coughed blood, and the rest of his life, a period of seven years, was punctuated by sojourns in Central European sanatoriums. In those last years of his short life (he died at the age of forty), he had a happy love affair and lived with his mistress in Berlin, in 1923, not far from me. In the spring of 1924 he went to a sanatorium near Vienna where he died on 3 June, of tuberculosis of the larynx. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Prague. He asked his friend Max Brod to burn everything he had written, even published material. Fortunately Brod did not comply with his friend's wish.

Before starting to talk of "The Metamorphosis," I want to dismiss two points of view. I want to dismiss completely Max Brod's opinion that the category of sainthood, not that of literature, is the only one that can be applied to the understanding of Kafka's writings. Kafka was first of all an artist, and although it may be maintained that every artist is a manner of saint (I feel that very clearly myself), I do not think that any religious implications can be read into Kafka's genius. The other matter that I want to dismiss is the Freudian point of view. His Freudian biographers, like Neider in *The Frozen Sea* (1948), contend, for example, that "The Metamorphosis" has a basis in Kafka's complex relationship with his father and his lifelong sense of guilt; they contend further that in mythical symbolism children are represented by vermin—which I doubt—and then go on to say that Kafka uses the symbol of the bug to represent the son according to these Freudian postulates. The bug, they say, aptly characterizes his sense of worthlessness before his father. I am interested here in bugs, not in humbugs, and I reject this nonsense. Kafka himself was extremely critical of Freudian ideas. He considered psychoanalysis (I quote) as "a helpless error," and he regarded Freud's theories as very approximate, very rough pictures, which did not do justice to details or, what is more, to the essence of the matter. This is another reason why I should like to dismiss the Freudian approach and concentrate, instead, upon the artistic moment.

The greatest literary influence upon Kafka was Flaubert's. Flaubert who loathed pretty-pretty prose would have applauded Kafka's attitude towards his tool. Kafka liked to draw his terms from the language of law and science, giving them a kind of ironic precision, with no intrusion of the author's private sentiments; this was exactly what Flaubert's method through which he achieved a singular poetic effect.

The hero of "The Metamorphosis" is Gregor Samsa (pronounced Zamza), who is the son of middle-class parents in Prague, Flaubertian philistines, people interested only in the material side of life and vulgarians in their tastes. Some five years before, old Samsa lost most of his money, whereupon his son Gregor took a job with one of his father's creditors and became a traveling salesman in cloth. His father then stopped working altogether, his sister Grete was too young to work, his mother was ill with asthma; thus young Gregor not only supported the whole family but also found for them the apartment they are now living in. This apartment, a flat in an apartment house, in Charlotte Street to be exact, is divided into segments as he will be divided himself. We are in Prague, central Europe, in the year 1912; servants are cheap so the Samsas can afford a servant maid, Anna, aged sixteen (one year younger than Grete), and a cook. Gregor is mostly away traveling, but when the story starts he is spending a night at home between two business trips, and it is then that the dreadful thing happened. "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from a troubled dream he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into corrugated segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs,

which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, flimmered [flicker + shimmer] helplessly before his eyes.

"What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream....

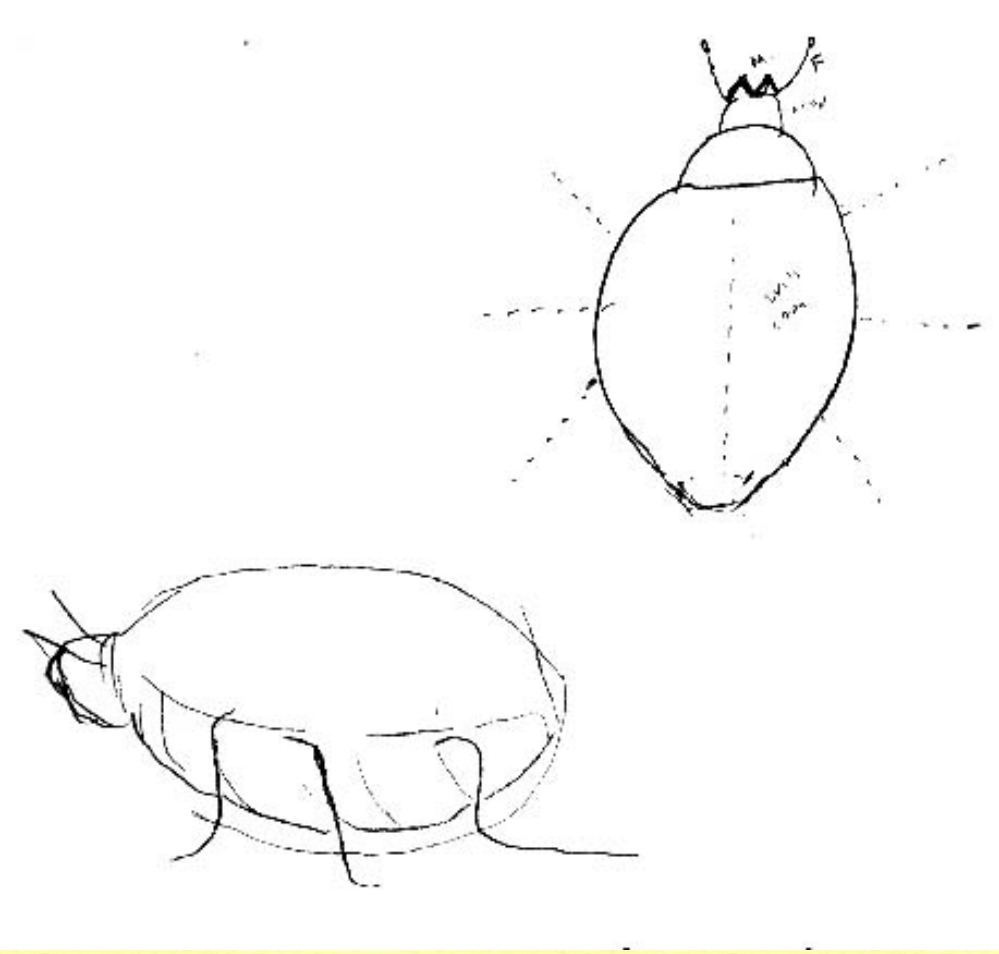
"Gregor's eyes turned next to the window—one could hear rain drops beating on the tin of the windowsill's outer edge and the dull weather made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. However violently he tried to hurl himself on his right side he always swung back to the supine position. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes* to keep from seeing his wriggly legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before.

**Nabokov's notes in his annotated copy: "A regular beetle has no eyelids and cannot close its eyes—a beetle with human eyes." About the passage in general he has the note: "In the original German there is a wonderful flowing rhythm here in this dreamy sequence of sentences. He his half-awake—he realizes his plight without surprise, with a childish acceptance of it, and at the same time he still clings to human memories, human experience. The metamorphosis is not quite complete as yet."*

"Ach Gott, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out. Many more anxieties on the road than in the office, the plague of worrying about train connections, the bad and irregular meals, casual acquaintances never to be seen again, never to become intimate friends. The hell with it all! He felt a slight itching on the skin of his belly; slowly pushed himself on his back nearer the top of the bed so that he could lift his head more easily; identified the itching place which was covered with small white dots the nature of which he could not understand and tried to touch it with a leg, but drew the leg back immediately, for the contact made a cold shiver run through him."

