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## The Alienated Self: Existential Crisis in Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis

**Akshara Dayal**

BA English,  
Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow Campus, Uttar Pradesh, India.

### ABSTRACT:

This essay uses an in-depth literary analysis based on existentialist philosophy and concept of absurdism to examine the issue of existential crisis in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. It explores the ways in which Gregor Samsa's hideous metamorphosis into an insect function as a metaphor for identity loss, alienation, and the ridiculous. The research explores Gregor's psychological issues, his failing relationships, and Kafka's criticism of social conventions through the existentialist philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The study concludes by arguing that Kafka's novella is nonetheless a potent examination of the human condition, capturing the universal search for purpose in a meaningless world.

**Key words:** Alienation, Existentialism, Franz Kafka, Identity, Human connection.

### Introduction to Franz Kafka:

German-speaking Bohemian author Franz Kafka (1883–1924) was born in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. His works are widely regarded as some of the most influential of the 20th century and explore themes like alienation, existential anxiety, and the absurdity of human existence. His unique literary style, which frequently combines surrealism and realism, has given rise to the term "Kafkaesque," which refers to situations that are bizarre, illogical, or nightmarishly complex.

Born into a middle-class Jewish family, Kafka's tense relationship with his controlling father, Hermann Kafka, had a significant impact on his sense of identity and self-worth; this tension is frequently seen in his characters, who battle oppressive forces and a crippling sense of guilt and inadequacy. Kafka worked as an insurance clerk, juggling his writing with a tiresome and boring work life. This duality between personal goals and professional responsibilities is a recurrent theme in his works.

The majority of Kafka's writings are short tales and unfinished novels, many of which were released after his death by his confidant and friend Max Brod. When Kafka passed away, he asked that his unpublished works be destroyed, but Brod recognised their literary value and decided to share and preserve them. *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *In the Penal Colony*, and, of course, *The Metamorphosis* are some of Kafka's best-known pieces. His exceptional ability to portray deep philosophical concepts through seemingly ordinary or fantastical situations is best demonstrated by these pieces.

Kafka's writing is characterised by a detached, even clinical tone that, ironically, exacerbates the protagonists' emotional and psychological suffering. The sense of powerlessness and loneliness that permeates his stories is strengthened by this artistic decision. Because of his painstaking attention to detail and skill in fusing the bizarre with the real, Kafka forces readers to face the more sinister facets of modernity and human existence.

Perhaps Kafka's most famous piece, *The Metamorphosis*, depicts the terrible metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa into a hideous insect. Readers who struggle with the conflict between their own identities and social expectations may find resonance in the novella's exploration of themes of alienation, shame, and the absurdity of human life. A powerful metaphor for the loss of agency and personality in a world that is becoming more and more impersonal and mechanised is provided by Kafka's depiction of Gregor's dehumanisation and his family's eventual rejection.

Since his examination of existential problems continues to stimulate scholarly investigation and interpretation, Kafka has had an incalculable impact on literature and philosophy. His writings are ageless because they provide a prism through which to view the intricacies of contemporary life and the human psyche. An understanding of Kafka's talent and his unwavering depiction of the absurdity and suffering inherent in the human condition can be gained by examining *The Metamorphosis*.

### Introduction to The Metamorphosis:

A travelling salesman named Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to discover that he has changed into a huge insect in Franz Kafka's eerie and fantastical tale, *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor's extreme estrangement from his family and society is symbolised by this hideous metamorphosis. After serving as the family's main provider, Gregor is now despised and alone. As his family struggles to accept their new reality, their initial disbelief soon gives way to frustration and neglect.

As Gregor struggles with the emotional and psychological effects of his metamorphosis, the novella follows his fruitless attempts to adapt to his new shape. His family, who had relied on him for financial support, now sees him as a liability. His sister, Grete, initially demonstrates some compassion but later turns bitter and uncaring, his mother struggles between shock and maternal impulses, and his father grows more antagonistic.

His family becomes less tolerant of Gregor's illness and publicly wishes for his death. As Gregor absorbs his family's contempt, his sense of self slowly crumbles. Ultimately, helpless and exhausted, he gives in to his destiny and passes away by himself in his chamber. When the family learns of his passing, they are relieved and quickly begin arranging for a new

beginning. As a sharp commentary on the frailty of human connections and the pointlessness of looking for purpose in a cruel and uncaring world, the story's depressing ending highlights the dehumanising repercussions of rejection from society and family.

One of Kafka's most well-known works, *The Metamorphosis*, represents the alienation of the contemporary person and the existential dread that comes with a lack of direction and comprehension.

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### **What is Existentialism:**

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that explores individual freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in an uncaring universe. Rooted in the works of thinkers such as Jean- Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard, existentialism contends that existence precedes essence—meaning that individuals are not born with a predetermined purpose but must construct their own via their activities. Anxiety, absurdity, alienation, and the responsibility of determining one's own fate are all major topics in existentialist philosophy.

