|  |
| --- |
| Existentialism and Social Behavior in Kafka’s Metamorphosis |
| Name: Athar Abbas  Instructor Name: Dr. Javed Akhtar Sherani  Course: Philosophy and Ethics  Date of Submission: 17 – Jan - 2031 |
|  |

Contents

[I. Introduction 2](#_Toc193467743)

[II. The Foundations of Existentialism 3](#_Toc193467744)

[IV. The Existential Canvas of *The Metamorphosis* 8](#_Toc193467745)

[V. Social Dynamics Under Scrutiny: Gregor's Social Behavior 10](#_Toc193467746)

[VII. Bridging Philosophy and Narrative: The Intertwined Fate of Existentialism and Social Behavior 11](#_Toc193467747)

[IX. Conclusion 12](#_Toc193467748)

[X.Bibliography 13](#_Toc193467749)

[XI. Appendix 13](#_Toc193467750)

[Works cited 14](#_Toc193467751)

# 

# I. Introduction

Existentialism, a prominent philosophical movement of the 20th century, grapples with fundamental questions surrounding individual human existence, the nature of freedom, and the persistent search for meaning within a universe that often appears devoid of inherent purpose 1. Amidst the backdrop of this philosophical inquiry, Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*, a cornerstone of modernist literature, unfolds a surreal narrative that has captivated and perplexed readers for generations with its profound thematic depth 6. The novella's bizarre premise of a man transforming into an insect has invited critical analysis from numerous perspectives, with existentialism offering a particularly insightful lens through which to examine its complexities 11. This thesis posits that *The Metamorphosis* serves as a vivid literary portrayal of core existential tenets, notably alienation, absurdity, and the arduous struggle for meaning. Furthermore, it argues that these existential themes exert a profound influence on, and are intricately reflected within, the social behavior exhibited by both the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, and his family. Ultimately, this analysis will demonstrate how Kafka's novella functions as a powerful commentary on the dehumanizing forces inherent in modern society.

To substantiate this central argument, this thesis will first lay the groundwork by elucidating the fundamental principles of existentialism, including its historical context and key concepts. Following this, a detailed plot summary and character analysis of *The Metamorphosis* will be provided to establish the narrative and its key players. Subsequently, the presence and significance of existential themes within the novella will be examined, focusing on Gregor's alienation, the palpable absurdity of his situation, the profound loss of meaning in his life, and the complex interplay between freedom and determinism. The analysis will then delve into the social behavior of Gregor both before and after his bewildering transformation, followed by a thorough investigation of his family's social conduct in response to his altered state. The thesis will then bridge the philosophical and narrative elements, demonstrating how Gregor's existential crisis is deeply intertwined with his social isolation and how the family's behavior reflects their own confrontation with meaninglessness. Finally, the report will explore interpretations of *The Metamorphosis* as a potent form of social commentary, addressing themes of societal alienation, the dehumanizing effects of modern life, and the breakdown of familial structures in the face of the absurd.

## **II. The Foundations of Existentialism**

Existentialism, rather than presenting a cohesive and unified system of thought, is better understood as a philosophical approach that emerged prominently in the mid-20th century, particularly in France, gaining significant traction in the aftermath of the Second World War 2. This intellectual movement, while encompassing a range of diverse and often divergent views held by major contributors such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus 2, shares a fundamental concern with the concrete experience of human existence in a world that often appears irrational and incomprehensible 2. Existentialism arose during a period marked by the decline of traditional religious worldviews and the rise of secularism and science, leading to widespread feelings of anxiety, alienation, and a sense of meaninglessness 5. It distinguishes itself from traditional philosophy by prioritizing the individual's subjective experience and engagement with the world, rather than detached, objective observation 5.

At the heart of existentialist thought lies the tenet that **existence precedes essence** 1. This revolutionary idea stands in stark contrast to essentialism, a philosophy championed by Aristotle, which posits that everything, including humans, is born with a predetermined essence or purpose 1. Existentialism, however, argues that individuals are born without a pre-defined nature; they come into existence first as a "blank slate" 1. It is through their subsequent choices, actions, and experiences throughout their lifetime that they gradually create their own meaning, purpose, and ultimately, their own essence 1. This places the onus of defining oneself squarely on the individual, free from any preordained destiny or external authority 1.