Now what exactly is the "vermin" into which poor Gregor, the seedy commercial traveler, is so suddenly transformed? It obviously belongs to the branch of "jointed leggers" (Arthropoda), to which insects, and spiders, and centipedes, and crustaceans belong. If the "numerous little legs" mentioned in the beginning mean more than six legs, then Gregor would not be an insect from a zoological point of view. But I suggest that a man awakening on his back and finding he has as many as six legs vibrating in the air might feel that six was sufficient to be called numerous. We shall therefore assume that Gregor has six legs, that he is an insect.

Next question: what insect? Commentators say cockroach, which of course does not make sense. A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small. He approaches a cockroach in only one respect: his coloration is brown. That is all. Apart from this he has a tremendous convex belly divided into segments and a hard rounded back suggestive of wing cases. In beetles these cases conceal flimsy little wings that can be expanded and then may carry the beetle for miles and miles in a blundering flight. Curiously enough, Gregor the beetle never found out that he had wings under the hard covering of his back. (This is a very nice observation on my part to be treasured all your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know that they have wings.) Further, he has strong mandibles. He uses these organs to turn the key in a lock while standing erect on his hind legs, on his third pair of legs (a strong little pair), and this gives us the length of his body, which is about three feet long. In the course of the story he gets gradually accustomed to using his new appendages—his feet, his feelers. This brown, convex, dog-sized beetle is very broad. I should imagine him to look like this:



In the original German text the old charwoman calls him *Mistkäfer*, a "dung beetle." It is obvious that the good woman is adding the epithet only to be friendly. He is not, technically, a dung beetle. He is merely a big beetle. (I must add that neither Gregor nor Kafka saw that beetle any too clearly.)

Let us look closer at the transformation. The change, though shocking and striking, is not quite so odd as might be assumed at first glance. A commonsensical commentator (Paul L. Landsberg in *The Kafka Problem* [1946], ed. Angel Flores) notes that "When we go to bed in unfamiliar surroundings, we are apt to have a moment of bewilderment upon awakening, a sudden sense of unreality, and this experience must occur over and over again in the life of a commercial traveler, a manner of living that renders impossible any sense of continuity." The sense of reality depends upon continuity, upon duration. After all, awakening as an insect is not much different from awakening as Napoleon or George Washington. (I knew a man who awoke as the Emperor of Brazil.) On the other hand, the isolation, and the strangeness, of so-called reality—this is, after all, something which constantly characterizes the artist, the genius, the discoverer. The Samsa family around the fantastic insect is nothing else than mediocrity surrounding genius.

PART ONE

I am now going to speak of structure. Part one of the story can be divided into seven scenes or segments:

Scene I: Gregor wakes up. He is alone. He has already been changed into a beetle, but his human impressions still mingle with his new insect instincts. The scene ends with the introduction of the still human time element.

"He looked at the alarm clock ticking on the chest. Good Lord! he thought. It was half-past six and the hands were quietly

moving on, it was even past the half-hour, it was getting on toward a quarter to seven. Had the alarm clock not gone off? ... The next train went at seven o'clock; to catch that he would need to hurry like mad and his samples weren't even packed up, and he himself wasn't feeling particularly fresh and active. And even if he did catch the train he wouldn't avoid a row with the boss, since the firm's messenger would have been waiting for the five o'clock train and would have long since reported his failure to turn up." He thinks of reporting that he is sick, but concludes that the insurance doctor would certify him as perfectly healthy. "And would he be so wrong on this occasion? Gregor really felt quite well, apart from a drowsiness that was utterly superfluous after such a long sleep, and he was even unusually hungry."

Scene II: The three members of the family knock on his doors and talk to him from, respectively, the hallway, the living room, and his sister's room. Gregor's family are his parasites, exploiting him, eating him out from the inside. This is his beetle itch in human terms. The pathetic urge to find some protection from betrayal, cruelty, and filth is the factor that went to form his carapace, his beetle shell, which at first seems hard and secure but eventually is seen to be as vulnerable as his sick human flesh and spirit had been. Who of the three parasites—father, mother, sister—is the most cruel? At first it would seem to be the father. But he is not the worst: it is the sister, whom Gregor loves most but who betrays him beginning with the furniture scene in the middle of the story. In the second scene the door theme begins: "there came a cautious tap at the door behind the head of his bed. 'Gregor,' said a voice—it was his mother's—'it's a quarter to seven. Hadn't you a train to catch?' That gentle voice! Gregor had a shock as he heard his own voice answering hers, unmistakably his own voice, it was true, but with a persistent pitiful squeaky undertone.... 'Yes, yes, thank you, Mother, I'm getting up now.' The wooden door between them must have kept the change in his voice from being noticeable outside.... Yet this brief exchange of words had made the other members of the family aware that Gregor was still in the house, as they had not expected, and at one of the side doors his father was already knocking gently, yet with his fist. 'Gregor! Gregor!' he called, 'what's the matter with you?' And after a while he called again in a deeper voice: 'Gregor! Gregor!' At the other side door his sister was saying in a low, plaintive tone: 'Gregor? Aren't you well? Do you need anything?' He answered them both at once: 'I'm just ready,' and did his best to make his voice sound as normal as possible by enunciating the words very clearly and leaving long pauses between them. So his father went back to his breakfast, but his sister whispered: 'Gregor, open the door, do.' However, he was not thinking of opening the door, and felt thankful for the prudent habit he had acquired in traveling of locking all doors during the night, even at home."

Scene III: The getting out of bed ordeal in which man plans but beetle acts. Gregor still thinks of his body in human terms, but now a human's lower part is a beetle's hind part, a human's upper part is a beetle's fore part. A man on all fours seems to him to correspond to a beetle on all sixes. He does not quite yet understand this and will persistently try to stand up on his third pair of legs. "He thought that he might get out of bed with the lower part of his body first, but this lower part, which he had not yet seen and of which he could form no clear conception, proved too difficult to move; it was all so slow; and when at last almost savagely he gathered his forces together and thrust out recklessly, he had miscalculated the direction and bumped heavily against the lower end of the bed, and the burning pain he felt taught him that it was the lower part of his body that probably for the time being was the most sensitive . . . But then he said to himself: 'Before it strikes a quarter past seven I must be quite out of this bed, without fail. Anyhow, by that time someone will have come from the office to ask what is the matter with me, since it opens before seven.' And he set himself to rocking his whole body at once in a regular series of jolts, with the idea of swinging it out of the bed. If he tipped himself out in that way he could keep his head from injury by lifting it at an acute angle when he fell. His back seemed to be hard and was not likely to suffer from a fall on the carpet. His biggest worry was the loud crash he would not be able to help making, which would probably cause anxiety, if not terror, behind all the doors. Still, he must take the risk... Well, ignoring the fact that the doors were all locked, ought he really to call for help? In spite of his misery he could not suppress a smile at the very idea of it."

