

ALIENATION AND ABSURDITY IN FRANZ KAFKA'S THE METAMORPHOSIS: AN EXISTENTIALIST STUDY

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Abstract: *This article examines the themes of alienation and absurdity, which are basic terms of philosophical trend-existentialism, in Franz Kafka's novella, The Metamorphosis. Through the bizarre and hidden transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect, Kafka offers a powerful metaphor for the isolation and absurdity that is the indication of the human condition. Drawing on the existentialist ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Friedrich Nietzsche, this study explores how Gregor's experiences highlight the unavoidability of alienation and the tension between individual freedom and social expectation. Kafka's narrative encapsulates the absurdity of existence, suggesting that even in a seemingly meaningless world, human beings must cope with their isolation and strive to create meaning.*

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, one of the major intellectual movements of the 20th century, confronts the fundamental problem of existence: how individuals can find meaning in a world that appears indifferent to their presence. At its core, existentialism emphasizes the human experience of freedom, responsibility, alienation, and the confrontation with absurdity—the irrational clash between the human desire for purpose and the world's lack of innate meaning. Philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Albert Camus articulated these themes, challenging traditional beliefs about morality and identity.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is often regarded as a quintessential exploration of existential concerns. Gregor Samsa's inexplicable transformation into a giant insect embodies the irrationality and absurdity that define the existential experience. With no apparent cause for his condition, Gregor becomes alienated from his family and society, struggling to maintain his sense of identity as he loses his role as the family breadwinner. His metamorphosis captures the essence of the human encounter with absurdity and isolation—central themes in existentialist philosophy.

This paper explores Kafka's portrayal of alienation and absurdity in *The Metamorphosis* through the lens of existentialism. By drawing on Sartre's concept of freedom, Camus' theory of the absurd, and Nietzsche's reflections on identity, I argue that Kafka's novella is not merely a story of personal misfortune but a broader reflection of the human condition in a meaningless world.

Chapter 1: Existentialism and the Absurd

1.1 Defining Existentialism

Existentialism emphasizes the individual's struggle to create meaning in a universe lacking in instinctive purpose. Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence" encapsulates the idea that human beings are not born with a predetermined identity but must define themselves through actions and choices. Similarly, Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), describes the absurd as the dissonance between the human search for meaning and the world's refusal to provide any. This clash creates a sense of disorientation, forcing individuals to confront the absurd nature of existence.

1.2 Absurdity in Kafka's Novella

In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka embodies the absurd by transforming Gregor Samsa into an insect for no apparent reason. The randomness of Gregor's metamorphosis serves as a metaphor for life's inherent absurdity—an event that defies logic and resists explanation. Gregor's initial reaction to his condition—worrying about missing work rather than contemplating his transformation—highlights the absurdity of everyday life. His absurd concern reflects the human tendency to cling to routine and responsibility, even when faced with incomprehensible events. This parallels Camus' absurd hero, who persists in the face of an indifferent universe.

Kafka's decision not to explain Gregor's transformation underscores the unpredictability and irrationality of existence. The narrative forces both Gregor and the reader to grapple with the incomprehensibility of the event, reflecting the existentialist notion that the world offers no answers to life's fundamental questions.

Chapter 2: Alienation in *The Metamorphosis*

2.1 Social Alienation

Alienation is a dominant theme in *The Metamorphosis*. Once a dependable provider, Gregor becomes isolated from his family and society after his transformation. His family's initial concern for him gradually fades, and he is increasingly treated as an unwanted burden. Grete, his sister, who initially cares for him, grows resentful over time and ultimately insists that the family must "get rid of it" (Kafka, 1915). Gregor's metamorphosis exposes the conditional nature of human relationships, demonstrating that social bonds often depend on utility rather than genuine affection.

Sartre's philosophy provides a useful lens through which to understand Gregor's alienation. Sartre believed that individuals are condemned to freedom—they must define themselves through choices but often encounter rejection or misunderstanding from others. Gregor's inability to communicate with his family after his transformation symbolizes the existential barrier between individuals, reinforcing the idea that alienation is an unavoidable part of the human condition.

2.2 Existential Alienation and Loss of Identity

Gregor's metamorphosis also leads to a profound crisis of identity. As he loses his ability to work and support his family, he experiences a sense of purposelessness. His identity, which had been closely tied to his role as the family breadwinner, disintegrates. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" is relevant here, as Gregor's identity was based on external validation rather than authentic self-understanding. Now stripped of his role, Gregor is forced to confront the void left in its absence.

Nietzsche's philosophy further illuminates Gregor's experience of alienation. Nietzsche argued that in a world where traditional sources of meaning (such as religion or societal roles) are no longer sufficient, individuals must confront the existential challenge of creating meaning on their own. Gregor's isolation from his family and his loss of purpose exemplify this existential predicament.

Chapter 3: Struggling to Create Meaning in an Absurd World

3.1 The Absurd Hero and Existential Freedom

Although Gregor ultimately succumbs to his isolation, his quiet acceptance of his fate can be seen as an act of existential freedom. In his final moments, Gregor resigns himself to his condition and dies without complaint. This acceptance reflects Camus' notion of the absurd hero, who, like Sisyphus, embraces life's absurdity without seeking escape or consolation. Gregor's willingness to endure his condition, despite its hopelessness, embodies the existentialist belief that meaning must be created through personal choice and acceptance, even in the face of absurdity.

3.2 Family as a Source of Alienation

Kafka's portrayal of Gregor's family underscores the existential theme that relationships are often conditional and fragile. As Gregor becomes useless to his family, they withdraw their affection, revealing the tenuous nature of human connections. Sartre's famous line, "hell is other people," is particularly apt in this context, as Gregor's family becomes a source of torment rather than comfort. His transformation highlights the existential reality that individuals are fundamentally alone, and that even familial bonds cannot fully bridge the gap between self and other.

Conclusion

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* offers a profound exploration of existential themes, particularly alienation and absurdity. Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect serves as a metaphor for the human encounter with a world that offers no explanations or inherent meaning. Through Gregor's isolation from his family and his struggle to find purpose, Kafka reflects the existentialist belief that meaning must be created in the face of absurdity and alienation.

Ultimately, *The Metamorphosis* illustrates the human condition as one of persistent struggle—where individuals must confront the absurdity of existence and assert their freedom, even when meaning and connection remain elusive. Kafka's novella remains a timeless reflection on the existential dilemma of modern life, challenging readers to find meaning and purpose in a world that often seems indifferent to their presence.

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