



Original Article

Existential Isolation and Identity Crisis in *The Metamorphosis*: An Exploration of Gregor Samsa's Transformation and Alienation

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ABSTRACT

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*The purpose of this study is to analyze the comparative presence of existential isolation and identity crisis in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The analysis indicates the relationships shift in alignment with Gregor's with his loved ones, using the existentialist theory to describe the breakdown of traditional roles and to the relationship's indifference to each other. The transformation consequently is what brings about Gregor's unhappy identity whereby he is own in a state of isolation because he is not even part of the human world or his family. The study found that Gregor's change of body is symbolic, because the existential belief that identity is unstable and highly dependent on societal roles which may crumble at any time and force one to face the meaning to life alone. The results also show how Gregor is isolated from his family and also isolated by his family who progressively see him as a burden and not a member of the household. The existential dilemma of meaning in a world that sums up a human's worth to productivity is here also rejected. Thereby showing how Gregor's journey symbolizes the absurd theory of existentialism, whereby life with no meaning comes into force to deter hope and resignation to despair. Finally, this study shows that *The Metamorphosis* highlights individuals' vulnerability and alienation when they are devoid of identity and meaning and it further conveys Kafka's critique of loneliness in being human. This research offers a contribution to our understanding of existentialism in literature showing that Kafka's work remains relevant in terms of its treatment of themes of isolation and the search for self in a world without feeling.*

Introduction

For a long time, western philosophy has centered around philosophically abstract ideas, forgetting about the person, and about them and who they are, and about their own experience (Hirschberger, 2019). Eventually, this lack of regard prompted the rise of existentialism, a philosophy which centers round real-world human challenges. Existentialism is a philosophy resulting from a frustration with abstract thought that pretends to know about humans, preferring

instead to question what it means to be a man or a woman in today's world (Mounier, 1948). The connection with ancient Greek thought is seen in the lineage that existentialism has in common with the Sophists: The Sophists were, first and foremost, moral philosophers. Through time existentialism approached phenomenology, a type of philosophy which studies subjective human experience. These concerns regarding the nature of their own existence, their own choice, their own responsibility are common to both philosophies. Existentialism, a school of thought that focuses on real world human concerns sources from Sartre; He believed in proposed existentialism together with phenomenology (Ricablanca et al., 2019).

Existentialism became popular after World War II because existential crises were prevalent among people who suffered and lost so much (Charlesworth, 1975). This forced people to attach meaning to a world that felt ever more out of control and bleak. However, the need for these answers made way for existentialist philosophy, which serves to give explanations regarding personal choice, freedom, the search for meaning in an indifferent world (Minar & Sutandio, 2017), like the absurdity of life, alienation, freedom and responsibility (Singu, 2016). Existentialism views that individuals free themselves to create their own life and identity and their very being through the act they perform without anything inbuilt nature.

In this focus on freedom and choice penologists of the period significantly impacted literature, where questions around the meaning of life and that of characters' identities appear most of all. Central to the idea of existentialism is that individuals are self-determined in an essentially meaningless world: they are 'condemned to be free' (Novak, 2003), as Sartre (1946) would argue, that the 'existence precedes essence' whereby, instead of having pre-determined roles or fated destinies forming our identity, we make our own. Existential literature characters repeatedly try to ignore expectations by society and come to terms with themselves, choosing to make their own way or to move along with the expectations by society. "Bad faith" according to Sartre and Mairet (1965) in the sense of the denial of freedom is to justify one's choice by external forces, e.g. fate and societal expectations instead of assuming the responsibility (Van De Kar, 1961).

Transformation is central in existentialism in which individuals acknowledge that freedom is heavy and therefore come with some responsibilities. In Heidegger's (1927) work on the topics of mortality, he encouraged people to be authentic, or to make meaningful choices through developing authentic awareness of mortality within its limitations; likewise, time is of such a limitation. According to Nietzsche (1883) who had his own version by way of the "Übermensch" or "Overman," one who challenges traditional moralities and establishes their own. Solitude and alienation were the subjects of attention of both philosophers and their influence on the push of individuals to tackle existential issues and undertake personal change was similarly recognized.