Scene IV: He is still struggling when the family theme, or the theme of the many doors, takes over again, and in the course of this scene he falls out of bed at last, with a dull thud. The conversation is a little on the lines of a Greek chorus. From Gregor's office the head clerk has been sent to see why he has not yet turned up at the station. This grim speed in checking a remiss employee has all the qualities of a bad dream. The speaking through doors, as in the second scene, is now repeated. Note the sequence: the chief clerk talks to Gregor from the living room on the left; Gregor's sister, Grete, talks to her brother from the room on the right; the mother and father join the chief clerk in the living room. Gregor can still speak, but his voice becomes more and more indistinct, and soon his speech cannot he understood. (In Finnegans Wake, written twenty years later by James Joyce, two washerwomen talking across a river are gradually changed into a stout elm and a stone.) Gregor does not understand

why his sister in the right-hand room did not join the others. "She was probably newly out of bed and hadn't even begun to put on her clothes yet. Well, why was she crying? Because he wouldn't get up and let the chief clerk in, because he was in danger of losing his job, and because the boss would begin dunning his parents again for the old debts?" Poor Gregor is so accustomed to be just an instrument to be used by his family that the question of pity does not arise: he does not even hope that Grete might be sorry for him. Mother and sister call to each other from the doors across Gregor's room. The sister and servant are dispatched for a doctor and a locksmith. "But Gregor was now much calmer. The words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before, perhaps because his ear had grown accustomed to the sound of them. Yet at any rate people now believed that something was wrong with him, and were ready to help him. The positive certainty with which these first measures had been taken comforted him. He felt himself drawn once more into the human circle and hoped for great and remarkable results from both the doctor and the locksmith, without really distinguishing precisely between them."

Scene V: Gregor opens the door. "Slowly Gregor pushed the chair towards the door, then let go of it, caught hold of the door for support—the soles at the end of his little legs were somewhat sticky—and rested against it for a moment after his efforts. Then he set himself to turning the key in the lock with his mouth. It seemed, unhappily, that he hadn't really any teeth—what could he grip the key with?—but on the other hand his jaws were certainly very strong; with their help he did manage to set the key in motion, heedless of the fact that he was undoubtedly damaging them somewhere, since a brown fluid issued from his mouth, flowed over the key and dripped on the floor. . . Since he had to pull the door towards him, he was still invisible when it was really wide open. He had to edge himself slowly round the near half of the double door, and to do it very carefully if he was not to fall plump upon his back just on the threshold. He was still carrying out this difficult manoeuvre, with no time to observe anything else, when he heard the chief clerk utter a loud 'Oh!'—it sounded like a gust of wind—and now he could see the man, standing as he was nearest to the door, clapping one hand before his open mouth and slowly backing away as if driven by some invisible steady pressure. His mother— in spite of the chief clerk's being there her hair was still undone and sticking up in all directions—first clasped her hands and looked at his father, then took two steps towards Gregor and fell on the floor among her outspread skirts, her face quite hidden on her breast. His father knotted his fist with a fierce expression on his face as if he meant to knock Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly round the living room, covered his eyes with his hands and wept till his great chest heaved."

Scene VI: Gregor tries to calm the chief clerk so that he will not be discharged. "'Well,' said Gregor, knowing perfectly that he was the only one who had retained any composure 'I'll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples and start off. Will you only let me go? You see, sir, I'm not obstinate, and I'm willing to work; traveling is a hard life, but I couldn't live without it. Where are you going, sir? To the office? Yes? Will you give a true account of all this? One can be temporarily incapacitated, but that's just the moment for remembering former services and bearing in mind that later on, when the incapacity has been got over, one will certainly work with all the more industry and concentration.' " But the chief clerk in horror and as if in a trance is stumbling towards the staircase to escape. Gregor starts to walk towards him—a wonderful bit here—on the hind pair of his three pairs of legs, "but immediately, as he was feeling for a support, he fell down with a little cry upon his many little legs. Hardly was he down when he experienced for the first time this morning a sense of physical comfort; his legs had firm ground under them; they were completely obedient, as he noted with joy; they even strove to carry him forward in whatever direction he chose; and he was inclined to believe that a final relief from all his sufferings was at hand." His mother springs up, and in backing away from him she upsets the coffeepot on the breakfast table so that it pours over the rug. " 'Mother, Mother,' said Gregor in a low voice, and looked up at her. The chief clerk, for the moment, had quite slipped from his mind; instead, he could not resist snapping his jaws together at the sight of the streaming coffee. That made his mother scream again." Gregor, looking now for the chief clerk, "made a spring, to be as sure as possible of overtaking him; the chief clerk must have divined his intention, for he leaped down several steps and vanished; he was still yelling 'Ugh!' and it echoed through the whole staircase."

Scene VII: The father brutally drives Gregor back into his room, stamping his feet and flourishing a stick in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Gregor has difficulty getting through the partly opened door, but forced by his father he tries until he gets stuck. "One side of his body rose up, he was tilted at an angle in the doorway, his flank was quite bruised, horrid blotches stained the white door, soon he was stuck fast and, left to himself, could not have moved at all, his legs on one side fluttered trembling in the air, those on the other were crushed painfully to the floor—when from behind his father gave him a strong push which was

literally a deliverance and he flew far into the room, bleeding freely. The father caught at the handle of the door with the stick and slammed it behind him, and then at last there was silence."

PART TWO

Scene I: The first attempt is made to feed coleopteron Gregor. Under the impression that his condition is some kind of foul but not hopeless illness that may pass with time, he is placed at first on the diet of a sick human being and he finds that a human meal of milk has been offered to him. We are always aware of those doors, doors opening and closing stealthily in the dusk. From the kitchen, across the hallway, to the hallway door of Gregor's room light footsteps had come, his sister's, awakening him from sleep, and he discovers that a basin with milk has been placed within his room. One of his little legs has been damaged in the collision with his father; it will grow better, but in this scene he limps and trails it uselessly behind him. He is a big beetle as beetles go, but he is smaller and more brittle than a human being. Gregor makes for the milk. Alas, while his still human mind eagerly accepts the notion of that sweetish sop, with soft white bread in the milk, his beetle stomach and beetle taste buds refuse a mammal's meal. Although he is very hungry the milk is repulsive to him and he crawls back to the middle of the room.

Scene II: The door theme continues and the duration theme settles in. We shall begin to witness Gregor's usual day and dusk during this fantastic winter of 1912, and his discovery of the security of the couch. But let us look and listen with Gregor through the crack of the parlor door on the left. His father used to read aloud the newspapers to his wife and daughter. True, this has now been interrupted and the flat is silent though not empty of occupants, but on the whole the family is getting used to the situation. Here is the son and brother plunged into a monstrous change that should have sent them scuttling out into the streets for help with shrieks and tears, in wild compassion—but here they are, the three philistines, cosily taking it in their stride.