This radical emphasis on individual existence leads directly to the existential concept of **freedom and responsibility** 1. Existentialists contend that human beings are not determined by natural laws in the same way as inanimate objects; rather, they possess a unique and profound freedom to determine their own behavior and shape their own lives 2. However, this immense freedom comes with a significant burden: the absolute responsibility for the choices one makes and the meaning one creates (or fails to create) in their life 1. Jean-Paul Sartre famously argued that this level of freedom can be so overwhelming that it becomes a source of anxiety, as individuals grapple with the weight of their choices in the absence of inherent rules or external guidance 1.

Another crucial concept in existentialism is the recognition of **meaninglessness and the absurd** 1. Existentialists posit that the universe itself lacks any inherent meaning, purpose, or rational design 2. The "absurd" arises from the fundamental conflict between humanity's innate and persistent desire to find meaning, order, and purpose in the world and the universe's apparent indifference to this yearning 1. In this answerless world, individuals are faced with the task of creating their own meaning and establishing their own moral codes to live by, often through courageous choices made in the face of this inherent absurdity 1.

The experience of **alienation and isolation** is also a significant theme within existentialist thought 11. This concept describes the feeling of estrangement, detachment, and isolation that individuals may experience from themselves, from other people, and from the broader structures of society 12. This sense of disconnect can arise from various factors, including the pressures of modern society, the breakdown of traditional social bonds, and the individual's confrontation with their own unique existence in a meaningless universe 15.

In response to the absurdity and the weight of freedom, existentialism emphasizes the importance of **authenticity** 1. Living authentically means acknowledging and embracing one's radical freedom and the accompanying responsibility for creating meaning in an absurd world 1. Conversely, **bad faith**, a concept notably explored by Sartre, describes the act of refusing to accept this freedom and responsibility by deceiving oneself and living according to the dictates of others, external pressures, or pre-established societal norms 1.

Finally, the immense freedom and responsibility inherent in existentialism, coupled with the awareness of life's inherent meaninglessness, often lead to feelings of **anxiety and dread (angst)** 1. This anxiety, as Kierkegaard famously described as the "dizziness of freedom" 26, arises from the individual's confrontation with the overwhelming number of choices and the lack of any ultimate, objective guidance in making those choices 1. It is the unsettling realization of one's own contingency and the potential for meaninglessness that can evoke this profound sense of dread 26.

**III. A Descent into the Absurd: Plot Summary and Character Analysis of** *The Metamorphosis*

The narrative of *The Metamorphosis* commences with the startling and inexplicable transformation of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, who awakens one morning to find himself metamorphosed in his bed into a "monstrous vermin" 7. Gregor's initial reaction, in a manner that immediately establishes the novella's blend of the bizarre and the mundane, is not one of utter shock or terror at his new physical form. Instead, his primary concern revolves around his inability to catch his train and the potential repercussions for his job and, consequently, his family's financial stability 6. The Samsa family – Gregor, his younger sister Grete, and his parents – are initially bewildered and frightened by Gregor's condition, keeping him confined to his room as they grapple with the unsettling reality of his transformation 7.

As the days turn into weeks, Gregor's confinement continues, and his relationship with his family undergoes a significant and ultimately tragic evolution. Initially, Grete, who shared a close bond with Gregor before his metamorphosis, takes on the responsibility of caring for him, bringing him food and cleaning his room 7. However, as the novelty wears off and the burden of Gregor's care, coupled with the increasing financial strain on the family, takes its toll, Grete's compassion gradually gives way to impatience, neglect, and a growing resentment towards her monstrous brother 7. Pivotal events punctuate Gregor's descent into isolation. The removal of his furniture, intended to give him more space to crawl, deeply distresses him as he feels it erodes his connection to his former human life 7. In a moment of desperate clinging to his past, Gregor attempts to save a cherished portrait of a lady in furs, an act that frightens his mother into unconsciousness and provokes a violent reaction from his father, who hurls apples at him, severely wounding him with one lodged in his back 7. To alleviate their financial woes, the family takes in three fastidious lodgers 7. The final crisis occurs when Gregor, drawn by the sound of Grete playing her violin, emerges from his room in a desperate attempt to connect with her through the music he once cherished. His horrifying appearance terrifies the lodgers, who immediately announce their departure without paying rent 7.

Following this disastrous incident, Gregor overhears his family, particularly Grete, expressing the sentiment that they must somehow get rid of him 7. Understanding that he has become an unbearable burden and is no longer wanted, Gregor laboriously retreats to his room, where he eventually dies from starvation and neglect before the next sunrise 7. The novella concludes with the Samsa family's palpable relief at Gregor's death and their optimistic outlook towards the future, as they take a day off work and discuss plans for a new, smaller apartment and the prospect of finding a husband for a now seemingly mature Grete 7.

