



# REINTERPRETING KAFKA'S "THE METAMORPHOSIS" IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN-DAY SOCIETAL ISSUES

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to examine the relevance of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka as it relates to alienation, identity, and existential angst in order to connect it with some of the main contemporary social problems of mental health, digital isolation, and the gig economy. In synthesizing these classic literary analyses with modern standpoints, it brought out precisely the potential of this novella for enlightening people of today regarding the stake of complexities and psychological issues at stake. The study underlines the timelessness of Kafka's work by showing how its themes still echo and give critical insight into contemporary problems, thus deepening the understanding of the human condition and the impact of societal structures on personal identity and well-being.

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, Alienation, Identity, Existential Angst, Mental Health, Digital Isolation

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Background and Rationale

Franz Kafka, one of the greatest figures of modernist literature, is generally famous for his surreal and frequently bleak study of human existence. His novella "The Metamorphosis" is one of his most famous works and encapsulates his amazing capability for plumbing depths of the human psyche and the dynamics of society. This is the story of Gregor Samsa, who overnight underwent a mysterious metamorphosis into a giant insect and was a travelling salesman by profession. This weird metamorphosis, aided by the consequent reactions of his family, is a powerful commentary on alienation, identity, and the human condition. It is more than a century since its writing, yet "The Metamorphosis" retains its very appeal to readers and scholars alike by begging the question of the work's significance in modern society.

Classic literature not only reflects the timeless human experiences but also mirrors most of the contemporary challenges amidst a changing world. In the reinterpretation of Kafka's works in relation to the modern condition, there lies hidden meanings that speak more pointedly to the problems at hand. The timeless power of "The Metamorphosis" lies in its capture of the quintessence of human suffering and change, something remaining relevant for modern personhood as we fumble our way through the convolutions of contemporary life. It offers a rich framework to understand and critique the phenomena at play within contemporaries such as mental health crises, the alienating effects of technology, or the precariousness of gig economy employment arrangements. As such, this paper is an attempt to discuss how Kafka's novella may be understood against the background of contemporary social problems and make contributions towards timeless understanding regarding the human condition.

### 2. Objectives

This paper primarily focuses on the examination of the themes by Kafka in "The Metamorphosis" in terms of their relevance to the current problems within modern society. More specifically, it will examine three major themes: alienation and isolation, transformation and identity, and existential angst and mental health.

First to be analysed will be the alienation and isolation undergone by Gregor Samsa in relation to contemporary digital isolation experiences via the impact of social media on human connections. In the novella by Kafka, the change in Gregor results in his being physically and emotionally separated from his family and society generally; this assumes a very different but equally clear form in many people who are afflicted by disconnection in an increasingly digital world. It will help the paper relate Gregor's isolation to the phenomenon of digital isolation and how, through technology and social media, people can be united and isolated today.

The second theme that emerges is one of transformation and identity understood as an identity crisis within the modern era shaped by digital personas and their life online. Gregor's turning into an insect is symbolic of gross disruption to his sense of self and his place in society. This paper shall, therefore, explore how similar disruptions take place today, as people negotiate the intricacies involved in fashioning and maintaining their identities in a digital age. The analysis will assess how online platforms alter self-perception and manners of presentation of self to others, often resulting in identity crises and existential dilemmas.

Finally, the theme of existential anxiety and mental health will be examined by drawing connections between the existential themes of Kafka and current mental health issues: anxiety, depression, and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world. It is an exemplary case of existential despair, a downfall of mental health; enshrined with Gregor, in a powerful way, reflecting psychological or mental problems common to many contemporary people in society. The research will attempt to explore how the portrayal that Kafka gives of existential angst speaks to modern conceptions of mental illness, allowing insight into its continued relevance.

### 3. Methodology

To realize these objectives, the combination of literary analysis with a review of contemporary literature will be adopted in the present research. The literary analysis will comprise a critical examination of the "Metamorphosis" using a variety of interpretative frameworks like the existential and psychoanalytic perspectives. In this way, there can be a nuanced understanding of the text, spotting the complex interplay between its thematic elements and the structure of the narrative.