I don't know if you read a couple of years ago in the papers about that teenage girl and boy who murdered the girl's mother. It starts with a very Kafkaesque scene: the girl's mother has come home and found her daughter and the boy in the bedroom, and the boy has hit the mother with a hammer—several times—and dragged her away. But the woman is still thrashing and groaning in the kitchen, and the boy says to his sweetheart, "Gimme that hammer. I think I'll have to knock her again." But the girl gives her mate a knife instead and he stabs the girl's mother many, many times, to death—under the impression, probably, that this all is a comic strip: you hit a person, the person sees lots of stars and exclamation marks but revives by and by, in the next installment. Physical life however has no next installment, and soon boy and girl have to do something with dead mother. "Oh, plaster of paris, it will dissolve her completely!" Of course, it will—marvelous idea—place body in bathtub, cover with plaster, and that's all. Meanwhile, with mother under the plaster (which does not work—wrong plaster, perhaps) boy and girl throw several beer parties. What fun! Lovely canned music, and lovely canned beer. "But you can't go, fellas, to the bathroom. The bathroom is a mess."

I'm trying to show you that in so-called real life we find sometimes a great resemblance to the situation in Kafka's fantastic story. Mark the curious mentality of the morons in Kafka who enjoy their evening paper despite the fantastic horror in the middle of their apartment. " 'What a quiet life our family has been leading,' said Gregor to himself, and as he sat there motionless staring into the darkness he felt great pride in the fact that he had been able to provide such a life for his parents and sister in such a fine flat." The room is lofty and empty and the beetle begins to dominate the man. The high room "in which he had to lie flat on the floor filled him with an apprehension he could not account for, since it had been his very own room for the past five years—and with a half-unconscious action, not without a slight feeling of shame, he scuttled under the couch, where he felt comfortable at once, although his back was a little cramped and he could not lift his head up, and his only regret was that his body was too broad to get the whole of it under the couch."

Scene III: Gregor's sister brings a selection of foods. She removes the basin of milk, not by means of her bare hands but with a cloth, for it has been touched by the disgusting monster. However, she is a clever little creature, that sister, and brings a whole selection—rotten vegetables, old cheese, bones glazed with dead white sauce—and Gregor whizzed towards this feast. "One after another and with tears of satisfaction in his eyes he quickly devoured the cheese, the vegetables and the sauce; the fresh food, on

the other hand, had no charms for him, he could not even stand the smell of it and actually dragged away to some little distance the things he could eat." The sister turns the key in the lock slowly as a warning that he should retreat, and she comes and cleans up while Gregor, full of food, tries to hide under the couch.

Scene IV: Grete, the sister, takes on a new importance. It is she who feeds the beetle; she alone enters the beetle's lair, sighing and with an occasional appeal to the saints—it is such a Christian family. In a wonderful passage the cook goes down on her knees to Mrs. Samsa and begs to leave. With tears in her eyes she thanks the Samsas for allowing her to go—as if she were a liberated slave—and without any prompting she swears a solemn oath that she will never say a single word to anyone about what is happening in the Samsa household. “Gregor was fed, once in the early morning while his parents and the servant girl were still asleep, and a second time after they had all had their midday dinner, for then his parents took a short nap and the servant girl could be sent out on some errand or other by his sister. Not that they would have wanted him to starve, of course, but perhaps they could not have borne to know more about his feeding than from hearsay, perhaps too his sister wanted to spare them such little anxieties wherever possible, since they had quite enough to bear as it was."

Scene V: This is a very distressing scene. It transpires that in his human past Gregor has been deceived by his family. Gregor had taken that dreadful job with that nightmare firm because he wished to help his father who five years ago had gone bankrupt. "They had simply got used to it, both the family and Gregor; the money was gratefully accepted and gladly given, but there was no special uprush of warm feeling. With his sister alone had he remained intimate, and it was a secret plan of his that she, who loved music, unlike himself, and could play movingly on the violin, should be sent next year to study at the School of Music, despite the great expense that would entail, which must be made up in some other way. During his brief visits home the School of Music was often mentioned in the talks he had with his sister, but always merely as a beautiful dream which could never come true, and his parents discouraged even these innocent references to it; yet Gregor had made up his mind firmly about it and meant to announce the fact with due solemnity on Christmas Day." Gregor now overhears his father explaining "that a certain amount of investments, a very small amount it was true, had survived the wreck of their fortunes and had even increased a little because the dividends had not been touched meanwhile. And besides that, the money Gregor brought home every month—he had kept only a few dollars for himself—had never been quite used up and now amounted to a small capital sum. Behind the door Gregor nodded his head eagerly, rejoiced at his evidence of unexpected thrift and foresight. True, he could really have paid off some more of his father's debts to the boss with this extra money, and so brought much nearer the day on which he could quit his job, but doubtless it was better the way his father had arranged it." The family believes this sum should be kept untouched for a rainy day, but in the meantime how are the living expenses to be met? The father has not worked for five years and could not be expected to do much. And Gregor's mother's asthma would keep her from working. "And was his sister to earn her bread, she who was still a child of seventeen and whose life hitherto had been so pleasant, consisting as it did in dressing herself nicely, sleeping long, helping in the housekeeping, going out to a few modest entertainments and above all playing the violin? At first whenever the need for earning money was mentioned Gregor let go his hold on the door and threw himself down on the cool leather sofa beside it, he felt so hot with shame and grief."

Scene VI: A new relationship begins between brother and sister, this time having to do with a window instead of a door. Gregor "nerved himself to the great effort of pushing an armchair to the window, then crawled up over the window sill and, braced against the chair, leaned against the windowpanes, obviously in some recollection of the sense of freedom that looking out of a window always used to give him." Gregor, or Kafka, seems to think that Gregor's urge to approach the window was a recollection of human experience. Actually, it is a typical insect reaction to light: one finds all sorts of dusty bugs near windowpanes, a moth on its back, a lame daddy longlegs, poor insects cobwebbed in a corner, a buzzing fly still trying to conquer the glass pane. Gregor's human sight is growing dimmer so that he cannot see clearly even across the street. The human detail is dominated by the insect general idea. (But let us not ourselves be insects. Let us first of all study every detail in this story; the general idea will come of itself later when we have all the data we need.) His sister does not understand that Gregor has retained a human heart, human sensitivity, a human sense of decorum, of shame, of humility and pathetic pride. She disturbs him horribly by the noise and haste with which she opens the window to breathe some fresh air, and she does not bother to conceal her disgust at the awful smell in his den. Neither does she conceal her feelings when she actually sees him. One day, about a month after Gregor's metamorphosis, "when there was surely no reason for her to be still startled at his appearance, she came a little earlier than usual and found him gazing out of the window, quite motionless, and thus well placed to look like a bogey. . .

She jumped back as if in alarm and banged the door shut; a stranger might well have thought that he had been lying in wait for her there meaning to bite her. Of course he hid himself under the couch at once, but he had to wait until midday before she came again, and she seemed more ill at ease than usual." These things hurt, and nobody understood how they hurt. In an exquisite display of feeling, in order to spare her the repulsive sight of him, Gregor one day "carried a sheet on his back to the couch—it cost him four hours' labor—and arranged it there in such a way as to hide him completely, so that even if she were to bend down she could not see him. . . Gregor even fancied that he caught a thankful glance from her eye when he lifted the sheet carefully a very little with his head to see how she was taking the new arrangement."