The central figure of the novella, **Gregor Samsa**, is initially portrayed as a hardworking and devoted, albeit somewhat resentful, traveling salesman whose primary motivation is to provide for his family and pay off his father's debts 6. Even after his bewildering transformation into an insect, Gregor's thoughts and concerns remain largely focused on his family's well-being and his inability to continue supporting them 7. He clings to memories of his human past and objects that symbolize it, such as the portrait, in a desperate attempt to retain his sense of self 7. However, as his isolation deepens and his family's revulsion grows, Gregor gradually succumbs to despair and a sense of worthlessness 7.

Gregor's younger sister, **Grete Samsa**, initially demonstrates significant compassion and takes on the role of his primary caretaker after his transformation 7. She is initially the only family member willing to interact with him and attempts to understand his needs 7. However, as the months pass and the burden of caring for Gregor becomes increasingly demanding, her initial kindness and attention wane, replaced by impatience, neglect, and a growing desire to be free from this responsibility 7. By the end of the novella, Grete undergoes a transformation of her own, emerging as a more assertive and independent young woman who ultimately insists that the family must rid themselves of Gregor 8.

**Mr. and Mrs. Samsa**, Gregor's parents, initially appear as somewhat helpless and dependent figures, having relied on Gregor's income for their comfortable lifestyle 7. Gregor's transformation forces them to return to work to support the family financially 7. Their reactions to Gregor's new form are primarily characterized by disgust, fear, and a growing indifference 7. While Mrs. Samsa expresses some initial hope for Gregor's recovery, she is ultimately overwhelmed by his appearance 7. Mr. Samsa, in particular, displays considerable hostility towards Gregor, even resorting to physical violence 7. Other characters, such as the charwoman, who treats Gregor with a matter-of-fact lack of fear or disgust, and the fastidious lodgers, serve to further highlight Gregor's isolation and the family's changing social and economic circumstances 7.

## **IV. The Existential Canvas of *The Metamorphosis***

*The Metamorphosis* is deeply imbued with the core tenets of existentialist philosophy, providing a potent literary exploration of these complex ideas through the bizarre and tragic fate of Gregor Samsa.

Gregor's transformation into an insect precipitates a profound and multifaceted **alienation**. He experiences physical alienation from his own body, which has become monstrous and unfamiliar 9. This physical change leads to emotional alienation from his family, who are repulsed and frightened by his new form 9. Furthermore, he suffers social isolation as he becomes confined to his room, unable to communicate effectively or participate in the human world 9. His inability to articulate his thoughts and feelings in a way that his family can understand only deepens this chasm of isolation 7. This profound alienation extends beyond the physical; it reflects a pre-existing emotional distance that the transformation tragically intensifies.

The very premise of Gregor's metamorphosis, an inexplicable and illogical event, lies at the heart of the novella's **absurdity** 7. Kafka offers no rational explanation for this bizarre transformation, nor does Gregor himself seek one 23. The characters' reactions to this extraordinary event are often strangely muted, focusing on the practical implications and the need to adapt rather than expressing profound shock or disbelief 7. This juxtaposition of the utterly irrational with the mundane underscores the inherent meaninglessness of existence and forces the reader to confront a world devoid of logical order or inherent justice. The focus on everyday concerns in the face of such an outlandish occurrence amplifies the pervasive sense of the absurd.

Before his transformation, Gregor's life was largely defined by his role as the sole financial provider for his family 7. This role provided him with a sense of purpose, albeit one driven by obligation rather than personal fulfillment. His transformation abruptly strips him of this primary function, leading to a profound **loss of meaning and purpose** in his existence 7. His attempts to find new meaning in his insect form, such as his brief enjoyment of crawling, are ultimately insufficient to replace his lost human identity and purpose. His identity was so deeply intertwined with his ability to work and provide that his incapacitation results in a devastating existential crisis.

There is a grim irony in the possibility that Gregor's horrific transformation could represent a perverse form of **freedom** from the oppressive demands of his job and his family's financial dependence 12. While it is a terrifying and irreversible change, it does liberate him from a life he clearly resented 7. This raises complex questions about the extent to which individuals truly exercise **free will** in their lives versus being determined by external circumstances 12. Gregor's metamorphosis appears to be entirely beyond his control, yet it forces both him and his family to confront a new reality where previous choices and obligations are rendered meaningless.

