

## The Convergence of Existentialism and Absurdity in the Understanding of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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### Abstract:

Franz Kafka is considered as one of the most accomplished existentialist and absurdist novelist of the twentieth century. His works represent a notorious challenge both to the ordinary reader as well as the specialized critics. Unlike other literary artists, Kafka conceives his works in an uncertain and purposeless universe where illogic, chaos, paradox, guilt, and punishment go pathetically and tragically unexplained. The aim of this research paper, however, is to examine Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* in the light of absurd perspective. With this perspective of absurdity in mind, the study focuses on some artistic features of Kafka's novella as the title, setting, structure, theme, and characters including their actions and dialogues.

**Keywords:** absurd; alienation; existentialism; Kafkaesque; metamorphosis

### 1- INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka's works are extremely difficult to read and the task is undoubtedly daunting. Many different approaches and methods are adopted to analyze his literary texts and each time the output is far from being convincing because of the myriad of paradoxical interpretations readers and critics alike would have obtained, let alone the interpretation of *The Metamorphosis*. The present research work, however, is an investigation of Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915) through the lens of absurdity.

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The researcher focuses on Kafka's narrative text through which the author works out the absurd main character in an uncertain, absurd, purposeless, and chaotic universe who attempts to struggle out of it but despair is all that one reaps. The dilemmas of absurdity Kafka has implemented in his content such as chaos, paradox, distortion isolation, and alienation have increased Kafka's factor of existentialism and Absurdism or "Kafkaesque." The scrutiny of the term Kafkaesque—a byword for everything felt to be "alien" and or "incomprehensible— which was coined by Englishman Cecil Day-Lewis in 1938, will certainly widen our understanding of absurdity (Julian, 2002, p. 220).

The metamorphosis is a story of a young hard-worker salesman, Gregor Samsa, who one morning has been metamorphosed into a giant dung beetle. His baffling monstrous physical appearance has augmented Greg's plight, especially his family because of unknown fear, he is locked in isolation, hidden from sight, disgusted by human food, deficient human voice, and incomprehensible language. In the middle of this chaos, Greg finally dies due to an apple that is thrown at him by his father. Nevertheless, many critics believe that *The Metamorphosis* is more than a mere transfer of the main character Gregor into an enormous vermin but a projection of Kafka's own gloomy and disturbed life. Through his protagonist, Kafka toils to depict his inner feelings. The story symbolizes Kafka's inner personal and professional life let alone his relationship with his tyrannical father and unsuccessful business, which has a great impact on the son's conscience, feelings, and self-confidence. Thus, the protagonist's abandon of his social identity, loath of job, unconscious renunciation of the symbolic order, and his revolt against the stifling laws of both his father and his boss are not Kafka's and his character Greg alone but may unpredictably, in a state of isolation, reflect emotions that emerge in all of us. Isolation, self-analysis, and personal judgments are fundamental aspects of Kafka's philosophy and prerequisite logic of his world in which he leaves his characters as bewildered aliens striving for a firm metaphysical anchor which they never quite understand. Consequently, the unexplained threatening situation his character face is one of total uncertainty and despair (Czermak, 1973). To conduct this analysis, the researcher deems it necessary to set up a plan meant to guide this research paper.

## **2. The Philosophy of Existentialism and Theories of Absurdity**

### **2.1 Existentialism**

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Existentialism is a philosophical approach that focuses on individual existence beyond absolute reason. Many scholars still dispute the coinage of the term 'existentialism'. Nevertheless, it is agreed that it was Simone de Beauvoir who first used it in her works in the early 1940s. As a philosophical movement, existentialism is often associated with Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche's writings. They are most often referred to as the 19th-century 'fathers' of the existentialist movement (Flynn, 2009). Increasingly, however, some thinkers would deliberately describe existentialism as "not a philosophy but a label for a set of widely different revolts against traditional philosophy" and "not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets" (Kaufman, 1956, p.11). Solomon seems to share the same views. He denies the idea of a movement to Existentialism. He also rejects the view that Existentialism is associated with a set of ideas of a certain category of authors (Solomon, 2005). Existentialism which carries different themes and meanings focuses basically on the individual-God relationship; the reason for people's existence and the role this existence has got. It denotes that man's life is full of unease, restlessness, awkwardness, apprehensions, worries, angst, and fear, and with no meaning in life (Webber, 2009).