It should be noted how kind, how good our poor little monster is. His beetlehood, while distorting and degrading his body, seems to bring out in him all his human sweetness. His utter unselfishness, his constant preoccupation with the needs of others—this, against the backdrop of his hideous plight comes out in strong relief. Kafka's art consists in accumulating on the one hand, Gregor's insect features, all the sad detail of his insect disguise, and on the other hand, in keeping vivid and limpid before the reader's eyes Gregor's sweet and subtle human nature.

Scene VII: Here occurs the furniture-moving scene. Two months have passed. Up to now only his sister has been visiting him; but, Gregor says to himself, my sister is only a child; she has taken on herself the job of caring for me merely out of childish thoughtlessness. My mother should understand the situation better. So here in the seventh scene the mother, asthmatic, feeble, and muddleheaded, will enter his room for the first time. Kafka prepares the scene carefully. For recreation Gregor had formed the habit of walking on the walls and ceiling. He is at the height of the meagre bliss his beetlehood can produce. "His sister at once remarked the new distraction Gregor had found for himself—he left traces behind him of the sticky stuff on his soles wherever he crawled—and she got the idea in her head of giving him as wide a field as possible to crawl in and of removing the pieces of furniture that hindered him, above all the chest of drawers and the writing desk." Thus the mother is brought in to help move the furniture. She comes to his door with exclamations of joyful eagerness to see her son, an incongruous and automatic reaction that is replaced by a certain hush when she enters the mysterious chamber. “Gregor’s sister, of course, went in first, to see that everything was in order before letting his mother enter. In great haste Gregor pulled the sheet lower and rucked it more in folds so that it really looked as if it had been thrown accidentally over the couch. And this time he did not peer out from under it; he renounced the pleasure of seeing his mother on this occasion and was only glad that she had come at all. “Come in, he's out of sight," said his sister, obviously leading her mother in by the hand.

The women struggle to move the heavy furniture until his mother voices a certain human thought, naive but kind, feeble but not devoid of feeling, when she says: 'Doesn't it look as if we were showing him, by taking away his furniture, that we have given up hope of his ever getting better and are just leaving him coldly to himself? I think it would be best to keep his room exactly as it has always been, so that when he comes back to us he will find everything unchanged and be able all the more easily to forget what has happened in between." Gregor is torn between two emotions. His beetlehood suggests that an empty room with bare walls would be more convenient for crawling about—all he needed would be some chink to hide in, his indispensable couch—but otherwise he would not need all those human conveniences and adornments. But his mother's voice reminds him of his human background. Unfortunately, his sister has developed a queer self-assurance and has grown accustomed to consider herself an expert in Gregor s affairs as against her parents. "Another factor might have been also the enthusiastic temperament of an adolescent girl, which seeks to indulge itself on every opportunity and which now tempted Grete to exaggerate the horror of her brother's circumstances in order that she might do all the more for him.” This is a curious note: the domineering sister, the strong sister of the fairy tales, the handsome busybody lording it over the fool of the family, the proud sisters of Cinderella, the cruel emblem of health, youth, and blossoming beauty in the house of disaster and dust. So they decide to move the things out after all but have a real struggle with the chest of drawers. Gregor is in an awful state of panic. He kept his fretsaw in that chest, with which he used to make things when he was free at home, his sole hobby.

Scene VIII: Gregor tries to save at least the picture in the frame he had made with his cherished fretsaw. Kafka varies his effects in that every time the beetle is seen by his family he is shown in a new position, some new spot. Here Gregor rushes from his hiding place, unseen by the two women now struggling with his writing desk, and climbs the wall to press himself over the picture, his hot, dry belly against the soothing cool glass. The mother is not much help in this furniture-moving business and has

to be supported by Grete. Grete always remains strong and hale whereas not only her brother but both parents are going to be soon (after the apple-pitching scene) on the brink of sinking into some dull dream, into a state of torpid and decrepit oblivion; but Grete with the hard health of her ruddy adolescence keeps propping them up.

Scene IX: Despite Grete's efforts, the mother catches sight of Gregor, a "huge brown mass on the flowered wallpaper, and before she was really conscious that what she saw was Gregor screamed in a loud, hoarse voice: 'Oh God, oh God!', fell with outspread arms over the couch as if giving up and did not move. 'Gregor!' cried his sister, shaking her fist and glaring at him. This was the first time she had directly addressed him since his metamorphosis." She runs into the living room for something to rouse her mother from the fainting fit. Gregor wanted to help too—there was still time to rescue the picture—but he was stuck fast to the glass and had to tear himself loose; he then ran after his sister into the next room as if he could advise her, as he used to do; but then had to stand helplessly behind her; she meanwhile searched among various small bottles and when she turned round started in alarm at the sight of him; one bottle fell on the floor and broke; a splinter of glass cut Gregor's face and some kind of corrosive medicine splashed him; without pausing a moment longer Grete gathered up all the bottles she could carry and ran to her mother with them; she banged the door shut with her foot. Gregor was now cut off from his mother, who was perhaps nearly dying because of him; he dared not open the door for fear of frightening away his sister, who had to stay with her mother; there was nothing he could do but wait; and harassed by self-reproach and worry he began now to crawl to and fro, over everything, walls, furniture and ceiling, and finally in his despair, when the whole room seemed to be reeling around him, fell down on to the middle of the big table." There is a change in the respective position of the various members of the family. Mother (on the couch) and sister are in the middle room; Gregor is in the corner in the left room. And presently his father comes home and enters the living room. "And so Gregor fled to the door of his own room and crouched against it, to let his father see as soon as he came in from the hall that his son had the good intention of getting back into his own room immediately and that it was not necessary to drive him there, but that if only the door were opened he would disappear at once."

Scene X: The apple-pelting scene comes now. Gregor's father has changed and is now at the summit of his power. Instead of the man who used to lie wearily sunk in bed and could scarcely wave an arm in greeting and when he went out shuffled along laboriously with a crook-handled stick, "Now he was standing there in fine shape; dressed in a smart blue uniform with gold buttons, such as bank messengers wear; his strong double chin bulged over the stiff high collar of his jacket; from under his bushy eyebrows his black eyes darted fresh and penetrating glances; his onetime tangled white hair had been combed flat on either side of a shining and carefully exact parting. He pitched his cap, which bore a gold monogram, probably the badge of some bank, in a wide sweep across the whole room on to a sofa and with the tail-ends of his jacket thrown back, his hands in his trouser pockets, advanced with a grim visage towards Gregor. Likely enough he did not himself know what he meant to do; at any rate he lifted his feet uncommonly high and Gregor was dumbfounded at the enormous size of his shoe soles."

