WEEK 1: SELF IN THE MODERN WORLD

BBE2082 Literature of the World

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SELF IN THE MODERN WORLD

What is self? How do we define the modern world?



What is 'self'?

Does it exist on its own?

Or is it defined by external factors?

Understanding "Self" in Literature

Definition: The "self" generally refers to an individual's identity, personality, and sense of existence. It is the way a person sees themselves, separate from others.

Philosophical View: Philosophers often debate if the "self" exists independently or is influenced by relationships, society, and culture. Some argue that the self is inherently individual, while others suggest that it is shaped by experiences and interactions with others.

Notes on Philosophers' Views:

- Inherently Individual Self: <u>Descartes</u>, <u>Locke</u>, and <u>Kant</u> argue that the self has an independent essence, rooted in consciousness, rationality, or memory.
- Socially Constructed Self: <u>Hegel</u>, <u>Mead</u> and <u>Foucault</u> view the self as shaped by social relationships, cultural norms, and power structures.

Understanding "Self" in Literature

Does the Self Exist on Its Own?

In Isolation

While the self might seem unique and individual, it **rarely exists in isolation**. Our values, beliefs, and sense of self-worth are influenced by family, community, societal norms, and cultural expectations.

Defined by External Factors

- Family & culture: We inherit certain ideas, traditions, and beliefs from our family and cultural backgrounds, shaping our identity.
- Society & expectations: Societal norms and roles (e.g., expectations to be successful, responsible, or conform to specific standards) also influence how we perceive ourselves and how we act.

Understanding "Self" in Literature

Reflection:

- 1. How much of who you are is defined by your family, culture, or society?
- 2. Are there aspects of your identity that feel completely personal or independent?

What is 'the modern world'?

Is there a time period?

How do we define it?

The Concept of the "Modern World" in Literature

What is the Modern World?

Historical Context: The "modern world" generally refers to the period that began in the **late 19th century** and continued **through the 20th century**. This era brought about radical transformations in technology, industry, and culture, especially in urban areas.

Characteristics of Modernity:

- Rapid urbanization
- **❖** Industrialization
- Scientific advancements

These changes led to a society that was increasingly fast-paced, competitive, and disconnected from traditional lifestyles.

The Concept of the "Modern World" in Literature

How Do We Define the Modern World?

Social & cultural shifts: The modern era saw shifts in values and beliefs. For instance, individuality and personal freedom became more important, but so did feelings of isolation and disconnection as societies became more urbanized.

Time period & historical events: While no fixed dates define the "modern world," it roughly spans from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. Key historical events, like the Industrial Revolution, World War I, and rapid technological advances, shaped this period.

The Concept of the "Modern World" in Literature

Reflection:

- 1. How do you think living in a rapidly changing society affects a person's sense of self?
- 2. Does modernity make individuals feel more liberated or more disconnected from their roots?

All Time Classics

THE METAMORPHOSIS

By Franz Kafka

FRANZ KAFKA & THE INSECT

The Metamorphosis tells the story of Gregor Samsa, a young man who wakes up to find himself transformed into a monstrous insect. His transformation alienates him from his family and leads to profound self-alienation.

How does 'The Metamorphosis' deal with themes of **identity** and **alienation**?

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back, and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes."

—Opening paragraph of 'The Metamorphosis'

"If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would have quit long ago, but I couldn't because I was in debt to my boss. Besides, I had to care for my parents and my sister. Had it not been for them, I would have told my boss exactly what I think. But as it is, I must just put up with it, as I always have."

—Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'

"His sister, who had gotten somewhat used to it all, could perhaps have borne him, but his mother, accustomed only to weariness and sickness, couldn't bear the sight of him, his father least of all. And now, as they all looked at him with revulsion, as his sister cried out that he must be gone and his father reached for a broom to push him back into his room, he felt himself becoming even more of a stranger."

—Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'

Themes in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

1. Transformation as a Symbol of Alienation:

Gregor's physical transformation symbolizes his deep-seated feelings of being alienated from society and family. His insect form visually represents how he perceives himself: as someone unworthy, insignificant, and rejected.

2. Impact of Societal Expectations:

Before his transformation, Gregor's identity is defined by his role as the family provider. His sense of self-worth depends on fulfilling this role. Once he can no longer work, he becomes worthless in his family's eyes, showing how external factors (job, family expectations) heavily shape his identity.

