

Kafka's stories "metamorphosis and a hunger artist" research paper

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



**ASSIGN
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One of the reasons why Franz Kafka is considered one of the 20th century's most prominent writers is that the reading of his masterpieces leaves very few doubts as to the fact that, while pursuing a literary career, he remained thoroughly aware of what used to account for the major discursive issue of the time - a phenomena of people growing increasingly alienated from the surrounding socio-political reality.

As Kundera noted, " His (Kafka's) enigmatic parables... demonstrate the alienation of capitalist society... (and) the loneliness and dread of man in a Godless cosmos" (88).

Therefore, it is fully explainable why the motif of alienation continually reemerges throughout most of his writings - Kafka strived to expose the actual reason why many of his contemporaries experienced the sensation of an emotional unease with the world, in general, and with their own sense of self-identity, in particular. In my paper, I will aim to explore the validity of this suggestion at length, in regards to Kafka's stories *Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist*.

Ever since the time of their early childhood, the majority of people is being made to believe in the ' sanctity of human life', based upon the assumption that every individual's existential uniqueness should be regarded as ' thing in itself', regardless of what happened to be his or her social status.

This idea, however, cannot be regarded as anything but utterly fallacious, in the conceptual sense of this word. After all, unlike what it is being the case with natural resources, ' human resources' are self-renewable, which means

that the extent of just about every person's actual worth is being reflective of his or her varying ability to be considered 'resource', in the first place. This is what Kafka's story Metamorphosis is all about.

In it, after having woken up one morning, the character of Gregor Samsa realized himself being turned into a hideous bug. However, it was namely the social implications of such his metamorphosis that alarmed Gregor more than anything else did. This is because Gregor rightly concluded that, being a bug, he would hardly be able to take care of his professional duties of a travelling salesman.

Nevertheless, being a responsible person, Gregor tried to get off the bed and to go to work, "A slight indisposition, a dizzy spell, has prevented me from getting up. I'm still lying in bed right now. But I'm quite refreshed once again. I'm in the midst of getting out of bed. Just have patience for a short moment!" (par. 15).

Apparently, Gregor was well aware of the fact that, in order for just about anyone to be considered a society's productive member, he or she must never cease being fully employed - those who cannot work are nothing but the society's 'burden'. In other words, Gregor's physical metamorphosis only indirectly contributed to the rapidly emerged sensation of worthlessness, on his part.

The actual reason why, as the story progressed, this Gregor's sensation was becoming increasingly acute, is that due to his physical impairment, produced by the metamorphosis, the capitalist society was no longer willing

to recognize Gregor's basic humanity – quite contrary to the fact that, despite his external appearance of a bug, Gregor never ceased being himself.

This is because, as it was implied earlier, the objective laws of nature do not correlate with the religion-based assumption of the human life's 'sanctity'. People are nothing but the physical carriers of genes (DNA), concerned with replicating themselves into posterity. As Dawkins pointed out, "We are all survival machines for the same kind of replicator – molecules called DNA" (24).

If a particular individual ends up being incapable of ensuring the survival of its genes (e. g. due to the loss of a job, which eventually causes starvation and death), the Darwinian laws will naturally deem such an individual 'worthless'.

However, it is in people's very nature to think of themselves as being so much more than just the lumps of an organic matter. Therefore, there nothing too surprising about the fact that, when faced with the workings of 'godless' universe, people often experience the sensation of a cognitive dissonance, which in turn causes them to lead socially withdrawn lifestyles.

This is exactly the reason why, as Kafka's story progressed, Gregor was growing increasingly reluctant to come out of his room. Apparently, the true horror of his metamorphosis was not so much concerned with the alteration of his physical appearance, but rather with his transformation into a 'social

parasite', who had to rely on others, as the actual mean of sustaining his physical existence.

Hence, the sensation of existential alienation, on Gregor's part, reflected by his depression-driven desire to remain out of his family members' sight, " He (Gregor) scurried under the couch, where, in spite of the fact that his back was a little cramped and he could no longer lift up his head, he felt very comfortable right away and was sorry only that his body was too wide to fit completely under the couch" (par. 37).

Being a self-conscious individual, Gregor tried his best to spare his mother, father and sister of seeing him, as he knew perfectly well that there was nothing aesthetically pleasing about his appearance of a bug.

Nevertheless, deep inside Gregor still maintained an irrational hope that, even though he could no longer contribute to the family's financial well-being, his mother, father and sister were not overly burdened with his presence in the household. Such his hope, however, was about to be proven short-lived. After all, despite the fact that Gregor's sister initially treated him with compassion, as time went on, she was becoming increasingly weary of having to take care of her insect-brother.

Eventually, she came to a point of refusing to believe that there was any humanness left in Gregor, " If it were Gregor, he would have long ago realized that a communal life among human beings is not possible with such a creature and would have gone away voluntarily. Then we would not have a brother, but we could go on living and honor his memory.

But this animal plagues us" (par. 75). Apparently, Gregor's metamorphosis did not only affect his state of mind, while causing him to act in a socially alienated manner, but it also had a negative impact on the main character's loved ones, as well. It appears that, while being exposed to the sight of 'transformed' Gregor, they were becoming endowed with suspicions, as to whether their continual association with the hideous bug was also making them less human.

