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| Kafka's *Metamorphosis*  In His Time and In Ours  Directions: Read and annotate the text below…this is an introduction to our next read, *The Metamorphosis…*  Warren Breckman  Associate Professor of History  University of Pennsylvania  Penn Reading Project Lecture  September 6, 2000  ***(note—I have edited the text and taken some things out)*** |

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| |  | | --- | | http://www.upenn.edu/nso/prp/met/images/breckman02.jpg | |  |   Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* strikes me as a particularly well-chosen novel for the Penn Reading Project, and I say this not only because the adult life into which you are entering will inevitably have its kafkaesque moments. Rather, with its exploration of identity, of belonging and exclusion, of tolerance and intolerance, *The Metamorphosis* raises many questions for people like you, students who are facing a time of transition and transformation. Of course, my hope is that your education at Penn will not transform you into beetles, but into less earth-bound creatures. Nonetheless, the tale of the unfortunate Gregor Samsa can make us think more deeply about our own identity, about the fluidity of what we take to be stable and fixed, and about the perils and miracles of our own metamorphoses.  For each of us, metamorphosis is experienced as a deeply personal event; yet, each of our lives intersects with a broader history. One of the most compelling elements in Kafka's genius is precisely his uncanny ability to translate the highly personal, particular circumstances of his life into works that are universally compelling. Even the barest knowledge of Kafka's life allows us to see the autobiographical elements in his writing: his tormented relationship with his father and emotional distance from his mother; his sense of personal weakness and failure; his much-resented work as a lawyer and bureaucrat in the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute; his anxieties about women, sexuality, and family, particularly the terrifying prospect of becoming a father himself; his conflicted relationship to his Jewish identity; the list could go on. Yet, all of these poignant personal dimensions also belong to history, they come out of a history that is much larger than Kafka himself. As a historian, it is my first reflex to seek understanding by turning to history, and in this lecture, I want to follow that impulse by reflecting historically on some key themes of *The Metamorphosis*.  The first is the issue of "communication." It will probably have struck you that Gregor's detachment from humanity occurs not only through the initial physical metamorphosis, but also through the loss of communication that follows. When Gregor first tries to respond to his mother's calls, his voice breaks into warbles and chirps; when the Office Manager cruelly provokes him with threats and accusations, Gregor tries to defend himself in a long speech that provokes only this response from the Manager: "That was the voice of an animal." From this moment on, Gregor ceases even to try to speak. The failure of communication drives a wedge between his inner life, which remains essentially "human," and the exterior world of appearances, in which he is now judged to be what he appears to be: an insect. When his mother finally addresses loving words directly to him his response is that of a human being craving affection. But with rare exceptions such as that, his existence and his sense of self as vermin are confirmed by the absence or failure of communication.  One of Kafka's deepest held beliefs was that language is the essence of our being. To be deprived of language is to lose what makes us human. Kafka's obsession with language and communication, or more precisely, with the frequent breakdowns of language was no accident. For Kafka was a Prague writer; more specifically, a Prague Jewish writer, and that meant that Kafka found himself in a linguistic minefield. To understand that claim, we need to take a short detour into the political circumstances of Kafka's world.  Prague is today the capital of the Czech Republic; but in 1912, when Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*, Prague was the third largest city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.  However, already by the end of the nineteenth century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was starting to fall apart. And the force that was pulling it apart was nationalism, the desire of all these separate ethnic and linguistic groups to go their own way, to form their own independent states. After the First World War, many of these groups did indeed form autonomous states…  Indeed, one of the defining features of Kafka's writing seems to be precisely the inexhaustibility and slipperiness of meaning. As one lifelong student of Kafka wrote:  "The experience of incapacity to understand seems [equivalent] to understanding Kafka...".  If we took this statement as a blurb for *The Metamorphosis*, it would not sell a lot of books on Amazon.com. However, this scholar's observation points to an enduring value in Kafka's works. For Kafka teaches us to live with complexity, ambiguity, multiple meanings, and unclear answers. Or to put it differently, Kafka invites us to be "readers" in the true sense of that word, readers who do not just passively digest texts, but actively interpret them. He urges us to become participants in an interpretive partnership between reader and writer in which neither the writer nor the reader holds the monopoly on wisdom or truth. That, I hope, is a lesson from Kafka that will prove significant in the years of metamorphosis that now await you.  <http://www.upenn.edu/nso/prp/met/breckman_lecture.html> |

Predictions: What do you think this book will be about?