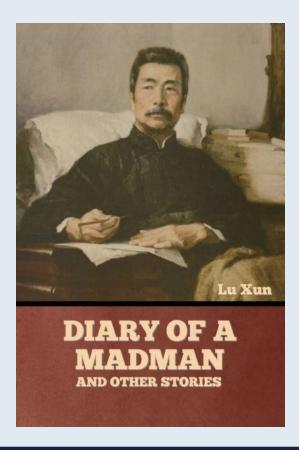
3. **Isolation and the Self:**

As Gregor's family rejects him, he becomes increasingly isolated. Kafka uses this to explore how isolation affects self-perception. Without meaningful relationships or validation, Gregor's sense of self diminishes.

Themes in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

What is the key takeaway from the story?

Kafka's work suggests that self-identity can be **fragile**, easily broken when a person loses their role or purpose in society. The self, in Kafka's view, is often **constrained** and **shaped by societal roles**, making it difficult for individuals to define themselves independently.



O3 LU XUN & THE MADMAN

Diary of a Madman is written as a series of diary entries by a narrator who believes that everyone around him practices cannibalism and is plotting to consume him. Although the narrator appears paranoid, his observations represent a critique of societal oppression and tradition.

How does 'The Diary of A Madman' discusses identity, paranoia and societal critique?

"Today the sun is shining. I opened the door and saw people passing by, one after another. They all looked at me with a strange, menacing expression. I realized that everyone in this village is a cannibal; they want to eat me, just like they've eaten others before. If I don't fight back, I will be next."

—Lu Xun's 'The Diary of A Madman'

"Save the children... Save the children! I'm afraid they'll fall into the same trap I did. They are all cannibals. They all eat human flesh without thinking about it. I'm afraid that even if they aren't eating now, they will soon."

—Lu Xun's 'The Diary of A Madman'

"It is I who am wrong... the only one awake in a town of sleepwalkers. But I have seen the truth. I am the only one who can see through their lies. And yet they call me mad... because I see clearly, because I am not blind to the horror around me."

—Lu Xun's 'The Diary of A Madman'

Themes in Lu Xun's 'The Diary of A Madman'

1. The "Madman" Perspective:

The narrator's belief in "cannibalism" serves as a metaphor for how society "consumes" the individual, forcing people to conform to traditions and social norms that strip away individuality. His paranoia reflects the fear of losing his sense of self to societal expectations.

2. Critique of Cultural Traditions :

Lu Xun uses the narrator's perspective to criticize oppressive feudal practices in Chinese society. The madman's fear of being "eaten" symbolizes the cultural and societal pressures that "devour" personal freedom, autonomy, and self-expression.

3. Identity in Opposition to Society:

The narrator's "madness" could be seen as a reaction to feeling trapped and oppressed by societal expectations. His isolation and detachment from reality represent the consequences of a rigid, unchanging society on the individual.

Themes in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

What is the key takeaway from the story?

Lu Xun's story suggests that oppressive societal structures can **consume** an individual's identity, forcing them to conform or be seen as "mad." The narrator's perspective shows the self as something that must sometimes **rebel** or appear "mad" to **resist** societal pressures.



What is the connection between Modernity, Society and Self in Kafka and Lu Xun's works?

How do society and the modern world influence self-identity in these stories?

Connecting Modernity, Society and Self in Kafka and Lu Xun's Works

How Society and Modernity influences Self-identity:

Kafka's Perspective:

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* reflects the alienation experienced in a modern, industrial society where individuals are valued based on their productivity and utility. Gregor's loss of identity after he can no longer work shows the modern world's impact on the self.

Lu Xun's Perspective:

Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* reflects a society that clings to outdated traditions, stifling individuality. The narrator's "madness" exposes the dangers of a society that suppresses personal freedom and autonomy, portraying modernity as a clash between tradition and new values.

Connecting Modernity, Self, and Society in Kafka and Lu Xun's Works

Key Points for Revision :

1. The Self and External Influence:

Both works explore the idea that the self is rarely autonomous and is often shaped by external forces—whether it's family expectations, social roles, or cultural traditions.

2. The Modern World's Impact on Identity:

Modernity brings new pressures and questions about identity, as people navigate the tension between traditional values and personal freedom. This can lead to feelings of alienation, isolation, and existential doubt.

3. **Rebellion and Conformity**:

Kafka and Lu Xun both suggest that society pressures individuals to conform. When characters like Gregor or the Madman fail to fit into societal roles, they are alienated or deemed "mad," raising questions about what it means to truly "be oneself" in a structured world.

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Symbolism, Satire and Irony



Understanding Literary Techniques: Symbolism in *The Metamorphosis*

What is Symbolism?

Symbolism is a literary technique where an **object**, **character**, or **event represents a larger idea or concept beyond its literal meaning** . A common example is a dove symbolizing peace. In stories, symbols help convey deeper meanings without explicitly stating them.