Existentialism fundamentally questions the notion that life has intrinsic significance. Rather, it asserts that people must establish their own values and sense of purpose in order to navigate a world that is fundamentally aimless. This insight frequently results in existential anguish, a deep unease brought on by the awareness of one's loneliness and the need to control one's own fate.

Authenticity, which entails living in accordance with one's genuine self rather than fitting in with social norms, is a fundamental idea in existentialism. Being authentic entails accepting and valuing one's autonomy over decisions, even in the face of the anxiety and terror that this autonomy may arouse. A common issue in existential writing is the conflict between societal norms and personal freedom.

Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis into an insect in *The Metamorphosis* represents the conflict between personal identity and social norms. In addition to making him estranged from his family, his hideous appearance deprives him of his position as the breadwinner. The existential dilemma of losing one's essence is mirrored in Gregor's inability to reconcile his new identity with his prior sense of purpose, which forces him to face the random and pointless nature of his life.

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### **What is Absurdism:**

Albert Camus developed absurdism, a notion that is strongly associated with existentialism, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to this theory, there is a fundamental conflict—what Camus referred to as the absurd—because people look for meaning in a cosmos that provides none. This tension results from people's search for intrinsic worth and meaning in life while facing an uncaring, chaotic, and illogical reality.

When confronted with the absurd, people have three options, according to Camus: they can embrace the absurd and carry on living in spite of its intrinsic meaninglessness, seek solace in religion or false optimism, or escape by suicide. Camus promotes the latter, accepting the ridiculous by admitting that there is no purpose in life and making the decision to live against it. In contrast to Sisyphus, who relentlessly drags a boulder uphill despite its futility, this method praises human endeavour by finding significance in the struggle itself.

Characters in absurdist literature are frequently confined to hostile, illogical, or unfathomable circumstances. This is best illustrated by Gregor Samsa's incomprehensible metamorphosis, which presents an illogical phenomenon with no obvious explanation or conclusion. His family's rejection of him and his fruitless attempt to adjust to his new condition highlight how ridiculous his life is. In the end, Kafka's depiction of Gregor's terrible demise offers a moving meditation on the human condition, where people must contend with an uncaring world and meaninglessness. *The Metamorphosis* becomes a timeless examination of absurdist ideas by capturing the tension between the world's inherent meaninglessness and human yearning for significance.

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### **Literature Review:**

*The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka has long captivated academics and critics, inspiring in- depth examination in the fields of philosophy, literature, and sociology. Existentialist and absurdist interpretations centre on the story's portrayal of alienation and dehumanisation. The subject of dehumanisation is emphasised by Walter Sokel's critical analysis, which contends that Gregor's metamorphosis into an insect represents the loss of autonomy and uniqueness in a capitalistic system. In a similar vein, Stanley Corngold emphasises how Kafka's depiction of the grotesque subverts conventional narrative structures by highlighting the novella's surreal narrative as a critique of modernity.

According to existentialist interpretations, Gregor's predicament is frequently consistent with Albert Camus's idea of the absurd, as is expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to Camus, the ridiculous arises from the struggle between an uncaring universe and people's search for meaning. This ridiculousness emerges in Gregor's metamorphosis as his sense of loneliness is heightened by his family's rejection and coldness. As Gregor's transformation compels him to face his loss of identity and purpose, Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy—in particular, the notion that "existence precedes essence"—also finds resonance in the story.

Kafka's examination of existential issues is still relevant to modern studies. The in-depth biography by Rainer Stach explores Kafka's own encounters with social pressure and isolation, providing insights into how these issues influenced his narrative. Elizabeth Boa's research delves deeper into the relationship between gender roles and family responsibilities, demonstrating how Kafka challenges patriarchal systems through Gregor's terrible destiny.

Scholars have increasingly investigated Kafka's impact on existential discourse and postmodern literature. Kafka is positioned as a forerunner of postmodern existentialism in Martin Greenberg's critical study, which highlights how the work's disjointed narrative structure and cryptic symbolism

force readers to make sense of an apparently meaningless universe. This continuous scholarly interest demonstrates the novella's lasting influence on philosophy, literary studies, and cultural criticism.

## Analysis and Discussion:

### 1. Alienation and the Absurd

An effective metaphor for alienation is provided by Gregor's metamorphosis into an insect. He serves as the family's main provider at first, but they see him as useless after his abrupt change. His family's relationship is transactional, as evidenced by the anger and neglect that quickly follow their initial astonishment. Gregor's experience revolves around the existentialist concept of alienation. He has been estranged from both his family and his previous identity.

Gregor's state reflects Albert Camus's concept of absurdity. His metamorphosis is meaningless and illogical, reflecting the ridiculousness of life. According to Camus, the absurd results from the struggle between the universe's apathy and the human need for comprehension. This ridiculousness is embodied in Gregor's hideous body, which imprisons him in a state of loneliness and aimlessness.

