

Existential Approach to Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'

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Abstract

Franz Kafka's writings invariably consist of existential themes. For Kafka there is plenty of hope for God not for humans. His writings reflect that humans are trapped under a hopeless world and the only escape from this, is through death. "Kafkaesque," "which, has become part of the English vernacular... that described the alienation and exclusion of the individual in the face of modern bureaucracy" ^[1] (Kaplan, 2014). 'The Metamorphosis' is one of the creative works of Kafka which unfolds human existential crisis in the world. Though human acquiring physical features of an insect is an impossible event yet Kafka brings out that in 'The Metamorphosis' to look for deeper aspects of human existence. Existentialism focuses on individual human existence in a concrete living reality. Existentialism hurdles a number of themes under its umbrella but I have focused mainly on two themes. Those are 'Alienation' and 'Absurd'. I have made an attempt to show how the concept of alienation and absurd are portrayed in the novella. I have adopted content analysis for this article by reading the content of the novella I have tried to identify the existential elements particularly 'Alienation' and 'Absurd'. I have dealt mainly with two questions 1. How does the theme of alienation evident in 'The Metamorphosis'? along with that Gregor's three stages of alienation i) himself ii) family iii) others. 2. How absurd life is portrayed in 'The Metamorphosis'? In this paper I have tried to convey the Absurd life of Gregor aligns with Comus' concept of absurd by highlighting indifference attitude of the world for Gregor's need.

KEYWORDS: Franz Kafka, Existentialism, Metamorphosis, Alienation, Absurd

Introduction

The following article makes an attempt to throw some light on existential problems present in Franz Kafka's novella 'The Metamorphosis'.

According to Oxford dictionary existentialism is a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

"That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards... Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism" ^[2] (Sartre 1946). He also says that it is the free choice of man and commitment to that choice actually defines man's existence.

Therefore Existentialism is a life of making choices with freedom and taking responsibility for those choices and making meaning out of it.?

“Kafka's existential crisis is based upon Sartre's attack on the impersonal narrator who with the knowledge of the inner working of the characters and situation turns accident into destiny. Sartre was of the opinion that such a role totally misrepresented the nature of human existence. Sartre attacks the impersonal narrator as a 'piece of obscurantism, encouraging us to evade the truth of life' ^[3] (htt). “The narrative is also important in conveying the existential loneliness of man, which Kafka believed was endemic to human condition” ^[3] (htt).

The *Metamorphosis* consists number of existential themes such as freedom of choice, anxiety, alienation, absurd, responsibility, etc. But we shall examine theme alienation and absurd. We shall look into the incidences in the novella which reveal these themes.

How does the theme alienation evident in ‘The Metamorphosis’?

One of the themes which is highlighted and very much seen throughout the novella is Alienation of the protagonist Gregor Samsa.

“By the mere appearance of the other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the other... I could feel irritation, or anger before it as a bad trait of myself which gives to my expression an ugliness or baseness which I do not have, but I could not be touched to the quick. Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the others see me. There is, however, no question of a comparison between what I am for myself and what I am for the other as if I found in myself, in the mode of being for itself, an equivalent of what I am for the other” ^[4](Sartre,1993).

Thus alienation is feeling out of place and estrangement from self in the presence of others because of judgment and perception of others. In Franz Kafka the heroes represents his own existential crisis, the representation of man as a being alienated from the world around him, haunted by feelings of guilt and governed by an all-powerful and inscrutable authority. In ‘The Metamorphosis’ after he transforms into an insect the perception of others about him makes him so estranged from himself and others.

How absurd life is portrayed in ‘The Metamorphosis’?

“According to Camus, the absurd is produced via conflict, a conflict between our expectation of a rational, just universe and the actual universe that it is quite indifferent to all of our expectations” ^[5] (Cline, 2018). In ‘The Metamorphosis we come across situations where Gregor finds life as absurd because his expectations are not fulfilled by the world. The world remains indifference to him. The human condition, for Kafka, is well beyond tragic or depressed. Kafka believed that the whole human race is the product of one of God's bad days.

In the novella Gregor's main concern is to make people to understand his situation of being helplessness. But no one understands him and his future is a question. He finds himself not worth living, his family itself eagerly waits to get rid of him since he had become burden to them. When Grete his sister tell her parents let get rid of him he asks himself a question “What now then?” looking round in the darkness. This question reveals that he had lost his hope and he is already in the darkness of life.

Alienation

Kafka's writing in many cases is reflection of his life situation specially the character of father in his writings been reflected his relationship with his dominating father. His father's an authoritarian personality not only strained their relationship but also influenced Kafka's writings.