Symbolism in The Metamorphosis:

Gregor's **transformation** into a giant insect is the central symbol of The Metamorphosis. This transformation is not just a physical change; it represents his deep sense of self-alienation (or isolation from himself and others).

Gregor's new form as an insect symbolizes how he feels about himself in his family and society—as someone insignificant, unwanted, and powerless. It's a visual representation of how he feels treated by those around him.

Understanding Literary Techniques: Symbolism in *The Metamorphosis*

How does Kafka's simple language enhances the symbolism?

Kafka uses **simple**, matter-of-fact language to describe something surreal and **extraordinary**. By writing about Gregor's horrific transformation in a straightforward way, Kafka creates an unsettling effect that makes the strange transformation seem almost normal to the reader.

This language makes the story feel more **believable and yet unsettling**, and it allows the reader to focus on the emotional and psychological impact of Gregor's transformation rather than just the horror of it. Gregor's physical change **symbolizes his inner feelings of alienation**, both from his family and from his own identity.

Understanding Literary Techniques: Satire and Irony in *The Diary of a Madman*

What is Satire?

Satire is a technique that uses humor, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize issues in society, politics, or human nature. The goal of satire is often to make the audience reflect on these issues and consider change. A satirical work might exaggerate a social flaw to an absurd level to make readers see its consequences more clearly. For example, a satirical story might exaggerate the obsession with social media to show its negative effects on human interaction.

Satire in Diary of a Madman:

The narrator in Diary of a Madman believes the people around him are practicing **cannibalism**, planning to consume him. This idea of "cannibalism" is symbolic—it represents how society's oppressive traditions can "consume" individuals by taking away their freedom and individuality.

Lu Xun uses this shocking metaphor to criticize oppressive traditions in Chinese society, particularly those that strip individuals of their identity or freedom. The satire lies in the **extreme portrayal of society as**literally eating people alive to illustrate how harsh and dehumanizing these traditions can be.

Understanding Literary Techniques: Satire and Irony in *The Diary of a Madman*

What is Irony?

Irony is a technique where there is a contrast between what is expected and what actually happens, or between what someone says and what they mean. Irony often creates a layer of complexity, revealing truths in unexpected ways.

- Verbal Irony: When someone says the opposite of what they mean (e.g., saying "What a pleasant day!" on a stormy afternoon).
- Situational Irony: When the opposite of what's expected occurs.
- Dramatic Irony: When the reader knows something that the characters do not.

Understanding Literary Techniques: Satire and Irony in *The Diary of a Madman*

Irony in Diary of a Madman:

The "Madman" perspective: The irony in Diary of a Madman lies in the **perspective of the narrator**, who seems paranoid and mentally unstable but may be the only one who sees society's oppressive reality for what it truly is. Here, what seems 'mad' might actually reveal deeper truths about society.

Questioning madness: Through this ironic perspective, Lu Xun invites the reader to **question who is truly mad**—the narrator or the society he criticizes. This ironic twist adds depth to the story, encouraging readers to reflect on whether society's customs should be viewed as "normal" or "mad."

"Tonight the moon is very bright. I haven't seen it for over thirty years; today when I saw it, it made me think of things that happened many years ago, and I couldn't go to sleep. Thinking about it I realize I have had my share of trials and tribulations, but I haven't taken much notice of them. All of a sudden I want to try to make sense of everything. This may be the last chance I get, and even if it brings trouble, I still want to see clearly what has happened."

—Opening paragraph of 'The Diary of A Madman'

The Insect, The Madman, and Self-Identity

Review Key Takeaways:

- Both Kafka and Lu Xun portray self-identity as a struggle against external societal pressures.
- Modernity forces characters to redefine themselves outside traditional roles and expectations.
- Gregor's transformation symbolizes his sense of alienation and worthlessness.
- Kafka uses simple language to emphasize the surreal, horrific nature of Gregor's existence, making readers sympathize with his isolation.
- Lu Xun makes satire is evident in the "cannibalism" metaphor, which critiques how oppressive traditions consume individuals.
- The "madman" perspective is ironic because it suggests that society's norms are the true "madness," not the narrator's paranoia.

Next class:

- 1. Refer to the **COURSE INFORMATION** document
- 2. Read the stories assigned for Week 2.
- 3. Answer the following questions **before** coming to next class:
 - a. What does "self" mean to you? Relate it to your understanding of Kafka's and Lu Xun's stories.
 - b. Do you think you have a "true" self that remains the same, always, inside of you?
 - c. How much of your "self" is shaped by your family, friends, society and culture?