As usual, Gregor is tremendously interested in the movement of human legs, big thick human feet, so different from his own flimmering appendages. We have a repetition of the slow motion theme (The chief clerk, backing and shuffling, had retreated in slow motion.) Now father and son slowly circle the room: indeed, the whole operation hardly looked like pursuit it was carried out so slowly. And then his father starts to bombard Gregor with the only missiles that the living-dining room could provide—apples, small red apples—and Gregor is driven back into the middle room, back to the heart of his beetlehood. "An apple thrown without much force grazed Gregor's back and glanced off harmlessly. But another following immediately landed right on his back and sank in; Gregor wanted to drag himself forward, as if this startling, incredible pain could be left behind him; but he felt as if nailed to the spot and flattened himself out in a complete derangement of all his senses. With his last conscious look he saw the door of his room being torn open and his mother rushing out ahead of his screaming sister, in her underbodice, for her daughter had loosened her clothing to ler her breathe more freely and recover from her swoon; he saw his mother rushing towards his father, leaving one after another behind her on the floor her loosened petticoats, stumbling over her petticoats straight to his father and embracing him, in complete union with him—but here Gregor's sight began to fail—with her hands clasped round his father's neck as she begged for her son's life."

This is the end of part two. Let us sum up the situation. The sister has become frankly antagonistic to her brother. She may have loved him once, but now she regards him with disgust and anger. In Mrs. Samsa asthma and emotion struggle. She is a rather

mechanical mother, with some mechanical mother love for her son, but we shall soon see that she, too, is ready to give him up. The father, as already remarked, has reached a certain summit of impressive strength and brutality. From the very first he had been eager to hurt physically his helpless son, and now the apple he has thrown has become embedded in poor Gregor's beetle flesh.

PART THREE

Scene I: "The serious injury done to Gregor, which disabled him for more than a month—the apple went on sticking in his body as a visible reminder, since no one ventured to remove it—seemed to have made even his father recollect that Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape, and ought not to be treated as an enemy, that, on the contrary, family duty required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience." The door theme is taken up again since now, in the evening, the door leading from Gregor's darkened room to the lighted living room is left open. This is a subtle situation. In the previous scene father and mother had reached their highest point of energy, he in his resplendent uniform pitching those little red bombs, emblems of fruitfulness and manliness; and she, the mother, actually moving furniture despite her frail breathing tubes. But after that peak there is a fall, a weakening. It would almost seem that the father himself is on the point of disintegrating and becoming a feeble beetle. Through the opened door a curious current seems to pass. Gregor's beetle illness is catching, his father seems to have caught it, the weakness, the drabness, the dirt. "Soon after supper his father would fall asleep in his armchair; his mother and sister would admonish each other to be silent; his mother, bending low over the lamp, stitched at fine sewing for an underwear firm; his sister. who had taken a job as a salesgirl, was learning shorthand and French in the evenings on the chance of bettering herself. Sometimes his father woke up, and as if quite unaware that he had been sleeping said to the mother: 'What a lot of sewing you're doing today!' and at once fell asleep again, while the women exchanged a tired smile.

"With a kind of mulishness his father persisted in keeping his uniform on even in the house; his dressing gown hung, uselessly on its peg and he slept fully dressed where he sat, as if he were ready for service at any moment and even here only at the beck and call of his superior. As a result, his uniform, which was not brand new to start with, began to look dirty, despite all the loving care of the mother and sister to keep it clean, and Gregor often spent whole evenings gazing at the many greasy spots on the garment, gleaming with gold buttons always in a high state of polish, in which the old man sat sleeping in extreme discomfort and yet quite peacefully." The father always refused to go to bed when the time had arrived, despite every inducement offered by the mother and sister, until finally the two women would hoist him up by his armpits from the chair, "And leaning on the two of them he would heave himself up, with difficulty, as if he were a great burden to himself, suffer them to lead him as far as the door and then wave them off and go on alone, while the mother abandoned her needlework and the sister her pen in order to run after him and help him farther." The father's uniform comes close to resembling that of a big but somewhat tarnished scarab. His tired overworked family must get him from one room to another and to bed.

Scene II: The disintegration of the Samsa family continues. They dismiss the servant girl and engage a still cheaper charwoman, a gigantic bony creature who comes in to do the rough work. You must remember that in Prague, 1912, it was much more difficult to clean and cook than in Ithaca, 1954. They have to sell various family ornaments. "But what they lamented most was the fact that they could not leave the flat which was much too big for their present circumstances because they could not think of any way to shift Gregor. Yet Gregor saw well enough that consideration for him was not the main difficulty preventing the removal, for they could have easily shifted him in some suitable box with a few air holes in it; what really kept them from moving into another flat was rather their own complete hopelessness and the belief that they had been singled out for a misfortune such as had never happened to any of their relations or acquaintances." The family is completely egotistic and has no more strength left after fulfilling its daily obligations.

Scene III: A last flash of human recollections comes to Gregor's mind, prompted by the still living urge in him to help his family. He even remembers vague sweethearts, "but instead of helping him and his family they were one and all unapproachable

and he was glad when they vanished." This scene is mainly devoted to Grete, who is now clearly the villain of the piece. "His sister no longer took thought to bring him what might especially please him, but in the morning and at noon before she went to business hurriedly pushed into his room with her foot any food that was available, and in the evening cleared it out again with one sweep of the broom, heedless of whether it had been merely tasted, or—as most frequently happened—left untouched. The cleaning of his room, which she now did always in the evenings, could not have been more hastily done. Streaks of dirt stretched along the walls, here and there lay balls of dust and filth. At first Gregor used to station himself in some particularly filthy corner when his sister arrived in order to reproach her with it, so to speak. But he could have sat there for weeks without getting her to make any improvement; she could see the dirt as well as he did, but she had simply made up her mind to leave it alone. And yet, with a touchiness that was new to her, which seemed anyhow to have infected the whole family, she jealously guarded her claim to be the sole caretaker of Gregor's room." Once when his mother had given the room a thorough cleaning with several buckets of water—the dampness upset Gregor—a grotesque family row ensues. The sister bursts into a storm of weeping while her parents look on in helpless amazement; "then they too began to go into action; the father reproached the mother on his right for not having left the cleaning of Gregor's room to his sister; shrieked at the sister on his left that never again was she to be allowed to clean Gregor's room; while the mother tried to pull the father into his bedroom, since he was beyond himself with agitation; the sister, shaken with sobs, then beat upon the table with her small fists; and Gregor hissed loudly with rage because not one of them thought of shutting the door to spare him such a spectacle and so much noise."

Scene IV: A curious relationship is established between Gregor and the bony charwoman who is rather amused by him, not frightened at all, and in fact she rather likes him. "Come along, then, you old dung beetle," she says. And it is raining outside, the first sign of spring perhaps.

