UC SANTA BARBARA

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# Human, Animal, Armor

The story of a traveling salesman who wakes one day to find himself transformed into a monstrous insect, Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" is recognized as a seminal piece of literature, in part for its examination of cause and effect and difference, and the disconnect they can create.

First published in its original German in 1915, it has been translated into many languages and adapted numerous times in fiction, theater, opera, film, ballet, radio drama, comics and animations — even manga.

Now, on the occasion of the work's 100th anniversary, UC Santa Barbara's Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies is hosting an interdisciplinary conference to explore the text and consider the many questions that it raises still today.

"Metamorphosis: Human, Animal, Armor" will be held December 3–5 in various locations on the UCSB campus. The conference will open at 4 p.m. Thursday in the Performing Arts Theater, with a welcome by John Majewski, UCSB's acting dean of humanities and fine arts.

"In our eyes, Kafka's text is as fresh, uncanny, disturbing and captivating as when it was first written," said Elisabeth Weber, a professor of German and of comparative literature and department chair for Germanic and Slavic Studies. "The questions it raises regarding the boundaries between human and animal, between acceptance and disgust, between belonging and utter rejection, between deserving to live and

being condemned to die through forms of extermination that are increasingly remote and impersonal have intensified. In any case, the ethical questions surrounding ‘metamorphosis’ have become even more complex.”

Weber convened the conference along with Wolf Kittler, also a professor of German and of comparative literature, and Julie Carlson, a professor and director of the “Literature and the Mind” specialization in UCSB’s English department.

Several faculty members from UCSB, as well as from UC campuses in Berkeley, Davis, Los Angeles and Riverside, and scholars from institutions including Brown, Rutgers, Yale and the University of Erfurt in Germany, are among featured participants the three-day gathering that will include talks, panel discussions and performances.

The aim of the conference, Weber said, is both to examine the story as a literary-historical text and to “explore metamorphoses that problematize the borders between species, and between living organisms and machines.”

“Kafka’s ingenuous idea is to insert Gregor Samsa’s transformation into an insect of unknown genus and species into the space of a regular but, as the story progresses, increasingly eerie nuclear family,” she explained. “By contrasting the protagonist to his all too human father, mother and sister, Kafka teases fateful decisions and deadly sentences out of everyday chatter, thus mixing the tragic to the comical, making you laugh and wanting to weep at one and the same time.

“By introducing the transformed Gregor Samsa first as ‘vermin,’ Kafka’s text alludes to the intensifying tendency to cast the ‘other’ as a harmful, bloodsucking parasite,” she added. “Keeping in mind that Kafka’s text was written during the intense militarization of European countries prior to World War I, we also hope that our participants address pressing questions in such fields as recent transformations in the technology of warfare, including the mimicry of insects in developments in drone warfare, bionics, prostheses and nano-technology.”

For attendees of the conference, Weber said she and her co-conveners hope to leave them with “a renewed desire to read literature and study questions that concern our world from the many perspectives offered by literature and the humanities.”

“Read and reread,” she urged. “A literary text’s capacity to change with the times and to address some of our latest challenges is why reading classic works is so vital

and how conferences like this can deepen public discourse and reaction to the complicated issues that confront us.”

More information about the conference and a detailed schedule can be found via the Germanic and Slavic Studies website.

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## About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.