

Existential, Dehumanization and Responsibility in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Yaseen Hatem Obaid

BA English Literature

Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Ms. S. Sherin Fathma

Assistant Professor of English

Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Abstract

Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis stands as one of the most profound and symbolic works of modern literature, exploring themes of existentialism, alienation, and dehumanization. The novella narrates the story of Gregor Samsa, a diligent traveling salesman who awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a monstrous insect. This absurd and unexplained metamorphosis serves as a powerful metaphor for the meaninglessness and isolation characteristic of modern existence. Viewed through an existentialist lens, Gregor's transformation compels him to confront the fragility of identity and the absence of inherent purpose in the universe. His identity, previously defined by his role as the financial provider for his family, collapses when he becomes physically incapable of fulfilling his responsibilities. Their reaction exposes a society that values individuals primarily for their economic utility rather than their intrinsic humanity. Through Gregor's tragic fate, Kafka presents a stark critique of modern social structures and underscores the existential struggle to find meaning in an indifferent world.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Existential, Metamorphosis, Monstrous Vermin.

Franz Kafka is known for portraying individuals who feel trapped in incomprehensible and oppressive systems. *The Metamorphosis* reflects the psychological and moral condition of modern individuals who live without freedom, meaning, or emotional connection. Kafka presents a world where human life is reduced to routine, obligation, and silent suffering.

Gregor Samsa lives only to work and support his family. He has no personal dreams, social life, or emotional fulfillment. His identity is completely defined by his job. When Gregor transforms into an insect, his body changes, but his situation remains the same he is isolated, controlled, and ignored. The transformation exposes the truth of his existence rather than changing it. Kafka raises important philosophical questions: What makes a person human? Is a person valuable only when they are useful? Can responsibility destroy individuality? Through these questions, *The Metamorphosis* becomes not just a story, but a philosophical reflection on modern life.

Existentialism is one of the central philosophical themes in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The novella presents a world in which human existence appears meaningless, absurd, and deeply alienating. Gregor Samsa's sudden transformation into an insect has no explanation, cause, or purpose, reflecting the existential belief that life itself often lacks rational meaning. Kafka portrays existence as something imposed upon individuals rather than freely chosen, forcing them to endure suffering without understanding its reason. Gregor's life before his transformation already reflects existential emptiness. He lives only to work and provide for his family, with no personal desires, dreams, or emotional fulfillment. His identity is entirely shaped by external expectations, particularly his job as a traveling salesman. This lack of self-definition illustrates the existential idea that individuals often lose their authentic selves while conforming to social and economic demands. After the transformation, Gregor does not question why he has become an insect. Instead, he worries about missing work and disappointing his employer. This reaction highlights how deeply he has internalized a meaningless routine. His concern for duty over his own condition shows how existential anxiety is suppressed by obligation and habit. Kafka emphasizes isolation as a key aspect of existential suffering. Gregor becomes increasingly disconnected from society, his family, and even his own sense of self. His inability to communicate reinforces his alienation, as language an essential part of human identity—fails him. The loss of communication symbolizes the existential loss of freedom and individuality.

Through Gregor's experience, Kafka suggests that modern individuals are trapped in systems that deny them meaning and humanity. The novella reflects the existential belief that life offers no inherent purpose, and that individuals must confront loneliness, absurdity, and despair in an indifferent world. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is widely regarded as a foundational existential text, despite being written before existentialism emerged as a formal philosophical movement. The novella presents a world in which human existence is marked by alienation, absurdity, and the absence of inherent meaning. Gregor Samsa's sudden transformation into an insect is not explained through logic, science, or morality. This lack of explanation is central to the existential nature of the text, as it reflects the idea that life's most significant suffering often occurs without reason or justification.

