

Absurdity in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*

Ajay M, Assistant Professor of English, Hindustan College, Mysore

Article Received: 29/12/2022,

Article Accepted: 27/01/2023,

Published Online: 29/01/2023,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.01.131

Abstract

This study aims to unveil the concept of absurdity in the novella *Metamorphosis*, written by Franz Kafka. The novelist successfully highlights the postulation of absurdity through the protagonist- Gregor Samsa. Kafka has deftly portrayed the concept of the absurd, like a man turning into an insect, then developed them with perfect realism and meticulous attention to detail. This randomness and absurdity of the world are portrayed in *The Metamorphosis* in a confusing, immediate, and unstoppable process that is beyond the protagonist's control and radically transforms his life. Furthermore, the parallels between Albert Camus' *Myth of the Sisyphus* and Gregor Samsa are highlighted in the study; wherein they are incapable of escaping the formidable forces of fate.

Keywords: Absurdity, Transformation, Fate, Meaninglessness, Randomness, Tragedy, Melancholy

1. Introduction

Metamorphosis is Kafka's most well-known work. It tells the tale of salesman Gregor Samsa, who awakens one morning and finds himself transformed into a gigantic insect and scuffles to calibrate to his new surroundings. The protagonist resides in a small apartment with his parents and sister. After waking up late for work, Gregor was surprised to see himself changed into an insect. He stays alone in his room for most of the narrative, which puts a more significant strain on his family, who are obliged to find work and take in lodgers to make up for the money that Gregor had previously given.

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphoses* was a novella published by Franz Kafka, a Czech writer, in 1915. He attended a German school and spoke German as his first language; correspondingly, he did not write in Czech. His native tongue was German, which had been influenced by Yiddish, often known as *Mauscheldeutsch*.

II. Parallels With Kafka's Real Life

For Kafka, the human condition goes well beyond tragedy or melancholy. There is no "meaning" to make sense of our life; he thought the entire human species resulted from one of "God's terrible days." Contrarily, this meaninglessness enables us to ascribe any interpretations we like to Kafka's works, whether his stories like "The Metamorphosis" or his novels like *The Trial*, which are about a legal "process" that does not process anything. In 1912, when he felt his creativity finally taking on a straightforward form, Kafka penned *The Metamorphosis*. The lengthy writing process for this book resulted in the most extended piece of writing Kafka had ever finished. The actual circumstances of his life, particularly his family life, are undoubtedly a model for the family dynamics in the novel. Kafka's observation of a play inspired the story's structure.

The book's style perfectly captures Kafka's writing. The narrative's approach gives the impression that it is grounded in reality, eliminating the idea that it was a dream, yet the story itself is about an impossibility. The reader is compelled to search for deeper meanings in the tale. It can be discovered from the novel that some of the plots reflect Kafka's own life. It is generally known that Kafka experienced multitudes of predicaments when he was in his father's commanding presence and even started to stutter when he spoke to him. Like Gregor, his father considers him unattractive and assaults him at every opportunity. Even in his writings, Kafka expressed satisfaction at Samsa's name's resemblance to his own. Like her alter-ego from the narrative, Kafka's mother remained discreetly hidden beneath her husband's presence. Kafka was compelled to accept a job he hated at an office out of a sense of responsibility to his parents and because he needed the money for his intended marriage. In addition, his family demanded that he spend his afternoons at work. While Kafka believed that going to work was futile, the amount of time it consumed prevented him from writing, which made him feel disconnected from his urge for creativity. Ottla, his sister, and Kafka were quite close, and she frequently shared his viewpoints. However, in this argument, even she sided against him by requiring that he remain at the workplace in the afternoons. Kafka believed she had deceived him, and he seriously considered committing himself that evening. It took place in November. Gregor's sister betrays him less than two months later in Kafka's work by demanding that the family get rid of him.

