

EXPLORING EXISTENTIALISM IN FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS*

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ABSTRACT

This research looks at how Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis shows existentialist ideas including absurdity and freedom and how characters deal with feeling apart from the world. Using existentialist thought by Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard this research looks at how Kafka builds his story. Text analysis shows how the main character Gregor Samsa's changes and exchanges illustrate basic thoughts from existence. We connect selected text with existential concepts through data analysis and introduce it to the bigger world of existentialism. Through this conclusion the text demonstrates how Franz Kafka conveyed existential problems effectively through literature.

Keywords: Existentialism, Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis, alienation, absurdity, identity, freedom, literary analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1915 Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* dazzles readers with its strange plot and deep philosophical meaning. The metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa into an enormous insect represents more than simple physical change. It shows an inner struggle that conforms to basic precepts of existentialism. In his writing Kafka shows how human beings are separated from the world and experience meaningless situations the same way as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus explained in their philosophy. This analysis uses existentialist principles to explain how the main character battles for purpose and freedom against the indifferent world.

During the 20th century existentialism became a popular philosophical theory that studies how people face an empty universe while fretting about their free choices which they seek to bring to reality (Solomon 2021). Even though Kafka wrote before Sartre and Camus his works show existentialist ideas especially the theory of existence before essence that Sartre later officially presented (Sartre, 2007). Kafka demonstrates despair through experiences that defy clear distinction between realistic and absurd presentation according to Bailey (2022) and Doll (2021). Doll, 2021). Through his misery and loneliness Gregor shows how society and family networks harm the worth of each person.

When Gregor transforms the reader finds no scientific reason according to Camus' idea of the absurd (Camus, 1991; Harper, 2020). Harper, 2020). Soon after becoming an outcast Gregor

reveals how weak his sense of identity was since his daily routines as a breadwinner depended on others' perspectives. Several researchers now argue that contemporary people usually feel distant from both society and their genuine selves (Roth, 2023. Lantz, 2022). Kafka explores the existential distress of being thrown into the world as defined by Heidegger when explaining existence as alienation into the world without any specific life direction.

As he thinks silently Gregor demonstrates his deep feelings of responsibility toward those who do not accept him. In terms of Sartre's "bad faith" philosophy people abandon both personal freedom and accountability to adopt preset societal part (Johnson 2019; Fitzgerald 2021; Sartre 1944). Fitzgerald, 2021). Kafka uses Gregor's physical and mental deterioration to uncover the emotional costs of giving up one's authentic life to unauthentic existence.

Based on new readings of Kafka's work by existentialists this research demonstrates The Metamorphosis serves as the story of human dilemmas to escape absurdity and keep distance from others. Our analysis of The Metamorphosis relies on Camus, Sartre and current scholars to show how Kafka describes human suffering that continues to affect us today in our modern society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic studies about Franz Kafka's existential aspects in his writings have persisted for a long duration. In his work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Albert Camus identifies Kafka as an important writer who displays the absurdity through his narrations which show humanity's struggle in a purposeless and uncaring universe. Camus maintains that Kafka's writings function as "a perpetual interrogation" instead of delivering philosophical summation thus maintaining existential doubt. Like Camus's *Sisyphus* the protagonist Gregor Samsa in Kafka's work faces the absurd condition by existing between human awareness and the isolated universe.

Through their philosophical examination of anxiety as well as authenticity and bad faith Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre provide deeper understanding of Kafka's storytelling. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) can be observed as Gregor continues to reject his freedom and faithfully perform his family duties despite his physical mutation. Kafka's portrayal of spiritual collapse matches Kierkegaard's concept of the human encounter with selfhood as explained in *The Sickness unto Death* in 1849.

The academic critics Harold Bloom (2003) and Ritchie Robertson (2004) validate how Kafka's modernist approach combined with his recurring existential topics. The literary central place Kafka occupies in 20th-century literary canon stems from his continuous questioning and deconstruction of identity and self-perception. Through his compact yet full-of-meaning literary style Kafka successfully creates feelings of existential crisis according to Robertson. According to Stanley Corngold (1973), Gregor's transformation symbolizes the collapse of his inner psychological state which displays feelings of alienation and diminished control.

