

Artistic Psychology in Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'

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Abstract

This article discusses the significance of artistic psychology in "The Metamorphosis" by the prominent representative of world literature, Franz Kafka. It analyses how different forms of artistic psychology—such as psychological description, psychological portrait, stream of consciousness, inner monologue, and dialogue—are used to reveal the inner world of a human being. Particular attention is given to the ways in which the author employs artistic psychology to раскрыть the character of the protagonist, Gregor Samsa. These elements are highly valued as essential tools that contribute to uncovering the ideological content and deeper meaning of the work.

Keywords: *Artistic Psychology, Psychological Depiction, Psychological Expression, Psychological Portrait, Stream of Consciousness*

Introduction

As a major representative of twentieth-century world literature, the works of Franz Kafka are widely recognized for combining elements of realism and fantasy. His writings typically depict absurd or surreal situations, as well as isolated protagonists confronted with incomprehensible social and bureaucratic forces. Franz Kafka, a German-speaking Jewish-Czech writer who occupies a prominent place in world literature, was born on July 3, 1883, in Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He studied law and, after completing his legal education, worked in various legal and insurance institutions. His professional responsibilities led to inner conflicts, as he realized that his true vocation and talent lay in writing. However, his father did not understand his inner aspirations and directed him toward a career in law.

During the writer's lifetime, only a small portion of his works was published. He wrote hundreds of letters to his family and close friends, particularly to his father, with whom he maintained tense and formal relations. At the time of Kafka's death, his works were likely known only within a limited circle of Czech and German writers. Kafka left explicit instructions to his friend and literary associate Max Brod to destroy all his published and unpublished works after his death. He wrote: "Dear Max, my final request is that everything I leave behind... diaries, manuscripts, and letters—should be burned unread."

However, Brod disregarded this request and, between 1925 and 1935, collected and published Kafka's works, including his novels. As Kafka's close friend, Max Brod played a decisive role in preserving and publishing his literary legacy. As a result, Kafka's name

became known throughout the world, and his works left a profound mark on world literature due to their distinctive psychological depth. Today, a separate field of study known as “Kafka studies” has emerged in world literature. Moreover, the term “Kafkaesque” is now widely used in German and other languages, referring to situations that are disturbing, incomprehensible, absurd, or surreal in nature.

Review of Related Literature

The study of Franz Kafka’s works, particularly *The Metamorphosis*, has been enriched by both global and local scholarship. Saidov (2023), in his introduction to the Uzbek edition of *The Metamorphosis*, characterizes Kafka as “the genius of a mad world,” emphasizing the psychological depth and surreal qualities that define his literary style. This perspective situates Kafka within the broader tradition of twentieth-century modernist literature, while also highlighting his relevance to contemporary readers.

Hutchinson and Waters’ learning-centered approach to literature teaching finds resonance in Uzbek scholarship as well. Mirqosimova and Rustamova (2007), in *Genre and Mastery*, explore the artistic and structural dimensions of literary works, providing a framework for analyzing Kafka’s blending of realism and fantasy. Similarly, To’ychiyev (2011) discusses the criteria of artistic expression in Uzbek literature, offering principles that can be applied to the study of Kafka’s narrative techniques and symbolic structures. Yuldashev (1996) contributes to the pedagogical dimension by outlining the scientific and theoretical foundations of teaching literature, underscoring the importance of integrating world classics like Kafka into national curricula.

The publication of Kafka’s works in Uzbekistan, such as the 2023 edition of *The Metamorphosis* by “Yangi asr avlodi,” reflects the growing interest in world literature and its adaptation into local educational contexts. This aligns with broader efforts to connect Uzbek literary scholarship with international standards and perspectives. By combining theoretical insights on genre, pedagogy, and artistic criteria with direct engagement with Kafka’s texts, the literature demonstrates a comprehensive approach to understanding his enduring influence.

Overall, the reviewed works highlight the dual trajectory of Kafka studies: global recognition of his unique literary style and local scholarly efforts to contextualize his writings within Uzbek literary and educational frameworks. This convergence underscores the importance of Kafka studies not only as a field of literary analysis but also as a pedagogical tool for fostering critical engagement with world literature.