This will be underpinned by an in-depth review of contemporary literature identifying scholarly works and studies touching on relevant issues facing society, such as mental health, digital isolation, and the gig economy. The study will synthesize insights from these sources to represent Kafka's themes against the background of modern-day challenges. It will thus contribute an interdisciplinary approach toward an understanding of how "The Metamorphosis" speaks to current problems, hence bridging the gap between a literary analysis and a social critique.

The methodology will help this research to discover new dimensions of Kafka's works relevant for the contemporary world. The proposed research shall be demonstrating, through an exploration of the relationships between Kafka's themes and modern contemporary societal issues, the continued educative power of literature in helping human beings to grasp the core human experiences and to understand one's times better.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Classic Interpretations of "The Metamorphosis"

Since 1915, when it was published, Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" has undergone massive volumes of scholarship. Classic readings of the novella usually focus on alienation, identity, and existential anxiety. These readings are based on different kinds of critical opinions: existentialism and psychoanalysis, both giving quite different insights into the text.

Gregor Samsa is overcome by intense feelings of alienation through which he passes in an existence that is absurd. Such readings, as attributed to this existentialist reading of "The Metamorphosis," span across and are based on several critical perspectives. Scholars such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre focused much on the existential plight of Kafka's characters, underlining themes of isolation, absurdity, and searching for meaning in an apparently indifferent universe. Gregor's turning into a bug exemplifies the case of the human condition by proving that absurdity and alienation are central in human beings (Camus, 1942; Sartre, 1943).

Psychoanalytic interpretations resort to the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, in which the story is discussed on psychological levels. What will be important for understanding Gregor's metamorphosis is that Freud categorizes it under outward manifestations of inner turmoil and repressed desires, governed by his theory of the unconscious mind and repression (Freud, 1919). On the other hand, Jungian analysis regards the symbolic nature of the narrative and views Gregor's metamorphosis in light of the process of individuation and struggling to bring together disparate parts of the self (Jung, 1959).

Existential readings, psychoanalytic readings, and Marxist critics have viewed "The Metamorphosis" with regard to class struggle and economic exploitation. Gregor's role as a travelling salesman and his transformation can be seen as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and the alienation of the worker from the means of production (Lukács, 1962). This view brings out clearly the economic and social dimensions of Gregor's alienation, further expounding the multifaceted interpretations of Kafka's work.

### 2. Contemporary Contexts and Issues

While earlier interpretations of "The Metamorphosis" somehow provided a grounding, modern scholars broaden this scope to include modern contemporary issues in modern society. Contemporary contexts open new dimensions of meaning in the works of Kafka, proving the obvious importance of this novella in bringing to light modern challenges facing the world today, from mental health to digital isolation and the gig economy.

Recent research conducted on mental health draws parallels between the psychological deterioration of Gregor Samsa and modern mental health issues. Scholars point out that Gregor's existential despair, isolation, and alienation are parallel to people living in the modern world with anxiety disorder, depression, and other psychic illnesses (Fuchs, 2017; Strik et al., 2019). It marks

the universality of Kafka's quest into the human psyche and makes a pressing call for the importance of taking care of mental health in the present world.

Another such relevance that "The Metamorphosis" finds is in the impact of technology and digital isolation. One could view the physical and emotional separation of Gregor from his family as a forerunner of the disconnection encountered by people in this age of social media, who are digitally connected yet often isolated. Scholars have discussed in detail how the themes of isolation and alienation in Kafka's novella might be related to the effects that technology has had on human relationships, underscoring the importance of real human connections in a virtual world (Turkle, 2011; Carr, 2010).

The gig economy and the precariousness of modern labour offer an equally compelling context for the reinterpretation of "The Metamorphosis." Gregor's role as a travelling salesman and the pressures he is put through to provide for his family parallel very well with the conditions of gig economy workers facing uncertain employment conditions and economic instability. Contemporary scholarship on the gig economy has examined problems of job insecurity, lack of worker rights, and psychic costs of precarious labour; in different ways, it draws a line between these issues and Gregor's feeling of duty, burden, and eventual fall (Huws, 2016; Standing, 2011).

