

Existential Failure in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Hamid Farahmandian & Pang Haonong

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University

99 Shangda Road, Shanghai, 200444, China

Email: FarahmandianH@gmail.com

Abstract This paper, by the means of illustrating the specific elements of Existentialism including “absurdity,” “existential Angst” and “ethical decline”, aims to show how Gregor as the main character of *The Metamorphosis* fails to fulfill self-definition. Kafka's protagonists are lonely because they are caught midway between a notion of good and evil, whose scope they cannot determine and whose contradiction they cannot resolve. This makes them to become alienated from a society in which fear is a central idea. Gregor, due to his family's financial issue and fear of being shame in the society, is unable to burst of his inner pressure. This pressure causes him to look for death as a suitable tool to escape of absurdity that society and his family offered him earlier.

Key words existentialism; Franz Kafka; *The Metamorphosis*; absurdity; existential angst

Authors **Hamid Farahmandian** is currently a PhD candidate of English Language and Literature at the School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University (Shanghai, 200444, China). His research focuses on Modernism and British Literature. **Pang Haonong** is Full Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University (Shanghai, 200444, China) specializing at British and American Literature.

Franz Kafka (1883–1924) is among the most intriguing and influential writers of the last century. During his lifetime he worked as a civil servant and published only a handful of short stories, the best known being *The Metamorphosis*. His other three novels, published after his death, helped to found his reputation as a uniquely perceptive interpreter of the twentieth century. “Kafka's stories present symbolically his inner personality so professionally that understanding his stories is possible just when one has a precise view of his life” (Huber 178). His relationship with his

tyrannical father, whom the only conclusion of his training was a son with a guilty conscience, full of feeling of terror, anger and lack of self confidence, is depicted throughout his works. As he mentioned in a letter to his father, he has suffered from a sense of guilt, since he was a child, which is the result of his lack of self-confidence and he notes that this is his father who is responsible for these all (Kafka 55).

The Metamorphosis is one of Kafka's most interesting works which was written in 1912 and published in 1915. It is the story of a salesman, Gregor Samsa, who one morning transferred in to a verminous bug. He was hidden in his room by his family and finally he died due to an apple which was thrown by his father. "This story is more than just a transformation of a human being in to a big insect" (Barfi 107). Vladimir Nabokov, in this case, referred to anyone "Who reads *The Metamorphosis* beyond just a fantasy as a good reader" (Nabokov 161). *The Metamorphosis* is a projection of his own life, even when Gregor Samsa transferred into a verminous bug. Like Kafka, his character Gregor, in *The Metamorphosis*, suffers due to his failures to exist within the ideal established by the Existential framework. Gregor's failures to successfully confront the world, or even to defend his own existence, result in his annihilation; first symbolically, as he is systematically stripped of meaning and humanity, and then corporeally, as his body can no longer take the alienation from its spirit and relinquishes its frail grasp on life in an anti-climatic death scene.

Absurdity

"Absurdity is related to human condition in which humans face nothingness" (Davachi 87); it is from the encounter of a human's need and the unreasonable silence of the world. As Camus believes, "In this unintelligible and limited universe, man's fate henceforth assumes its meaning. A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until this ultimate end. In his recovered and now studied lucidity, the feeling of absurd becomes clear and definite" (Camus 21). In order to clarify the concept of absurdity in *The Metamorphosis*, it is necessary to study the text carefully to understand how good and evil notions lead the main character to overwhelm in his alienation which makes him to reject any possible hope for his problems.

Beyond Good and Evil (beyond rationalism and moralizing) is the idea that promulgated by Nietzsche. This idea, among others, utters that "There was no absolute good or absolute evil in the world. All was relative, created by human being in their attempts to rationalize and make sense of the world" (Bressler 124).

Various iterations of this thought run through Existentialist thought, whereby, once again, the individual is defining its own environment, and its existence is affected by this process of definition. The way this notion is manifested in *The Metamorphosis* is in Kafka's lack of judgment of his characters. Take the father and the sister as examples. There is no castigation of guilt put upon them by the narrator for neglecting and even turning against Gregor. They, as far as the text supplies, act in a way to better their own lots in life. They break away from dependence and become free-moving, self-sufficient entities. This, it would seem, is what Kafka suggests is more important than notions of good or evil, right or wrong. In fact, at the end of the story, the family freed from their burdens, are presented in a pleasant light. Gregor, who brought guilt onto himself at every turn, and who dies to lessen the burden of himself on his family, is presented as pathetic.

