

Culminating Writing Task Exemplar Student Response

Inspiration can take many forms. It awakens the mind and soul, compelling an artist forward in the work. It is not merely an imitation as some would think, but rather an adaptation and progression of the original inspiring piece. Franz Kafka was clearly inspired by Ovid's "The Transformation of Arachne into a Spider" in his novella, *The Metamorphosis*. But his expression of transformation is more than a simple imitation of Ovid's source text; he clearly adapts and moves forward from the original myth. Kafka draws on Ovid's punitive use of a metamorphosis, but he transforms the myth into magical realism by depicting the life and destiny of the being who is transformed while Ovid only depicts the act of the transformation.

In Ovid's "The Transformation of Arachne into a Spider," Arachne is changed into a spider by Pallas as punishment for challenging that her weaving skills were far superior to those of the goddess. Arachne boasts, "Let her contend with me. There is nothing which, if conquered, I should refuse to endure." After completing the weaving challenge, Pallas declares, "Live on indeed, wicked one, but still hang; and let the same decree of punishment be pronounced against thy race." The goddess then showers Arachne with a magic herb and she is transformed into a spider. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa awakens, "transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin." Although no explicit cause is given for Gregor's metamorphosis, his feelings about his work and his boss are made clear. "If I didn't have my parents to think about I'd have given in my notice a long time ago, I'd have gone up to the boss and told him just what I think, tell him everything I would, let him know just what I feel. He'd fall right off his desk!" Like Arachne, Gregor attempts to challenge a superior and is transformed in body and mind as a result. He resents the fact that to support his family he must endure his boss "talking down" at him "from up there, especially when you have to go right up close because the boss is hard of hearing."

Although the main characters in both works are transformed as punishment for challenging their boss or ruler, Ovid's depiction ends after Arachne becomes the spider. Arachne's "hair, touched by the noxious drug, fell off, and together with it her nose and ears" and, "Her slender fingers cleave to her sides as legs." All that is known of her future is that "she works at her web as she did before," continuing to weave in her transformed state. There is only a description of the act of metamorphosis with no explanation of the life she leads as a spider or if her change impacts character in a meaningful way. Kafka, on the other hand, illustrates in great detail the reality of Gregor's life as a vermin. The reader learns of Gregor's struggles with and discovery of his new body as he pushes "himself over to the door, feeling his way clumsily with his antennae - of which he was now beginning to learn the value - in order to see what had been happening there." Kafka not only describes Gregor's matter-of-fact reaction to his metamorphosis, but he also describes how this change impacts Gregor's family. The diligent care of Gregor's sister Grete turns to apathy and finally to hate this altered life affects her. "We can't all work as hard as we have to and then come home to be tortured like this, we can't endure it. I can't endure it any more" she finally confesses to her parents.

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* meets the criteria of magical realism because he draws on and transforms Ovid's "The Transformation of Arachne into a Spider." He is inspired by Ovid's use of a putative transformation, but Kafka moves his work beyond that act to realistically depict the life and struggles of living with this magical metamorphosis. It is this pragmatic, rational depiction of the irrational that makes it a classic example of magical realism.