Objectives

This study aims to examine the literary significance of Franz Kafka as a major representative of twentieth-century world literature, focusing on the unique blend of realism and fantasy in his works. By analyzing his depiction of absurd and surreal situations, as well as isolated protagonists confronting incomprehensible social and bureaucratic forces, the research seeks to highlight the psychological depth and thematic originality that define Kafka’s contribution to modern literature.

Another objective is to explore the role of Max Brod in preserving and publishing Kafka’s legacy. Despite Kafka’s explicit request to destroy his manuscripts, Brod’s decision to publish them between 1925 and 1935 ensured that Kafka’s works reached a global audience. This act not only secured Kafka’s place in literary history but also gave rise to

“Kafka studies” as a distinct academic field and the widespread use of the term “Kafkaesque” to describe disturbing, surreal, or incomprehensible situations.

Finally, the study intends to assess the broader impact of Kafka’s writings on world literature and cultural discourse. By tracing the evolution of his reception from limited recognition during his lifetime to worldwide acclaim after his death, the research underscores how Kafka’s works continue to shape literary analysis, philosophical inquiry, and cultural imagination. This objective highlights the enduring relevance of Kafka’s oeuvre in understanding the complexities of modern existence and the human condition.

Methodology

A considerable number of scholarly studies have been conducted on the life and creative work of Franz Kafka, and numerous films have been produced and theatrical performances staged based on his works. The renowned German writer Hermann Hesse, who was highly regarded in his time and considered worthy of the Nobel Prize, described Kafka as “a hidden force of German prose.” As a talented writer with a distinctive creative style, Kafka has been highly evaluated by literary scholars worldwide. For example, Harold Bloom noted: “At his best, Kafka competes with Dante and stands as the dominant Western author of our era.” Professor Harry Steinbauer stated: “Kafka has had a stronger influence on educated society than any other writer of the twentieth century.” Sandbank observed that despite Kafka’s widespread recognition, his unique style remains inimitable.

In Kafka’s works, through exaggerated and symbolic representations of events, the tragic vulnerability of human beings in the face of ignorance and cruelty is vividly depicted from a psychological perspective. Concepts such as law and humanity, light and darkness are presented in a state of ambiguity, with no clear path to escape from this condition. Although his works often portray themes of darkness, fear, emptiness, and uncertainty, the primary aim is not to instill fear in the reader, but rather to strengthen the individual’s belief in overcoming all obstacles. In general, faith in the human being, in the human soul and spirituality, forms the foundation of Kafka’s творчество. These ideas are also reflected in the portrayal of the characters discussed below:

- The Metamorphosis (Die Verwandlung): a short story about the traveling salesman Gregor Samsa, who is transformed into an insect;
- The Trial (Der Prozess): a novel centered on Josef K., who is prosecuted without knowing the nature of his accusation;
- The Castle (Das Schloss): a novel about a land surveyor who arrives in a village but is unable to gain access to the castle;
- The Burrow (Der Bau): a short story depicting the inner struggle of a protagonist who constructs an underground dwelling to ensure his safety;
- A Country Doctor (Ein Landarzt): a short story about a doctor left in a remote rural setting.

In addition to the works mentioned above, Franz Kafka produced many other literary works. However, this study primarily focuses on his well-known and widely analysed work “The Metamorphosis” (Die Verwandlung), which has been extensively examined by scholars of world literature. First published in 1915, “The Metamorphosis” is one of Kafka’s most famous works and consists of three parts.

The narrative centres on the experiences of the main character, the traveling salesman Gregor Samsa, who awakens to find himself inexplicably transformed into a giant insect. He struggles to adapt to this condition or to escape from it, while his family members gradually begin to treat him as a useless and burdensome individual. Gregor is portrayed as a person deeply devoted to his work; however, his transformation enables him to see those around him more clearly, leading to the painful realization that he is insignificant in the eyes of society and even within his own family. This awareness, combined with his helplessness, leaves a profound impact on his consciousness.