Furthermore, it might be said that Gregor's primary failure is his neglect of self-definition; or in other terms, his spinelessness, which is manifested symbolically in his insect form. Gregor is passive at every turn which makes him become alienated from his surrounding world. Perhaps the greatest consequence of Gregor's metamorphosis is the psychological distance it creates between Gregor and those around him. Gregor's change makes him literally and emotionally separate from his family members — indeed, from humanity in general — and he even refers to it as his “imprisonment.” After his transformation he stays almost exclusively in his room with his door closed and has almost no contact with other people. At most, Grete spends a few minutes in the room with him, and during this time Gregor always hides under the couch and has no interaction with her. Essentially he has become totally isolated from everyone around him, including those people he cares for like Grete and his mother. In fact, “The alienation caused by Gregor's metamorphosis can be viewed as an extension of the alienation he already felt as a person” (Blauner 107).

“Humans need meaning, even though, it appears there is no meaning to be found. Much of life is characterised by such absurd paradoxes: we build our lives on the hope of tomorrow, yet tomorrow brings us closer to death, the ultimate enemy; we live as if we don't know about the certainty of death” (Camus 114). No matter how hard Kafka's heroes strive to come to terms with the universe, they are hopelessly caught, not only in a mechanism of their own contriving, but also in a network of accidents and incidents, the least of which may lead to the gravest consequences. Gregor's inability to sleep, his hopes and fears from everyday life are described in terms of the nightmarish and ghostly; he is “often haunted by the idea” (Kafka 29) that he will return to his normal position in the family and

in society. The inversion of the dream-like and reality thus permeates the very language in which Gregor's thoughts are described, wedding the dream language and the anxiety over physical act of sleep. Instead of trying to make the absurd aspects of his life conform to a logical explanation, Gregor now sees any hope for normalcy as the most absurd and nightmarish thing of all. There being alienated from the world around, he comes to accept that hopelessness is what waits for him.

In the end, it is difficult for the reader to sympathize too much with Gregor, or to judge his family too harshly for wanting to be free of burden he had become. Gregor fails to take himself out of absurdity and nothingness because lets himself to be alienated from the family and the world around him. This alienation makes him not to think for any hope, though, he used to have it in early stage after metamorphosis.

Existential Angst

Guerin Wilfred defines that "Existential angst describes the internal conflict experienced by every conscious individual due to the fact that the world is not a rational place and existence can be maintained only by constant struggle" (226). The implications of this idea range from the notion of something as basic as finding a means to provide the most basic needs for survival, to struggling with the idea of searching for and defining meaning in the world, trying to communicate and to establish meaningful relationships with other creatures, etc. All existential struggles represent the conflict that naturally opposes the original state of human existence, which is the simple karmic existence in the womb. In this framework, the point of birth, the exit from the safety and peacefulness of the womb, into the world of horrors and uncertainties, is a very crucial moment where existence is defined inside the framework of the world as we know it.

In *The Metamorphosis*, it is this womb-like state, without conflict, decision or self-definition that Gregor longs to return to. However, of course, this is impossible, and "Gregor's escapist attitude is largely responsible for his failure in life" (Bennett 75). Gregor's desire to escape is illustrated throughout the text. Escape, in fact, is a motif which manifests itself in Gregor's sleeping to escape, avoiding decisions, and his eventual physical and mental exhaustion, all which lead to his ultimate escape through death.

A second manifestation of existential angst resides, ironically, in free choice. "That ultimate prize coveted by all of humanity, says the Existentialist, is also one of the biggest burdens on the human, and a source of omnipresent anxiety" (Frankl 55). With complete freedom of choice, the average individual would quickly become overwhelmed. This is compounded by the fact that as conscious

beings, humans know that every decision they make is irreversible and determines outcomes they cannot even fathom. Further the individual operating solely for the good of its own existence, without regard for society as a whole, becomes quickly alienated. It is Gregor's denial of self-definition and choice that has put him at the whim of the world. His faith in the world as a rational place has been proven absurd by his irrational transformation into an insect. Gregor clearly fails in this vein as he seeks to avoid decisions at every turn. He lets decisions make themselves.

