In Franz Kafka’s novella, The Metamorphosis, the travelling salesman Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning, in his family’s home, to find “himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka 3). While this immediate physical change, supported by ensuing physical imagery, suggests that the “metamorphosis” introduced in the title is purely physical, other interpretations are also possible. When the reader relies upon the extended and embedded metaphors present in this text, he or she may construe Gregor Samsa’s transformation as an emotional, mental, or internal change. It is a combination of both physical and nonphysical interpretations of Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis, however, which produces a multifaceted, enriched perspective on Gregor Samsa as a character, both realistic and allegorical. When one accepts antithetical interpretations of the metamorphosis in this text, one not only gains a clearer perspective of both physical and nonphysical readings, one also becomes aware of the concept of metamorphosis on every level of this novella, from the stylistic to the thematic.

Through the use of intense, repetitive, detail-oriented, physical imagery, the narrator of this text situates the characters in a very realistic, physical realm. Such details as the “unpacked line of fabric samples,” the “pretty gilt frame” with the magazine picture, and the “raindrops hitting against the metal window ledge” immediately situate the changed Gregor in a world, not of ideals and lucid symbols, but of raw and imperfect physical facts (3). Thus, once informed of Gregor Samsa’s insect-like state, the reader finds it natural to contextualize this fantastic piece of information realistically. The straightforward, physically realistic diction places emphasis on a counter-intuitive acceptance, on the part of the reader, of the “fact” of Gregor Samsa’s actual physical transformation.

Diction throughout the novella supports this acceptance. Subtle details of Gregor Samsa’s state and situation provide enforcement of a purely physical reading of the transformation. Such details closely following the transformation’s commencement include the specified times Gregor Samsa’s desired train leaves (4), the specific details of Gregor Samsa’s trials with physical movement in his new body-- “and in spite of its width and weight, the mass of his body finally followed, slowly, the movement of his head” (7)--, the “firm stride” of the maid (9), and the “brown liquid” that comes out of Gregor Samsa’s mouth when he hurts himself (4). This emphasis on, if not limit to, physical imagery continues throughout the text, which actually ends with the physical detail of Gregor’s sister, who survives him, getting up to stretch “her young body” (58).

One benefit of this reading is the inherently logical view of Gregor Samsa’s situation, a viewpoint which allows for full realization of absurd and unobstructed allegory and metaphor. The world Gregor Samsa inhabits is logical, but how can his present state be? As Professor Ralph Freedman, a doctor of Comparative...
Literature, describes, “Within this framework of realism and deliberate distortion Kafka’s fiction evolves as a problem-solving activity. Man is confronted by a world of impossible dimensions and he cannot but despair of comprehending its overwhelming and mysterious forces” (Freedman 133). That is, it is the physical realism of this piece which simultaneously makes its fantastic and “impossible” elements more and less believable; their well-cut, specified place within the world of realism gives them a certain validity, yet the resulting contrast highlights how bizarre it is, or could be, when a travelling salesman wakes up in the body of a bloated insect.

Although there is strong textual support, mostly in the form of word choice, for a purely physical interpretation of Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis, a purely internal, or mental, interpretation is also possible. The narrator’s use of metaphor, both extended and embedded, supports such a reading.

To discover the over-arching metaphorical framework of this novella, one must first investigate Gregor’s position within the family Samsa. As the text explicitly portrays, Gregor works hard as a travelling salesman, a job he finds “grueling,” with aspects which he considers to be “torture” (Kafka 4). Yet, Gregor has long worked, with stamina and devotion, to support his parents and his sister. After Gregor’s transformation, invisible forces no longer limit and control his actions; rather, Gregor’s new physical state solidifies, even personifies, those weak legs and wing cases of demanding familiarity and dependency which held him captive before. It is the implied imprisonment by Gregor’s family which allows the reader to see Gregor’s metamorphosis as a metaphor for Gregor’s position within familial ties, bonds, and pressures. Thus, the reader can interpret Gregor’s transformation as a mental change, a realization, even. For, what is a metaphor but a change in perspective?

Embedded metaphors in the text support pieces of this whole, thereby enforcing and strengthening the “mental change” interpretation in general. For example, in his insect form, Gregor takes up the “new entertainment” of crawling all over his floor, walls, and ceiling (32). The reader may interpret this behavior to serve as a metaphor for Gregor’s pre-transformation position as a travelling salesman. This subtle metaphorical reference reminds the reader that he or she may be in the land of allegory, and thus supports an interpretation of the metamorphosis in this text as mental or internal.

The audience may choose to read this text as one in which a purely mental or emotional change has taken place. One may even take it so far as to agree with world-renowned scholar, poet, and professor Edwin Honig, and argue that, in this novella, the “localization is significantly deceptive, for it is really an emanation of the hero’s own disabled consciousness” (Honig 138). That is, it is possible, even logically appealing, to allow the metaphors in this text to render all convincing physical imagery only supportive and not indicative or explanatory, as this makes the aforementioned absurdity of Gregor Samsa’s position in a realistic domain explicable, since the realm he inhabits is no longer just physical.
A rich, fulfilling, and more objective (insofar as it encompasses different readings) interpretation of the text, however, comes when the reader couples the physical interpretation of Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis (as suggested by physical imagery) with the mental/emotional/spiritual/internal, or simply more abstract, definition of this same change. When one applies both a realistic, imperfect physical presence and a situational symbolism to Gregor’s character, he becomes whole. Gregor Samsa is now at once archetypal and individual, and he serves as a more convincing symbol because of the physical credibility, through situation in a realistic, physical world, of the transformation which he undergoes. Whether or not Gregor Samsa actually, physically transforms into a vermin is irrelevant. The novella is a work of fiction. However, the realist approach to Gregor’s experience elucidates all implied metaphors, and vice versa.

This mutual relationship between physical imagery and mental metaphor in the text results in an effective, somewhat antithetical form of character development. Within the multifaceted allegory of his realistic world, a limited, omniscient narrator follows Gregor Samsa, and witnesses some of what he thinks and all of what he does. However, it is not simply this uninterrupted study of Gregor which makes the text so intriguing. It is the conflict between those literary elements which render Gregor Samsa’s transformation physical and those elements which render it nonphysical that makes it a transformation, not only in theme and plot, but in stylistic detail as well. In this way, *The Metamorphosis* contains enriched transformations on multiple textual levels. Gregor Samsa is trapped in a foreign body which inhabits both physical and nonphysical realms. He is trapped in a text, the contents of which exist in much the same way. The cosmic intersection between the two, occurring at and in an unfortunate travelling salesman, is perhaps the true metamorphosis at the heart of this text.