The Metamorphosis, however, can only be fully understood from these sources for the book. It is neither a straightforward autobiography nor a reworking of a play or a narrative written solely to demonstrate Kafka's frustration with the writing process. These components are only the building blocks that Kafka deftly combines in his unique way to create a meaning that is far too enigmatic to be explained.

III. The Theatre of the Absurd

Most plays that make up the Theatre of the Absurd movement were created between 1940 and 1960. These plays were so drastically different from anything done before that they astounded spectators when they were initially performed. Many of them were even classified as "anti-plays." In his 1960 book of the same name, Martin Esslin used the phrase "The Theatre of the Absurd" to describe and categorize this radical movement. All of the

plays highlighted the absurdity of the human situation, which is why he told it this way. Although we sometimes equate "absurd" with "ridiculous," Esslin was speaking about the word's original definition, which is "out of accord with reason or propriety; illogical" (Esslin 23). In essence, each play portrays man's existence as absurd and useless. Following the two World Wars of the 20th century, a "collapse of moral, theological, political, and social systems" prompted this theory (Abbotson 1).

The concept of absurdism refers to the philosophy that holds that existence, in general, is absurd. In other words, the world lacks meaning or a higher purpose and is not fully intelligible by reason. The absurdists claim that the world as a whole is absurd. The absurdity of existence as a whole, as opposed to just certain circumstances, is a critical component of absurdism.

Albert Camus' work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, serves as an example of his absurdist philosophy. The absurd, according to Camus, is the folly of looking for meaning in a world devoid of purpose. The conflict between the human need for structure, purpose, and happiness and the natural world's indifference to those things is what gives rise to absurdity. When composing their plays, the authors associated with the Theatre of the Absurd were unaware they were part of a movement. Interestingly, each of them perceived themselves as "a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in [his] own] little universe" (Esslin 22). Most plays strongly emphasize a person's isolation or inability to interact with others, demonstrating how deeply ingrained this worldview is in their writing. This concept is included in the most well-known drama from the absurdist movement, *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett (1952). Vladimir and Estragon, the play's two central protagonists, are both tramps who spend their whole time on the periphery of society. Despite having each other, they are also apart from one another.

IV.Absurdity of Existence in Metamorphosis

The bizarre notion that a man may change into an insect is ludicrous. This ridiculous notion gave rise to the absurdity of existence, in which Gregor loses significance because he cannot perform any labor since his change. When someone is no longer helpful, his family members begin to feel his worthlessness. He finally gives up hope and passes away due to realizing how society and his family treat him.

This randomness and absurdity of the world are portrayed in *The Metamorphosis* in a confusing, immediate, and unstoppable process that is beyond the protagonist's control and radically transforms his life. When Gregor finds himself lying on his back and unable to get up, he reflects on his job as a traveling salesman and cloth merchant, which he calls full of "temporary and always changing human relationships ."If he were not his family's sole breadwinner and working off his father's bankrupt debts, he would soon quit his job. Indignant over Gregor's unexcused absence, the chief clerk turns up at Gregor's office while Gregor tries to move. In his attempts to communicate with his family and the manager, Gregor hears only incomprehensible vocalizations from behind the door. After lifting his

foot from the floor, Gregor drags himself to the room's door. As soon as the clerk sees Gregor transformed, he runs from the apartment. Gregor's father shoves him when he gets stuck in the doorway.

When Gregor awakens, he discovers milk and bread have been left in his chamber. He is delighted but rapidly realizes that he no longer enjoys milk, formerly one of his favorite foods. He lays down beneath a couch and takes in the calm of the space. The milk is not consumed when his sister Grete enters the room the following morning, so she replaces it with some decaying food scraps, which Gregor gleefully consumes. His sister then feeds him and does the dishes as he hides beneath the sofa out of fear that his appearance may scare her.

Gregor becomes more at ease with his altered physique. For enjoyment, he starts climbing the walls and ceiling. Grete decides to rearrange some of the furnishings to give Gregor more room after learning about his new hobby. She removes furniture with her mother, but Gregor finds this quite upsetting. He tries to preserve a wall painting that depicts a woman donning a fur coat, hat, and scarf. After seeing Gregor hanging from the wall, Gregor's mother collapses. Someone addresses Gregor directly for the first time since his change when Grete cries out to him.