Moreover, communication is a prime source of existential angst. This is in part due to the fact that communication always involves struggle. There is no pure communication; in every instance, something is inherently lost because the tools of communication are imperfect. Communication is also a major motif in *The Metamorphosis*. "Gregor's inability to communicate is central to his difficulties at the outset of the story. His world soon becomes unintelligible, perhaps mirroring his feelings about communication, and symbolizing his relinquishing of any real effort to make it work" (Sarkar 96). Throughout the story, Gregor attempts to communicate with body language, a fundamental communication, but in most instances, this fails or is misinterpreted.

To Sum up, Gregor have the others to make choice on behalf of him. Being in far from any choices derived from the point that he is not eager to learn that he should have self-definition in order to change along with the world changes. Moreover, the difficulties of physiological communication after metamorphosis and physical communication after metamorphosis bring have too much pressure that he is unable to connect to the world around.

Ethical Decline

A major German Enlightenment philosopher by the name of Immanuel Kant came up with the ethical principle that you should act toward others as if your actions served as a universal law applicable to everybody, including yourself. It's another way of saying that you should do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Kafka puts a twist on this whole ethical tradition by making the subject of ethical debate in *The Metamorphosis* a bug. And not just any bug — a vermin, a pest. So what happens to ethics when the subject is a bug? Should we do unto vermin as we would have vermin do unto us? What if we can't determine what Gregor is exactly? Which laws apply to Gregor? The ongoing reasons in this paper which bring the collapse of the ethics include guilt, fear that resulted in death as a tool to escape.

Humans feel obligated to do certain things. It makes them feel good, or worthwhile. Gioia believes that if these responsibilities are not met or to the

obligator's own standards then guilt comes upon them (94). In *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka, "Gregor's self-condemnation keeps him trapped. Gregor is enslaved to his family: (Munro 98). Therefore Gregor's guilt emerges from the families' burden. The excerpt below is a key passage to understanding Gregor's guilt:

Believe me, sir, there's something the matter with him. Otherwise how would Gregor have missed a train? That boy has nothing in his mind but the business. It's almost begun to rile me that he never goes out nights. He's been back in the city for eight days now, but every night he's home. He sits there with us at the table, quietly reading the paper or studying timetables. (Kafka 10)

Guilt can be derived from different situations. Gregor's guilt was from his obligation to work. Even Gregor's mother, a bystander, could see his dedication to his job. Life without amusement becomes stressful and unpleasant. Throughout the novel Gregor finds himself stressed out because of his dissatisfaction with his ability to provide for his family. Gregor, finally near the end of the novel, finds satisfaction in something: his sister's violin.

Gregor and his family have the fear of being judged by the society. This fear which is along with the idea of shame as a motivational factor is relevant here, and is illustrated by such events as the situation in which Gregor frets over the way he will be perceived by his family when the attorney comes to check on him. It is also relevant in instances in which Gregor hides himself from his family to grant them respite from suffering his grotesqueness. This fear has been originated from the idea of social judgment which is also central to the entire story— that Gregor's change was only "A symbolic manifestation of the way society made him feel, as seen through the eyes of social judgment (Fromm 101). In turn, by coming to see himself this way, by his existential weakness, in letting others define him, Gregor allowed himself to be transformed.

After becoming injured by his father, and finding himself ceasing to eat or sleep, Gregor Samsa dies alone in an isolated room. The death of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* occurs under most unusual circumstances and is ironically celebrated by his family rather than mourned. His unusual death cannot simply be attributed to one fatal causation, but is left ambiguous. Possibly, the neglect and abuse from his family killed Gregor's insect self. Maybe Gregor selfishly gave up on life, finding things too painful to continue. Literary critic Michael Ryan argues that "Gregor embodies a cycle of suffering, death and

rebirth. He explains that, for Gregor, death is a goal. Through this he suggests that Gregor's death has an overall purpose" (145). Walter Sokel presents an alternative idea that "Gregor's death was not purposeful but due to an inner conflict between his desire to rebel and to appease those who love him" (206). The confusion surrounding his death is also further complicated by the fact that his family does not mourn his death, but instead seems relieved as if freed of a burden. His family goes out, and the mood of the story immediately evolves, becoming brighter and more joyous.

