The Metamorphosis
Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka 3rd Edition

Summary

Gregor Samsa awakes one morning to find that he has been inexplicably transformed into a giant insect. He has also slept late. His parents and his sister Grete try to rouse him so he can make it to his dreary job as a traveling salesman. The family depends on him for its livelihood. Gregor, however, is now a bug. When a clerk from his company comes to demand an explanation for his absence, Gregor makes a great effort to open the bedroom door and show himself. This sends the terrified clerk tearing down the stairwell and Gregor’s family into shock.

Grete, more than his father or mother, handles the situation practically. Gregor is fed, and his room is cleaned. Before long, however, economic reality requires all three to find work, and less attention is paid to Gregor—except when he gets out of his room. No one in the family is fully able to reconcile him—or herself to the insect Gregor, and Gregor is unable to express himself to his family. The fear and disgust his presence inspires (the irrational fear of the mammoth cockroach) is a detriment to his mother’s health and incites his father to brief fits of violence. One such fit, a bombardment of fruit, deals Gregor a deep and crippling wound.

Hobbled and neglected, Gregor begins to waste away in his room. The family takes in three carping lodgers, using Gregor’s room to store excess furniture and other miscellanea—adding insult to injury. Yet the family does leave Gregor’s door slightly open in the evenings, so that he may take part in the household in a small way. One evening, the lodgers hear Grete practicing her violin. They call her into the parlor for a concert. She obliges, and the music so moves Gregor that he creeps out into the parlor towards her, wanting to convey that he understands her gift and will help it to blossom. The lodgers see Gregor and immediately give notice. This is the breaking point for the family. Grete declares that they must abandon the notion that this hideous bug is their dear Gregor. All sadly agree. Gregor slinks back into his room. He dies that night.

A great weight has been lifted from the family. After a moment of mourning, the father demands that the lodgers leave immediately. The family takes a trolley out of the city and into the countryside. It is a beautiful, sunny day, and as Grete stretches out her limbs in the trolley car, her parents’ thoughts turn to finding her a husband.

Organizational Patterns

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The Metamorphosis is divided up into three long chapters that are each 15 pages long. The text itself is no more than 45 pages and therefore a short read, though not necessarily an easy read. The sentence structure is a little difficult to comprehend because the text was originally written in German and has been translated into English.

**The Central Question/Enduring Issue**

**Alienation**

**What situations do/have I felt alienated in?** Though Gregor’s experience, the reader is introduced to the alienation that Gregor feels in his place in society, within his work place, within his family, and even within his own mind. Students can relate this to their own personal experiences and what elements have caused them to feel alienated, isolated, or alone.

**What are ways that I can prevent from adding to these feelings or trends of alienation or isolation?** This text can be most helpful in aiding students to identify the source of alienation and what can be done to stop it or to lessen the effects of it. The story ends with Gregor giving up the battle against alienation and this leads to his demise. This is obviously a little morbid and students should be directed to constructive ways of dealing with feelings of alienation.

**Issues Related to this Study of Literature**

**Themes:**

**Economic effects on human relationships**- Gregor is enslaved by his family because he is the one who makes money. Thus, with the possible exception of his sister, the family seems to treat him not as a member but as a source of income. When Gregor is no longer able to work after his metamorphosis, he is treated with revulsion and neglected. Once the family begins working, they also find difficulty communicating with each other, eating dinner in silence and fighting among themselves. The exhaustion of dehumanizing jobs and the recognition that people are only valuable so long as they earn a salary keeps anyone who works isolated from others and unable to establish human relations with them.

**Family Duty**- The theme of family and the duties of family members to each other drive the interactions between Gregor and the others. His thoughts are almost entirely of the need to support his parents and sending his sister to the Conservatory. Though Gregor hates his job, he follows the call of duty to his family and goes far beyond simple duty. The family, on the other hand, takes care of Gregor after his metamorphosis only so far as duty seems to necessitate. He is kept locked in his room and brought food. In the end, his room is barely cleaned and his sister no longer cares about what food she brings him. Her actions are routine, as she only wants to do enough that she can claim she has fulfilled her duty. When she decides she has had enough, she insists that their duty to him has been fulfilled: “I don’t
think anyone could reproach us in the slightest," she says as she suggests that they need to get rid of him.

**Alienation from others, self, and society**

Before his metamorphosis, Gregor is alienated from his job, his humanity, his family, and even his body, as we see from the fact that he barely notices his transformation. In fact, even his consideration for his family seems to be something alien to him, as he barely notices it when he loses this consideration at the end. After his metamorphosis, Gregor feels completely alienated from his room and environment and, as a symbol of this, can’t even see his street out the window. The Metamorphosis, then, is a powerful indictment of the alienation brought on by the modern social order.