Existentialist philosophy also doubts general truths and ethical orders, urging to them that a person does not lose his own opinions about that or ignorance. As Camus (1942) made the argument, life is without intention as such, therefore the individuals give themselves significance. In existential literature, this freedom is often experienced by characters as a sense of responsibility (sometimes it's rendered as angst, existential anxiety, Kierkegaard, 1843). But such anxiety can also be a trigger to lead a life according to one's true value (Jeong, 2022).

Additionally, existentialism states that responsibility cannot be passed outside — neither to either fate nor society. Freedom however ‘men’ must be responsible for themselves that is take ownership of what they do and what comes from it (Sartre, 1946). Therefore, true transformation is one where we clear ourselves of bad faith, accept ourselves as we really are, and recognize that each decision transforms what we are (Johnson & Melnikov, 2008). Existentialism see life as ongoing process of self-creation by each new choice (Kierkegaard, 1843).

Existentialism is a theoretical frame work on examining identity freedom and struggle of human existence seen in literature. In Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, these themes are shown by presenting a character that transforms into another thing, and who must then struggle with isolation and the loss of identity and identity and the existence of absurdity. With that, the work of Kafka is meant to challenge its readers to consider some existential questions about implications of the human body, loneliness and social exclusion in the search for meaning (Friedlander, 2013; Wardani et al., 2022). In this study, existentialism is employed in analyzing *The Metamorphosis* by Gregor Samsa’s transformation to exhibit themes claiming to identity, the freedom and the quest of meaning in an indifferent world.

Statement of Problem

This paper fills the gap by studying the rare representation of existential issues in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* which depicts the subject’s transformation and its effect on the subject, Gregor Samsa, identity and isolation. Existing scholarly works commonly focus on plot symbolism and various sociocultural aspects, but rarely indicate how the story becomes a reflection of the existential ideas, such as Sartre’s attitudes towards identity, freedom, the weight of decision. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap by considering how passages from Gregor’s metamorphosis reflect existential crises on themes of identity, alienation, and absurdity within the novel. In doing so, the study attempts to bring to light the existential struggle in Kafka’s work specifically regarding Gregor, offering a deeper reading of Kafka and existential literature by applying Sartrean theories.

Research Objectives

- 1) To identify and discuss existential themes in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*.
- 2) To analyze how Gregor Samsa’s physical transformation impacts his personal identity and social role.
- 3) To explore how isolation contributes to Gregor’s existential crisis and reflects Sartrean concepts of freedom and self.

Literature Review

Kafka’s portrayal of identity is accounted for by Lestienne (2020), suggesting that both *The Metamorphosis* and *In the Penal Colony* describe how characters are broadly transformed and alienated. Lestienne claims that this change signifies a loss of personal identity, and, moreover, society’s separating people it deems as ‘different’. The shifting gender roles of the novella were also analysed from a feminist perspective by Straus (1989). According to Straus, female characters such as Gregor’s mother and sister tend to supply influence over him, changing from protecting figures to coldblooded characters, embodying the norms of what is an

active individual. According to Straus, through Kafka, we find women as nurturing and tyrannical, the way in which society treats them.

Then in their essay Kohzadi et al. (2012) looked at *The Metamorphosis* as a symbol of absurdity and existential isolation, with Gregor's transformation being an example of alienation, and life itself as meaningless. The isolation from family and society that they isolated Gregor in was meant to symbolize the absurdity of existence, and how your life is meaningless, and everyone around you doesn't care when it suffers. Likewise, Wahyuni et al. (2017) analyzes freedom in the novella and proclaims that Gregor's change both permitted him physically and liberated him from social and family restriction, and further works on Kafka's satirical reflection onto capitalist society that leads to isolation.

Through a psychological analysis of the novella, Webster (1959) introduces Gregor's transformation as a death-rebirth cycle; he only dies for his family to discover their new purpose. For Webster, this was a religious allegory in which Gregor's demise actuated a Christ-like sacrifice, that paves the way for his family's rebirth. For example, Sokel (1983) argued that Gregor in purely Marxist terms represents alienation workers suffer under capitalism, in Kafka's opinion and criticized capitalist societies which treat people as worthless things, if they are not productive.