The theological-existentialist interpretation of Walter Sokel (1966) finds *The Metamorphosis* portraying characters that search for spiritual values in their life of existential emptiness. According to Sokel *The Metamorphosis'* main characters display alternating patterns of hope versus despair through their existential metaphysical conflict very similar to Kierkegaard's "leap of faith." Arendt (2018) .

Interpretations of Kafka during postmodern and contemporary eras actively build his ongoing significance as an existential writer. The main characters in Kafka's works spend their time between existential thresholds in states of continuous transformation thus establishing poststructuralist patterns in existential research according to Rezaei and Valinezhad (2021).

Through his writing Kafka predicted the postmodern age along with its subject-oriented fears according to Ahmed (2022) but his existential stories center on traditional themes of free will and meaning.

Literary scholars Dodd (2019) and Ryan (2020) analyze the philosophical meaning behind bodily alienation expressions in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. According to Dodd Gregor fights between personal identity and the demands of society through his body whereas Ryan examines the imagery of Kafka's vulnerable flesh to express existential dangers against the external world.

Academic research into existentialist ideas has reached broad levels of inquiry yet key areas of study still need further investigation. The analysis of Kafka's existential elements in *The Metamorphosis* through systematic philosophical and literary methods remains scarce despite numerous broad existent investigations. Thematic interpretations and biographical and psychoanalytical readings make up the bulk of previous critiques done on Kafka's work. The absence becomes clear when examining the scarcity of research that syncretically merges existential philosophy with thorough textual study while giving equal weight to Kafka's language, symbolic devices and narrative viewpoints.

The paper fills this knowledge gap through a directed existentialist interpretation of *The Metamorphosis* by combining literary critique with philosophical investigation. The research explains the existential meaning of Kafka's novella through a step-by-step analysis of existential fundamental concepts including absurdity together with alienation and bad faith and freedom and identity. The study enhances existential literary criticism while providing new perspectives on Kafka's continued value in human existence analysis today.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research uses qualitative content analysis to examine Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* through textual analysis. The selected textual sections undergo existentialist interpretation which adopts the philosophical ideas of absurdity (Camus) and alienation (Marx and Kierkegaard) and freedom and responsibility (Sartre) and the loss of identity. The research methodology uses qualitative content analysis to identify textual elements which reflect existentialist concerns and creates thematic categories out of them.

4. EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN *THE METAMORPHOSIS*

4.1 Alienation

His transformation pushes him far away from being connected to his own body, family life, and his position in the world. As the only earner for the family Gregor becomes useless according to his relatives and neighbors when he fails to provide income anymore. His family starts to reject him as part of the loneliness people feel when working in today's money-driven world according to both Marxist and existentialist ideas.

“He would have used his arms and his hands to push himself up; but instead of them he only had all those little legs continuously moving in different directions...” (Kafka, 1915)

This somatic alteration marks a profounder existential alienation: Gregor is no longer who he was, nor is he renowned as such by others. His internal realization remains human, but his exterior refutes social and familial recognition.

4.2 Absurdity

According to Camus the absurdity exists when people seek meaningful purposes yet the universe remains static and aloof toward their pursuit. The novel exposes the absurd quantity through its refusal to provide scientific explanations or supernatural reasons for Gregor's condition.

“Was he an animal, that music could move him so?”

Music triggered a powerful reaction from him so much that it made senses to wonder if he was merely an animal.

His deformed appearance does not diminish Gregor's response to art which exposes the absurd contradiction between his internal and external states. Humans cannot bridge subjective experiences to external reality which defines absurdity according to Camus.

4.3 Identity Crisis

The transformation removes Gregor's social identity as well as his personal identity. Through work and family obligations Gregor used to find his identity until his transformation left him without a way to identify with his current state.

