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The Existentialist Nature of The Metamorphosis

“The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka is one of the most well-known pieces of existentialist literature. This paper will work towards supporting this statement by taking a deep look at the existentialist themes of the story and delving into the background of Kafka himself. This paper will also be comparing “The Metamorphosis” to other stories to emphasize the point. Firstly though, an understanding of the basics of existentialism will be critically important in order to understand the main point of this paper.

Existentialism began with the 20th century philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre, though it was not known as existentialism at the time. Sartre was born on June 21st in Paris, France. In the 1920s – his teenage years – he became attracted to philosophy by reading Henri Bergson’s essay “Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness”. The essay discusses free will and could be considered what got Sartre on the track towards existentialist thought. His first novel *Nausea*, published in 1938, had within it many existentialist themes. Sartre’s 1946 lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* defends the ideas of existentialism from those who did not support it. Despite Sartre saying he disliked the lecture it is frequently used as an introduction to existentialist ideas. (Crowell, Flynn, Mittal, Burnham, Sartre)

Existentialism explores the problems and questions of human existence. Existentialists tend to believe that every individual person is responsible for giving life meaning; they must

shape their own destiny and help shape the destiny of those around them. Existentialism can be considered an antithesis to religious practice, as instead of looking to a higher power to grant meaning to life, existentialists look to the individual. Authenticity is another common existentialist term which revolves around the idea that people should try to “create” their true and authentic self, living by their own nature and not one imposed by outside forces. (Crowell, Burnham)

The Metamorphosis is a novella written by Bohemian novelist Franz Kafka. The story is about a man named Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning and notices that he has suddenly and inexplicably turned into a giant insect. It is worth mentioning that this transformation never has a canonical explanation, and why he transformed is left entirely up to the readers interpretation. There are multiple valid explanations as to why the metamorphosis happened, but there is one that is specifically applicable to the topic of this paper. Before transforming, Samsa worked as a travelling salesman, and his work supported his parents and his sister. He worked tirelessly and diligently to support his family, and in exchange for his kindness, after he transforms, his family... slowly but surely abandons him. At first his sister feeds him and cleans his room, but over time even that kindness stops. (Kafka)

Upon first examining this, one could wonder how this is a book about existentialism? A man works without complaint to support his family, and for that he is punished. Why? How is this book existentialist? Well, first and foremost it is because he does not want to work as a travelling salesman. Far into the story of *The Metamorphosis*, his family begins to strip his room of all furniture, and he lets them do so – with one exception. As his family is taking away everything that once belonged to him, the only piece of furniture he refuses to part with is his

writing desk. “Now, Gregor could still do without the chest of drawers if need be, but the writing desk really had to stay.” (Kafka 24) Why is this important? (Kafka)

Well, to answer this we must look into the background of the novella’s writer, Franz Kafka. Kafka was born into a prosperous middle-class Jewish family. (Britannica) Kafka always seemed to enjoy writing, but his parents – especially his father – did not approve of him pursuing the path of writing. Kafka’s father was a dominating presence in his life, he only valued material success and social advancement. (Britannica) Because of this mindset Kafka became a student of law instead of pursuing his literary talent, or really doing anything he truly wanted to do. Gregor protected his writing desk because he never wanted to be a travelling salesman – he wanted to be a writer. (Britannica)

Gregor Samsa is a broken man. Before he had his job as a travelling salesman, his father was the money-earner of the family. However, one day his father’s business failed, and Gregor stepped up as the family’s money-earner without any semblance of a complaint. Similarly, when Gregor woke up and found himself transformed into a bug, he remains calm and composed, immediately accepting his new form. Thoughts of his own personal wellbeing do not cross his mind; all he wants is to go to work and make money to provide for his family. “‘Now,’ said Gregor, well aware that he was the only one who had kept his composure. ‘I’ll get dressed right away, pack up the collection of samples, and set off. You’ll allow me to set out on my way, will you not?’” (Kafka 10) Gregor lives his life in a perpetual state of acceptance, willingly chaining down his own freewill out of what he thinks is necessity. Because he rejects his authentic “self” and lets work consume his life because he thinks it needs to, he is punished by being turned into an insect that can no longer work. It can be thought then that the metamorphosis happened because he needed to spend time finding himself, and to do so he needed to be incapable of rejecting himself

in favor of working. This fails however, because once he comes to fully accept that he is a burden to his family, he lies on the ground and dies, without any semblance of a complaint.

(Kafka)

A character who is similar to Gregor would be Meursault from Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger*. Meursault is broken in a similar, yet different, way than Gregor. While Gregor's life was driven by a job he did not want to do, Meursault's life is simply driven by nothing. Meursault lets the world do what it will with him, and he never makes any attempt to control his own fate. This issue causes him to do whatever he thinks people want him to do, including shooting somebody. It is debatable whether or not Meursault truly wanted to shoot the man or not, but for the sake of this essay he shot the man because he was an enemy to his friend. Since his friend wanted him dead, Meursault wanted him dead. In his mind, it was the obvious thing to do in order to be a good friend, and his own morals – which may or may not exist – did not matter. Meursault is similar to Gregor because he lets other people entirely choose his path in life for him. For Gregor, this basic rejection of human individuality results in him turning into a giant and grotesque bug; for Meursault this results in him going to prison and eventually being executed. Both of these men died for their willing lack of individuality. (Camus, Cline)

The Alchemist is a novel by the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho and serves as a good contrast to "The Metamorphosis" and *The Stranger*. The main character of *The Alchemist* is Santiago, a young shepherd, and he is the antithesis of Gregor and Meursault. Santiago immediately shows more individuality than them as his parents initially wanted him to become a priest, yet he decided to become a shepherd so he could see the world. This sets him on the path of a long and arduous journey to self-actualization, a goal shared by existentialists. *The*

Alchemist is a book detailing Santiago's journey to find himself – a journey that both Gregor and Meursault refused to go through. (Coelho)

In conclusion, when looking at Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* through an existential lens, it is a story about a man rejecting his true and authentic self in order to support his family – because he believes he must. The truth is, everyone has a choice about what they can and cannot do, or what they can and cannot be. Everyone has an authentic “self”, and everyone should strive to be it – to create and find it within themselves. If you reject your authentic self, the thing that existentialists believe is most important, you may just turn into an insect.

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