**Freedom and Escapism**

Gregor is trapped in his job by his duty to his family, but he dreams of the day when he can finally pay off their debts and quit his job. His need for freedom from the restrictive demands of work is expressed in his metamorphosis, by means of which he escapes. This escape, however, fails to bring Gregor freedom, for he is now imprisoned by his family in his room. Thus, when Gregor works, he is enslaved by his job and, when he doesn’t work, he is enslaved by his family. There is no way of balancing out freedom and duty, and in the end one is always a slave. The only means of escape turns out to be death.

**Internal Guilt**

Guilt stems from family duty, and is Gregor’s most powerful emotion. When he is transformed into an insect, Gregor is made unable to work by circumstances beyond his control. Despite the fact that his metamorphosis is not his fault, however, he is racked by guilt every time that the family mentions money or that he thinks about the pain that he has inadvertently inflicted on them by losing the ability to support them. Guilt, it turns out, is deadly, as Gregor realizes at the end that his life is the only thing keeping the family from a better life. He dies for them just as he lived for them: out of guilt.

**Personal Identity**

Alone in his room, Gregor tries to rebuild the self-identity that he had lost by living entirely for others and ignoring his own needs. He cannot, however, escape from what he sees as his family duty, and continues to act only to serve his family by doing his best not to inconvenience them. Gregor’s comments about his family’s behavior are often tinged with resentment at the way they treat

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him, but he will not allow himself to recognize his bitterness. Gregor manages to escape his self-effacing sense of duty only in the last chapter, when he asserts himself in realizing that his family has been neglecting him. Gregor's search for his identity seems hopeless, however, because he never had an identity to start with. He finds his humanity only at the end, when his sister's playing reminds him of his love for his family. This love, coupled with his freedom, is the final ingredient he needs to establish his identity.

http://www.gradesaver.com/the-metamorphosis/study-guide/major-themes/

**Setting:** Most of the story takes place within the confines of Gregor's small room. Eventually, the reader is introduced to the rest of the small apartment, but the majority of the plot takes place within his room. In fact, we are only given a haggard glimpse at the world outside the window of Gregor's room through his limited memory and eyesight. No distinction is given to the actual country or city that the story takes place in. This is effective because it helps to reinforce the fact that these are universal themes and can be applied to anyone, in any position, at any time.

**Conflict:**

**Internal**- Gregor is conflicted with himself because although he hates his job, he knows that he needs to perform it in order to provide for his family. He is torn with guilt when he is unable to do so because he has transformed into a large bug and because, very soon, it become quite apparent to him that he would not be very effective anyway due to the reactions of his employer and even his family to his current physical state. He becomes further conflicted when his family alienates him because of his unnaturalness and their inability to understand him. He loves his family, but they are now shunning him and this tears him apart. He is also conflicted as he begins to fight the “bug” within him. As he becomes more bug-like in demeanor, Gregor fights it until he becomes too tired to rebel against what he is becoming and gives in when he is tired or feeling especially alienated. Indeed, this internal conflict brings about his demise when Gregor realizes that all he is doing is causing his family pain, and gives up his place in life.

**External**- There is physical conflict between Gregor and his family. Oftentimes, whenever Gregor ventures out of his room, he is met by either his mother, his father, or lodgers who try to do physical harm to him because they do not understand him and think that he is dangerous. This results in fainting spells for his mother and with emotional consequences for his sister, who has to take care of Gregor now that the rest of his family does not care to have anything to do with him. This also results in physical impairment to Gregor, who on one occasion is bombarded by fruit (thrown by his father) which does permanent damage to his exoskeleton. Gregor is also in conflict with his physical surroundings. He feels
confined by the smallness of his room, but becomes scared to venture out of it and encounter larger things.

**Point of View, Narrative Voice:**
This short story is told in third person omniscient with the focus on Gregor’s thoughts and feelings. The reader is introduced to Gregor and his current predicament en medias reis (in the middle of things). A lot of attention and detail is given to Gregor's physical state, although the reader is never specifically told what kind of bug Gregor has transformed into. Attention is given to his room and its set up as well as the pictures on the wall and even his window.
The reader is introduced to the other characters through Gregor’s thoughts and perceptions of them. Therefore, the reader is limited to Gregor's knowledge and point of view and does not get any of the other character’s thoughts or feelings except through interpretation of their actions.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work:**
Students will be able to relate to Gregor through feelings of alienation or isolation. If students have moved from a different country or state, or even another school district, they can most likely relate to Gregor. Even with the change in school grades or classes students can feel alienated if they are having to deal with new issues that make them feel alone or separated from others. They could also relate if they are having to deal with any familial issues, such as a divorce or a step-parent situation. Ultimately, students will be able to relate if they have ever felt alienated from their friends or other associates. This seems to be a common happening in middle school and high school (indeed in human nature in general). They can relate to the alienation that occurs with and within school clicks. Any situation that deals with feelings of alienation relates back to the main theme of this text. Of course we do not wish these feelings upon our students, but it is most likely that they have felt the affects of alienation at some point in this lives.