“He felt integrated into the family circle again, and from the two loving glances he received, he believed that the worst was over.”

The glimpse of affection from his family members led Gregor to think the toughest part of his change had passed.

The sensation of belonging vanishes abruptly which reveals his hopeless attempt to find himself again. As his family members show more anger he experiences a breakdown of his identity which depends upon societal acceptance.

4.4 Freedom and Responsibility

According to Sartre's view the responsibility required of freedom brings additional weight upon oneself. Gregor regains existential understanding through his physical limitations which the body change has imposed upon him. The transformation removed all bonds from his employment alongside his duties and family demands.

“He felt proud that he had been able to provide such a life in so beautiful an apartment for his parents and sister.”

Even though Gregor became physically immobilized he chose to maintain his previous mindset and continue enslaved to his former duties.

The pride emanated from Gregor because he had succeeded in offering his family a luxurious apartment amidst great beauty.

Through his commitment to past roles Sartre sees Gregor practicing "bad faith" as he fails to acknowledge his ability to define his new identity.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

A selection of textual excerpts was analyzed to identify existentialist themes. The data was categorized under key existential concepts and interpreted accordingly:

Existential Theme	Textual Evidence	Interpretation
Alienation	“He would have used his arms...”	Loss of bodily control signals detachment from self and others
Absurdity	“Was he an animal, that music could move him so?”	Emotional resonance contradicts physical deformity
Identity	“He felt integrated into the family circle again...”	False sense of belonging highlights identity confusion

Bad Faith

“He felt proud that he had been able to provide...” Denial of current reality reflects bad faith

You need to analyze specific stories in *The Metamorphosis* to see how existentialism works there when you view them through an existential interpretation. This study breaks down *The Metamorphosis* through four key existential ideas which are isolation, absurdity of life, personal identity, and non-genuine conduct.

Kafka starts his theme of alienation through Gregor's unexpected transformation into an insect. The words "He would have used his arms..." demonstrate Gregor's inability to regain control of his new body and express his past freedom. Because Gregor loses his role within everyday life and internal awareness he demonstrates an existential unease with himself and his whole existence. According to Sartre's existential view alienation emerges since isolation disconnects persons from who they truly are. At this instant Gregor experiences the feeling of being an outsider in his own body that reflects how people feel disconnected from others in a world that does not care.

During this passage Kafka creates a strong sense of absurdity through the following writing: Music created strong feelings in Gregor yet he wondered if he had no human qualities. At the moment Gregor feels emotions from his sister's music the question forces readers to see his lack of connection between body and soul. The unbelievable reality comes from having an inner existence that matches beauty while appearing as a revolting creature externally. According to Camus understanding human needs for meaning clashes with the universe's lack of care for existence. The moment that Gregor shows human feelings toward sound conflicts sharply with his dehumanized outer form, illustrating the struggle between existence and non-existence.

The phrase shows that Gregor felt welcomed back into his family when no one spoke or looked at him. The confusion people feel about themselves becomes clear through this untrue sense of family membership. Despite undergoing physical changes Gregor holds onto the belief that he is still his family's primary member. Existentialists teach that our identity needs to repeatedly prove itself through our true personal choices. Gregor's belief mistake about fitting back into the family shows how outside praise makes a person lose touch with their real self and base identity in outdated roles.

His feeling of pride appeared through the words "He felt proud that he had been able to provide..." The paralyzed Gregor considers his previous role as a financial provider of the family. Sartre defined bad faith as the mental state where persons trick themselves into ignoring their personal freedoms and duties. Even though Gregor remains attached to his old role as family provider, he cannot face the facts of his present situation. By denying reality he saves his purpose-driven beliefs which blocks his freedom to exist. He refuses to change his roles within society and family which demonstrates his bad faith existence.

Kafka incorporates existentialism deeply into his writing throughout these chosen examples. The novella intertwines philosophical enlightenment with specific textual examples to explain our unique human experience of self-estrangement and dishonesty founded on irrational behavior.