In the labor theology contained in his paper, Loy (2016) explained how Kafka presents Gregor's change to be the diminishing of the human value in a capitalistic society which is focused on productivity bigger than on individuality. Kafka's critique of capitalist culture's dehumanization comes through, of course, in Gregor. Like Joshi (2021), who investigated gender dynamics in *The Metamorphosis*, and suggesting that Kafka portrays women as both encompassing caregivers and controllers. In her thesis, Joshi posited that Gregor's female relatives are agents of his demise and work to undermine the old binary, validating Gregor's rise through his marital life rather than his professional career.

In Kafka's work Sweeney (1990) examines identity which is unstable, particularly in the symbolism of Gregor's insect form as a picture of human struggle for identity in a society whose worth of the individual is not recognized. Uddin (2023) also emphasized on the alienation of Gregor, and that it can point out to the present of how human beings are dehumanized in capitalist society. Kafka uses irony to illustrate the absurdity of modern life in which our value is determined by what we do for society, Uddin said.

Study conducted by Asriningtyas and Mustofa (2022), specifically, elaborated about Gregor's journey via Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, which Gregor deals with stages of self-realization to be as human. Gregor's transformation was suggested to represent his psychological fragmentation which is human alienation. Furthermore, the Marxism description of Deligöz (2024) expanded further the explanation with his description how Gregor's being an insect is linked to Marx's labor alienation theory, so he explains that like in the case of Marx's theory, Gregor is completely dehumanized and becomes only one of the objects of production in the system of production.

In his analysis of the *The Metamorphosis*, Price (2018) used deconstructive theory to explain how Kafka's use of language and identity was to challenge static meanings in terms of

fluid identities. In discussing the transformation of Gregor, Rhodes and Westwood (2016) talk about ethics and economy and how the economy of generosity disappears with the vanishing of economic utility. The society trends to value people based on economic productivity thus the change of the family attitude.

Mallah (2016) argued that existentialism in Gregor's work is somehow connected to the existential themes in Kafka's work; the fact that this freedom and choice bring about despair is in fact a struggle for authentic existence. The paper, therefore, presents existentialism as a pinnacle that Kafka and other existentialist authors use to also explore isolation and individual struggle for meaning. Rae (2010) clarified existentialism has its focus in alienation; Van (2005) as well as Natanson (2012) emphasized connections between existentialism and phenomenology, the way literature mirrors human existence and freedom through characters in the struggle to justify that purpose.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine themes and symbolic elements in Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, within an existential framework. Qualitative research is the kind of research that involves using nonnumeric data—such as text, behaviors, or perceptions—to explain a topic completely and explore what it means (used in the humanities and social sciences to help understand meanings and viewpoints).

The principal data collection technique used is close reading, involving a concentrated reading of the text. In this method, the researcher goes to *The Metamorphosis* and simply reads certain sections of it. Whenever a symbol or theme or language that can indicate something comes up, the researcher annotates it, so basically the researcher is trying to unearth any hidden meanings in *The Metamorphosis*. As a response, this approach enables a deep exploration of existential motifs: isolation, selfhood and transformation, by striking Gregor Samsa's physical and psychological state. Ryan (2007) asserts that close reading helps one to get a better understanding of the layered structure of a text viewing Kafka's language and style as communicating existential themes.

The study uses textual analysis to analyse existential themes in *The Metamorphosis*, for data analysis. Textual analysis is according to Belsey (2013), how meaning is interrogated through language, compose and symbols contained in a text. The examination of these themes is done through this approach by looking specifically at the ways that they are embedded throughout Kafka's chosen characters and plot.

Metaphors, descriptions of characters, and dialogue are also subject to textual analysis, to reveal the novella's philosophical ideas. Its main point is to show the transformation of Gregor Samsa as a representation of crises in the existential sense that he tries to find meaning of life in a meaningless world. Textual analysis is especially applied to literary studies because it tells us how texts produce meanings and how readers interpret these meanings.

Taking an existentialistic theoretical framework from Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, two key existential philosophers, this study discusses what the cause and effect and themes and plot are in connection to objects and characters. There are notions of individual freedom,

freedom of decision, and existence of the human. This will be a highlight of the existential ideas produced in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and how it affected the same one, Gregor Samsa.

