

Existential Angst: A Reading of Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism is a philosophical theory which emphasizes the existence of the individual as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a novella that tells the story of a young man, who transformed overnight into a giant beetle like insect and becomes an object of disgrace to his family and also an alienated man. This is an existential novel with the basic themes of existentialism like absurdity, alienation, meaninglessness and death. The research article analyzes the existential themes present in *The Metamorphosis*.

Keywords: Existential Angst, Absurdity, Essence, Alienation, Depersonalization, Self-estrangement, Cultural estrangement

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is a philosophy of the twentieth century. It analyses the existence of human beings and throws light on the way they find themselves existing in the world. Two nineteenth century thinkers, Soren Aabye Kierkegaard, a Dane, and Friedrich Nietzsche, a German, are recognized as initiators of the movement particularly in their concept of the individual existent, as also in their diagnosis of the modern human predicament. In fact Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism. He maintained that the individual has the sole responsibility for giving one's own life meaning and to live life passionately and sincerely despite many obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, choice and death. It emphasizes human existence and the qualities which are distinctive in man. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice and personal responsibility. Mulder, a literary critic defines existentialism, somewhat literally and optimistically as "an attempt to reaffirm the power of the self to deal with experience" (Chatterji 11). It is a philosophical movement oriented towards two major themes such as, the analysis of human existence and the centrality of human choice. Various existentialists differ on the fundamental problems but agree on pursuing certain objective realities like the crisis in human values, the significance of human anxiety, deprivation of human freedom and importance of human emotions. No emotional problem is more threatening than the existential problem. The problem of meaning is in many ways the chief problem with which the twentieth century philosophy of existentialism occupies itself. Since existentialism deals with problems related to concrete human existence, existentialist thinkers have often found their best mode of expression in literature. It covers such widely different writers like Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Franz Kafka.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924), a German novelist and short story writer is widely regarded as one of the major figures of the twentieth century literature. Franz Kafka is an author prominently known for his works with existential ideas and two such works are *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. In both these novels, Kafka uses the existential idea that man's fate is sometimes beyond man's control. In his works chance or destiny rules man's life. Since Franz Kafka has become the poster boy for twentieth century alienation and disoriented anxiety, his work is often introduced in the context of Kafka's own experience of alienation. Kafka described human existence as the quest for a stable, secured and radiant reality that continually eludes it or he described it as threatened by a guilty verdict about which it knows neither the reason nor the circumstances but against which it can do nothing- a verdict that ends with death.

In Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, the idea of existentialism is brought out in a subtle, yet definite way. Existentialism is defined as a belief in which an individual is ultimately in charge of placing meaning into their life, and that life alone is meaningless. They don't believe in any sort of ultimate power and focus much of their attention on concepts such as dread, boredom, freedom and nothingness. This philosophical literary movement emerged in the twentieth century when Kafka was establishing his writing style in regard to alienation and distorted anxiety. A mirror to his own personal life style this story follows the short and sad life of a man unable to break out of the bonds society has placed on him. These bonds are not only evident in the work place but at home too. Being constantly used and abused while in his human form Gregor's lifestyle becomes complicated once he becomes a giant insect and is deemed

useless. Conflicts and confusion arise primarily between Gregor and his sister Grete, his parents and his work. Each of these three relationships has different moral and ethical complications defining them. However, it is important for one to keep in mind that Gregor's metamorphosis has placed him in to a position of opposition, and that he has minimal control over the events to take place. Conflicts will also occur between family members as they struggle with the decision of what to do with Gregor. In the end they all come to the agreement that maintaining his uselessness is slowly draining them and they must get rid of him.

“When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin (Kafka 3). It is with this startling, bizarre, yet surprisingly funny first sentence, Kafka begins his masterpiece *The Metamorphosis*, written in 1912. It was written in German and was later translated into English. Since Kafka's fiction is set in an alternate reality that is threatening, one always has the sense of an individual unfairly trapped in an absurd world as he was. The weirdness of this transformation or change makes us evaluate Gregor's role as the symbolic prototype of the existential hero because the story was written from an existentialist viewpoint, proven by its emphasis on loneliness, isolation, and the autonomy of one's existence.