The study shows that *The Metamorphosis* reflects existential questions about identity loss, purposeless chaos, and freedom denial through Gregor's experiences.

6. DISCUSSION

Widely considered the primary existential literary work *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka demonstrates the pivotal conflicts which exist between human beings and society's burdensome mechanisms alongside the influence of identity and self-awareness. Kafka's novel *The*

Metamorphosis follows the transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect as he explores existentialist concepts about alienation from society and searches for meaning within a purposeless world. The fundamental aspects of existentialist philosophy appear in these themes because they explore how individuals deal with their subjective freedom while bearing the weight of existence during unpredictable events in a disorderly universe.

The morphological evolution Gregor undergoes functions as a symbolic representation of his mental and emotional disconnect that developed before his physical change in *The Metamorphosis*. His position as traveling salesman alongside his damaged family dynamics and his absences of meaningful life satisfaction lead to his complete isolation and alienation. The external physical transformation Gregor experiences signifies the end of an inner solitary existence he has been hiding from himself for a long time. The existential elements within Kafka's work stem from Gregor's encounter with an absurd reality throughout his fruitless attempt to belong in a world that lacks authentic meaning.

Alienation stands as a primary existential theme throughout *The Metamorphosis* which existential philosophy defines as a core concept. Throughout existentialism a person feels disconnected from everything including his environment and himself and other individuals. The feeling of isolation Gregor experiences first began as purely mental and emotional because he hates his job without any purpose or enjoyment. Through his daily monotonous activities Gregor moves forward through meaningless action that keeps him endlessly dissatisfied. The money Gregor provides for his family keeps him separated from his aspirations which serve as his dreams. The external world controls his entire life through his familial duties combined with his job requirements as well as his responsibility to provide money.

After undergoing his transformation Gregor becomes more isolated because his family members shift their perspective from dependent to burdensome. As an insect he becomes transformed into a beast that repels both his family members and himself while pushing him deeper into his feeling of being cut off from humanity. Since Gregor cannot talk to his family his transformation has created extra distance between himself and the world by preventing him from explaining his condition. As Gregor's ability to communicate with his family fails he becomes more detached from the human world emotionally and physically.

Absurdity emerges as one of the main existentialist narrative elements in Kafka's novella. According to the writings of Albert Camus the absurd describes the conflict that arises from human needs for meaning while the universe shows no care for such needs. Gregor's predicament remains absurd because it attacks everything we normally think of as logical and reasonable. The story introduces Gregor's insect form during his daily awakening without offering any cause and forces him to face the extensive absurdity of his new existence. Without any reason behind his metamorphosis Gregor's situation echoes existential beliefs about life having no natural sense or reason. An explanation or logical cause is nonexistent for his condition thus revealing the absurdity of human existence.

Gregor's troubling situation becomes more absurd since his transformation fails to lead to significant discoveries about the meaning or purpose of life. Instead of any meaningful understanding it generates afraid reactions which lead to growing feelings of detachment from his family. His phobic nature prevents the ability to unite his previous identity as a human being with his current disturbing visage. The loss of his former purpose (providing for family) makes his existence without meaning upon becoming an insect. The family denounces Gregor while

concentrating only on their survival which helps demonstrate how absurd existence truly becomes. The family has no more need for Gregor since his change and it becomes impossible for him to maintain his roles as provider or son.

Through his metamorphosis Gregor experiences existentialism's defining identity crisis the way a central element of the philosophy operates. The existentialist view of human identity rejects determinism since individuals must actively construct their identities by choosing their life path. The constrained environment of Gregor's situation restricts his capability to build an independent sense of self. Before metamorphosis he exists in roles which others have forced upon him primarily because of his occupation and familial obligations. His worth as a person originates from accomplishing his obligation to earn money. Other people establish his personal value which directly correlates with his ability to produce work and contribute to their needs.