In this respect, to avoid plunging into the quagmire and confusion of the term, it is very adequate to acknowledge that though existentialism is often concerned with presenting all the negative aspects of life such as homelessness, nothingness, facelessness, meaninglessness, solitariness, and chaos; only two outstanding views about existentialism are identified: atheist and theist existentialism (Marshall, 2006). Atheist existentialism, whose theorists include Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, and Martin Heidegger, to name but a few, might seem to exclude any transcendental, metaphysical, or religious beliefs from philosophical existentialist thought and denies the possibility of faith. Therefore, it is necessary, at this point, to indicate Sartre's revelation that atheism is not a necessary component of existential thought (Reynolds, 2006). It is not even a metaphysical attempt to fathom what the world is and what the world's beyond is. Sartre's focus is mainly on the issue of existence. This is widely apparent in his famous dictum that "existence precedes essence" (Barrent, 1964, p. 67). The key concept of Sartre's Existentialism is man's conditioned responsibility of his being. This would lead to the idea that that man's existence comes first. Then, each man—while striving to become himself—

encounters himself and shapes himself according to his wills and self-conceptions. Sartre explains that “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (Qtd. in Solomn, 2005, p. 220).

Atheist existentialists generally believe that life is meaningless with no purpose. It is just an existence with no ultimate truth. Both Camus and Samuel Beckett share this viewpoint. Camus goes to the extent that even philosophy begins with a reflection on suicide (Camus, 1991). Samuel Beckett throughout his existentialist play, *Waiting for Godot*, explores how pursuing the existence of meaning through an existentialist lens ultimately leads to nothing. One of the basic principles of existentialism is the notion that life keeps cyclically repeating the same happenings. What happened before is but a duplicate of what will happen tomorrow. Increasingly, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is a **genuine** example of the two outstanding characters, who in a desperate and exasperating state, keep repeating the same words and expressions ad nauseam. Thus, the two characters seem to be compelled to perform actions to overcome the burden of time (Pattie, 2000). Therefore, repeated habitual actions and the absence of any form of entertainment would certainly hasten and accelerate a man’s wish for death. This is very noticeable in clearly said by Vladimir’s words when he says, “Habit is a great deadener” (Beckett, 1956, Act I).

On the same token, it may comparatively be assumed that Heidegger’s existentialism is more complex. Heidegger acknowledges, with a more in-depth explanation through his concept of “thrownness” that man may be flung into a world beyond his wills bereft of any choice or alternative.

To put it clearly, man cannot determine the conditions of his being. Yet these conditions deeply affect the way this man lives and experience the rest of his existence. Thus, in this state of being, explains Heidegger, that man has to deal with the conditions of his existence that are not, by all means, the choice of his. Nonetheless, Heidegger attempts to show that man bears responsibility for his existence through some kind of self-determination or control. This Heideggerian conception of human existence as being-in-the-world was the spark that has set the philosophies of many thinkers aflame. It was Heidegger’s idea of finding oneself “thrown” into existence that has set forth the nature of human existence itself a central philosophical concern.

Later, though still much absorbed by the question of Being, Heidegger coined the term “existentialia” (Philipse, 1998) which has, then, in turn, been morphed into the word “existential” by Sartre, Beauvoir, and

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others. This would eventually lead to their being described as “existentialists”. Therefore, for existentialists, “man ... is thrown into the universe and desolate isolation.” Existentialists emphasize the “isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe” (Kern, 1970, p. 169). Because human existence is extremely hard to explain, as existentialists would claim, the human being is condemned to live in a perpetual exile. Hence the individual consciousness would offer the possibility to construct a unique identity for itself, rejecting any form of external guidance as well as cherishing exclusive freedom of choice, governed and controlled by its consequences.

On the other hand, existential theists quite reasonably believe in an infinite form of reality that is beyond the temporal and spatial limits. They emphasize a kind of objective reality. Theists also put stress on different types of interpersonal relationships. Theists are strongly convinced that humans are created by God for a purpose. Both theists and existentialists generally agree on “freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one’s acts” (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 138). However, the main difference between them lies in that the former believe in an absolute moral standard, while the latter believe in moral relativism. Many outstanding religious figures, under the influence of Kierkegaard, may seem to share these atheists’ views: such as the Protestant Karl Jaspers, the Catholic Gabriel Marcel, Rudolph Bultmann, and Paul Tillich, to name but few. Without the guidance of universal rules of morality, human nature, or a knowable God, they believe, man must endow the world and create the meaning in which he seeks to live. Literary figures such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, Giacometti, Picasso, Ionesco, and Beckett—all-powerful exemplars of existentialist themes in the arts—and others have also been productively associated with existential concerns.

