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Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* –Veracity of Life, Consciousness, and Existence

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Abstract - Franz Kafka in his novella 'The Metamorphosis' uses literary techniques like expressionism and Absurdism to investigate the meaning of consciousness and human existence between absurd ethics of socio-economic settings. The protagonist of the story Gregor Samsa's transfiguration into a huge Bug unveils his depressed mind, he struggles, accepts, and succumbs to the absurd transformation. Gregor becomes a symbol in Kafka's novella in which he shows the world where he leads an insecure, ignored, isolated, and criticized life solely bearing his oppression.

Keywords: Absurdism, Expressionism, Metamorphosis, Human life, Consciousness, and Existence.

INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka was one of the most critically acclaimed writers of the 20th-century novelists. He was highly influenced by the writings of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Expressionism is a modernist movement, which began in Germany and France during the early 20th century. Expressionism opposed Naturalism and Realism. Absurdity in literature probes deeper into the meaning of human existence. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* portrays the gloomy world of the protagonist who struggles to encounter the taxing circumstances in life. Kafka shows the macrocosm where Gregor Samsa dwells with insecurity, ignored, isolated, and criticized, solely bearing his oppression. This article presents Kafka's effective use of Expressionism and Absurdist techniques to describe Gregor Samsa's pathetic and miserable life.

FRANZ KAFKA

Franz Kafka was born in Prague, Bohemia into a German-speaking Jewish family in 1883. His father, Hermann Kafka was a prosperous businessman and his mother Julie was the daughter of a brewer. Kafka attended the elementary schools in Prague and after his secondary school attended Charles Ferdinand University where he studied Law. He became a Doctor of Law degree in 1906.

In 1907 he joined a big Italian Insurance company and quit the job within a year as the timings did not match with his timings for writing. Later he joined the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia and stayed there till he retired in 1922 because he was suffering from tuberculosis. He died at the age of 41 in Prague in June 1924.

Kafka's father did not like his literary endeavor and never read Kafka's works. He was much interested in enhancing his business and he considered Kafka's literary pursuit were useless. His father's discouragement made a deep wound in his mind which turned his life murky and dull. This darkness is infused in all his works. Kafka's writing style describes his absurdity of life.

EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism is a literary movement that thrived in Germany between 1914 and 1924. Expressionism imparts a few characteristics of Romanticism which underscores perception, dream, and enthusiasm.

"Expressionism, like Romanticism, was a voice of protest against the whole materialistic and mechanical trend of modern technological and industrial civilization which reduces man to a 'robot', alienates him from his essential nature and makes him a prey to purposeless, tedious, and meaningless existence like Kaiser's Cashier who attempts to break the cage of modern life of money and profit, and seek love and romance." (1).

Expressionism was defiance against literary movements like Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism, Neo-Romanticism, and Impressionism. Dream-like mystic strain is the main aspect of expressionist writings.

Expressionists were motivated by the Marxist socialist-radical movement and the Freudian psychosis theory. The Marxian view of the conflict of social classes, and bourgeois-capitalistic system resulting in wars were the main subject of the Expressionists. Expressionist writings emphasize man's existential predicament, the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

pathetic condition of the underprivileged class due to war, and the capitalist society.

Kafka was much influenced by Expressionism and his works echo his anxiety and concern on the degradation of human values, universal fraternity, and family relationships in the plutocrat world.

Absurdism in Literature

"Absurdism means the internal conflict between the human tendency to find the inherent value and the meaning of life and his inability to find any. In other words, absurdism refers to humans' struggle to find the region in their life and their inability to find it due to humanly limited constraints. Thus absurdism refers to something humanly impossible rather than logically impossible. In this sense, one who tries to find inherent values and meaning in life will ultimately fail because of impossible certain." (Eng.Sum. 2020,1)

Absurdist fiction is often portrayed as dark comedy and satire was popularized by 20th-century writers like Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Kurt Vonnegut, and Paul Auster. Absurdist literature concentrates on the personal experiences of characters, which are lost in life, are presented as strange and abnormal characters performing senseless actions.

