



## ABSURDITY IN FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS*: AN ANALYSIS

Dr. SMITA MISHRA

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Basic Sciences & Humanities,  
PSIT, Bhauti, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

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### ABSTRACT

*The Metamorphosis* is a short story written by Franz Kafka and published in 1915. It is one of the most popular among Kafka's work. It tells the story of a travelling salesman, Gregor Samsa, who woke up one morning to find himself transformed into a large insect. The main conflict of the story arises with Gregor and his family learning to adjust and adapt to his new affliction. It is the most influential and widely read piece of absurdist fiction on the twentieth century. It discusses themes of human guilt, inadequacy and isolation. The nature and psychology of Kafka's novels are all directly related to dynamics he suffered as the son of an imposing father, who greatly influenced his life and career. The present paper will explore the aspects of Absurdism as dealt with in the story through several situations and characters.

KEYWORDS: Isolation, Humility, Frustration, alienation, transformation, indifference.

### INTRODUCTION

To begin with an analysis of the idea of Absurdity let's first know what is the story all about. Gregor Samsa is a hard working travelling salesman who is entrusted with mantle of looking after his family of retired parents and a young, school going sister. He wakes up one day, hoping to go about his day as usual, and finds himself to be transformed into a hideous insect. It is an affliction that hopeless hinders his ability to work, communicate, and eat or even to move freely. His family finds themselves in difficult position of losing the only bread-winner of their family, forcing themselves to find menial jobs in order to sustain their way of living. It creates a resentment in them that carries onto the way they behave towards Gregor. His hideous form doesn't help his case, so ugly that his own mother finds it difficult to look at him. The only saving grace is his sister, who takes up his mantle and agrees to take

care of him. Eventually, his sister also gets tired of him and his upkeep, stressed from the job she has to maintain and coping with loss of her dreams and ambition. She loses all interest in life and grows resentful of her brother, the resentment translating into her behaviour and the care she gives to him. His father, who has taken retirement from a flopped business venture, also finds himself forced to work as a security guard. His father is the most hateful and cruel towards Gregor in the whole family. He attacks Gregor at one of the instances, and constantly wishes he was dead and done away with.

Gregor finds himself isolated and mistreated, unable to communicate with the only remaining contacts he has to the human world. He dies of neglect, deteriorating at the lack of care and contact in his life. His family, finally free of him, becomes carefree and happier, with the burden of Gregor and his affliction finally weighing off their minds.

**Absurdity in Literature**

Absurdism in literature came about during period of the world wars. The wars had shaken up the stability of their times. Violent killings of millions of people made the writers of their times lose all meaning to the realist and pacifist values of the past. They felt like the world order that they were used to had no effect on their situation anymore. A nonsensical massacre of masses was approached with nonsensical and meaningless new concepts. They wrote about concepts that were humanly impossible rather than logically impossible

Samuel Beckett was a playwright who dealt with the Theatre of Absurd. His play *Happy Days* features a protagonist that is buried waist deep in a mound of sand, unable to climb out. She tells us that she wasn't always covered this way but does not explain how she got herself into her current predicament. She is reminiscent of her past life, using the items she stores in her handbag to evoke memories of more mundane times. The more reminiscent she is of her past, the deeper she buries herself, unable to let go of happier days.

Lewis Carroll's famous works *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are considered precursors to absurdist fiction. They feature absurd situations and characters like the Mad Hatter, Cheshire Cat- a smiling, disappearing cat, and caterpillar that asks philosophical questions, all situations that are seemingly absurd but serve as deep social commentary.

**Absurdity in *The Metamorphosis***

Kafka brings about the absurd element in *The Metamorphosis* by transforming his protagonist, Gregor Samsa, into a despicable insect. He offers no explanation for Samsa's affliction and the protagonist himself does not search for one. Instead he focuses on Samsa's efforts to cope with it. He dives into the family's reaction and their attempts in overcoming the loss of their only source of income.

His family's indifference and unwillingness to help him in his time of need is also another element of absurd that Kafka employs. His family tries to hide him from plain view as his form repulses them and they do not want the neighbours to find out about

his horrible affliction. Kafka focuses on the indifference of the family as the main theme of his book.

**Gregor Samsa and his parents**

Samsa, even in the beginning of the book, shared a strenuous relationship with his parents. His job demanded days away from his home, arriving at odd hours in the night and choosing to sleep throughout his stay at home. This created a gap between him and his parents, the communication between them was limited to bare necessities and polite niceties. This divide was further pronounced and personified after his transformation. Gregor was unable to produce coherent speech, his conversation limited to grunting and moaning. This divide was highlighted using the element of absurd.

His relationship with his parents reached a screeching halt. They turned hostile towards him, his form and affliction being utterly repulsive to them. His mother refused to look at him or to mention him around the household, claiming that being reminded of her dear son being rendered incapable this way saddened her too much. She refused to enter his room or to look after his needs, opting to let Gregor stay hungry when his sister is unable to take care of him.