As a result, Gregor has been caught in the mid way of thinking about the benefit of himself or his family. However, his family does not follow him in this notion and they easily put him away after his metamorphosis. They were good with him until the time that he was the source of financial outcome; Gregor becomes useless after he changes to a useless bug. There this is Gregor's people who lead him to think of death as a tool for freedom. He wishes to die to get rid of the injustice world in which he has been situated.

Conclusion

Kafka's protagonists are lonely because they are caught midway between a notion of good and evil, whose scope they cannot determine and whose contradiction they cannot resolve. This is what make them alienated from the surrounding and far from any hope they look for death as a suitable tool to escape. From Kafk's portrayal of Gregor's life before the change, we can see that the transformation is also a logical continuation of certain changes that were occurring inside Gregor's mind and his demise can be understood, in part, as a failure to address or to try to interrupt any of these things before it was too late. Gregor failed to change with the changing world. In conclusion, it may be said that the metamorphosis would not have occurred in either of these two cases: if Gregor had not nurtured hostility toward his work and his boss, or if he had revolted openly and thrown up his job without regard to his parents. It comes as the climax of a secret history of hostility and guilt. These combine to erupt in the catastrophe which mutilates and destroys him who has failed to face the turmoil in his soul.

Works Cited

- Barfi, Zahra. "A Study of Kafka's the Metamorphosis in the Light of Freudian Psychological Theory." *Research Journal of Recent Sciences* 10 (vol. 2, 2013):107-09.
- Bennett, Jane. "Deceptive Comfort: The Power of Kafka's Stories." *Political Theory* 1 (vol. 19, 2005): 73-95.

- Blauner, Robert. *Alienation and Freedom*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.
- Bressler, Charles. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice, 4th ed.* New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2007.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955.
- Camus, Albert. *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom, and Selected Essays*. London: Everyman's Library, 2004.
- Davachi, Azadeh. *Existential Absurdity and Alienation in Kafka's The Metamorphosis and Hedayat's The Blind Owl*. Kuala Lumpur: UPM, 2010.
- Frankl, Viktor. *Man's search for meaning*. Boston: Beacon, 2006.
- Fromm, Erich. *Man for Himself*. London: Routledge Classics, 2010.
- Gioia, Dennis. "Pinto Fires and Personal Ethics: A script Analysis of Missed Opportunities." *Journal of Business Ethics* 6 (vol. 11, 2009): 379-89.
- Guerin, Wilfred. *A Hand Book of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Huber, Christian. "Kafka's Mythology: Organization, Bureaucracy and the Limits of Sensemaking." *Human Relations* 4 (vol. 65, 2012): 523-44.
- Kafka, Franz. *Dearest Father, Trans. Hannah and Richard Stokes*. London: One World Classics LTD, 2008.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. New York: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.
- Munro, Iain. "Moral Distance in Organizations: An Inquiry into Ethical Violence in the Works of Kafka." *Journal of Business Ethics* 4 (vol 2, 2013): 94-104.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Franz Kafka: The Metamorphosis. In F. Bowers ed., Lectures on Literature*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.
- Ryan, Michael. "Samsa and Samsara: Suffering, Death, and Rebirth in *The Metamorphosis*." *German Quarterly* 2 (vol. 2, 2010): 133-52.
- Shmoop Editorial Team. "The Metamorphosis Theme of Morality and Ethics." *Shmoop*. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 21 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.shmoop.com/metamorphosis/transformation-theme.html>>
- Sokel, Walter. "Kafka's Metamorphosis: Rebellion and Punishment." *Monatshefte* 4 (vol. 48, 2002): 203-14.
- Sarkar, Mrinal. "Incapacity of the Moment: An Analysis of Inability and Transformation in Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis." *Literary Quest* 5 (vol. 1, 2014): 92-99.