Students may also be able to relate to Gregor’s feelings of intense guilt. This is not limited to a certain gender or time of life. Students most likely have felt the guilt of not turning in an assignment on time or of doing poorly on a test. Unfortunately, students have probably had more unfortunate and stronger relationships with guilt.

With these feelings aside, students will also be able to contemplate ways that society alienates people and what human nature seems to have an effect on. Students will be able to step back and see what causes feelings of alienation, isolation, and guilt, and hopefully they will be able to gain some peace or at least understanding of the nature and the source of these feelings.

**Vocabulary Issues:**
The Metamorphosis was originally written in German and has been translated (in different versions) into English. This causes some difficulties with sentence structure, as the sentences are usually very complex and worded in a way that is unfamiliar to students. There may be some words that they are unfamiliar with, but generally it is the sentence

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structure that provides the most difficulty. Students may have to read a sentence or a paragraph twice in order for it to flow well or make sense.

**Background Knowledge**

It would be most helpful to teach this short text in the context of or relating to Existentialism. Franz Kafka was an existentialist and obviously embeds existentialist views and issues in this text. This provides teachers with the ability to talk about important figures like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and what they have contributed to philosophy and to human relations through their writings. This is a subject that could be briefly covered, with emphasis on the elements of existentialism, or could be covered in great detail with the history and context of Existentialism starting in Europe during the Red Scare. (*There is conflict with where Existentialism originates from. Do your research and provide students with your opinion and concrete evidence of the origin of existentialism).  

**Implications for Student Diversity:**

The Metamorphosis focuses on feelings of alienation, which can be caused by any manner of differences. Therefore, it can be related to people from various socioeconomic backgrounds, to people of different races, to those of different religions, etc.

**Gender Issues**

The Metamorphosis touches upon the feelings of inadequacy that Gregor feels as a male needing to provide for his family. He views his mother as a fragile being and his sister as being innocent and in need of protection from the evil of the outside world. This is obviously a very patriarchal home and situation. This can be addressed tactfully by the teacher in relation to the equality of males and females. This can also be addressed in the context of the time and society that the story was written in.

**Project Ideas**

**Pre-activities**

* Discuss the meaning of isolation and being outcast.  
* Discuss what human conditions/situations may lead to isolation in contemporary society, even within the microcosm of the school.  
* Don’t tell students what Gregor is! As you read, ask for predictions. These will be interesting!  
* Read the novel. With lower level students, it may be necessary to read aloud with them so they understand the vocabulary and concepts. Higher level students can handle independent reading.

**Activities**

1. Students should keep a reading response journal. Each day, class should begin with a response to a question geared toward the reading of the previous class meeting or homework. This allows for very personal reactions towards Gregor’s developing plight. Examples:
* What did you first think Gregor was as you began reading? Why?
* Have you ever felt isolated from a person or group? Why? How did you feel?
* As Gregor loses his humanity, do you think Kafka is really saying something about society and the effects we have on others?
* Tell me your thoughts about...

2. After reading the first few paragraphs, we have the setting and our main character. Have students predict Gregor’s ailment. Discuss the things in Gregor’s bedroom, especially the picture of the girl. Once the ailment is discovered, students can draw Gregor in his bedroom.

3. Define symbolism. Now that the symbol has been revealed, discuss why Kafka chose to have Gregor change into a dung beetle. Students react in various ways to this change. This is a great discussion point. Evaluate what has affected Gregor so negatively. Make sure students understand this is a symbol! This may require a discussion of cliches or symbols they already know.

4. As the story progresses, Gregor’s family responds in a way which surprises many students. They expect kindness and maybe curiosity, but not fear and hatred. Look at the family as a catalyst for his change and his continual loss of human memory and instinct. This evaluation covers character motivation. Look at the motivations of each family member.

5. Pay attention to the setting. Gregor’s environment changes, becoming more empty. Why is his sister removing furniture. What emotions are evoked in Gregor?

6. Gregor’s father is especially violent towards him and provides a terrible physical injury. What may this symbolize? Apply this injury to things in the students’ lives which feel as painful. The starvation could also be symbolic.

7. After completing the novel, have students evaluate the novel’s ending. They must give their point of view regarding Kafka’s choice of death and support their point of view with reasons from the text and personal opinion.

8. Students should rewrite the ending of the novel. The length of this assignment can certainly vary. Students must include the parents and sister in this ending in addition to Gregor. Be vague in content expectations to allow for creativity and originality.

Additional Teaching Ideas/Sources:
There are several film adaptations of this text:
The Metamorphosis- film adaptation by: Carlos Atanes
The Metamorphosis- film adaptation by: Peter Kuper