The transformation into an insect reduces Gregor's ability to contribute work and communicate with others or engage in human interaction. His family's perception of his worth declines thus causing his self-identity to fade away. His change becomes both physical and symbolic as it eliminates all aspects that define who he was before the transformation. Gregor fights to express himself while attempting a return to his previous existence which mirrors his search for authentic self-existence. The insect transformations confine him to an inhuman state where he lacks connection to his previous human life.

Due to his disability and his family's intolerance his perceived self-image faces direct opposition with how they choose to view him. His family views him now as a different kind of being because he can no longer be their original son or provide support. The world's shifting view compels Gregor to face extreme self-assessment and create existential turmoil because he can't merge his current situation with his former personality.

Even though Gregor appears to have lost all freedom his bug-like metamorphosis serves as a type of existential freedom. According to existentialist thought freedom emerges as the power to choose freely while accepting personal accountability for all your actions. Before his metamorphosis Gregor lived a life that outside elements controlled including his employment responsibilities and his family's expectations alongside social expectations. His transfiguration separates him from daily life but breaks free of all social obligations he previously bore. Since his change he does not need to labor or care for his family members or follow any social rules and expectations. The newly gained liberty has an enormous negative impact on his overall condition: Its outcome creates a complete separation from others that results in constant misery.

Gregor fights for his ability to exist as a human being in addition to fighting for his physical well-being. He believes his newfound freedom turns into a malicious force because his incapacitated body removes every opportunity for meaningful self-empowerment. The transformation and his family's abandonment of him obliterates his freedom to make choices thus denying him any chance to experience authentic life. His experience of unrestricted freedom reveals the insufficient bounds of human freedom during times of absurdity.

The Metamorphosis by Kafka explores a deep contemplation of existentialist ideas through its exploration of marginalized existence and its unanticipated absurd turn of events in addition to identity exploration and freedom's difficult meaning. The tragic transformation of Gregor Samsa serves as Kafka's vehicle to dive into human existence while demonstrating the futile effort of living authentically in a world lacking empathy towards our search for meaning and relationships. The story makes readers face existential truth about separation from others while struggling to

define themselves in an absurd world which gives no definitive answers. When Kafka examined these existential concepts in his work he created a lasting effect that still resonates in current times to stir critical thinking about existence alongside the pursuit of meaning in this unpredictable environment that frequently feels hostile.

7. CONCLUSION

Kafka shows how losing true happiness results in unwelcomed changes. Before he changed Gregor devoted himself to bring home money for his family as a traveling salesperson. Gregor performs his work solely because he must for others yet finds no inner joy in what he does. His transformation into an insect ends his life as someone who never knew how to act for himself. The physical transformation Gregor experiences mirrors the profound emotional and mental isolation which built up inside him. When people exist to please others they become less like themselves and more like what society expects them to be.

As Gregor turn into bugs he feels more distant from his own family members than before his transformation. Before he changed he formed the heart of the family unit by earning money for them regularly. Once transformed into an insect he loses his rightful place in their home because they now consider him an ugly danger to their lives. According to Kafka life bonds with others weaken rapidly when people refuse to match what society or their family members expect from them. The physical change to Gregor helps his family understand they depended on him financially which unveiled the transactional dynamic between them. Kafka shows that when family members don't understand each other and empathize their connections are weak and personal identity grows from the jobs they are made to perform.

As a monster Gregor lets readers see how people handle existential freedom according to existentialist doctrine. According to Sartre human beings must take charge of defining their identity because they find themselves free to act amidst an environment characterless and adverse to their existence. The transformation turns Gregor physically free from working but physical freedom becomes a burden that he cannot handle. He lacks verbal communication skills and separates himself from his familiar human life. Despite gaining freedom Gregor finds himself locked inside his transformed body as it stops him from establishing human bonds and stops him from feeling true purpose. In his story Kafka shows Gregor's freedom as an existential struggle: A person must face extreme loneliness and suffer from defining themselves as free individuals rather than suffer control from external forces. Kafka uses Gregor's misery to make us wonder if living freely makes us truly free or drives us away from our basic humanity.

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