## **V. Social Dynamics Under Scrutiny: Gregor's Social Behavior**

Before his inexplicable metamorphosis, Gregor's social behavior was almost entirely defined by his role as the primary financial provider for his family 6. He worked tirelessly in a job he disliked, enduring the "torture of traveling" and superficial relationships with colleagues, all to ensure his family's comfortable existence and to pay off his father's debts 7. His relationships with his family members, while seemingly dutiful, lacked genuine emotional depth and reciprocity 11. His social interactions outside of his immediate obligations were minimal, his life consumed by the demands of his work. This pattern of behavior suggests a life lived more out of necessity and obligation than genuine personal connection or fulfillment, potentially aligning with the existential concept of bad faith.

Following his transformation, Gregor's insect form rendered normal social interaction utterly impossible 7. His attempts to communicate with his family resulted in only frightened and incomprehensible sounds 7. Despite his grotesque physical state, Gregor retained his human thoughts and emotions, desperately yearning for connection with his family and deeply hurt by their growing fear and revulsion 7. He made efforts to adapt to his new physical form, even finding a strange enjoyment in crawling, but this only further alienated him from his human identity 7. His post-transformation social behavior was characterized by a tragic struggle for connection amidst increasing isolation, highlighting the devastating impact of alienation on the individual.

**VI. The Family's Existential Response: Social Behavior Post-Transformation**

The Samsa family's social behavior underwent a dramatic transformation in response to Gregor's metamorphosis. Their initial reactions were marked by profound shock, fear, and disgust at Gregor's monstrous new form 7. While Grete initially showed some compassion and took on the role of his caretaker, this initial concern gradually eroded under the weight of the responsibility and the disruption to their lives 7. Their feelings towards Gregor shifted from a sense of familial duty to resentment and a growing desire to be rid of him 7.

Gregor's inability to work forced the previously dependent family members to confront their own need for financial independence, leading them to seek employment 7. This shift in responsibility, while ultimately beneficial for their own growth, fostered resentment towards Gregor, whom they increasingly viewed as a burden and the cause of their hardship 7. The family's social behavior became increasingly characterized by dehumanization and rejection. They began to refer to Gregor as "it" or "the insect," stripping him of his humanity in their language and, consequently, in their treatment of him 7. Their ultimate desire to be rid of Gregor, explicitly voiced by Grete, and their palpable relief after his death demonstrate the complete breakdown of their familial bond in the face of the absurd and burdensome reality of his existence 7.

## **VII. Bridging Philosophy and Narrative: The Intertwined Fate of Existentialism and Social Behavior**

Gregor's profound existential crisis, marked by his overwhelming feelings of alienation, the crushing weight of meaninglessness in his transformed existence, and the palpable absurdity of his situation, is inextricably linked to his tragic social isolation 9. His family's increasingly hostile and rejecting behavior only amplified his despair and sense of worthlessness, creating a vicious cycle that ultimately led to his demise 7. Trapped within an insect body and unable to connect with the human world, particularly his own family, Gregor's struggle to find any new meaning in his transformed existence proved futile.

Similarly, the Samsa family's dramatic shift in attitude towards Gregor and their eventual relief at his death can be interpreted as a reflection of their own confrontation with the existential theme of meaninglessness 7. Gregor's monstrous form and their inability to understand or relate to him likely became a constant and disturbing reminder of the inherent absurdity and lack of inherent meaning in life. Their focus on their own futures and their optimistic plans immediately following Gregor's death can be viewed as a desperate attempt to reassert meaning and normalcy into their lives after being confronted with the inexplicable and burdensome reality of his transformation 8. Their seemingly callous reaction underscores the human instinct to seek purpose and order, even if it means distancing oneself from the uncomfortable and the absurd.

## **IX. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* stands as a profound and enduring literary exploration of the intricate relationship between existentialism and social behavior. Through the bizarre and tragic narrative of Gregor Samsa's transformation, the novella vividly portrays core existential themes such as alienation, absurdity, and the arduous search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. These philosophical concepts are not merely abstract ideas within the text but are deeply interwoven with the social dynamics between Gregor and his family. Gregor's profound existential crisis, triggered by his inexplicable metamorphosis and exacerbated by his inability to fulfill his former role, directly leads to his social isolation and his family's increasingly hostile and rejecting behavior. Conversely, the Samsa family's reactions, marked by fear, resentment, and eventual relief at Gregor's death, reflect their own struggle to cope with the absurd and to reassert meaning in their lives in the face of the inexplicable.