A closer look at the novella "The Metamorphosis" will reveal that it identifies and relates to modern concerns; new dimensions derived from Kafka's work serve to keep it relevant for discussion about human issues today. This interdisciplinary approach enables more than just an enriching understanding of the novella; it also highlights literature's continued illumination of the human condition across time and cultures.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

### 1. Alienation and Isolation

The transformation of Gregor Samsa into a giant insect in "The Metamorphosis" is the symbolic high point of his alienation and isolation from family and society. It may be said that the theme is apparent right from the beginning, for which the disgusting metamorphosis of Gregor forms an impassable boundary between him and the outside world. His family is first paralyzed with shock and later on repulsed, underscoring how disconnected he has become from human relationships. Gregor's alienation is not physical but emotional and psychological, and it reflects the human condition in general.

Alienation and isolation form such a prominent theme in contemporary society, especially in the setting of digital isolation and social media. Ironically, it is a time when everyone is connected and interrelated, yet human beings have never been so disengaged from one another. Studies have shown that the overuse of social media can create feelings of loneliness and depression, certainly no different from the isolation Gregor experiences (Turkle, 2011; Primack et al., 2017). Most social media platforms give one the feeling that they are in company while actually giving way to face-to-face interactions and deep relationships. This digital isolation reverberates Gregor's plight—superficial connections inasmuch as deep alienation gets draped in front.

### 2. Transformation and Identity

Gregor's transformation forms the central aspect of "The Metamorphosis," such that external changes resound deep into personal identity. He undergoes an existential crisis, in that he is forced to make sense of himself and his place in the world. At the outset, Gregor identifies himself as human but goes on to gradually identify with the insect form. The very duality of this fact illustrates the fluidity of identity and the pulse of struggle of the inner self toward the external realities.

People are also torn by identity crises in this digital era. These have been influenced by strong technologies shaping up to live avatars and personas online. Construction and continuous maintenance of digital identities on social network sites can cause the fragmentation of self. People come with their curated version of themselves online, which might mismatch with the identity they were holding onto, thereby creating confusion and identity dissonance. The phenomenon is that of the Gregorian transformation, where the outer self has changed and is now misaligned with the inner self, breaking the link between the physical form and his identity.

### 3. Existential Angst and Mental Health

Existential themes of searching for meaning in an uncaring universe are part and parcel of the metamorphosis. Gregor's metamorphosis and the reaction of his family members towards him evoke emotions of existential despair and nullity. His deteriorating mentality, characterized by isolation, helplessness, and purposelessness, seems to be in the grip of deep existential crisis.

Anxiety, depression, and other contemporary mental health-related problems often result from like concerns. Added to the pressures of life today are the fragmentations of traditional support systems, culminating in a growing sense of existential angst. It is surely a factor that today's factors such as social isolation and insecurity at work, linked with the pursuit of success at all costs, further exacerbate mental health problems (Smith & Yang, 2017; Briley & Tucker-Drob, 2014). This downward spiral of Gregor shows how so many people of modern society are suffering from similar psychological problems. Kafka's representation of an angst-ridden human condition provides the fertile ground through which a number of such existential themes find relevance even in the most contemporary models of mental illness.

## 1. Mental Health

Modern man has been occupying himself more and more with mental health issues, expressing the real and even profound psychological crises people have been going through. Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" is a very dominant illustration of depression; here, the main character, Esther Greenwood, undergoes a deep feeling of despair and disconnection. "I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had the feeling that I was a rag being pulled by invisible strings," Plath writes (Plath, 1963, p. 182). This portrait corresponds to the existential despair of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," in which Gregor's metamorphosis into a bug serves as the metaphor of his degrading psyche. Kafka crystallizes Gregor's deep isolation and worthlessness in the sentence, "I cannot tell you how I feel, but I am alone, and I am afraid" (Kafka, 1915).

Andrew Solomon's "The Noonday Demon" goes ahead to add more intricacies to mental illness by shedding light on the universal nature of depression and how it affects the victim. According to Solomon, "Depression is the inability to construct a future" (Solomon, 2001, p. 28). That makes his situation similar to Gregor in "The Metamorphosis", whose transformation does not only set him apart from his family members but also obstructs him from being able to view the future, which explains why the novella still depicts the struggle of people with mental health disorders to this day.