Scene V: The lodgers arrive, the three bearded boarders, with a passion for order. These are mechanical beings; their beards are masks of respectability but actually they are shoddy scoundrels, these serious-looking gentlemen. In this scene a great change comes over the apartment. The boarders take the parents' bedroom on the far left of the flat, beyond the living room. The parents move across to the sister's room on the right of Gregor's room, and Grete has to sleep in the living room but has now no room of her own since the lodgers take their meals in the living room and spend their evenings there. Moreover, the three bearded boarders have brought into this furnished flat some furniture of their own. They have a fiendish love for superficial tidiness, and all the odds and ends which they do not need go into Gregor's room. This is exactly the opposite to what had been happening in the furniture scene of part two, scene 7, where there had been an attempt to move everything out of Gregor's room. Then we had the ebb of the furniture, now the return flow, the jetsam washed back, all kinds of junk pouring in; and curiously enough Gregor, though a very sick beetle—the apple wound is festering, and he is starving—finds some beetle pleasure in crawling among all that dusty rubbish. In this fifth scene of part three where all the changes come, the alteration in the family meals is depicted. The mechanical movement of the bearded automatons is matched by the automatic reaction of the Samsas. The lodgers "set themselves at the top end of the table where formerly Gregor and his father and mother had eaten their meals, unfolded their napkins and took knife and fork in hand. At once his mother appeared in the other doorway with a dish of meat and close behind her his sister with a dish of potatoes piled high. The food steamed with a thick vapor. The lodgers bent over the food set before them as if to scrutinize it before eating, in fact the man in the middle, who seemed to pass for an authority with the other two, cut a piece of meat as it lay on the dish, obviously to discover if it were tender or should be sent back to the kitchen. He showed satisfaction, and Gregor's mother and sister, who had been watching anxiously, breathed freely and began to smile." Gregor's keen envious interest in large feet will be recalled; now toothless Gregor is also interested in teeth. "It seemed remarkable to Gregor that among the various noises coming from the table he could always distinguish the sound of their masticating teeth, as if this were a sign to Gregor that one needed teeth in order to eat, and that with toothless jaws even of the finest make one could do nothing. 'I'm hungry enough,' said Gregor sadly to himself, 'but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here am I dying of starvation!' "

Scene VI: In this great music scene the lodgers have heard Grete playing the violin in the kitchen, and in automatic reaction to the entertainment value of music they suggest that she play for them. The three roomers and the three Samsas gather in the living room.

Without wishing to antagonize lovers of music, I do wish to point out that taken in a general sense music, as perceived by its consumers, belongs to a more primitive, more animal form in the scale of arts than literature or painting. I am taking music as a whole, not in terms of individual creation, imagination, and composition, all of which of course rival the art of literature and painting, but in terms of the impact music has on the average listener. A great composer, a great writer, a great painter are brothers. But I think that the impact music in a generalized and primitive form has on the listener is of a more lowly quality than the impact of an average book or an average picture. What I especially have in mind is the soothing, lulling, dulling influence of music on some people such as of the radio or records.

In Kafka's tale it is merely a girl pitifully scraping on a fiddle and this corresponds in the piece to the canned music or plugged-in music of today. What Kafka felt about music in general is what I have just described: its stupefying, numbing, animallike quality. This attitude must be kept in mind in interpreting an important sentence that has been misunderstood by some translators. Literally, it reads “Was Gregor an animal to be so affected by music?” That is, in his human form he had cared little for it but in this scene, in his beetlehood, he succumbs: “He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved.” The scene goes as follows. Gregor’s sister begins to play for the lodgers. Gregor is attracted by the playing and actually puts his head into the living room. “He felt hardly any surprise at his growing lack of consideration for the others; there had been a time when he prided himself on being considerate. And yet just on this occasion he had more reason than ever to hide himself since owing to the amount of dust which lay thick in his room and rose into the air at the slightest movement he too was covered with dust; fluff and hair and remnants of food trailed with him, caught on his back and along his sides; his indifference to everything was much too great for him to turn on his back and scrape himself clean on the carpet as once he had done several times a day. And in sprite of his condition no shame deterred him from advancing a little over the spotless floor of the living room.”

At first no one was aware of him. The lodgers, disappointed in their expectation of hearing good violin playing, were clustered near the window whispering among themselves and waiting for the music to stop. And yet, to Gregor his sister was playing beautifully. He “crawled a little farther forward and lowered his head to the ground so that it might be possible for his eyes to meet hers. Was he an animal that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved. He was determined to push forward till he reached his sister, to pull at her skirt and so let her know that she was to come into his room with her violin for no one here appreciated her playing as he would appreciate it. He would never let her out of his room, at least not so long as he lived; his frightful appearance would become for the first time useful to him; he would watch all the doors of his room at once and spit at intruders; but his sister should need no constraint, she should stay with him of her own free will; she should sit beside him on the couch, bend down her ear to him and hear him confide that he had had the firm intention of sending her to the School of Music, and that, but for his mishap, last Christmas—surely Christmas was long past?—he would have announced it to everybody without allowing a single objection. After this confession his sister would be so touched that she would burst into tears, and Gregor would then raise himself to her shoulder and kiss her on the neck, which, now that she went to business, she kept free of any ribbon or collar."

Suddenly the middle lodger sees Gregor, but instead of driving Gregor out the father tries to soothe the lodgers and (in a reversal of his actions) "spreading out his arms, tried to urge them back into their own room and at the same time to block their view of Gregor. They now began to be really a little angry, one could not tell whether because of the old man's behavior or because it had just dawned on them that all unwittingly they had such a neighbor as Gregor next door. They demanded explanations of his father, they waved their arms like him, tugged uneasily at their beards and only with reluctance backed towards their room." The sister rushes into the lodgers' room and quickly makes up their beds, but "The old man seemed once more to be so possessed by his mulish self-assertiveness that he was forgetting all the respect he should show to his lodgers. He kept driving them on and driving them on until in the very door of the bedroom the middle lodger stamped his foot loudly on the floor and so brought him to a halt. 'I beg to announce,' said the lodger, lifting one hand and looking also at Gregor's mother and sister, ‘that because of the disgusting conditions prevailing in this household and family'—here he spat on the floor with emphatic brevity—'I give you notice on the spot. Naturally I won't pay you a penny for the days I have lived here; on the contrary I shall consider bringing an action for damages against you based on claims—believe me—that will be easily susceptible of proof.' He ceased and stared straight in front of him, as if he expected something. In fact his two friends at once rushed into the breach with these words: 'And we too give notice on the spot.’ On that he seized the door-handle and shut the door with a slam."

Scene VII: The sister is completely unmasked; her betrayal is absolute and fatal to Gregor. " 'I won't utter my brother's name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it....

" 'We must try to get rid of it,' his sister now said explicitly to her father, since her mother was coughing too much to hear a word. 'It will be the death of both of you, I can see that coming. When one has to work as hard as we do, all of us, one can't stand this continual torment at home on top of it. At least I can't stand it any longer.' And she burst into such a passion of sobbing that her tears dropped on her mother's face, where she wiped them off mechanically." Both the father and sister agree that Gregor cannot understand them and hence no agreement with him is possible.

