

Existentialist meaning in kafka's the metamorphosis

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary defines existentialism, in part, as "a philosophical theory that...emphasizes the existence of the individual person... determining their own development through acts of the will."

Existentialist work stresses the importance of the individual often denying the "existence of objective values." Existentialism is focused on choice, as well as the idea that people must exist before they can have any values. The *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka uses Gregor Samsa's struggle against existentialist principles, as well as the consequences surrounding Gregor's actions against the existentialist principles to exhibit a chiefly existentialist theme.

Jean-Paul Sartre was the pioneering philosopher in the existentialist movement who claimed that "existence preceded essence" and rejected the ideas of older philosophers that humans had a set nature. Human essence refers to "...ideas that [are] eternal and unchanging," such as those a person could obtain from following a religion. Aristotle believed the essence of humanity was reason, and that reason was what separated humans from animals (Fiero, 70). Sartre argued that humans have no predisposition to any sort of being, and existence in a purely physical manner comes first in human priorities. In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow theorized that humans have a need-based set of priorities, this theory is commonly referred to as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This hierarchy described physiological needs, such as those for food, water and basic bodily functions as being the most important. The theory also states that needs further up in the hierarchy, for example friendships and familial relationships, cannot be met until the levels in the hierarchy below these needs are met (Noltemeyer, 1).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is existentialist in nature because humans must meet physical needs in order to exist, before being able to have any sort of philosophy, like a religion, or essence. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor violates Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs after his transformation, therefore violating existentialist principles.

Gregor Samsa's attitude about going to work after his transformation is an example of existentialism because of the consequences that result when he fights the "existence before essence" concept of existentialism. When confronted with his transformation, Gregor immediately attempts to go back to work, despite being transformed into a "monstrous vermin" (Kafka, 1). Instead of trusting his nature and ensuring his needs as a living being, which are now different from the needs Gregor had before his transformation, are met; Gregor attempts to go to work out of obligation to his family member's needs. Gregor is violating Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs, and attempting to fulfill the love and belonging needs that are satisfied when he supports his family before filling his own physiological needs. These actions go directly against the nature of existentialism, and therefore cause Gregor physical harm and emotional distress (18, 19). Due to the consequences of violating the nature of existentialism, *The Metamorphosis* can be classified as existentialist because when Gregor's actions violate the principles of existentialism, the consequences are negative.

Existentialism focuses on choice as one of the defining aspects of human existence. The "freedom to choose" was at the heart of human existence and was what made people different from other animals. Humans alone are

responsible for their choices, as well as the consequences surrounding these choices. Sartre believed that almost all choices have more than one option and always have more than one outcome to a situation. He also claimed that man's choices always led to negativity because hindsight gives humans the ability to see the possible outcomes from choices they did not make. Sartre believed that to blame an outside source for a negative consequence from one's actions, or to claim the choice made was the only choice available is to act in "bad faith" and is "a form of self-deception and inauthenticity" Sartre also claimed that humans natural anxiety about these choices and that every choice made was reflection of humanity as a whole (Fiero, 70). The existentialist principles of choice and "existence before essence" coincide with each other in that the choices made by humans begin to give way to the essences that humans do not have intrinsically. These choices not only give way to the essence of a person, but define what essence they possess. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor attempts to violate the coupling of these existentialist principals and have an "essence" before choosing to act one way or another.

Gregor's situation before his transformation in *The Metamorphosis* is an example of existentialism because Gregor's choice to support his family instead of doing what he wishes results in negative consequences he can only see after his choice has been made. Gregor's family does not work and relies solely on him to pay the family debt (Kafka, 4). The other members of Gregor's family have the potential to work, yet none do and Gregor elects to work to support his family members (Cite). Only obligation to fulfill his

family's needs, and therefore his interpersonal needs, compel Gregor to work. Although the argument may be made that Gregor supports his family because he has to, Gregor actually supports his family because he chooses to. This choice leads to Gregor's pain. Not only is Gregor in physical pain from the abuse done unto him by his family, his physiology is in pain as well. Gregor stops leaving his room, does not eat and spends his days in agony (43). The Metamorphosis is existentialist because Gregor's choice to support to his family ultimately leads to negative consequences, and while a traditional manner of thinking would call Gregor's support of his family something he must do, it is actually something he chooses to do, therefore suffering from the outcome. When Gregor goes against another existentialist principle, the consequences are negative.

Existentialism places the most power in the individual, and The Metamorphosis is an existentialist work because it exhibits how lack of individualism leads to demise. Gregor loses his individuality after his transformation. He is no longer able to do the things he loves to do, or support his family. At the beginning of the story, Gregor has framed a picture of an advertisement with a pretty girl in a home-made frame, something he enjoys doing (1). Gregor does not get to do much, but his wood cutting hobby is something he enjoys. Gregor's sole purpose in life is to make enough money to support his family and pay off their debt (4). This compulsion makes Gregor an individual and gives his life meaning. When Gregor is unable to work or do any of the activities he could do before his transformation, he loses what makes him a person. Upon discovering

Gregor's dead body, the Samsa's maid exclaims "Come and have a look! It's croaked; it's lying there dead as a doornail" (52). She does not refer to Gregor as "he," but rather as "it," fully robbing Gregor of his humanity. Gregor dies due to the loss of his individuality. He is no longer a human being in a psychological sense, as well as physical. Once his former passions and purpose are lost, Gregor is not an individual, and therefore dies after being reduced to something less than human. The events that lead to Gregor's loss of individuality and subsequent death are existentialist in nature. Gregor dies when he loses the chief idea of existentialism, individuality.

Jo Bogaerts once wrote "French existentialism was among the first intellectual movements to bring Kafka critical renown as well as widespread popularity..." (Bogarets, 69). It can be concluded that Kafka's popularity with French existentialists is due to his work, *The Metamorphosis*, an example of existentialist literature. Jean-Paul Sartre credited Kafka as wanting to "describe the human condition" (70). Kafka achieves an existentialist this existentialist description of the human condition in *The Metamorphosis*. By showing how the rejection of existentialist principles, including the focus on the individual, choices, and the idea that one must exist before one can have true values, lead to negative consequences, Kafka champions an existentialist cause.