## 2. Technology and Isolation

One of the common themes discussed in contemporary literature is how technology effects human relations and furthers social isolation. Sherry Turkle's "Alone Together" further reveals that digital communication can result in lonely moments: "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. We use technology to create relationships but avoid real ones" (Turkle, 2011, p. 13). This mirrors the situation of Gregor Samsa in Kafka, whereby the physical transformation he undergoes in this literature entirely alienates him from any aspect of meaningful human interaction. The detachment of Gregor is related by Kafka through the statement, "He was cut off from everything he had known; his room had become a trap" (Kafka, 1915).

Wherein, in the digital superficiality of interactions, Jaron Lanier lambastes in "Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now" on the premise that "Social media gives us the illusion of connection while undermining the quality of our real relationships" (Lanier, 2018, p. 45). In some points, this critique is very much aligned with the themes that "The Metamorphosis" brought about, whereby Gregor's physical transformation into an insect has led to the emotional and social chasm that technology—in its modern sense—shares. The novella mirrors the alienation of the digital age, where one is grasping at tenuous connections.

## 3. The Gig Economy and Modern Labour

The impact of the gig economy on modern labour and associated instability is an essential point of concern in modern literature. In her *Gigged*, Sarah Kessler reviews and discusses the precarious nature of gig work, whereby "Gig workers" face the constant anxiety of not knowing when or where their next paycheck will come from" (Kessler, 2018, p. 77). This uncertainty parallels Gregor Samsa's experience in *The Metamorphosis* as his role as travelling salesman keeps him open to economic and life pressures and instability. Gregor's burdens are illustrated by Kafka with, "He had no way of knowing if he would ever return to his previous life" (Kafka, 1915).

"The Gig Economy" by Jessie Hempel further explores the psychological and economic toll of precarious labour, citing, "The insecurity of gig work makes for massive stress and a gnawing, perpetual fear of financial instability" (Hempel, 2016, p. 92). Most strikingly, Gregor's metamorphosis and consequent loss of employment reflect the instability of his time: having become a 'verminous creature,' he suffers from a physical handicap, though even more from psychic distress because he is unable to perform his role in his family. In this struggle of Gregor, what is shown by Kafka is actually one of the very first critiques against economic pressures on workers—something that arguably has some bearing on contemporary labour instability discourses.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Synthesizing Classic and Contemporary Insights

The lasting relevance of Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" becomes relevant if read in the light of today's concerns in society. A deeper comprehension of its thick thematic content and underlying meaning for the modern reader is possible to be uncovered only by fusing timeless readings with contemporary identifications. Alienation, identity, and existential angst—Kafka's themes—make a timeless comment on the human condition. Newer challenges like mental health, digital isolation, or the gig economy update these themes with new contexts within which to consider them.

In that sense, the theme of alienation in "The Metamorphosis" is very relevant in terms of digital isolation today. Gregor Samsa's physical metamorphosis, with his consequent seclusion, thus serves as a metaphor for the emotional and psychic disconnection of so many in this connected, digital, fragmented social world. As Sherry Turkle (2011) rightly puts it, "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. We use technology to create relationships but avoid real ones" (p. 13). This critique brings to light a dissonance between online personas and real identities, which turns out to be a struggle—a fight for identity—by which many can identify themselves with the transformation and identity crisis of Gregor.

The other significant strand of the theme of transformation and identity that Kafka strikingly rings out in his novella is one that can easily be reinterpreted in light of the challenges brought about by digital personas and online identities. Gregor's struggle to come to grips with his human identity, now within an insect form, serves to reflect the fragmentations of self one feels amidst today's digital age. Jaron Lanier (2018) criticized the superficial nature of digital interactions by saying "social media gives us the illusion of connection while undermining the quality of our real relationships" (p. 45). This critique brings out the dissonance of online personas from true identities, a struggle that pretty much echoes Gregor's transformation and identity crisis.

Existential angst is also addressed in "The Metamorphosis" and within contemporary mental health. It is in Kafka's account of the sinking feeling Gregor experiences during his decline that one comes upon a powerful analogue for the psychological struggle of people wrestling with anxiety, depression, and meaning-seeking. As Andrew Solomon noted (2001), "Depression is the inability to construct a future" (p. 28); this has a bearing both on the existential plight of Gregor and on what the novella might say about the challenges of modern mental health.