"It is well known that Kafka felt like an insect in his father's authoritative presence and even developed a stammer while speaking to him. Gregor, likewise, cowers in fear of his father, who finds him repulsive and attacks him at every turn. Kafka even wrote that he was pleased with the similarity of Samsa's name to his own. Kafka's mother, like her alter-ego of the story, hid silently behind her husband's presence. Out of a sense of duty to his parents, and because he needed money for his planned marriage, Kafka was forced to take an office job he did not enjoy. Furthermore his family insisted that he needed to spend his afternoon in his office. Kafka himself felt that his presence at the office was pointless, but it took up enough time that he would not be able to write, alienating him from his creative needs. Kafka had been very close to his sister, Ottla, and she usually understood him. In this dispute, however, even she turned against him in insisting he stay at the office in the afternoon. Kafka felt that she had betrayed him, and that night he actually contemplated suicide"^[6] (Kafka, 2018).

In the *Metamorphosis* we observe alienation of Gregor Samsa in different stages reflects Kafka's alienation from oneself, family and from society.

Alienation from one's physical features:

"The first sign of alienation which happens to him is his reaction to his physical change. Gregor Samsa feels that he has been treated as a lowly insect and comes to feel that he is one: the story makes the leap from "I feel like an insect" to "I am an insect"^[7] (Hamedreza Kohzadi 1, 2012).

Kafka's creative writing force readers to search for deeper meaning in text. In the *Metamorphosis* Kafka doesn't mention how and why does Gregor transform all of a sudden into an insect. Gregor gets up from a troubled dream and he sees himself transformed into a horrible vermin. His physical changes makes him confused but still he thinks like human. When his family members called him he found changes in his voice. He becomes alienated to his voice. "Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could be hardly be recognized as the voice he had had before"^[6] (Kafka, 2018). the family members recognize his voice as an animal voice. He loses his human physical body features like his back becomes more elastic than before. "He seemed, unfortunately to have no proper teeth...but lack of teeth was, of course, made up for with a very strong jaw"^[6] (Kafka, 2018). He also loses his appetite. His food habits suddenly changes. "Milk like this normally his favorite drink, and his sister had certainly left it therefore him because of that, but he turned, almost against his own will, away from the dish and crawled back into the center of the room"^[6] (Kafka, 2018). Finally he loses even his mobility due to injury caused by his father by throwing apples at him. "Because of his injuries, Gregor had lost much of his mobility-probably permanently"^[6] (Kafka, 2018). Gregor loses one's own living body features, voice and mobility and finally his life.

Alienation from family

In the *Metamorphosis* Gregor constantly makes an effort to gain acceptance and to be part of family but the family keeps him at a distance and treats him as an insect even before he was an insect. After Gregor turning into an insect it is more visible how they alienate him. “Should he really call for help though, even apart from the fact that all the doors were locked? Despite all the difficulty he was in, he could not suppress a smile at this thoughts”^[6] (Kafka, 2018). This thought of his to smile when he thinks of calling for a help shows how his relationship with his family. He was neglected by them and not interested in taking care of his needs. He was used for their needs and survival and nobody was concerned about his needs in life.

When the family encounter Gregor first time as an insect Gregor becomes much more alienated from his family. “Gregor’s mother, her hair still disheveled from bed despite the chief clerk’s being there, looked at his father. Then she unfolded her arms, took two steps forward towards Gregor and sank down onto the floor....His father looked hostile, and clenched his fists as if wanting to knock Gregor back into his room”^[6] (Kafka, 2018). His mother was shocked and his father reacts in arrogance, henceforth they decide to keep him further away in a locked room. “The previous morning while the doors were locked everyone had wanted to get in there to him, but now, now that he had opened up one of the doors and the other had clearly been unlocked some time during the day, no-one came, and the keys were in the other sides”^[6] (Kafka, 2018). This descriptive of the text unveils the approach of family members towards Gregor. Especially the statement ‘the keys were in the other side’ is a clear indication that no one was interested in meeting Gregor and they wanted to be away from him. Her sister regretted her behavior, because she saw him as stranger. In the text we notice that he loved his sister. He wanted her to perceive what she likes to do, especially with music. But now she feels that Gregor is like a stranger and his appearance was disgusting for her. Finally they come to a conclusion to get rid of him. His beloved sister urges his father and mother to erase their idea of Gregor from their mind. “We have only harmed ourselves by believing it for so long. How can that be Gregor? If it were Gregor he would have seen long ago that it’s not possible for human beings to live with an animal like that and he would have gone of his own will. We wouldn’t have a brother any more, then, but we could carry on with our lives and remember him with respect. As it is this animal persecuting us, it’s driven out our tenants, it obviously wants to take over the whole flat and force us to sleep on the streets”^[6] (Kafka, 2018). With this they are convinced that the insect is not Gregor but an animal which has come to destroy their peace of mind. Now he is completely alienated from his family. He enters the room and never comes out. He realizes that his presence makes his family unhappy and alienated from rest of the world for having son like that. Hence he enters his room which is dark and remains there till his death.