It is safe then to strike a balance between existentialism as a philosophical movement whose basic themes such as individual freedom, responsibility, the irrationality of life, subjectivity, selection of choices, anxiety, and absurdity, and their recurrence in literature and arts. Hence, the concern of the researcher is the deal with existentialism as a philosophical movement wrapped with artistic implications rather than as merely a literary movement with philosophical pretensions. It is an attempt to interpret both texts while keeping in view the major themes of absurdity.

## 2.2 Absurdity

Absurdity is strongly related to existentialist philosophy which qualifies human existence as being meaningless, ambiguous, desperate, and chaotic. Literally, absurdity refers to all that is meaningless, bizarre, illogical, irrational, foolish, ridiculous, and unreasonable. Notwithstanding the avalanche of books, and myriad articles that have made use of the terms, existence, and absurdity often succumb to abstraction because of their opposed practices in different disciplines. The former portrays, Sartre, clarifies, the incomprehensibility and the irrationality of the human condition in a comprehensible and logically constructed reasoning. However, the latter embraces a new form of dramatic conventions, abandoning the entire traditional ones, to pigeonhole the new content (Cline, 2019).

Nonetheless, it was probably the Absurdist playwright, many critics would argue, that best demonstrate the existential philosophy that Sartre and Camus did in their plays. Etymologically then, the term absurd was coined by Martin Esslin while examining the works of some anti-realistic post-war drama of playwrights such as Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Jean Genet, not to mention Pinter, Ionesco, and Albee (Nelson, 1993). Esslin's quotes of Camus' passage from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “. . . in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and light, man feels a stranger . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity” (Esslin, 1961, p. xix) is the fact upon which he introduced and defined the idea of absurdity. He seems to add that the word *absurd* originally came from a musical context which meant “out of harmony,” and is used in the everyday sense of “ridiculous” (Esslin, 1961, p. xix). This viewpoint seems to be shared by Chris Baldick's explanation of the term absurd, in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001). Chris says that absurd is “a term derived from the existentialism of Albert Camus, and often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value”; he goes on to single out the works of Kafka, ‘in which the characters face alarmingly incomprehensible predicaments’ (Baldick, 1990, p. 2).

To make his definition more intelligible, Esslin refers to Ionesco's essays which the latter had written on Kafka in 1957 “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Esslin, 1961, xix). Esslin believes that Ionesco is one of the

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principal absurdists whose reading of Kafka's short story is indirectly defined as being absurd. It is clear then to the common readers that the notion of the absurd emphasizes the purposelessness and senselessness of life. "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . ." Esslin, 1961, xix). Nevertheless, Kafka ad nauseam assumes that there is meaning in life in the condition that one *is* connected to his or her religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots (Ionesco, 1957).

In nutshell, absurdity can be defined as a condition where man is forced to exist in a society deprived of his individualism and any effective communication (Robert, 1995). There is no "meaning" to make sense of our lives; hence man's existence is naturally anchored in an absurd life and drifted in a world as bewildered beings in an incomprehensible universe. So this senselessness and bewildered existence compels man into detachment, absolute alienation, despair, and escape with a great conscious that there is no final solution (Goodwin, 1971). Reaching the crux of the matter, absurdity, then, results in estrangement whose basic calamity is strongly and eminently connected with the existentialist theme.

### **3. Kafka and Absurdity**

#### **3.1 The Spirit of Absurdity in Kafka's Works**

Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883. His dual nationality German and Czech, his Jewish origin, some people think, augmented and galvanized his sadness suffering, and resentment; for from the Czech point of view, Kafka was German, and from the German point of view he was, after all, Jewish. What is worth mentioning is that Prague at that time was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Jews were expected to live apart in ghettos. His father, Hermann Kafka a bad-tempered domestic tyrant, was a businessman who ran a store of dry goods assisted by his wife Julie Löwy, Kafka's mother. Kafka's incapacity to indulge in a healthy relationship with his father led him to permanent resentment and failure in business. No matter how hard his mother tried to settle down the feud between the quarreling members, she failed. The only strong ties, however, Kafka would cherish was with his sister Ottla who offered him help to break his relationship off with his first fiancée Felice Bauer (Czermak, 1973). From 1889 to 1893 Franz went to the boys' elementary school in Prague. In 1901 Franz attended Karl-Ferdinand University where he met Max Brod, who would become a close friend and future literary editor.

After his graduation on June 18, 1906, Franz performed an obligatory year of unpaid service as a law clerk for the civil and criminal courts. Later in 1907, Kafka started working in a huge Italian insurance company where his malaise, anxiety, and irritation of office work and working time scheduling began to be a great burden, especially, when it stymied his concentration on his writing. Eventually, on July 15, 1908, he became a legal adviser in a Prague insurance company. Committed to his literary work, Kafka worked there until July 1922 when serious health problems compelled him to retire. During his frequent convalescence from tuberculosis in 1917, Kafka was supported by his sister Otta. Throughout his entire life, Kafka suffered from depression, social anxiety, and insomnia caused by excessive stresses and strains. This would certainly affect his professional career as well as his intimate relations and would constitute the bulk of his fiction.