## 2. Implications for Modern Readers

There are several teachings and reflections in "The Metamorphosis" by Kafka that are relevant to modern man: empathy, understanding, and social critique. The alienation, identity crises, and the existential angst portrayed through the novella testify to the human need for proper relations and the psychological price a human being pays for being alone. These themes in modern times get fathomed as the immense effects that technology, unstable economies, and mental struggles cause on the human experience.

It is a work that beckons much more contemporary and profound reflection on how the structures of society and the digital technological advances of the day bind as much as they estrange. Drawing on the parallels between Gregor's alienation and digital isolation, it begs the question: How can real connections be built within our highly virtualized world? A step further, using Gregor's economic distress as representative of the gig economy, one would say it is time to ensure greater protection for workers' rights and to ensure more is being done to combat the psychological damage caused by precarious labour.

Kafka explores existential angst and mental health, and through reading it, one comes to consider larger implications for the contemporary world. Destigmatizing mental health conditions and creating a more supportive and understanding environment for those affected can be achieved if one is aware of the universality of psychological struggles.

"The Metamorphosis" is indeed an intensely relevant piece that retains relevance even with the modern-day reader. In that very way, the timeless themes of alienation, identity, and existential angst that Kafka addresses help us in understanding the predicaments faced by contemporary society. After all, literature was always meant to unmask the human condition and bring it a little closer to us. We synthesize classical and modern ideas, enabling us to realize just how relevant Kafka's body of work remains in engaging the challenges and complications of life today.

## CONCLUSION

### 1. Summary of Findings

Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" is an immortal work that gains relevance in its strong thematic insight into various issues of contemporary society. In this regard, the present research has come up with substantial evidence regarding the timelessness of Kafka's discussions on alienation, identity, and existential angst and their applicability in modern contexts such as mental health, digital isolation, and the gig economy.

In Kafka's hands, Gregor Samsa transforms into an insect, a powerful expression of alienation and isolation. It thus runs parallel to digital isolation in today's society, which has happened with mass addiction to social media, whereby the connectivity provided by the medium sinks one further into loneliness and disconnection. Similarly, Gregor's identity crisis, which is a direct outcome of his transformation, resonates with the fragmented selves people of today undergo with all the troubles of digital personas and online identities. The angst lingers on in "The Metamorphosis," and it is the height of the psychological struggles of individuals living today.

Gregor's downfall to a life of misery and worthlessness parallels the experiences of people struggling with mental illnesses like depression and anxiety disorders. The parallels running between Gregor's economic pressures as a travelling salesman and modern gig economy workers only underline the prescient critique of labour exploitation and psychic cost of precarious employment that the novella levels.

### 2. Future Research Directions

Although this research has shown the applicability of "The Metamorphosis" toward modern society, additional research in these areas might grant further understanding of the implications Kafka's work holds for modern society. Future studies may do so through the interface of disciplinary approaches that bring literary insight into meaningful combination with psychological, sociological, and technology studies-based modes of investigation for closer consideration of the alienating, identity-distorting, and existentially angsty nature of modernity.

Comparative analysis with other classic and modern literature might be done on an even larger scale. In this way, more meaning for these themes and their change in the history of humankind would be revealed. Authors such as Sylvia Plath, David Foster

Wallace, and contemporary ones writing about mental health, digital isolation, and labour problems would be able to enrich our perception of the universality and timelessness of these issues.

It would also be interesting to consider the various receptions and interpretations of the work of Kafka within such varying contexts of cultural, social, and economic factors. This would be useful in underpinning the different ways through which "The Metamorphosis" still relates to readers around the globe.

While the relevance of "The Metamorphosis" for contemporary societies has been emphasized in this paper, further research could give greater depth to Kafka's work and its implications for modern society. Those possible studies can incorporate interdisciplinary approaches: literary analyses with insights from psychology, sociology, technology studies, looking through these various dimensions concerning alienation, identity crises, and existential angst in far greater detail.

Also, such a cross-comparison with other canonized and modern works shall allow one to frame a wider scope of context in which the themes have evolved through time. Very enlightening comparative analyses on how universal and timeless these concerns are could be derived from authors like Sylvia Plath, David Foster Wallace, and contemporary writers on mental health, digital isolation, and labour concerns.

Discussion of ways in which cultural, social, and economic factors interact to affect reception and interpretation in these different contexts may offer valuable insight into the many ways in which "The Metamorphosis" continues speaking to people all around the world today.

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