"The human condition, for Kafka, is well beyond tragic or depressed. It is "absurd." He believed that the whole human race was the product of one of "God's bad days." There is no "meaning" to make sense of our lives. Paradoxically that meaninglessness allows us to read into Kafka's novels such as *The Trial* (which is about a legal "process" which doesn't process anything), or his stories like "The Metamorphosis," whatever meanings we please." (Yale Univ. Blog, 1)

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*– Analysis

Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," the most popular and best-selling short story, was completed in 1912 and published in 1915. Kafka wrote the story in his third-floor room, which had a view of the Vltava River and the toll bridge.

"I would stand at the window for long periods," he wrote in his diary in 1912, "and was frequently tempted to amaze the toll collector on the bridge below by my plunge." (Bio.2009, 1).

The Metamorphosis, written in the novella form, deals with the bizarre situation of the protagonist Gregor Samsa who transformed into a gigantic vermin when he woke up from sleep one morning. The incidents in the life of Gregor Samsa are identical to Kafka's own life.

At one point in time, Gregor Samsa's transfiguration into a vermin can be seen as an allegory of anti-Semitism, criminal extermination of the Jewish community who were regarded "verminous" race by the Nazis. *The Metamorphosis* was seen as a presage of the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, after World War I. Kafka and his fellow citizens faced the loss of identity with the collapse of the monarch. On the other hand, the story can be read to know Kafka's fractioned relationship with his father, who failed to show interest in his son's works. Kafka strongly felt that his father shattered all his self-confidence and trust in him an endless feeling of guilt. The alienation that Kafka suffered in his personal life was expressed through his protagonist Gregor Samsa.

Kafka's personal life voices his affinity towards socialism which is contempt against the capitalist bourgeoisie society exploiting the proletariat. He used the communist ideology of the ongoing struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed:

"He [Marx] described how the wealth of the bourgeoisie depended on the work of the proletariat. Therefore, capitalism requires an underclass. But Marx predicted that the continued exploitation of this underclass would create great resentment. Eventually, the proletariat would lead a revolution against the bourgeoisie."(4)

Kafka never envisioned a victory for the proletariat, but in his dark world where the lower class always struggled, suffered, marginalized, protested, and finally failed in life. This is the dark world of Gregor Samsa, who takes refuge from his never-ending struggles in life, by his transfiguration into a vermin:

Oh God," he thought, "what a strenuous career I've chosen! Traveling day in, day out - on the road. Doing business like this takes much more effort than doing your own business at home office, and, on top of that, there's the curse of traveling, worries about making train connections, bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know

RESEARCH ARTICLE

anyone or become friendly with them. It can all go to hell! (16)

These were the speculations that crisscrossed Gregor's mind when he found himself changed into a huge vermin. The first sentence of the novella:

"One morning when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin." (15)

Gregor had unpleasant dreams before his transformation into a huge vermin. The metamorphosis in him becomes a symbol emphasizing the existential predicament in Gregor Samsa. Gregor Samsa's transformation into an enormous insect is the shows his depressed mind and withdrawal symptoms. Later, while he was analyzing his strange condition Gregor was unable to understand the situation:

"What happened to me?" he thought. It wasn't a dream. His room, a proper human room, although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls." (15)

Kafka was one among the few writers in Germany who experimented with the genre Absurdism. Absurdist create incomprehensible situations in their stories as pointers to emphasize the meaninglessness of existence through their projection of absurd images of life. The transformation of Gregor into a huge vermin is one such image of absurdity. This is due to the novelist's absurd imagination. Moreover, the protagonist is not at all frightened by his transformation, but he examines the changes in his body and his limbs feeling hapless. The giant vermin was able to think like a human being, Samsa, who was a human, now lives inside this huge insect. He was even able to unbolt his door, of course with considerable effort and also to utter some unintelligible talk, which cannot even be imagined for a vermin. To convince the readers further, the novelist makes Gregor's father, mother, sister, and the office manager witness his transformation who are all frightened by the transformation they have witnessed in Gregor. The father drives him out into his room using a newspaper and by thudding his shoes. Furthermore, his food habits change to that of roach and he prefers to eat rotten stale food. But the paradoxical element is seen here in the vermin's behavior, which complies with the appetite of a vermin, but thinks like a human being. The readers are forced to believe that

the transformation is not just a mental disorder but it is a real physical change, which will eventually end up in his death.

