# Beyond the Insect Body: Alienation, Existential Crisis, and the Human Condition in Kafka's The Metamorphosis

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis has long been read through separate critical lenses — symbolic, psychological, social, existential — yet few studies have asked what happens when these readings are held together rather than apart. This gap matters because Gregor Samsa's transformation resists tidy categorization; it is, at once, a domestic tragedy, a philosophical parable, and a quiet indictment of a world that prices people by their output. Methods: Using a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in close textual analysis, this study examines Kafka's novella alongside both classical and recent literary criticism. Passages concerning Gregor's transformation, his family relationships, and his psychological interiority were purposively selected and read against established alienation and existentialist frameworks to trace how these threads interact across the text. Results: The analysis suggests Gregor's alienation predates his physical change — it is unmasked, not created, by it — and that his silence about why he has transformed functions less as an unresolved plot hole than as a deliberate absurdist gesture. Family rejection emerges as the mechanism through which economic usefulness quietly replaces love as the family's organizing value. Conclusion: Read together, these threads support a single, integrated claim: Gregor's transformation dramatizes the erosion of human worth in a world that measures people by productivity, offering a philosophical vision that remains, uncomfortably, current.

**Keywords**

Franz Kafka; The Metamorphosis; alienation; existential crisis; human condition

## 1. Introduction

There is something almost too neat about the opening line of *The Metamorphosis* — a man wakes up as an insect, and the story simply moves on. No scream, no explanation, no narrator pausing to marvel at the impossibility of it. Kafka doesn't ask us to believe the transformation; he asks us to notice what nobody in the story bothers to ask about it. That refusal to explain is, I'd argue, the real subject of the novella, and it's worth sitting with before turning to what Gregor Samsa's body has actually become.

Kafka (1883–1924) remains one of the most persistently reread writers of the twentieth century, in part because his fiction rarely tells readers what to feel. His protagonists are ordinary people dropped into circumstances that expose,

**Significance |** This study reframes Gregor Samsa's transformation as a unifying lens for understanding modern alienation, existential anxiety, and human dignity.

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almost clinically, the loneliness and uncertainty sitting underneath ordinary life (Corngold, 1973; Gray, 2005). *The Metamorphosis*, published in 1915, has attracted continuous critical attention for exactly this reason: it takes something absurd — a man becoming an insect — and treats it as almost beside the point. What Kafka seems interested in is not the insect but everything the insect makes visible.

Alienation is usually where readings of the novella begin, and for good reason. Gregor's transformation does not sever him from his family, his job, and himself so much as reveal that those severances had already happened, quietly, over years of unexamined obligation (Hossain, 2014; Robertson, 1985). It's a subtle but important distinction. His body changes overnight; his isolation did not. Long before the insect appears, Gregor is a man who has folded his entire identity into his job as a traveling salesman — a life organized around debt, duty, and other people's expectations, with almost nothing left over for himself. The transformation, in this sense, functions less as a cause of his alienation than as its confession.

From there, the novella opens onto harder, more existential ground. Gregor never learns why this happened to him, and — this is easy to miss on a first read — Kafka never really lets him ask. Camus (1955) reads this silence as central to Kafka's vision of the absurd: a world in which human beings keep searching for meaning despite the world's flat refusal to supply any. Whether or not one accepts Camus's full philosophical apparatus, the observation holds up on the page. Gregor's first coherent thought, upon discovering he is an insect, concerns being late for work — not, notably, what he has become (Kafka, 1915/2007). That misplaced priority says more about the emptiness of his prior life than any direct commentary from the narrator could. More recent scholarship has extended this reading, noting that contemporary literature continues to stage exactly this kind of crisis — characters whose isolation and search for connection feel less like individual pathology and more like a shared modern condition (Beveridge, 2018; Hasnain et al., 2023).

Kafka's symbolism deserves its own mention here, if only briefly, because it does a great deal of quiet work throughout the text. The locked door, the discarded apple lodged in Gregor's back, Grete's violin playing to a room that can no longer properly hear it — these are not decorative details. Recent readings of the novella's spatial symbolism, particularly of Gregor's increasingly prison-like room, suggest that physical confinement doubles as psychological confinement (Wesley, 2024), while broader scholarship on literary transformation more generally treats bodily change as a proxy for inward, often unspeakable, psychological shifts (Hossain et al., 2025).

And yet — despite decades of excellent scholarship on each of these strands individually — surprisingly few studies have tried to hold alienation, existential crisis, and Kafka's broader philosophical vision together in a single frame (Azad et al., 2025; Manzar et al., 2024). Treated separately, each reading is persuasive but partial. This study attempts something more integrative: to ask not just what Gregor's transformation *means*, but how alienation, existential anxiety, and the erosion of dignity operate together, as a single sustained argument Kafka makes about what it costs to be valued only for what one produces.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Study design.

This study used a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis — the standard approach for literary-critical inquiry into symbolism, theme, and philosophical meaning (Corngold, 1973). Rather than testing a hypothesis in the empirical sense, the design was oriented toward building a defensible, evidence-anchored interpretation, one that could be checked and, in principle, replicated by another reader working from the same sources and the same procedure.

### 2.2 Primary source.

The primary text was Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, read in the Corngold translation (Kafka, 1915/2007). A single translation was used deliberately, and consistently, throughout the analysis; translation choices shape connotation in ways that matter for close reading, so mixing translations would have quietly undermined the internal consistency of the argument.