From an existential perspective, Gregor's transformation represents the condition of modern humanity. Even before his metamorphosis, Gregor lives an existence devoid of freedom or self-determination. His life is structured entirely around work, routine, and obligation. He does not question the purpose of his labor or the fairness of his situation. Instead, he accepts his role as a provider unquestioningly. This unreflective acceptance illustrates what existential philosophers describe as an inauthentic mode of existence, in which individuals surrender their freedom to external systems and expectations. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human beings are condemned to freedom and must take responsibility for giving meaning to their lives. However, Gregor's life contradicts this ideal. He does not exercise freedom; rather, he is imprisoned by economic necessity and familial duty. His identity is reduced to a single function—that of a working body. When this function is destroyed by his transformation, Gregor's existence loses all value in the eyes of others. Kafka thus exposes a society that denies existential dignity to individuals who cannot conform to productive roles. Alienation is a key existential theme in the novella. Gregor is alienated not only from society but also from himself. After his transformation, he gradually internalizes society's rejection and begins to perceive himself as a burden. This self-alienation reflects the existential idea that individuals often absorb oppressive values and turn them inward. Gregor's loss of language further intensifies this alienation. His inability to communicate symbolizes the collapse of identity and the breakdown of human connection. Language, which once affirmed his humanity, becomes meaningless noise to others. Albert Camus's concept of the absurd provides a valuable framework

for understanding Kafka's narrative. Camus defines the absurd as the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's indifference.

Gregor's condition perfectly embodies this conflict. His transformation occurs without cause, and no moral lesson is offered in return. Yet, instead of rebelling against this absurdity, Gregor continues to worry about practical matters such as work schedules and family responsibilities. This response highlights how deeply societal norms suppress existential awareness. Gregor's passive acceptance of suffering distinguishes him from Camus's ideal of rebellion. He does not resist his fate or assert his individuality; rather, he withdraws further into silence and self-sacrifice. Kafka portrays this resignation as tragic, suggesting that modern systems condition individuals to endure suffering rather than question it. Gregor's gradual physical and psychological decline reflects the existential erosion of selfhood in a world that denies meaning and compassion. Ultimately, Kafka presents existence as profoundly lonely. Gregor's isolation is not merely the result of his transformation but a condition that precedes it. The metamorphosis makes visible the existential reality of a life already stripped of purpose and recognition. Through Gregor Samsa, Kafka anticipates existentialist thought by illustrating how modern individuals are trapped in meaningless routines, alienated from their true selves, and abandoned by a society that refuses to acknowledge their humanity.

Existentialism in *The Metamorphosis* is most powerfully expressed through the absurd nature of Gregor's transformation. Kafka deliberately avoids providing any explanation for why the metamorphosis occurs. This absence of causality reflects the existential belief that suffering and hardship often arise without reason or moral justification. Life unfolds arbitrarily, and individuals are forced to confront circumstances beyond their control. Albert Camus's concept of the absurd is particularly relevant to Kafka's narrative. According to Camus, the absurd arises from the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the silent indifference of the universe. Gregor's transformation exemplifies this conflict. His desire to fulfill his responsibilities and maintain order in his life is rendered meaningless by an event that defies logic and understanding. Yet, instead of rebelling against this absurdity, Gregor continues to prioritize duty over self-preservation. Gregor's concern with work, even after his transformation, illustrates how deeply societal expectations have shaped his consciousness. His life is governed by schedules, authority figures, and financial obligation. Kafka suggests that such a system strips individuals of existential freedom, leaving them incapable of questioning their own suffering. Gregor's submission to this routine reflects a loss of agency, where existence becomes mechanical rather than meaningful. As Gregor's condition worsens, his physical decay mirrors his psychological deterioration. His gradual withdrawal from human interaction represents the existential erosion of identity. Kafka portrays modern existence as a condition marked by isolation, absurdity, and silent endurance. In this sense, *The Metamorphosis* anticipates later existential philosophy by illustrating the emotional consequences of living in a world devoid of meaning and compassion.