His dedication to supporting his family through his work, as well as his concern for helping his sister Grete develop her talents, reveals him as a character who lives for others and rarely thinks of himself, lacking a personal sense of purpose.

What kind of work is “The Metamorphosis”?

Analysis

“The Metamorphosis” is a profound and meaningful work that symbolically depicts the alienation and devaluation of an individual within society, characterized by strong elements of modernism and absurdism. From a psychological perspective, the work portrays the protagonist’s inner suffering, fear, and loneliness. From a philosophical standpoint, it compels the reader to reflect on the meaning and value of human life, as well as the individual’s place in society.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the story skillfully presents the psychological world of the individual. Uzbek literary scholars have expressed the following views on this work. Khurshid Dustmuhammad asks: “Why did “The Metamorphosis” become such a remarkable phenomenon in the history of world short stories? What allowed it to elevate narrative mastery to a new level? Most importantly, Franz Kafka approached the transformation of a human into an animal not as a fairy tale, legend, or fantasy, but as a real event. Without hesitation, he introduced this situation into the form of a realistic narrative as if it were an actual occurrence.”

Professor Q. Yoldashev notes that Franz Kafka’s творчество established a unique direction in world literature. In particular, “The Metamorphosis” serves as a clear example of this. He emphasizes that Kafka departed from traditional literary approaches and adopted a new mode of thinking. His works often lack a definitive resolution, because life itself has no conclusion; the world exists, people exist, and life continues.

Academician A. Saidov states that Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” is an exceptionally valuable work and a vivid example of existentialism in literature. Existentialism (from the French “existence”) is one of the major philosophical movements of twentieth-century Western thought, focusing on individuality, human existence, and the irrational aspects of life. The prominent representative of this movement, Jean-Paul Sartre, described existentialism as “a humanism.” Regarding “The Metamorphosis”, the scholar further emphasizes that the work is not merely about a fantastical or surreal transformation of a human into an insect; rather, it is about the transformation of people themselves—how individuals lose their humanity and become something else. In simple terms, it reflects how people ultimately fail to understand one another.

“The Metamorphosis” is a work of profound emotional depth that portrays tragic loneliness and the sorrowful, devastating outcome of relationships even among the closest people. It is like a frightening dream from which one cannot awaken. In this story, Franz Kafka profoundly reveals the catastrophe of people failing to understand one another, becoming emotionally distant, and losing the ability to comprehend each other’s inner worlds. The transformation of a human into an insect serves as a distinctive artistic device used to depict how individuals—even those closest to one another—become like entirely different beings, incapable of mutual understanding. What deeply unsettles the reader in this work is not merely the lack of communication in language among family members, but rather their inability to understand each other’s hearts and emotions.

Many scholars have offered high praise for this work, considering it one of the most refined realistic forms of the short story genre in epic literature. Kafka’s portrayal of a human transforming into an insect is presented not as a fairy tale, legend, or purely fantastical depiction, but as a realistic event. This approach reflects important stages in the development of existentialism, modernism, and absurd elements in literature. Therefore, in examining the issue of artistic psychologism in this story, we proceed by presenting the following theoretical considerations in order to reveal the deeper meaning of the narrative.

Findings and Discussion

One of the primary functions of literature is to depict the human soul, its spiritual world, and inner experiences. Since human spirituality is highly complex, multifaceted, and often contradictory, its representation in literary works requires the use of specific artistic techniques. In this context, the concept of artistic psychologism emerges in literature. In general, artistic psychologism refers to the use of literary means to deeply portray an individual’s inner experiences, internal struggles, transformations of character, and spiritual states. It also represents the writer’s skill in analyzing and artistically depicting the psychological depth of characters—their emotions, inner monologues, and the dynamics of their feelings. Thus, artistic psychologism serves as one of the most important tools in literature for revealing the inner world of characters, their hidden emotions, internal conflicts, spiritual transformations, and psychological suffering.