### 2.3 Secondary source selection.

Secondary sources were identified through a combination of database searching (Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar) using the terms "Kafka," "Metamorphosis," "alienation," "existentialism," and "symbolism," supplemented by citation-chaining from foundational works already known to be central to Kafka scholarship (Camus, 1955; Corngold, 1973; Gray, 2005; Robertson, 1985). Inclusion favored: (a)

peer-reviewed or otherwise scholarly sources, (b) works directly addressing *The Metamorphosis* or closely related theoretical frameworks (existentialism, alienation theory), and (c) a mix of foundational (pre-2000) and recent (post-2018) scholarship, so the analysis wouldn't lean entirely on either older consensus or newer trends. Sources tangential to the novella's core themes, or lacking clear scholarly grounding, were excluded — though, admittedly, that line isn't always crisp, and a handful of borderline sources were kept where they offered a genuinely distinct angle.

**2.4 Analytical procedure.**

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, passages concerning Gregor's transformation, his family relationships, and his interior psychological state were purposively identified through repeated close readings of the primary text. Second, these passages were interpreted against the theoretical frameworks established in the secondary literature — alienation theory (Hossain, 2014; Robertson, 1985), existentialist philosophy (Camus, 1955), and symbolic/spatial readings (Wesley, 2024) — with particular attention to where these frameworks converged on the same textual moments, since convergence across independent readings offered a rough check on interpretive plausibility. Third, findings were organized thematically rather than chronologically, allowing alienation, existential crisis, and philosophical vision to be traced as interacting strands rather than isolated topics.

**2.5 Trustworthiness and reflexivity.**

Two safeguards were used to keep the interpretation grounded rather than merely asserted. First, every major interpretive claim was checked against at least one piece of textual evidence and, where possible, cross-referenced against existing scholarship, to avoid claims resting on a single reader's impression alone. Second, it's worth acknowledging plainly that literary interpretation is never fully neutral — the reader's theoretical commitments shape what counts as significant in the first place. This analysis leans toward alienation and existentialist frameworks by design, which means other equally valid readings (Marxist, psychoanalytic, disability-studies) were consciously set aside rather than overlooked; that boundary is stated explicitly so readers can weigh the interpretation accordingly, not treat it as the only possible one.

**2.6 Reproducibility.**

Because the primary text, translation, search terms, inclusion criteria, and analytical framework are all specified above, another researcher could substantially reconstruct this study's evidentiary base, even if their final interpretive judgments differed — which, in qualitative literary research, is less a flaw than the expected and legitimate outcome of independent close reading.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Alienation Made Visible: The Transformation as Revelation, Not Rupture

Perhaps the most consistent finding across the analysis is one that initially seems counterintuitive: Gregor's alienation does not begin with his transformation. It's tempting to read the insect body as the cause of his isolation — the obvious, dramatic rupture — but the text resists that reading almost immediately. Gregor's first thought on waking is not horror at his new form but anxiety over missing his train (Kafka, 1915/2007), which tells us, rather bluntly, that his sense of self was already organized entirely around obligation before anything physical changed. Corngold (1973) makes a related point, arguing that Kafka deliberately builds a gap between Gregor's persistently human mind and his increasingly alien body — a gap that, this analysis suggests, functions as a kind of visual metaphor for alienation that had been present, invisibly, all along.

### 3.2 Family, Usefulness, and the Fragility of Conditional Love

A second, closely related pattern concerns the Samsa family. Their affection for Gregor, it turns out, was never quite separable from his income — and once that income disappears, so, gradually, does their willingness to see him as family at all. Robertson (1985) frames this as symptomatic of a broader Kafkaesque concern: institutions, even the most intimate one (the family), organized around economic value rather than emotional connection. What's striking on close reading is how *quickly* this shift happens once Gregor stops earning — within weeks, not years — which suggests the family's prior warmth was more precarious than anyone, including perhaps Gregor himself, had recognized.

### 3.3 The Absurd and the Unasked Question

A third finding concerns Gregor's curious lack of curiosity about his own condition. He never demands an explanation, and Kafka never offers one. Camus's (1955)

reading of this silence as an expression of the absurd — the human tendency to keep searching for meaning in a universe indifferent to that search — holds up well against the text. Gregor's energy goes almost entirely toward practical worry (his job, his family's finances) rather than existential inquiry, which paradoxically makes the existential crisis *more* visible to the reader, even as it remains largely unspoken by the character himself.

### 3.4 Symbolism as Psychological Architecture

Finally, the analysis supports recent readings of Kafka's use of physical space, particularly Gregor's room, as symbolic architecture for his psychological state (Wesley, 2024). As the room fills with discarded furniture and eventually becomes a place the family avoids altogether, its transformation tracks Gregor's own — from person to burden to, finally, something the family would rather not look at. This pattern is consistent with broader claims in recent literary scholarship that physical transformation in fiction often operates as a proxy for inward, otherwise unspeakable psychological change (Hossain et al., 2025), and it reinforces this study's central claim that alienation, existential crisis, and symbolic representation in the novella are not separate threads so much as one argument, told three ways.

## 4. Conclusion

Read as a whole, Gregor Samsa's transformation resists being filed under a single critical heading. It is, at once, a symbol of alienation that predates the insect body, a quiet existentialist meditation on a question Gregor never thinks to ask, and a case study in how quickly conditional love collapses once its economic justification disappears. What this analysis has tried to show is that these readings are not competing explanations but interlocking ones — each sharpens the others when held together rather than apart. That integration, more than any single new claim about the text, is this study's contribution. Kafka's refusal to explain the transformation was never a gap to be filled; it was the argument itself. And that argument — that human worth is fragile when tied to usefulness — has, if anything, only gained urgency in the century since Kafka wrote it.

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## Author Contributions

**M.S.H.:** Conceptualization, literature review, original draft preparation. **M.S.A.C.:** Supervision, methodology guidance, critical revision, final approval.

## Competing Financial Interests

The authors declare no competing financial interests related to this manuscript.

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