Gregor Samsa who was struggling to complete the tasks of his work as a traveling salesman and as the breadwinner of his family becomes frustrated and isolated and questions the meaning of his existence. He builds a wall around himself and kept aloof from the rest of the family by locking his room at night. He does not see an end to his struggle till the next five or six years. He feels neglected by his father who only wants his money and by his boss who wants to get his work done without a break and who aims only on his business development.

Gregor's transformation is a kind of escapism from his work and family responsibilities. The lack of self-confidence in Gregor reduces him to the level of a vermin who is disgusting for everyone including his family members. His mother and sister Grete view this transformation with shock and fear while his father shows anger and frustration. In the beginning, it evokes sympathy and concern in his sister but later it changes into disgust and aversion. The act of removing the furniture from his room symbolizes his loss of identity in the family. The denial of his rightful place means his emotional as well as physical removal from the family and society. His transformation illustrates a similarity between his emotions and his physical appearance. At last his sister, Grete also ignores him who was the only person to support him in his troubled state:

"I don't want to call this monster my brother, all I say is: we have to try to get rid of it. We've done all that's humanly possible to look after it and be patient, I don't think anyone could accuse us of doing anything wrong" (88).

And again:

"It's got to go," shouted his sister. "That is the only way, Father. You've got to get rid of the idea that's Gregor. We've 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 free will. We wouldn't have a brother anymore, then, but we could carry on with our lives and remember him with respect" (90)

Grete's rejection makes Gregor's alienation complete and he decides to disappear from their lives. His life comes to an end when he was alone in his room:

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“He thought back of his family with emotion and love. if it was possible, he felt that he must go away even more strongly than his sister. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful rumination until he heard the clock tower strike three in the morning. He watched as it slowly began to get light everywhere outside the window too. Then, without his willing it, his head sank completely, and his last breath flowed weakly from his nostrils.” (92)

Life, Consciousness, and Existence

Gregor struggles in the beginning to accept the fact that he has transformed into a vermin. His transformation into a bug in a way echoes rationality though his plight of being an insect sounds absurd. At times his physical change and the pains that he suffers due to his new physique envelope his consciousness and psyche which in a way he could not comprehend.

Gregor was unaware of the external pains, which is evident through his human consciousness which is different from his vermin body. At times Gregor forgets his self-consciousness and enjoys being an insect. His behavior as a vermin exposes the beastly attitude of the other characters in the story. The comparison between an insect and human beings emphasizes that humans have a beastly side that they cannot deny. His transformation also suffered identity in the family and society. His language loss is another drawback because he could not express his presence in the family as well as to have a hold on his own life.

Gregor's alienation and isolation existed even before his transformation into a vermin. The deterioration of his bedroom into a storage room echoes how his relationship with human society is worsened.

The Metamorphosis portrays how the human mind constructs gloominess, misery, and distress. The story also satirizes the family structure where Samas skip their responsibilities and pile all the responsibilities on the shoulders of Gregor. Gregor even after his transformation continues to remain a member of the family.

CONCLUSION

The expressionistic elements in Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* are depicted in the subjectivity in the narration. The story is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist Gregor Samsa. Throughout the story, Gregor Samsa is only concerned about voicing his thoughts and feelings. He narrates the happenings in Gregor's household in his absence as a human being and the narration focuses on the complex and incomprehensible matrix of the family relationships by showing the reader how the family has taken the son's metamorphosis. The Father, mother, and the sister accept Gregor's death with a heavy heart but they also have the feel the sigh of relief and they are filled with new hopes to start a new life. Death comes as a blessing to Gregor and relieves him from the existential crisis.

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