In revealing the essence of artistic psychologism, two aspects are of primary importance: first, the consideration of the psychological state of characters in real life; and second, the process of constructing these psychological states through the author’s artistic creativity. In literature, artistic psychologism manifests in several forms. In analyzing Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”, it becomes evident that the writer employs various techniques of artistic psychologism. One such form is psychological depiction or psychological representation, through which the author vividly portrays the characters’ emotional states, such as fear, joy, anger, sorrow, doubt, and hope. In “The Metamorphosis”, this technique is clearly reflected in the protagonist’s feelings of fear, despair, and fragile hope. The central idea of the story revolves around the fear of becoming unnecessary. Gregor, who was once emotionally burdened yet human, becomes outwardly repulsive after his transformation, provoking feelings of rejection and disapproval not only in society but also even within his own family. Through the image of Gregor as an insect, Kafka powerfully conveys the experience of becoming unwanted.

Previously, Gregor had been the main support of his family—a hardworking and responsible individual who paid off debts and devoted himself to his household. However,

in a single day, he becomes a burden to his loved ones. At first, his family fears him; later, they begin to reject him, neglect him, deprive him of food, and eventually wish for his disappearance. For example, in the story, Gregor's sister Grete is overcome with fear when she encounters him. This fear is vividly expressed in the following psychological depiction: "Early in the morning—when it was still almost night—Gregor's sister, already fully dressed, cautiously opened the door and peered into his room, as if testing the firmness of the decision she had just made. She sensed Gregor at once, but seeing that he was under the sofa, she thought: 'Oh God, surely he couldn't have flown away—he must be somewhere!'" She became so frightened that, unable to control herself, she quickly withdrew and locked the door from the outside..." In addition, the technique of the psychological portrait is employed in literary works to depict the characteristics of characters in connection with their inner states. In this approach, the characters' facial expressions, gaze, actions, external appearance, and their relationship with their inner condition are portrayed in an integrated manner. In "The Metamorphosis", the method of psychological portrait is illustrated in episodes involving Gregor's sister and mother:

"One day, nearly a month had passed since Gregor's transformation, and his sister was no longer surprised by his appearance. She entered earlier than usual and saw Gregor standing motionless in a frightening posture in front of the mirror. If she had not entered the room, this situation might have seemed ordinary to Gregor; however, as he stood before the mirror, he was blocking his sister from opening the window. She did not step into the room, but immediately recoiled, stepped back, and locked the door. To an outsider, it might have appeared as if Gregor were deliberately blocking his sister and was about to attack her. Of course, Gregor at once hid himself under the sofa. Yet he had to wait until evening for his sister to return, and when she did, there was a certain unexplainable anxiety in her..."

A similar example of a psychological portrait is presented in the episode where Gregor's mother sees his appearance:

"—What shall we take out now?" said Grete, glancing around anxiously. At that moment, her gaze met Gregor's eyes as he clung to the wall. Since her mother was beside her, Grete restrained herself and, in order to prevent her from turning around, stepped closer and, trembling, uttered the first words that came to her lips:
—Shall we go back to the living room for a moment?

Grete's intention was clear to Gregor—she wanted to take her mother to a safe place and then drive him down from the wall. Let her try! He remained sitting on the picture and would not give it up; if necessary, he was ready to throw himself at Grete's face. Yet Grete's words alarmed her mother; she stepped aside and noticed large dark spots on the patterned wallpaper. Before realizing that it was Gregor hanging on the wall, she screamed at the top of her voice: "Oh God, oh God!" Then, with her arms outstretched and powerless, she collapsed onto the sofa and lay motionless.

"Gregor!" cried his sister, raising her fist and glaring at him.

These were the first words addressed directly to Gregor after his transformation into an insect."