It is the story of a young man, Gregor Samsa, who transformed overnight into a giant beetle like insect and becomes an object of disgrace to his family, an outsider in his own home and also a quintessentially alienated man. The family depends on Gregor for its livelihood. Gregor, however, is now a bug. It is clear from the story that Gregor lived in a absurd world full of suffering and peculiarity. After Gregor inexplicably woke up one morning as a monstrous vermin, he remarked that he “saw no way of bringing peace and order into this mindless motion and that all his efforts to go about his daily routine were for naught” (7). If Gregor's predicament is taken to be symbolic of mankind's, then this efforts indicates the fundamental struggle of each individual against the alien and hostile world. This fundamental realization that he was entirely helpless in the world came after his reconciliation with the fact that as for adopting another profession, he was not only too old for that but too fanatically devoted to fasting and led him into a deep depression, which led to his death. As the only human bug, Gregor was alone and alienated in his world. Even before his metamorphosis Gregor was a travelling salesman who was “constantly seeing new faces” and would have “no relationships that last or get more intimate” (4).

The underlying theme of *The Metamorphosis* is an existential view that says any given choice will govern the later course of a person's life and that the person has ultimate will over making choices. In this case, Gregor is a man who devotes his life to family and work, for nothing in return. Only when he is transformed into a helpless beetle does he begin to develop a self-identity and understanding of the relationships around him. Gregor's lack of identity has caused him to be numb to everything around him.

According to Kafka and existentialism, people have both an individual side and a side with a commitment to society. It is our choices that must be in moderation of the two, to maintain balance. If a person chooses himself over society, he will lose the support of society; however, if a person chooses society, he will lose his individuality. Gregor initially chooses society over himself, which in turn transformed him into the working drone he was. After his physical transformation he is forced to reassert his focus to himself, and society abandons him. Through Gregor's plight, his family became cohesive and productive in society, each contributing to work and leisure. Gregor learned to live for himself too late to become a whole person. Gregor begins to look for entertainment and fun in the form of a bug, a form that knows nothing but work. He enjoys crawling around the walls and ceiling of his room. By ignoring the purpose of being an insect, Gregor defeats the purpose of living in his new form of life and in effect dies.

Another element of existentialism is the sense of alienation. Gregor's metamorphosis literally separates him from the human race as it makes him no longer human. Essentially he has become totally isolated from everyone around him, including those people he cares for like Grete and his mother, which in turn is an essential feature of absurdity. Among many views of existentialism as exposed in the novel, one of the main views is alienation or estrangement which is demonstrated by Gregor's relationship with his family, his social life and the way he lives his life after the metamorphosis. Namely it suggests that man is reduced to an insect by the modern world and his family; human nature is completely self-absorbed. Kafka reflects a belief that the more generous and selfless one is, the worse one is treated. This view is in direct conflict with the way things should be; man, specifically Gregor should be treated in accordance to his actions. Gregor should be greatly beloved by his family regardless of his state. This idea is displayed in three separate themes. First, Gregor's family is only concerned with the effect Gregor's change will have on them, specifically the effect it will have on their finances and reputation. They are more than willing to take gratuitous advantage of Gregor; he works to pay their debt and they are happy to indulge themselves with luxury. Gregor is the soul employed member of his family and this is their primary interest when Gregor is transformed. Secondly, Gregor is penalized for his efforts to be a good son and a good worker; his toils are completely taken for granted by his family. The Samsa family is not interested in Gregor beyond their own needs, outsiders are reverentially treated. Thirdly, it is displayed by the positive changes that occur in the Samsa family as Gregor descends into tragedy and insignificance. As Gregor's life becomes more painful, isolated and worthless the Samsa family becomes more functional and self – reliant.