Gregor's father on the other hand is open and outwardly expresses his anger and repulsion to his son. He drives away Gregor from the living room, treating him like a wild animal, when all Gregor wanted was some company and a change in scenery from his drab and musty room. He pelts him with apples, the first and the second embedding into his body, successfully conveying the message to leave the living room, after which Gregor tries to scurry back to the safety of his room. His father, despite seeing that Gregor is leaving, continues to pelt him with more apples in an attempt to hurt him further and to take out his frustration towards him. His actions were an act of naked aggression directed towards his son, seeing him as the cause for all his misery. He lost a comfortable way of life, was forced to go back to work and had to witness his wife and young daughter struggle to make ends meet. The embedded apple, somewhat symbolically, eventually brings about his death.

**Grete Samsa**

Gregor and his sister Grete shared a close relationship with each other. He believed that the only member of his family who cared wellbeing was his sister Grete. He worked hard every day in hopes of getting a promotion that'll pay enough for him to be able to afford sending his sister to conservatory that'll train her into becoming a musician, which was a lifelong dream for her. She was the only person who showed empathy and wanted to help him overcome his affliction. She took time out in order to find out what foods he liked and fed him at the right times. She regularly cleaned his room and moved around furniture to help him become more comfortable. She in fact played the violin for her brother every day, read to him, conversed with him on mundane things in an effort to communicate with him. But Kafka illustrates this relationship so clearly in order to show the limits of human kindness. Her interest and dedication towards him eventually dwindled, trapped in a seemingly one way conversation. She started viewing her brother as less than human, resented him for all the extra work she needs to do for him and turned negligent towards his care. Her change in behaviour is symbolic of the point that Kafka tries to imbibe on its readers, that empathy, kindness and gratuitousness, all have their limits. Humans, by nature, are self-centred beings and will eventually put themselves first.

**Detachment and Decay**

Gregor's inability to communicate translates into the quality of his daily life. He is unable to convey that despite his insect form, he still retains his human emotions and is able to perform complex thoughts. His loss of a communication channel rendered him incapable. His family assumed that after his transformation, he also lost all other pieces that made him human. His assumed loss of humanity is the reason that his family justifies their despicable behaviour. His father becomes physically violent one day, throwing apples at him which embeds itself into his body. The apple lodged in his spine limits his physical movement, losing most of the functions of his limbs. They do not bother removing the apple to lessen his pain, or to try and fix him while he is bleeding. The apple rots where it stands, leaving his

body disabled and he eventually dies with it still lodged in his spine, decaying under depression and his loss of humanity.

**Gregor's view of self**

Post his transformation, although Gregor retained his human mind, his inability to communicate, his insectile form, his loss of movement and the need to re-train his body in order to eat, sleep, and to move all weathered on his sense of self. Although he was able to perform complex human thoughts, feel human emotions and experience pain, his less than human features began to play on the forefront of his mind. The attitudes of his family and his sister and their need to hide him from public view, all reinforced his view that he has lost his humanity. Although he wasn't monstrous or inhumane, he began to see himself as one. He felt that he did not deserve love, care or respect anymore- all salient features and needs of a human being. He did not feel more animalistic, he did not turn wild, ravenous or savage- he lost his sense of self as he was deprived of all human pleasures and needs and therefore he felt less than alive. The lack of validation of his existence caused him to deteriorate, he found himself disinterested in eating or moving, he shirked human contact and preferred to spend the rest of his days asleep, awaiting death and release from his painful existence.

**Conclusion**

Franz Kafka's masterfully employs a single element of absurd, the transformation of Gregor Samsa, to illustrate a dark and violent world of treachery and disillusionment. Kafka left his mark by defining the emotion we feel when situations are nightmarishly complex, bizarre, and illogical as 'Kafkaesque'. His world is unpleasant and yet it's a place that most of us in the murky periods of our lives will eventually end up in. When we realise that we are not in control of our destiny, when we are tormented, humiliated and scorned by our own families and society.

*The Metamorphosis* is a story of self-disgust, the duplicity of the family institution and about frightening arbitrary power. Gregor is in danger of being stomped on by his father when he attempts to

crawls across the floor. His family realise that they manage quite well without him. They imprison him to a room and throw trash at him. The family decides that the creature in the bedroom can't actually be their son and brother. They begin to refer to Gregor as "it" instead of "him". They decide that somehow they need to be rid of the creature, that it shouldn't be their burden to bear anymore. Gregor agrees with his family, finding himself to be an uninvited problem, and dies quietly. After his death, Gregor's family is slightly ashamed of their behaviour, but only slightly.

The title not only relates Gregor's own physical metamorphosis but in fact, to the change and growth of all the members of his family. As Gregor's metamorphosis makes him a dependant, morbid, despicable creature; his family grows into self-sufficient unit. His sister, forced to grow up fast, transforms into an independent and strong willed young woman who takes up the mantle as the family's provider. His father leaves behind his sedentary and solitary lifestyle, leaving the house and finding a job for himself. Gregor's death assisted in the upliftment of their lives, their mental state and their overall quality of living.

#### REFERENCES

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