

# The Metamorphosis

## *Sample Analytical Paper Topics*

*The Metamorphosis* is a richly layered and textured story that is open to many interpretations, that is, religious, philosophical, autobiographical, Freudian, and mythical, to name a few. The following paper topics contain a thesis statement, and an outline should be used to stimulate your thinking and writing about the story.

### TOPIC #1

The term metamorphosis means a complete and profound change in form, structure, and substance or a change in form from one stage to the next in the life of an organism. The central change in *The Metamorphosis* is the change in Gregor's life, from an ordinary man and traveling salesman to a gigantic insect. Gregor's transformation causes other remarkable changes in the story—changes that directly bear on his family. Write a paper that shows how Gregor's major change in life also affects the lives of his parents and sister.

#### *Outline*

- I. Thesis Statement: *Change is the essence of life, and in The Metamorphosis, the theme of change is organic to the action, dictating the unfolding of the plot and influencing the characters' behavior and destiny.*
- II. **Initial change in Gregor's life: his metamorphosis into a gigantic insect and the thoughts, reflections, and feelings this profound change causes in him on the first day**
  - A. Gregor's conscious awareness that he has become an insect and the thoughts and feelings this discovery evoke in him
  - B. The familiar sights and objects in Gregor's room and how these objects are contrasted to the extreme circumstances he finds himself in
  - C. Gregor's chief concern, his job; the fact that he's missed his early morning train, and his fear that someone from his office may come to check on him
  - D. The response of the chief clerk and his parents as he shows himself to them for the first time
- III. **Second change in Gregor's life: his adjustment to his new body, to his new life as an insect**
  - A. Recognizing the limitations of his body; his loss of appetite for milk, his private feelings for his sister
  - B. Feelings of guilt and sorrow when he overhears his father discussing the family's plight and financial situation
  - C. The effect the removal of his furniture has on his spirit; changes in Grete as she cares for him
  - D. How Gregor's helplessness affects Mr. Samsa and how this changes the balance of power in the house
  - E. Gregor's futile attempt to placate his father's anger and his hapless retreat to his room when he is being bombarded with apples
  - F. His mother's desperate screams and pleas to spare Gregor's life when she runs to her husband
- IV. **Third change in Gregor's life and in that of his family: complete reversal of family roles, that is, the family no longer depends on Gregor for their support, while Gregor must now depend on his family for his survival**
  - A. The different jobs the family takes to earn money
  - B. Grete's increasing ambivalence toward Gregor
  - C. Gregor's decline in health; his slide into disintegration and decay
  - D. The domino effect the three lodgers have on the plot and on Gregor's fate

## **V. The change in the family fortunes after Gregor's death**

- A. Hope and renewal symbolized by the coming of spring, the warm sunshine in the train, Grete's youthful, attractive body
- B. Grete's own metamorphosis into a young, beautiful eligible bride

## **TOPIC #2**

Other short stories have been written in which the central character's dying and death have a lasting effect on those around him or her. One such story is Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1884). Compare and contrast the two stories, focusing on how the protagonist of each story, Gregor Samsa and Ivan Ilych, affect their families through their strange illnesses.

### **Outline**

- I. Thesis Statement: *Both Gregor Samsa and Ivan Ilych share the same unfortunate fate in that both suffer an irreversible illness that deeply affects their families' lives.*
- II. **Gregor Samsa and Ivan Ilych: their lives compared and contrasted before and after their illnesses**
  - A. Gregor's life as a traveling salesman and Ivan Ilych's life as a magistrate
  - B. Gregor's initial response to his metamorphosis and Ivan Ilych's denial that there is something wrong with him
  - C. Gregor's mild acceptance of his fate and Ivan Ilych's refusal to accept the pain in his side and the fact that he may be dying
  - D. Initial family reactions: Gregor's family is one of shock and horror and sorrow; Ivan Ilych's family's indifference to what has happened to him
- III. **The way Gregor's regressive behavior impacts his family and the manner in which Ivan Ilych's illness torments his wife and children**
  - A. The general torpor that settles over the Samsa family and the annoyance Ivan Ilych's family experiences when they hear him scream out
  - B. The way Kafka and Tolstoy both describe the banality of everyday life and its contrast to the acute suffering, both mental and physical, of the protagonists
  - C. How Mr. Samsa and his wife and daughter change in their attitudes toward Gregor, and the way Ivan Ilych's wife and children show their resentment and irritation toward Ivan Ilych's illness
  - D. Grete's change of heart, her self-importance, and self-possession and ambivalent feelings toward Gregor
- IV. **The changes induced in both Gregor and Ivan Ilych as they come to the end of their lives**
  - A. Ivan Ilych's internal, mental suffering compared to Gregor Samsa's inner thoughts and feelings as he approaches death
  - B. Ivan Ilych's talk with the peasant, Gerasim, contrasted to Gregor's ongoing inner dialogue to find meaning and truth
  - C. Ivan Ilych's spiritual growth and understanding compared to Gregor's resignation and sense of hopelessness
- V. **Ivan Ilych's understanding of the meaning of his life and inevitable death compared to Gregor Samsa's tender feelings of love for his parents and sister**
  - A. Ivan Ilych's self-knowledge and revelation
  - B. Gregor Samsa's moment of clarity before death
  - C. The Samsa family's new life
  - D. Ivan Ilych's forgiveness, his love for his family
  - E. The peaceful deaths of both protagonists

## TOPIC #3

Symbolism often appears in modern literature as a name, event, action, or object that embodies more than its literal, concrete meaning. Like many of Kafka's works, *The Metamorphosis* is rich in its symbolism. Symbolism allows the reader to penetrate the complexity and mystery of a work of art with greater understanding and insight. Discuss the symbolism in *The Metamorphosis*. Try to focus on only those symbols that you think may have relevance to the story's ideas and themes and characters.

### Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *The symbolism found in The Metamorphosis helps us to understand Gregor's inner life better and illuminates the conflicts he experiences after his metamorphosis.*
- II. **Gregor's transformation into a repellent, gigantic insect**
  - A. Why an insect? Why not something equally repugnant or noxious? A vulture? A rat? A poisonous snake? Would the story be any different if Gregor turned into one of the above?
  - B. The many doors in the Samsa apartment and what they mean when they're open and closed
  - C. The importance of the story beginning just before Christmas and ending right before spring
  - D. The familiar sights in Gregor's room and how they're related to his life as a salesman and student
  - E. The significance of the chief clerk and what he comes to represent in Gregor's life
- III. **Intensification of the father-son relationship**
  - A. Gregor's life as a salesman and as the family breadwinner before his metamorphosis
  - B. Mr. Samsa's life before and after his business failed
  - C. Gregor's increasing reliance and dependency on his father; his fear of his father; the love he has for his mother
  - D. The importance of the picture of the woman in her furs; Gregor's attachment to it, his fierce desire to protect it at any cost
  - E. Mr. Samsa's bank uniform, the gold buttons
  - F. The apples used by Mr. Samsa to attack Gregor
  - G. The way Mrs. Samsa flings herself on Mr. Samsa in a state of near undress
- IV. **The arrival of the cleaning woman and the number "three"**
  - A. The cleaning woman's white hair, her age, the fact that she's a widow
  - B. The use of the number "three" in the story: three chimes of the clock, three lodgers, the appearance of Gregor three times outside his room, the three members of the Samsa family, the structure of the story into three parts, the three months from late December to early March—the span of the story itself
  - C. The cleaning woman's discovery of Gregor's body; her disposal of his body
  - D. The cleaning woman's dismissal
  - E. The religious significance of the number "three"