" 'He must go,' cried Gregor's sister, 'that's the only solution, Father. 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 trouble. But how can it be Gregor? If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can't live with such a creature and he'd have gone away on his own accord. Then we wouldn't have any brother, but we'd be able to go on living and keep his memory in honor. As it is, this creature persecutes us, drives away our lodgers, obviously wants the whole apartment to himself and would have us all sleep in the gutter.' "

That he has disappeared as a human brother and should now disappear as a beetle deals Gregor the last blow. Painfully, because he is so weak and maimed, he crawls back to his own room. At the doorway he turns and his last glance falls on his mother, who was, in fact, almost asleep. "Hardly was he well inside his room when the door was hastily pushed shut, bolted and locked. The sudden noise in his rear startled him so much that his little legs gave beneath him. It was his sister who had shown such haste. She had been standing ready waiting and had made a light spring forward. Gregor had not even heard her coming, and she cried 'At last!' to her parents as she turned the key in the lock." In his darkened room Gregor discovers that he cannot move and though he is in pain it seems to be passing away. "The rotting apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, all covered with soft dust, already hardly troubled him. He thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible. In this state of vacant and peaceful meditation he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning. The first broadening of light in the world outside the window entered his consciousness once more. Then his head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last faint flicker of his breath."

Scene VIII: Gregor's dead, dry body is discovered the next morning by the charwoman and a great warm sense of relief permeates the insect world of his despicable family. Here is a point to be observed with care and love. Gregor is a human being in an insect's disguise; his family are insects disguised as people. With Gregor's death their insect souls are suddenly aware that they are free to enjoy themselves. " 'Come in beside us, Grete, for a little while,' said Mrs. Samsa* with a tremulous smile, and Grete, not without looking back at the corpse, followed her parents into their bedroom." The charwoman opens the window wide and the air has a certain warmth: it is the end of March when insects come out of hibernation.

** In a note in his annotated copy Nabokov observes that after Gregor's death it is never "father" and "mother" but only Mr. and Mrs. Samsa.*

Scene IX: We get a wonderful glimpse of the lodgers as they sullenly ask for their breakfast but instead are shown Gregor's corpse. "So they entered and stood around it, with their hands in the pockets of their shabby coats, in the middle of the room already bright with sunlight." What is the key word here? Shabby in the sun. As in a fairy tale, in the happy end of a fairy tale, the evil charm is dissipated with the magician's death. The lodgers are seen to be seedy, they are no longer dangerous, whereas on the other hand the Samsa family ascends again, gains in power and lush vitality. The scene ends with a repetition of the staircase theme, just as the chief clerk had retreated in slow motion, clasping the banisters. At the orders of Mr. Samsa that they must leave the lodgers are quelled. "In the hall they all three took their hats from the rack, their sticks from the umbrella stand,

bowed in silence and quitted the apartment." Down they go now, three bearded borders, automatons, clockwork puppets, while the Samsa family leans over the banisters to watch them descend. The staircase as it winds down through the apartment house imitates, as it were, an insect's jointed legs; and the lodgers now disappear, now come to view again, as they descend lower and lower, from landing to landing, from articulation to articulation. At one point they are met by an ascending butcher boy with his basket who is first seen rising towards them, then above them, in proud deportment with his basket full of red steaks and luscious innards—red raw meat, the breeding place of fat shiny flies.

Scene X: The last scene is superb in its ironic simplicity. The spring sunshine is with the Samsa family as they write their three letters—articulation, jointed legs, happy legs, three insects writing three letters of excuse to their employers. "They decided to spend this day in resting and going for a stroll; they had not only deserved such a respite from work, but absolutely needed it." As the charwoman leaves after her morning's work, she giggles amiably as she informs the family: " 'you don't need to bother about how to get rid of the thing next door. It's been seen to already.' Mrs. Samsa and Grete bent over their letters again, as if preoccupied; Mr. Samsa, who perceived that she was eager to begin describing it all in detail, stopped her with a decisive hand. . .

" 'She'll be given notice tonight,' said Mr. Samsa, but neither from his wife nor his daughter did he get any answer, for the charwoman seemed to have shattered again the composure they had barely achieved. They rose, went to the window and stayed there, clasping each other tight. Mr. Samsa turned in his chair to look at them and quietly observed them for a little. Then he called out: 'Come along, now, do. Let bygones be bygones. And you might have some consideration for me.' The two of them complied at once, hastened to him, caressed him and quickly finished their letters.

"Then they all three left the apartment together, which was more than they had done for months, and went by trolley into the open country outside the town. The trolley, in which they were the only passengers, was filled with warm sunshine. Leaning comfortably back in their seats they canvassed their prospects for the future, and it appeared on closer inspection that these were not at all bad, for the jobs they had got, which so far they had never really discussed with each other, were all three admirable and likely to lead to better things later on. The greatest immediate improvement in their condition would of course arise from moving to another house; they wanted to take a smaller and cheaper but also better situated and more easily run apartment than the one they had, which Gregor had selected. While they were thus conversing, it struck both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter's increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a buxom girl. They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body."*

** "The soul has died with Gregor; the healthy young animal takes over. The parasites have fattened themselves on Gregor." Nabokov's note in his annotated copy.*

Let me sum up various of the main themes of the story.

1. The number three plays a considerable role in the story. The story is divided into three parts. There are three doors to Gregor's room. His family consists of three people. Three servants appear in the course of the story. Three lodgers have three beards. Three Samsas write three letters. I am very careful not to overwork the significance of symbols, for once you detach a symbol from the artistic core of the book, you lose all sense of enjoyment. The reason is that there are artistic symbols and there are trite, artificial. or even imbecile symbols. You will find a number of such inept symbols in the psychoanalytic and mythological approach to Kafka's work, in the fashionable mixture of sex and myth that is so appealing to mediocre minds. In other words, symbols may be original and symbols may be stupid and trite. And the abstract symbolic value of an artistic achievement should

never prevail over its beautiful burning life.

So, the only emblematic or heraldic rather than symbolic meaning is the stress which is laid upon three in "The Metamorphosis." It has really a technical meaning. The trinity, the triplet, the triad, the triptych are obvious art forms such as, say, three pictures of youth, ripe years, and old age, or any other threefold triplex subject. Triptych means a picture or carving in three compartments side by side, and this is exactly the effect that Kafka achieves, for instance, with his three rooms in the beginning of the story—living room, Gregor's bedroom, and sister's room, with Gregor in the central one. Moreover, a threefold pattern suggests the three acts of a play. And finally it must be observed that Kafka's fantasy is emphatically logical; what can be more characteristic of logic than the triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. We shall, thus, limit the Kafka symbol of three to its aesthetic and logical significance and completely disregard whatever myths the sexual mythologists read into it under the direction of the Viennese witch doctor.

2. Another thematic line is the theme of the doors, of the opening and closing of doors that runs through the whole story.

3. A third thematic line concerns the ups and downs in the well-being of the Samsa family, the subtle state of balance between their flourishing condition and Gregor's desperate and pathetic condition.

There are a few other subthemes but the above are the only ones essential for an understanding of the story.

You will mark Kafka's style. Its clarity, its precise and formal intonation in such striking contrast to the nightmare matter of his tale. No poetical metaphors ornament his stark black-and-white story. The limpidity of his style stresses the dark richness of his fantasy. Contrast and unity, style and matter, manner and plot are most perfectly integrated.

Back to Leni's Franz Kafka Page