Data Analysis

In this section of the research paper, we refer to *The Metamorphosis* and look at it with relation to Gregor Samsa's physical transmutation as well as his subsequent isolation in relation to Kafka's novella and existentialist theory, especially that of Sartre and Camus. Gregor's startling transfer into a "monstrous verminous bug," (Kafka, p.1) introduces existential chaos and a central absurdity according to Camus's idea of a life purposeless (Camus, 1942). Gregor's condition is the embodiment of Sartre's principle 'the existence precedes the essence', since he is derailed from his identity being outside social position (Sartre, 1946). It mimics Sartre's 'bad faith,' the effort to be breadwinner in the new physical form, which Sartre (1943) views as an individual's deception of himself to fulfill a predicted role in society rather than face his/her true self.

Existing in isolation, and alienated from family, is central to the story because Gregor transforms from his human form. Existential break from Gregor's body as analyzed through the theory of Heidegger's "being-toward-death" (Heidegger, 1927) is reflected in the grotesque physical changes of the character, having "numerous legs... flickering helplessly" (Kafka, p.1). This would suggest that Gregor's changed form is a dying to himself, a living apart from himself, and an opportunity for thought toward the impossibility of existential need in an indifferent world.

Second, in Gregor's isolation, he fights a losing battle against the inutility of his life, a basic theme of existential absurdity. In response, his "grotesque form" making him unable to communicate, shutting him out from the human contact thus leaving him in the silent singular battle (Kafka, p.13). Johnson and Melnikov (2008) enhance the importance of social relationships in the construction of identity, but Gregor's change alienates him from all social relationships and makes him totally isolated. According to Sartre (1946), this theme fits in with his idea that individuals have the task of self definition without the support of society.

It demonstrates also how in the environment of the capitalist society individuals are valued solely depending on their utility in the eyes of other members of the family or society. Indeed, once Gregor can no longer bring money home his family treats him as a "burden, a monstrosity" (Kafka p.24), which corresponds to Marxist alienation (Sokel, 1983). According to Sokel, in critiquing the dehumanizing affect of capitalism and portraying Gregor's worth as dependent on productivity, Kafka had its heyday. Here, too, this aligns with Sartre's theory of bad faith, as Gregor's once deep-rooted identity in who he was, a provider, is dissolving and he is being shown the hollowness of his own self-definition.

Instead, existential freedom, to Sartre, needed individuals to take on their autonomy. Nonetheless, thanks to Gregor's entrapment in his insect form, he loses the freedom to do things, so he ends up being a passive, inert object (Sartre, 1946). Kafka signifies Gregor's limited movement and compromised self-sovereignty by Gregor "dragged himself over the floor" (Kafka, p.11). Taken together, this physical decay along with this psychological detachment encases Sartre's idea of freedom as a burden and a curse.

The Struggle becomes more and more Existential as Gregor's family rejects him more and more. Once kind, his sister "can hardly bear to be in the same room" (Kafka p. 24) as he, leaving him finally isolated from all human contact. Accordingly, Mahajan (2021) argues that existentialist literature tends to portray characters struggling to find meaning in an environment unfriendly for that goal; with Gregor's fruitless bid to retain his human rapport, one immediately understands that point. Kafka's depiction of Gregor's limited existence reflects the kind of alienation found within existential despair as is so notably argued by Sartre (1943) that isolation is a key element of the human condition.

Such as Gregor, reflecting on his life, finds himself questioning the purpose that drove him to his former obligations, and the revelation that he has, is a revelation of the kind Camus means by existential absurdity. According to Camus (1942), recognizing the absurdity of life one must submit or struggle against. While Gregor's transformation is involuntary, it is also the key to what can be regarded as a subconscious rebellion against the mandatory cultural constraints of which he detaches, and thus frees himself from one hand, and isolates himself even more from other outsiders on the other.

The ending of Gregor's story, peace, "peaceful reflection" before his death is the triumph of life's uselessness (Kafka, p.51). Gregor ceases to resist his fate because acceptance is Camus's idea of a response to the absurd. As far as Heidegger's being-toward-death philosophy goes, Gregor's resignation becomes a dialectical struggle, here in a consciousness with the death, ending his internal struggle (Heidegger, 1927).

