

CALL FOR PAPERS

Metamorphoses in Contemporary Literature

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany, May 22nd–24th 2025

In recent Nobel Laureate Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), a woman undergoes a transformation into a tree. In Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland* (2021), the protagonist becomes part of a fungal network as a result of a governmental experiment. In Madeline Miller's bestseller *Circe* (2018), transformations abound: men turn into pigs, a nymph into a monster, a monster into a rock. Medusa's metamorphosis from beautiful girl to snake-haired villain, as imagined by Ovid, has recently been retold, and reevaluated, by Jessie Burton (2021), Natalie Haynes (2022), and Lauren J.A. Bear (2023), among others – and concurrently been reclaimed as an icon for survivors of sexual violence on TikTok.

In light of an increasing interest in the relationships between the human and non-human world from ecocritical, post-humanist, and new materialist perspectives, as well as a trend toward re-imaginings of classical myths, particularly from feminist perspectives, metamorphosis emerges as an important motif in contemporary literature.

Tales of metamorphoses have continued appearing in literature throughout time and across genres: From Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, wherein Daphne turns into a laurel tree to escape Apollo, Narcissus transforms into a flower as a result of his self-obsession, and Arachne is changed into a spider for challenging Athena, to fairy tale portrayals of princes turning into frogs, mermaids into women, and men into beasts, to human-animal transformations in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*.

This conference seeks to explore the functions of the metamorphosis motif in recent contemporary literature against the backdrop outlined above – be it symbolism, social critique, subversion, punishment, escape, reward, emancipation/empowerment, identity exploration, psychological reflection, explorations of gender or of forms of kinship with the non-human world. From a formal perspective, we ask how different literary techniques and devices, forms, and styles contribute to recent literary approaches to metamorphoses.

While we are interested in the full range of metamorphoses in contemporary literature, we are particularly curious about transformations of women* characters into plants, fungi, animals, or objects and (queer)feminist contexts of the metamorphosis motif. Metamorphoses of women* into animals in particular – be it in Marie Darieussecq's *Pig Tales* (1996), Sarah Hall's *Mrs Fox* (2013), Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021), or Silvia Moreno Garcia's *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* (2022) – connect to a long line of tradition in literature. To exemplify, women have been likened to caged birds in the domestic context in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Sarah Orne Jewett's "The White Heron" (1886), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). In gothic literature, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) or Moreno Garcia's *Mexican Gothic* (2020), women conflate with the houses they are entrapped in, leading to a fused existence with the architecture. Transformations of women* into inanimate objects also appear in Gabrielle Bell's graphic short story "Cecil and Jordan in New York" (2009), where a young woman transforms into a chair, and Monica Brashear's *House of Cotton* (2023), in which the protagonist

imagines herself as a warm loaf of bread, among other objects, throughout the story. A feminist take on metamorphoses from the world of myth is offered in Madeline Miller's *Galatea* (2013) and her above-mentioned *Circe*, Yoko Tawada's *Opium for Ovid* (2000), and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2004), the latter merging (queer)feminist science fiction, magical realism, and Chinese mythology.

We are looking forward to exploring these and other approaches to the metamorphosis motif in our conference panels. The program will be complemented by a reading by Anelise Chen, author of the hybrid memoir *Clam Down* (upcoming at Penguin Random House in June 2025), which sees its protagonist turn into a clam following the dissolution of her marriage. As an assistant professor of fiction and director of undergraduate studies in creative writing at the Columbia University School of the Arts, Chen will further host a creative writing workshop as a PhD networking event.

Themes and questions

What are functions of metamorphoses in contemporary literature?

How are different literary techniques and devices, forms, and styles used to approach metamorphoses in contemporary literature?

Topics may include but are not limited to:

- functions of metamorphoses in literature
- forms, styles, and devices of literary accounts of metamorphoses
- metamorphosis in short stories, novels, poetry, graphic novels etc.
- in speculative fiction, magic realism, fairy tales, horror, and rewritings of classical myths
- human to non-human metamorphosis
- non-human to human metamorphosis
- new materialist, posthuman, (queer)feminist, and ecocritical perspectives on the conference theme
- the tradition of metamorphosis in women*'s literature
- narratives of metamorphosis from marginalized perspectives (queer, Black, Indigenous, disability, neurodiverse, etc.)

Submission Guidelines

Please submit a **300-word abstract and brief bio** to the conference organizers Berenike Jakob, Carolin Jesussek, and Franziska Rauh (metamorphoses@uni-mainz.de) by **January 31st**.

We welcome contributions on metamorphoses in literature of any genre and language. Creative submissions are also very welcome.

Please note that the language of presentation will be English only.

This conference is open to researchers of all stages of their careers. We particularly welcome contributions from early career researchers and graduate students.

If you are a PhD student interested in joining us for the writing workshop with Anelise Chen (May 22nd), please indicate so when submitting your abstract.

Location and Financial Support

The conference will be held from Thursday, May 22nd to Saturday, May 24th 2025 at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany.

We aim to provide a lump sum to help cover travel expenses and accommodation for everyone presenting at the conference. Additional funding for travel expenses and accommodation is available for PhD students participating in the creative writing workshop. Further information will be provided with the emails of acceptance.

Organizers

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For inquiries, please contact the conference organizers via metamorphoses@uni-mainz.de.

More information will be provided on our **conference website** soon:

<https://metamorphosesmainz.wordpress.com/>.