In modernist literature, the technique of stream of consciousness—one of the widely used forms of artistic psychologism—depicts a character's thoughts in a disordered and rapidly shifting manner. This technique frequently appears in the works of Franz Kafka. For

example, it is vividly illustrated in Gregor's psychological state when the manager from his workplace arrives at his home:

"Gregor, speaking hurriedly and scarcely understanding his own words, muttered incoherently. He moved closer to the chest in his room and, leaning against it, tried to raise his entire body upright. He truly wanted to open the door, to leave his room, and to speak with the manager; he was eager to see what those waiting outside would say upon seeing him. If they were frightened, then Gregor would be relieved of his responsibility and could feel at ease. If they accepted it calmly, then there would be no reason for concern, and if he hurried, he could indeed be at the station by eight o'clock. At first, he slipped several times from the polished chest, but finally, with one last movement, he managed to stand upright. He paid no attention to the pain in the lower part of his body, though it was causing him great suffering. Now he felt capable of controlling his body and remained silent, listening for the manager's response..."

In the stream of consciousness presented above, the author portrays Gregor's inner experiences in such a way that he imagines the thoughts of those around him as if they were his own. Although Gregor tries to justify and explain himself, the inability of others to understand him gives rise to feelings of fear, hopelessness, and loneliness, gradually extinguishing his inner spirit.

In literary works, a character's self-reflection and inner thoughts are expressed through the technique of inner monologue, which is an important form of artistic psychologism. This method allows the author to reveal the most hidden layers of a character's inner world. Franz Kafka skillfully employs inner monologue in his work. For example, Gregor engages in a self-reflective dialogue about his profession:

"Oh God," he thought, "What a demanding profession I have chosen! Traveling day in and day out. The worries of business are far greater than those at the office, and on top of that, there is the strain of constant travel, anxiety about train connections, irregular and poor meals, and the fleeting, superficial relationships with ever-changing, unfamiliar people. To hell with it all! ..."

In addition, in this work, dialogue also plays an important artistic role in revealing the psychological experiences of characters other than Gregor. For example, when Gregor's mother faints upon seeing his insect-like appearance, the following dialogue between his father and sister is presented:

"—What has happened?" These were his first words. Grete's appearance revealed everything to him. Hiding her face in her father's chest, she replied in a trembling voice: —Mother has fainted, but she is recovering now. Gregor has come out.

—I expected this," said his father. "I have always warned you about it, but you women never listen..."

Seeing his wife and daughter terrified of Gregor and perceiving his transformation as a burden upon the family, the father becomes enraged. He takes apples from a bowl in his pocket and throws them at Gregor, wishing for his disappearance. One of the apples strikes Gregor forcefully in the back, leaving him severely injured. Confronted with his father's furious behavior, Gregor is left stunned. The wound caused by the apple weakens him, and ultimately contributes to his death.

Conclusion

The protagonist of the story, Gregor, who is transformed into an insect, remains lonely throughout his life. Even before his transformation, he did not share warm and affectionate relationships with his parents and sister, as his thoughts were entirely consumed by his work responsibilities. The climax of the narrative is clearly expressed through Gregor's death. He dies alone in his room. When the housemaid informs his family of his death, they show no strong emotional reaction; they do not even grieve. On the contrary, they seem relieved by Gregor's passing. Turning their attention to their daughter's future, they leave the house for a walk, as if freed from a heavy burden. Franz Kafka does not explain the reason for the protagonist's transformation into an insect, leaving its interpretation to the reader. From this work, the following conclusion may be drawn: if a person is of no benefit to others, they risk becoming unnecessary. Living as someone who is deemed unnecessary destroys the individual's inner world and forces them to endure profound psychological suffering. Therefore, people who are capable of understanding one another and who inspire compassion and trust in the human heart are of great importance.

In this work, Kafka does not merely portray feelings of loneliness and worthlessness, but also seeks to emphasize that compassion and humanity should not disappear from people's hearts. In general, the impact of any literary work is largely determined by the credibility and depth of the psychological experiences of its characters. Thus, artistic psychologism serves as one of the most important tools in literature: it is a fundamental means of developing the plot, revealing conflict, and creating character, while also deepening the ideological content of the work. As demonstrated in the analysis above, artistic psychologism vividly portrays the protagonist's inner world, his experiences of isolation, and the complex psychological emotions that overwhelm his soul through expressive and nuanced psychological depiction.

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