Increasingly, it is evident that Kafka's works reveal their existentialist spirit and absurdity. Quite interestingly Kafka too is absurd in his writing. Absurdity is obvious from his novella "The Metamorphosis". Gregor, the protagonist of the novella, got no interest in the world but rather sees it quite hostile towards him and thus being tired of its cruelty, represents the absurd world. He becomes aware of the insane nature of life and considers himself as an alien to this world. However, compared to other absurd writers, Kafka seems to have hope in his world of absurdity. This could be justified by Bod's words, says "Kafka's fundamental outlook may be summarized in some such formula like this: almost everything is uncertain, but once one has a certain degree of understanding one never loses the way anymore" (Brod, 1937, p.173). Although Kafka's protagonist Gregor Samsa's alienated fate in "The Metamorphosis", could be the fate of anyone, he never surrenders to his alienation which is caused notably by the inability to understand the world with certainty. The only way, Kafka believes, to overcome this absurd world is that alienation should be accepted as a way of life. Kafka's literary career came to an end when he died on June 3, 1924.

### **3.2 Absurdity in Title**

A short glance at the title of Kafka's work *The Metamorphosis* would suffice the reader, especially if it is compared concerning absurdity, to be aware that the title shows the absurd nature of the text. Nobody knows the reasons for Gregor's transformation into a gigantesque insect nor can he/she associate some meaning or purpose to this sudden physical change. Using



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the existential idea Kafka demonstrates that man's fate is sometimes beyond man's control. Gregor Samsa "awoke one morning from uneasy dreams" to find himself "transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka, 2007, p. 85). Strange enough, Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis is "no miracle and is hardly even startling for the protagonist himself. It simply happens and he has no choice but to adapt (Mairowitz, 1996). Hence this creates the effect of meaninglessness which not only makes things ambiguous but also absurd. There is, Nina Pelikan Straus suggests, no single interpretation which can invalidate or at least deliver the story's significance (Straus, 1989). The title *The Metamorphosis* also suggests or is a symbol of the protagonist's bitter and impaired alienation from the world. A person who can hardly come to terms with a particular society thrown away in his room delivered to his faith in a total estrangement.

### **3.3 Absurdity in Setting**

Written in an absurd vein, the setting of the novella "The Metamorphosis" reflects an implicit Kafkaesque orientation that life is revelatory of being pointless, odd, meaningless, and ambiguous. Even though the story does not provide the reader with a specific geographical location or historical date, its setting, nonetheless, is a modest apartment where the protagonist is locked in one of its rooms. One might with equal ease point that the author's setting highlights the strange absurd-related elements i.e. isolation and oppression Gregor experienced within his society. Sandwiched between his parents' room and his sister Grete's room, Gregor is locked alone in a bedroom where he will spend most of the rest of his life after his transformation. Not once, from the outset of the novella to the death of the protagonist, does Gregor leave the apartment. He is left confined to his room which seems a reflection of his dehumanizing transformation and an eventual coffin where he rots away to death. Gregor's total isolation, thus, reflects the feeling of isolation that any human being can feel at times throughout their lives. Janis Kendeline in her article about Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* suggests that Kafka's story may represent how individuals have been trapped by what society has imposed upon them (Kenderdine, 2004).

It can be inferred; however that Gregor's imprisonment, isolation, and loneliness would set the environment of despair where one's hopes could not fulfill. Nevertheless, Kafka's artistic talent enables him to describe

situations in humble frozen words to avoid choking his readers with ad nauseam and detailed descriptions of horrific scenes preferring blunt absurdity. This no evidence of this bluntness than the first sentence of *The Metamorphosis*: “When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed” (Kafka, 2007, p. 85). Kafka’s setting displays the protagonist’s lonely situation where there is nobody with whom to communicate his fate.

It is this strangeness and despair nature of the setting which produces a sense of anarchy and adds to the absurd nature of the story. Nevertheless, what Kafka wants to demonstrate is that the most gruesome aspect of Gregor’s fate is not his physical transformation, but the blindness with which everybody treats this transformation. The hero is left to face the absurdity of life and senseless fate.