Furthermore, *The Metamorphosis* transcends its individual narrative to offer a powerful and unsettling commentary on the dehumanizing aspects of modern society. The novella critiques societal alienation, the reduction of individuals to their economic utility, the fragility of family structures under pressure, and the often harsh consequences faced by those who deviate from societal norms. Through Gregor's tragic fate, Kafka compels readers to confront fundamental questions about the nature of humanity, the search for meaning in an absurd world, and the profound impact of societal expectations on the individual's existence. The enduring relevance of *The Metamorphosis* lies in its unflinching examination of these timeless existential themes and their continued resonance in a contemporary world still grappling with issues of alienation, the pursuit of meaning, and the pressures of societal conformity.

### X.Bibliography

* Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. Translated by Stanley Appelbaum, Dover Publications, 199665.

### XI. Appendix

* **Image 1:** An abstract and unsettling depiction of a man transforming into an insect, perhaps focusing on the blurring of human and insect-like forms to represent the internal and external changes Gregor undergoes.
* **Image 2:** A stark image of a large insect isolated in a dimly lit room, possibly viewed from outside the closed door, emphasizing Gregor's physical and emotional isolation from his family and the world34.
* **Image 3:** A depiction of the Samsa family before Gregor's transformation, perhaps showing a somewhat strained or distant dynamic, hinting at the underlying tensions that are exacerbated by his metamorphosis. Alternatively, an image showing the family after the transformation, with a clear physical and emotional distance between them and Gregor67.
* **Image 4:** A detailed rendering of the "lady with the muff" portrait, highlighting its significance as a symbol of Gregor's fading humanity and his connection to a more aesthetically pleasing and perhaps idealized past8.

|  |
| --- |
|  |

### Works cited

1. What Is Existentialism? An Ethics Explainer By The Ethics Centre, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-existentialism/>
2. Existentialism - Wikipedia, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism>
3. EXISTENTIALISM Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/existentialism>
4. Existentialism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/existent/>
5. Existentialism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), accessed March 21, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>
6. en.wikipedia.org, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Metamorphosis#:~:text=Gregor%20is%20the%20main%20character,the%20remainder%20of%20the%20story.>
7. The Metamorphosis - Wikipedia, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Metamorphosis>
8. The Metamorphosis - Book Summary - YouTube, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEdCuvyAplk>
9. The Metamorphosis: Full Book Analysis - SparkNotes, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/metamorph/analysis/>
10. The Metamorphosis: Study Guide - SparkNotes, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/metamorph/>
11. Existential Angst: A Reading of Franz Kafka‟s The Metamorphosis, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.erpublications.com/uploaded_files/download/anju-m-s_WIlyf.pdf>
12. Philosophy of Kafka's Metamorphosis | by Abhishek James | Medium, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://medium.com/@abhishekjames/philosophy-of-kafkas-metamorphosis-29fe26fb93d5>
13. Existential Philosophy In The Metamorphosis By Franz Kafka | Free Sample, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://hub.edubirdie.com/examples/existential-philosophy-in-the-metamorphosis-by-franz-kafka/>
14. Profound Analysis of Existentialism in Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' - Literary Odyssey, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://literaryodyssey.com/blog/profound-analysis-of-existentialism-in-kafka-s--the-metamorphosis->
15. Existential Philosophy In The Metamorphosis By Franz Kafka | Free ..., accessed March 21, 2025, <https://aithor.com/essay-examples/existential-philosophy-in-the-metamorphosis-by-franz-kafka>
16. The Metamorphosis: A Surreal Exploration of Alienation and Isolation - Marcellino NY, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://marcellinony.com/the-metamorphosis-a-surreal-exploration-of-alienation-and-isolation/>
17. Exploring Themes of Alienation and Isolation in Franz Kafka's Works - Literary Odyssey, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://literaryodyssey.com/blog/exploring-themes-of-alienation-and-isolation-in-franz-kafka-s-works>
18. The Role of Work and Identity in Kafka's The Metamorphosis - SDLC Corp, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://sdlccorp.com/post/the-role-of-work-and-identity-in-kafkas-the-metamorphosis/>
19. How Kafka's The Metamorphosis and Modern Existential Anxiety: A Timeless Reflection, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://sdlccorp.com/post/how-kafkas-the-metamorphosis-and-modern-existential-anxiety-a-timeless-reflection/>
20. Existential Plight Of Gregor Samsa In Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis - R (Placeholder1)esearchGate, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376758317_Existential_Plight_Of_Gregor_Samsa_In_Franz_Kafka's_The_Metamorphosis>