Alienation from others

Gregor was unhappy with his working condition. He himself says that he doesn’t like his job. For him it was a strenuous career. He was fed up of traveling day in and day out. He was feeling alienated from his working condition and he wanted to get rid of that work and change his life. When his chief clerk comes home to see why Gregor was absent for his work he encounters Gregor as an insect. “But the chief clerk had turned away as soon

as Gregor had started to speak, and, with protruding lips, only stared back at him over his trembling shoulders as he left. He did not keep still for a moment while Gregor was speaking, but moved steadily towards the door without taking his eyes off him”[6](Kafka, 2018). Even the maid of his family after coming to know Gregor’s metamorphosis within a quarter of an hour she left the job. The neighbors in the flat thought of vacating the flat after seeing Gregor as an insect. All these incidents makes Gregor feel out of place and puts him in shame and guilt of existence. . Sartre in his essay ‘The Look’ he states that how other’s look can put oneself into shame and becomes threat for one’s own subjectivity which eventually leads oneself to be alienated from the surrounding. It is the perception and the look of others on Gregor made him feel shame and be alienated from them. Kafka’s writing looks an act of impossible event that is turning a human into an insect but his writing has deeper meaning twined in the abstract conversion. Gregor turning into an insect in the novella implies how human is treated when he doesn’t align himself in normal life of other human beings. So also when Gregor is cut off from rest of the world when he doesn’t have to involve himself in day today activity of human life, like working, eating, entertainment, etc. he is automatically alienated from the rest of the world.

“What is new in Kafka’s creative writing and view of the problem is his realization that the ‘Law’ of man’s alienation remains hidden from modern man. Man has become the slave of the unknown law of the impersonal ‘one’ to such an extent that he does not know about his own self or his inner life any longer at all, he represses it and cloaks it again and again by means of calculations”[7](Hamedreza Kohzadi 1,2012).

Absurd

For Camus the absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need and unreasonable silence of the world. Here for Gregor’s needs the world becomes silence. “Gregor would think to himself that maybe it would be better if his mother came in, not every day of course, but one day a week, perhaps; she could understand everything”[6](Kafka, 2018). His mother does visit him but rarely, however, she doesn’t understand his needs. It is not only after his metamorphosis but even before, he was like an insect doing routine work in spite of his dislike, because he found no meaning in it. There are two groups of characters which reveal absurd in the novella.

On one hand we see Gregor though he is aware of his metamorphosis. He doesn’t bother that how and why he has become like that. He is occupied with a concern of catching the usual train to go for routine job. He is not connected to his self that is mind and body. His effort is to convince people he is going to be fine soon. We also find he is nowhere regrets of his metamorphosis rather he is concerned with other things which bothered him in day today life, like catching train, going for job, concerned about economic situation of his family.

On the other hand we see other group of characters no one asks why Gregor transformed into an insect. Their concern is to keep him away from them and others, by locking him in the room. They are not able to understand feelings and needs of Gregor. They become hopeless in considering Gregor as earlier Gregor. When Chief clerk had come to find out reasons for Gregor’s absence for work, he sees Gregor as transformed insect. While he was running away Gregor tries to stop him. “Gregor realized that it was out of the

question to let the chief clerk go away in this mood if his position in the firm was not to be put into extreme danger. That was something his parents did not understand very well;” They thought Gregor was trying to harm the chief clerk. There was another incident where Gregor comes to appreciate her sister playing violin when the Guest had come to his house but they misunderstand his intension of coming out of his room. So we find a wider gap between Gregor and the rest of his world in terms of understanding the needs of Gregor. So eventually Gregor finds his life absurd, because others won’t understand him and they want to get rid of him. “If it is possible, he felt that he must go away even more strongly than his sister. He remained on this state of empty and peaceful rumination....” [6](Kafka, 2018). Finally his absurdity ends with his death.

Conclusion

Kafka’s writing involves mainly about human facing existential crisis. Being a modern writer he brought out human condition in industrialized world. He primarily addressed the human alienation in the world and absurd life which causes guilt. ‘The Metamorphosis’ is such one writing where he reflects human state in the world of industrialization. Gregor Samsa worked like an insect before transformation. He had no time for recreation his only worry was repaying the debt which he had got from the chief clerk. His life had become routine where he had no time for creative expression. After metamorphosis also his main worry was to catch a train and go for job. When people realize he can’t work he becomes a useless creature for the society and burden for the family, hence he was locked in a room. Gregor’s alienation and absurd life was evident before as well as after transforming into an insect. It is true even today where many people feel alienated and absurd in the world by doing routine work for the sake of doing. Some try to find happiness in routine work just like Sisyphus in ‘the myth of Sisyphus’ others find no meaning being in the world so end their life by committing suicide.

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