### **3.4 Absurdity in Structure**

Beginning with what should be its climax—the protagonist’s great transformation into an insect— “*The Metamorphosis*” is structured in such a notorious way that portrays the uselessness and meaninglessness of life in modern materialistic society. Readers have always been accustomed to the standard tradition that any ordinary text starts the story with an exposition, then climax ending up with a resolution. However, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* ironically commences in a very unique and strange way. The author begins with the climax in the first sentence. No warming up, no tension, and then all of a sudden: Gregor is now a giant insect. The reader is compelled to deal with the consequences of this fact. Everything after that first declarative sentence is unraveling. It is that first sentence of Kafka’s story which causes the reader’s surprise and confusion leading him/her to ask questions about the causes and the possibility of the transformation. Nabokov summarizes this point that “[...] generalizing interpretations of “*The Metamorphosis*” are due to the unquestionable absurdity of the beginning of the story” (Nabokov 1980, “Good Readers and Good Writers”).

What is odd is Gregor’s family whose annoyance and disturbance at his sudden transformation is much more intense than their surprise or horror. Besides, the structure of the novella reflects the absurd nature of the protagonist’s progression via his acceptance of reality as an alien and stranger to society. Gregor’s transformation into a bug increases his despair as he is being easily crushed by society. The remainder of the story may reveal that Gregor does not want this metamorphosis to happen; that is he

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refuses to become an alien to society, nevertheless, the climax in the opening serves to give the readers an insight into Gregor's response to a sudden transformation. Gradually, at worst Gregor accepts himself as an alien by the fact he does not scream or panic while descending into the abyss of forced and not chosen alienation. Gregor is ignored not only by the family members but the charwoman as well. She uses Gregor's room as a garbage dump: Whatever useless dirty junk or superfluous furniture even the rubbish bin of the kitchen was simply flung into his room (Kafka, 2007, p. 131). This suggests an extreme version of absurd and desperate alienation which Kafka sees as inescapable. (Solomon, 2005) Consequently, Gregor slowly dies because of his family's neglect, shame, and guilty despair, a death that reflects Gregor's freedom of being.

### **3.5 Absurdity in Theme**

The theme of *The Metamorphosis* is not exempt from the elements of absurdity. **Absurdity wraps the entire theme of the story.** The text contains both forms of alienation physical and mental isolation. Gregor's anxious isolation in his bedroom sandwiched between his parents' room and that of his sister Grete, where the three family members are communicating with him through three different doors and directions, is evidence of his physical isolation. He is isolated away from his environment in a detached and absurd manner. It is also worth noticing Gregor's emotional isolation from the rest of the world. He is entirely deprived of any kind of love from the members of the family and no respect from the charwoman. This strange detachment and isolation are evidence of its absurd nature. It is also notable that Gregor has always been a good son and brother, forced to do a job he despises so that he can provide a better life for his family and his plans to pay his sister's studies of music at the conservatory (Kafka, 2007, p.134).

Nevertheless, the basic absurdity of all things is that though there is no indication that Gregor deserves his fate all the members of the family treat his transformation as something unusual and disgusting, a random occurrence or a mere illness. No matter how hard Kafka's hero strives to come to terms with his family, he is hopelessly caught in unexplained despair. Gregor has been highly praised thanks to his ability to work and his financial support. Once he becomes invalid unable to provide for the family, he becomes a real burden to be disposed of, notably his beloved sister. She says "if it was Gregor, he would long ago have seen that human

beings cannot live together with an animal like that, and he would have left of his own free will. That would have meant I didn't have a brother..." (Kafka, 2007, p. 138). All these elements add to the story a distinct overtone of absurdity and suggest a universe immune from any governing system of order and justice. Kafka in his diaries considered Gregor Samsa's alienated fate in "The Metamorphosis", to be the fate of anyone (Ryan, 1999).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The horrifying absurd uniqueness of *The Metamorphosis* has, in fact, left us with the fantastic text where empirical reality is presented by an enigmatic and a mysterious event. This latter remains unexplained throughout the whole story baffling and continuously haunting the reader. Certainly Kafka's text allows for a plethora of critical readings: existentialist, psychoanalytical, and or autobiographical, however, what is notable is that absurdity the reader tangibly touches in the meaninglessness of actions, barrenness of characters and oddity of setting. This is not the end of the matter for Kafka even tries to tell the phenomenon of the absurdity of a man (Samsa) in search for meaning in an absurd universe. Absurdity, shyness, alienation, anxiety, melancholy and chaos are typical recurrent idiosyncrasies in Kafka's short masterpiece "The Metamorphosis" and the inevitable result is isolation and subsequent death of hopeless and irrecoverable vermin in search of nonexistent salvation. These oppressive, nightmarish and bizarre qualities along with the reminiscent themes reflected in his works are usually swollen with the adjective Kafkaesque.

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