Kafka's transformation of Gregor embodies the theme of existential notion of isolation, existential freedom and their rejection in society. Kafka attempts to lay bare capitalist values that reduce productivity of individuals to the means of their valuation. Sartre theorized about freedom being a double edge sword, and Gregor's metamorphosis proves existential truth that self-definition often comes with pain of separation from expectations of society. Kafka presents the tragic and well-known image of existentialist struggle in an unjust world through Gregor Samsa's journey.

Kafka shows, In *The Metamorphosis*, how the dynamics between power and subordination inside Gregor Samsa's family have changed since his morphing, subverting the conservative systems of paternal power. Having nullified Gregor's authority, his sister, Grete, now tends to his needs, her treatment of him now inversion of family roles. Inadequate, however, is the role shift to Gregor, who alienates him further and symbolizes his separation from his familial connection. The apple lodged in his back "a visible reminder of his disgrace," (Kafka, p. 34) signifies the total rejection by family and society. According to Deligöz (2024), Gregor's injury marks his metamorphosis into a nonfunctional component in the capitalist scheme of things was now a burden.

That makes Gregor's new form even more isolating. Physically and emotionally alienated, he watches his family from afar and he has become "an outsider in his own home" (Kafka, p.40). His separation has a point of relevance to Sartre's (1946) description of existential isolation, in that he has to face his existence alone. Existentialist literature often offers characters who are making an attempt to mean something in an indifferent world, says Mahajan (2021).

This isolation is mirrored by Gregor in his struggle, and his struggle and isolation are encapsulated bona fide existential despair.

Gregor's plight, trapped in an insect body, is absurd (Camus, 1942), as the human is given a desire for purpose only not matched in the universe. In the end, Gregor realizes that he is futile and surrenders to alienation, in which case this existential crisis finally ends in Gregor retreating under the sofa. As a Marxist critique of dehumanization, Sokel (1983) provides us with an interpretation of Gregor's metamorphosis because he once he was considered economically useless or useless he became invisible.

Camus' notion is ultimately brought forth by Gregor's death, because the isolation of meaninglessness truly seems to apply to Gregor – his family does not care about his death. Kafka's presentation of a beastly Gregor and the indifference of his household in response to his life and subsequent death point to an existential truth: in a world that cares neither for nor about us, we become isolated and discarded creatures, rejected physically and psychologically.

Conclusion

The objectives of the study are achieved through a reading of Gregor Samsa's transformation in *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka, which is meant to bring out existential themes of isolation, alienation and the quest for identity in an alienating world. The metamorphosis into an insect undoes Gregor's role in the family, taking away his authority and the respect he once had, while his skin makes him unable to communicate or to connect with surrounding like person. Transformed, it signifies how the fragility of identity specifically expressed as based on societal roles that may dissolve or just disappear instantly. Gregor loses his human form, and, in the process, he is also cut off from the human relationships which previously lent his life meaning, and thus left to deal with an existence from which he no longer belongs.

This society shapes itself around individuals by their utility. As the man grows weaker, and thus less able to fulfil his previous role in the family, his family members grow altogether more indifferent to him, placing him in the unwanted pest category. This indifference mirrors the general existential quandary defined as being tormented by the question of why one exists when and if one is denounced by a society. Having Gregor's family's slow neglect and alienation inside his own home again this reflects that aliens do occur with people that no longer fit into society's needs or expectations. If it is the case that the individual has no choice except to face existence in the absurd, then it is clear that he must do so alone.

Ultimately, Gregor will ultimately hand himself over to his fate because in illusionary role that he is playing for all of these years in a world, there is no offer of any meaning. As abstention from purpose and connectedness, his retreat into isolation and in effect his death symbolizes despair and resignation. In Kafka's novella, life can be presented thus, with struggles all the way through, as indifference and rejection from society can really feel one helpless and invisible. All the loneliness and absurdity of human existence, and the vulnerabilities wrung out of one when identity and purpose are stripped away can be seen through Gregor's tragic end.

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