

# Twentieth century turmoil reflections in literature



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During the twentieth century, life in Europe changed drastically, due to the multitude of events and changes that crowded this century. From the wars to the effects of the Industrial revolution, the lives of Europeans were constantly changing, with the priorities and views of society as a whole changing with the occurrences of the time. However, the eras such as World War I, World War II, and the roaring twenties all resulted in an increased demand for production, and therefore assembly lines and factories. This results in the increased detachment of the workers since there is no longer a sense of completeness and skill associated with the job. Instead, workers solely work on one aspect for hours a day. The mistreatment of the workers also add to this sense of alienation since at the time, abuse and taking advantage of the lower class was rampant in the world, especially in the Western world. Alienation is also profound during this era due to the effect war has on soldiers and on countries in general. The experiences and decisions of people in times of war often result in alienation which was extensive in this century. Literature in certain areas usually reflect the views of the people, and this is shown in works such as *Metamorphosis*, *The Stranger*, and *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Twentieth Century literature deploys methods of alienation to demonstrate the state of people's lives in society during this century. Although there are noticeable differences between books from different years, the use of alienation is present in most, showing Europe as a whole was experiencing the tragedy of alienation.

In *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, Kafka first alienates the reader by creating an unusual environment in which the reader is unable to relate to. The first line of the book states that the character is transformed into some

kind of vermin. By doing this, Kafka is able to make Gregor Samsa foreign and completely unrelatable, especially after his response to his peculiar situation. Instead of a rational response of panicking or even questioning what occurred, Samsa instead ignores the problem, waving it off as a sickness so that he could focus on work. However, when he begins to go into why work is constantly on his mind, the reader is able to sympathize more with the character. After failing to get to the office in time and even missing the second train, it is revealed that Samsa has to work, even though he dreads and dislikes his job, because he has to pay off the family debt. It is also later revealed that the whole family's well being depended on Samsa because no other family member worked. We even learn that it is the sister's dream to go to a music school for the violin and that Samsa was planning on working to the point where he could pay for her to attend. Although the reader may think that Samsa is completely unrelatable and unrealistic, Kafka is able to open up the reader and allows for sympathy through explaining the background of the protagonist.

The life of Gregor Samsa relates to the time in which Kafka wrote the *Metamorphosis*, which was during World War I. During this time, the Allies were still in need of fighting forces and soldiers were still deployed in the thousands. With war comes a cost, a cost that soldiers typically have to take. During 1915, there would have been a multitude of injured veterans and innocent soldiers. Society would have changed drastically since able bodied men were deployed and those who came back were no longer 'able.' To be sent off of the battle field would have mean an injury so severe that the soldier could no longer fight, which would often mean the inability to work as

well. This would make them feel alienated from society since overnight, their lives, bodies, and minds were changed drastically. Even those who were not physically hurt still had to live with the memories of war and the remorse of their actions. They would have watched their comrades die and may have participated in killing themselves. All of this accumulates to a problem that veterans still have today, which is the feeling of alienation. Kafka is able to demonstrate both the external alienation that veterans may feel by portraying the main character, Gregor, as a bug.

The book *The Stranger* by Albert Camus is another work from twentieth century Europe that follows the trend of alienating the protagonist. The protagonist, Meursault, first seems completely unlikable even though he is presented in the middle of a tragedy. The story begins at Meursault's mother's funeral, which would typically draw sympathy from readers. However, our introduction to this character does the opposite. Instead of feeling bad for the character, we think that the character is rude and disrespectful. This is because instead of paying his respects inside of the funeral and seeing his mother's body one last time, he stands outside to smoke and drink coffee. A possible explanation for this would be he is so overcome with grief that he can not go see his mother, but this is not supported. Instead, the opposite is shown since no emotion is described. Instead, he only describes the people at the funeral walking in and out. Not only does this make Meursault seem disrespectful, but it also portrays him as a cold and unforgiving character. This makes impossible for the readers to sympathize with the him.

Although the time period in which the *Stranger* was written was different than that of the *Metamorphosis*, the circumstances of the era were similar since it was the middle of World War II. However, the alienation that the *Stranger* focuses on differs from that of *Metamorphosis* since the emphasis is not on the relationship between soldiers and their surroundings but within the soldiers themselves. The conflict that is constantly recurring is Meursault's inability to feel and react to different events in his life. Not only does that make him harder to sympathize with, but it also highlights the problems with complete belief in facticity and bad faith. Throughout the book, Meursault accepts everything as a fact and does not believe that he could influence and cause change in any way. This is similar to how many of the axis powers saw France when the country surrendered to Hitler in the year of 1940. Although at the time, the outlook for the Allies powers was not positive, many people believed that France should have fought instead of surrendering to avoid more bloodshed. The leaders of France, including the Prime Minister Daladier, believed that if they could not fight against Nazism, which can be seen as bad faith. Camus captures the belief of facticity and the internal alienation that plagued France at the time in the *Stranger*.

A third twentieth century European work that also has a similar effect on the readers is *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. This book describes the daily routine of Ivan Denisovich, who is in a prison camp in Siberia. A short description like one stated may make the book seem like it is something that is extremely easy to empathize with. A prisoner in Siberia is someone that should pull on heartstrings since what most people know about Siberia is only that it is cold and it was where Russia used to

send its prisoners to die. This is similar to how Australia began since its original colonists were prisoners of Great Britain. However, although the readers expect to read about and empathize with an innocent and helpless victim in a Siberian prison camp, we later learn about his actual personality. Typically, when authors want readers to feel sorry for the protagonist, they make the main character helpless and innocent. Essentially, the perfect character is made. However, in the case of this story, the protagonist, Ivan Denisovich, is the opposite of a typical, perfect main character. Instead of honest, the first thing we hear about him is how he tried to fake a fever to get on the sick list. Then, when he is punished and told to mop the floors, he does not completely fulfill the task. Although the reader wants to empathize with the protagonist, it is not possible unless the reader can admit to being a cheater and being lazy him or herself.

The trend of alienating the readers from the protagonists is common in many twentieth century European works. This can be seen as the effect of the events that happened in Europe during this century as they all resulted in the alienation of Europeans at the time. The three books, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, are able to reflect the turmoil of the time through their unconventional narratives.