Dehumanization is one of the most dominant and disturbing themes in *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka presents Gregor Samsa's physical transformation as a visible manifestation of a process that began long before he became an insect. Even in his human form, Gregor is treated as a tool for economic survival rather than as a person deserving care and dignity. His worth within the family is entirely dependent on his ability to earn money, revealing how capitalist values infiltrate and distort intimate human relationships. Gregor's family gradually withdraws their emotional connection as his productivity ceases. His father responds with aggression and violence, symbolizing authoritarian power that seeks to eliminate weakness. The apple lodged in Gregor's body after his father's attack functions as a lasting wound both physical and symbolic representing the permanent damage inflicted by familial and societal rejection. Kafka uses this act to demonstrate how systems

of authority dehumanize individuals who no longer serve a functional purpose. Gregor's mother embodies moral conflict and denial. Although she retains traces of maternal affection, she is unable to confront Gregor's suffering directly. Her avoidance reflects society's discomfort with weakness and dependency. Compassion becomes conditional, limited by fear and social pressure. Kafka suggests that emotional distance is often justified as necessity in a world obsessed with order and normalcy. Perhaps the most tragic transformation occurs in Grete, Gregor's sister. Initially compassionate, she gradually adopts the family's utilitarian mindset. As she begins to work and contribute economically, her empathy for Gregor diminishes. Eventually, she becomes the voice advocating for his removal, asserting that the creature in Gregor's room is no longer her brother. This shift marks the complete collapse of familial bonds, where economic survival overrides emotional loyalty. Kafka reveals how dehumanization is not imposed solely by institutions, but also internalized and enacted by individuals within the private sphere of the family. Gregor's confinement to his room further reinforces his dehumanized status. His living space transforms into a prison, stripped of furniture and human comfort. He is hidden from view, as if his existence itself has become shameful. Kafka portrays death not as a tragedy, but as a relief for the family a chilling reflection of a society that measures human value by usefulness rather than humanity.

Kafka presents responsibility as a destructive force when it is imposed without empathy or mutual care. Gregor Samsa feels an overwhelming sense of duty toward his family's financial stability, even at the expense of his own well-being. This responsibility is not chosen freely; it is imposed by circumstance, authority, and emotional manipulation. Gregor internalizes this burden to such an extent that he accepts suffering as a moral obligation rather than questioning its legitimacy. Following his transformation, Gregor's sense of responsibility mutates into guilt. He perceives himself as a failure, despite the fact that his condition lies entirely beyond his control. Kafka critiques a moral system that teaches individuals to blame themselves for structural injustice. Gregor's guilt reflects the internalization of oppression, where victims accept responsibility for their own marginalization. True moral responsibility, Kafka suggests, should be grounded in care, understanding, and reciprocity. However, in Gregor's world, responsibility operates as a one-sided demand. His family expects sacrifice without offering compassion in return. This imbalance leads to moral collapse, as ethical values are replaced by survival instincts and social conformity. Gregor's silent endurance ultimately exposes the cruelty of a system that prioritizes duty over humanity.

Gregor's death represents the final consequence of imposed responsibility without recognition. His disappearance restores order and comfort to the family, highlighting the complete erosion of ethical accountability. Kafka leaves readers with an unsettling realization: when responsibility is detached from empathy, it becomes a mechanism of oppression rather than a moral virtue.

The *Metamorphosis* reveals how existential suffering, dehumanization, and moral burden are products of an unjust and indifferent society. Gregor Samsa's transformation exposes the fragile nature of human identity in a world dominated by work, duty, and authority. Kafka shows that Gregor is dehumanized long before he becomes an insect, as his value is determined solely by his economic role. The novella highlights the existential condition of modern individuals who live without meaning, freedom, or emotional connection. Gregor's isolation, silence, and eventual death demonstrate the consequences of a society that lacks compassion and understanding. His family's relief after his death reflects the moral emptiness of a system that prioritizes convenience over humanity. Kafka challenges readers to reconsider the concepts of responsibility and morality. True responsibility, he suggests, should be rooted in empathy rather than obligation. Through an absurd and tragic narrative, Kafka exposes the loneliness, cruelty, and meaninglessness of modern existence, making *The Metamorphosis* a powerful critique of modern life.

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