Alienation as a theme of existentialism is a separation between a person and his unconscious mind. Alienation generally suggests depersonalization, self-estrangement, cultural estrangement, the sense of meaninglessness and powerlessness. In the novel the first sign of alienation which happens to Gregor is his reaction to his physical change. Gregor Samsa feels that he has been treated as a lowly insect and comes to feel that he is one: the story makes the leap from 'I feel like an insect' to 'I am an insect'. Gregor Samsa doesn't at all desire such a transformation into an animal. On the contrary it happens to him suddenly- a frighteningly incomprehensible and strange occurrence. He is far from identifying his ego with a beetle. It is true that he too, precisely, is in a state of unresolved conflict between work and ego. Gregor vacillates between two spheres. On the one hand he is ruled by the rational plan- making considerations related to his work: he wants to get up and carry on his business trip. "Just don't stay in bed being useless" (7) Gregor said to himself. On the other hand however he curses his work, "the upset of doing business, the torture of travelling" (3) and he ponders "How about going back to sleep for a few minutes forgetting all this nonsense" (3). The 'nonsense' refers to his metamorphosis into the beetle that inwardly he in no way accepts, but actually wants to forget in his sleep. A part from this, the blindness with which everybody treats this transformation adds to the alienation. Gregor will not admit it. "I'll get dressed right away; pack up my samples, and go" (15). His parents and his sister do not understand it. The self is what is absolutely alien, void and non-existent, not only in the world of business but also in the world of the family. Gregor even thinks "how simple everything would be if he could get some help" (8). The terrible truth of this novel is the realizations that even the most beautiful and most tender relations among people are founded on illusions. Grete, his sister at first appears to have the most tolerance for Gregor shortly after his metamorphosis. But later she too "had gotten fed up with taking care of Gregor" (42).

Moreover his family had gotten into the habit of putting in his room "things for which they couldn't find any other place" (43). And towards the end of the novel Grete even says that "we have to try to get rid of it. We've done everything humanly possible to take care of it and to put up with it; I don't think anyone can blame us in the least" (48). Here by she is addressing Gregor as 'it' and this shows her indifference to her living brother and on hearing this, his father also says that "she's absolutely right" (48). In order to make her parents accept the notion of getting rid of him, emphasizing the same idea she again says exclusively to her father that "we must try to get rid of it" (49). The way others perceive us, or look at us, changes the way we perceive ourselves, our thoughts and our notions of self, of right and wrong. In this novel the family as a whole is afraid of being judged by the society. This kind of reaction from his dearest ones added to Gregor's alienation.

Alienation is the primary theme in *The Metamorphosis*. Indeed, much of early twentieth century literature takes as its basic premises that man is alienated from his fellow humans and forced to work in dehumanizing jobs. Before his metamorphosis Gregor is alienated from his job, his humanity, his family, and even his body as we see from the fact that he barely notices his transformation. Perhaps the greatest consequence of Gregor's metamorphosis is the psychological distance it creates between Gregor and those around him. Gregor's change makes him literally and emotionally separate from his family members indeed, from humanity in general. After his transformation he stays almost exclusively in his room with his door closed and has almost no contact with other people. At most, Grete spends a few minutes in the room with him, and during this time Gregor always hides under the couch and has no interaction with her. Furthermore, he is unable to speak, and consequently he has no way of communicating with other people. Lastly, Gregor's metamorphosis literally separates him from the human race as it makes him no longer human. Essentially he has become totally isolated from everyone around him, including those people he cares for like Grete and his mother.

Existential angst is another term that describes the internal conflicts experienced by every conscious individual due to the fact that the world is not a rational place and existence can be maintained only by constant struggle. The implications of this idea range from the notion of something as basic as finding a means to provide the most basic needs for survival, struggling with the idea of searching for and defining meaning in the world, trying to communicate and to establish meaningful relationships with other creatures etc. all existential struggles represent the conflict that naturally opposes the original state of human existence in the womb. In the novel it is this womb-like state without conflict, decision or self-definition that Gregor longs to return to. But of course this is impossible and Gregor's escapist attitude is largely responsible for his failure in life. Gregor's desire to escape is illustrated throughout the text. Escape in fact is a motif which manifests itself in Gregor's sleeping to escape, avoiding decisions and his eventual physical and mental exhaustion, all of which lead to his ultimate escape through death.

However from Kafka's portrayal of Gregor's life before the change, it is clear that transformation is also a logical continuation of certain changes that were occurring inside Gregor's mind and his death can be understood in part as a failure to address or to try to interrupt any of these things before it was too late. Gregor failed to change with the changing world. Kafka gives expression to his philosophy of existentialism in this novel *The Metamorphosis*. The novel therefore constitutes a picture of life without pattern and is a satire on the kind of pattern that men try to impose on life.

In conclusion, this research article attempts to reveal the basic themes of existentialism, as a twentieth century philosophy in Franz Kafka's novel *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka as an existential writer has expressed most of his

existential ideas through his novel *The Metamorphosis*. Themes of absurdity, alienation, responsibility, death, existence precedes essence, beyond good and evil, angst, irrational world etc came to characterize existential thought. And these prominent characteristics of existentialism are to be found in *The Metamorphosis*.

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