### 2. Loss of Identity and Human Dignity

Kafka's depiction of Gregor's metamorphosis emphasises both the significant loss of identity and physical metamorphosis. Prior to his metamorphosis, Gregor's identity was inextricably linked to his function as a family provider. Even if his work was demanding and unsatisfying, it gave him some sense of direction. But after being changed into an insect, his identity is taken away, and he is left to struggle with a warped and disjointed understanding of who he is.

Sartre's existentialist belief that existence comes before essence is consistent with this loss of identity. Gregor's societal role and responsibilities had shaped his entire life; when these are taken away, his essence is left empty. His goals, aspirations, and sense of self are all obliterated under the weight of his metamorphosis, making him essentially a non-entity.

Kafka also criticises the way that people are reduced to mere functions in capitalist society. Gregor is only valuable to his family if he can work and support them; if he is unable to do so, he is no longer seen as human. The dehumanising effects of utilitarianism, where efficiency takes precedence above human dignity, are reflected in this grim reality. Gregor's terrible transformation from provider to burden is a potent critique of a culture that values people more than their ability to make money.

### 3. Family Dynamics and Emotional Disintegration

In addition to making Gregor feel alone, his metamorphosis also acts as a trigger for his family's dynamics to break down. Initially, the Samsa family is shocked and overwhelmed by Gregor's grotesque new form, but as time passes, their empathy erodes, giving way to resentment and hostility. His father's violent outbursts, his mother's fearful avoidance, and his sister's gradual shift from caretaker to adversary illustrate how Gregor's helplessness strips him of familial bonds.

This decline demonstrates how Kafka criticises the brittleness of interpersonal bonds under the weight of social and economic demands. The family starts to see Gregor as a burden rather than a cherished one after they learn he is no longer a provider. This shift in their perspective emphasises how their affection and concern were really transactional—reliant on Gregor's capacity to provide for them monetarily.

The way that Kafka depicts the family's changing perspectives speaks to the existential topic of alienation. Once a vital member of the family, Gregor turns into an unwanted guest. The existential catastrophe of losing one's identity and purpose when society roles are taken away is mirrored in this emotional detachment. The harsh truth of human disposability in a world dominated by self-interest and practicality is symbolised by the family's last rejection of Gregor, which ultimately results in his death.

### 4. Loss of Identity and Dehumanization

In addition to a bodily change, Gregor undergoes a deep existential crisis that deprives him of his identity. Before his transformation, Gregor's identity was strongly linked to his function as a family provider. Even though his work as a travelling salesperson is demanding and draining, it gives him a feeling of direction and community. But his abrupt metamorphosis into an insect prevents him from carrying out his obligations to his family and society, which causes him to lose his identity and sense of value.

Kafka criticises how contemporary, capitalistic society turn people to nothing more than economic machines through this metamorphosis. Gregor loses his identity as their provider and becomes useless to his family once he is unable to work. The existential problem of facing a society where one's worth is based only on production is reflected in this dehumanisation process.

Kafka's depiction of this loss is tragic and profoundly unnerving, highlighting how societal pressures and utilitarian values can undermine human dignity and individuality. Gregor's gradual acceptance of his insect form also represents his surrender to the absurdity of existence, as he grows more and more estranged from his human identity and loses both his role within the family and his sense of self.

### 5. Family Dynamics and Betrayal

One of the most striking features of *The Metamorphosis* is the change in family dynamics after Gregor's transformation. The Samsa family is initially financially dependent on Gregor, but as he becomes incapacitated, their attitude changes from concern to resentment. Gregor's sister, Grete, initially shows compassion by feeding and caring for him, but as time goes on and the family's financial burdens increase, even Grete's empathy wanes, and she eventually demands that Gregor be taken from their home.

This transgression highlights how brittle family ties can be when they are founded on financial reliance rather than sincere love. Kafka criticises the way that human relationships are eroded by utilitarian values, which turn them into merely transactional ties. Gregor's father, who formerly depended on his son's income, grows more antagonistic and aggressive, representing the bitterness resulting from the loss of financial stability.

In addition to solidifying Gregor's estrangement, his family's final rejection of him makes his life even more ridiculous. Even after his prior sacrifices, Gregor's metamorphosis makes him an outsider and an unwelcome burden. This ruthless breaking of family bonds brings to light the harsh realities of a world where sympathy is ephemeral and motivated by self-interest and practicality.

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### Conclusion:

The *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka is still a profound examination of existential crisis and the human condition; through Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis and subsequent alienation, Kafka exposes the absurdity of existence and critiques the dehumanising aspects of modern life. The novella's lasting relevance comes from its capacity to provoke contemplation on personal purpose, societal expectations, and the search for meaning in the midst of chaos. By facing the absurd and embracing one's agency, Kafka's story forces readers to reevaluate their own lives, making it a timeless masterpiece that still has resonance with audiences today.

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