In other words, the motif of alienation in Kafka's story is not only being explored, in regards to the character of Gregor, but also in regards to the story's other notable characters. And, as psychologists are being well aware of, if one's alienation-fueled depression is being left untreated, it becomes only the matter of time, before the concerned individual would grow suicidal.

This is exactly what happened to Gregor. After having realized that his relatives were not welcoming his continual existence, Gregor did not even try to recover from the injury, sustained from his sister, and decided to pass away instead, " In this business, his own thought that he had to disappear was, if possible, even more decisive than his sister's... His head sank all the way down, and from his nostrils his last breath flowed weakly out" (par. 93).

Despite its unnaturalness, such Gregor's decision was thoroughly justified. This is because the representatives of Homo Sapiens species are socially-integrated beings. What it means is that, once being deprived of an opportunity to lead socially interactive lifestyles, they necessarily succumb

to depression, which in turn often causes them to decide to end the futility of their continual existence.

The motif of social alienation can be easily identified in Kafka's story *A Hunger Artist*, as well. This story's plot revolves around the so-called 'hunger artist' - an individual who earns money out of having turned its ability to fast for lengthy periods of time into a public spectacle.

Kafka's hunger artist was able to attract intellectually marginalized spectators by the mean of providing them with an opportunity to experience a powerful emotional shock, while exposed to the sight of him sitting motionless in the cage and not touching any food for the duration of forty days. Nevertheless, even the hunger artist's most committed fans could not quite understand what motivated him to continue putting up his show.

After all, the overwhelming majority of these people believed that the reason why the hunger artist was able to withhold from consuming any food for more than a month, is that he was inventive enough to have some food secretly delivered to him, while there were no spectators around his cage.

This is the reason why some of the hunger artist's fans used to watch him 24/7, so that he would not be able to have even a single bite of secretly delivered food, " Sometimes there were nightly groups of watchers who carried out their vigil very laxly... clearly intending not to allow the hunger artist a small refreshment" (par. 2).

Yet, if anything, the hunger artist wanted to cheat his fans the least, “ During the period of fasting the hunger artist would never, under any circumstances, have eaten the slightest thing, not even if compelled by force. The honor of his art forbade it” (par. 2).

Apparently, these fans were arrogant enough to never consider the possibility that the hunger artist's public performances did not have anything to do with his presumed preoccupation with trying to make easy money, but rather with the artist's ability to derive an aesthetic pleasure out of his ability to exercise a complete conscious control over its animalistic instincts.

In its turn, this can be explained by the fact that; whereas, the hunger artist was endowed with the so-called ‘ Faustian’ mentality (which prompted him to seek self-actualization by the mean of subjecting the emanations of a surrounding reality to his will-power), psychologically speaking, his spectators were nothing but ‘ Apollonians’ (individuals driven by their animalistic anxieties).

Hence, their inability to consider the possibility that there may be a purely ‘ metaphysical’ purpose of one's existence (Greenwood 53). What it means, is that while entertaining people, the hunger artist never ceased being emotionally and intellectually alienated from them.

The same can be said on the part of spectators, who never stopped suspecting him of being dishonest, “ Most of them (spectators)... believed he was a publicity seeker or a total swindler, for whom, at all events, fasting was easy” (par. 3). This explains why, while fasting, the hunger artist could

not care less about the impression he was making on the crowd – he was his own performer and the audience in one body.

The validity of this suggestion can be well illustrated in regards to the fact that the hunger artist always tried to resist being taken out of the cage, at the end of his 40-day fasting periods. Apparently, he could not quite relate to the spectators' selfish interest in preventing him from dying, at the expense of denying him the chance to beat his own fasting-record, " Why stop right now after forty days?

He could have kept going for even longer, for an unlimited length of time. Why stop right now, when he was in his best form, indeed, not yet even in his best fasting form?" (par. 3). It appears that, despite how spectators used to perceive him, the hunger artist never considered himself an entertainer *de facto*.

This explains why, after having ended up being completely forgotten by his former fans, the hunger artist nevertheless continued fasting. This also reveals the actual significance of the dying hunger artist's remark about the fact that there was not much of a rationale for people to admire his fasting skills, throughout the course of his career, as an entertainer, " You shouldn't admire it... I couldn't find a food which tasted good to me. If had found that, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle of myself" (par. 9).

Of course, there was not any truth in this remark – the hunger artist simply wanted to show that his former spectators were not worthy of his performances. Yet, it was only at the end of his life that the hunger artist was

able to realize this simple truth. What prompted him to do so is the fact that, by walking straight to the cages with animals, without noticing the cage with the hunger artist inside, spectators were proving themselves not much different from the horned and tailed creatures of the nature that they came to see.

Therefore, it will only be logical, on our part, to suggest that the Kafka story's ultimate conclusion once again stresses out the motif of alienation. While facing death, the hunger artist had enough courage to admit to himself that the reason why spectators used to admire him, is that they perceived him as something he has been trying hard not to be - a money-greedy human animal. The ironic sounding of the story's final scene is self-evident.

I believe that the provided earlier line of argumentation, in regards to how the motif of existential/social alienation defines the philosophical significance of Kafka's stories *Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist*, is being thoroughly consistent with the paper's initial thesis-statement. Apparently, it was Kafka's proficiency in exploring this particular motif in many of his literary works, which established objective preconditions for him to be considered a truly great writer.

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