Before Gregor's transformation, Gregor's father had been complaining about his company's failure, getting increasingly sluggish, and making his son the only breadwinner for the family. He is the most hostile toward the transformed Gregor; once, he throws apples at him. As a result of Gregor's strange condition, Mr. Samsa is forced to return to work and put in a uniform. He works as a bank messenger. Mr. Samsa demonstrates his regained power by ejecting the lodgers at the conclusion after bringing them in to assist in paying the rent.

They frequently talk about the challenging financial circumstances they are currently in without Gregor's support. He observes how his shift and their new poverty are weighing on his family. Even Grete, who feeds Gregor and tidies up with little effort, appears to dislike him now. When the family realizes that Samsa will in no way make a significant contribution to stamp out the persistent poverty in the family, they decide to get rid of him. Grete warns her parents that keeping Gregor around will ruin them all. Her father concurs, praying that Gregor could comprehend them and would decide to go on his own. Gregor nods his understanding and makes a leisurely retreat to the bedroom. There, Gregor commits himself because he wants to leave his family.

These circumstances are so illogical or unsound in reason as to be unthinkable or unworthy of serious consideration and, as a result, are absurd.

V.Parallels with the Myth of the Sisyphus

Samsa and Sisyphus submit to the absurd and fail to retort against the forces of fate. Here man learns his limitations as he is condemned to die and has no chance of being saved. His inquiries are met with a need for more responses and perhaps even hostility. His time on the planet is finite. This absence of a future must thus be made up for by the amount and

caliber of his encounters. Since time does not exist for him, the absurd man has mastered living in full awareness of absurdity and is committed to the fleeting intensity of the present.

VI. Conclusion

The family is ecstatic to learn that Gregor is dead and is greatly relieved. The father evicts the tenants and chooses to terminate the maid who disinterred Gregor's remains. The family rides in a trolley to the countryside and thinks about their finances. Due to Gregor's health, they have had months of extra living expenses, which has resulted in significant savings. They choose to transfer to a more excellent residence. Grete, his sister, seems to have regained her beauty, and vigor prompts her parents to consider trying to match her with a spouse. Indeed, her transformational remodeling was solely due to Gregor's absurd dispositional groundwork.

By the tale's end, the family has become more resilient and self-sufficient while Gregor, battling his Metamorphosis, weakens and ultimately perishes.

References

- Kafka, F. (2010, May 31). *Franz Kafka: Metamorphosis*.
- Camus, A. (2018). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Van Haren Publishing.
- Esslin, M. (1969). *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Anchor Books.
- Davachi, A. (2009). Existential Absurdity and Alienation in Kafka's the Metamorphosis and Hedayat's the Blind Owl. *UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA*.
- Absurdity in "The Metamorphosis" and "The Stranger" | Free Essay Example*. (2022, June 12). StudyCorgi.com. <https://studycorgi.com/absurdity-in-the-metamorphosis-and-the-stranger/>
- The Absurdity of Existence: Franz Kafka and Albert Camus* (2022b, April 12). Yale University Press. <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2015/09/16/the-absurdity-of-existence-franz-kafka-and-albert-camus/>
- Bloom, H. (n.d.). *Bloom's Guides: The Metamorphosis* (2007th ed.). Infobase Publishing.
- The Kafka Project | Special issue: The Metamorphosis | Lecture on "The Metamorphosis" by Vladimir Nabokov*. (n.d.). <http://www.kafka.org/index.php?id=191,209,0,0,1,0>
- Biography of Franz Kafka, Czech Novelist*. (2020, April 2). ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-franz-kafka-czech-writer-4800358>
- Franz Kafka uměl dobře česky*. (2021, April 8). Radio Prague International. <https://cesky.radio.cz/franz-kafka-umel-dobre-cesky-8075704>