

From Estrangement to Selfhood: Alienation and the Search for Meaning in *The Stranger* and *The Metamorphosis*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 06 July 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Aug 2026; Accepted: 05 Aug 2026; Available online: 09 Aug 2026 Keywords— Alienation, Modern Identity, Existentialism, Absurdism, Franz Kafka ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).	The twentieth century witnessed a profound crisis of identity as rapid social, political, and philosophical transformations challenged traditional conceptions of the self and human existence. Against this backdrop, Franz Kafka's <i>The Metamorphosis</i> and Albert Camus' <i>The Stranger</i> emerge as seminal explorations of alienation, exposing the individual's struggle to establish meaning within an indifferent and often incomprehensible world. This study undertakes a comparative examination of these two texts to investigate how alienation shapes modern identity and influences the protagonists' perceptions of self, society, and existence. Employing a qualitative, comparative approach informed by existentialist philosophy, absurdism, and theories of alienation, the study analyzes the experiences of Gregor Samsa and Meursault as representations of the fragmented modern individual. Gregor's metamorphosis symbolizes the dehumanizing effects of social and familial estrangement, while Meursault's emotional detachment and rejection of conventional social values embody the existential confrontation with the absurd. Although the protagonists respond differently to their isolation, both narratives reveal the tension between individual authenticity and the expectations imposed by society. The study argues that Kafka and Camus redefine alienation as more than a condition of social exclusion; they present it as a fundamental aspect of modern consciousness that compels individuals to question identity, freedom, and purpose. By highlighting the collapse of stable meaning and the inadequacy of traditional moral and cultural frameworks, both works illuminate the complexities of the modern human condition. Moreover, this comparative analysis demonstrates that <i>The Metamorphosis</i> and <i>The Stranger</i> remain enduring literary texts that deepen our understanding of alienation and the ongoing search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world.

Literature Review

The concepts of alienation and modern identity have been widely examined in literary and philosophical studies, particularly in relation to Franz

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Scholars have interpreted these texts as profound explorations of the individual's estrangement from society, family, and self in the modern world. Existentialist critics have emphasized

that Camus' *The Stranger* illustrates the philosophy of the absurd through the character of Meursault, whose emotional detachment challenges conventional morality and exposes the indifference of the universe. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), argues that human beings constantly seek meaning in a world that offers none, a conflict he describes as the absurd. This philosophical perspective provides the foundation for understanding Meursault's acceptance of life's meaninglessness.

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* has similarly been interpreted as a powerful representation of alienation and dehumanization. Sokel (1966) argues that Gregor Samsa's transformation symbolizes the loss of individuality within a bureaucratic and materialistic society. Likewise, Corngold (1973) views Gregor's metamorphosis as a metaphor for the psychological isolation and identity crisis experienced by the modern individual. These interpretations suggest that Kafka portrays alienation as both a social and existential condition. Scholars have also explored the broader relationship between existentialism and modern literature. Barrett (1962) contends that existentialist literature focuses on individual freedom, isolation, and the search for authentic existence in an uncertain world. Similarly, Esslin (1961) argues that twentieth-century literature reflects humanity's confrontation with absurdity, loneliness, and the collapse of traditional values. Although substantial scholarship has examined Kafka and Camus individually, comparatively fewer studies have analyzed how both writers represent alienation as a defining element of modern identity. This study addresses that gap by comparing Gregor Samsa and Meursault, demonstrating how their different responses to alienation reveal contrasting yet complementary perspectives on the search for meaning in modern existence.

Manzar, Musawar, and Fayaz (2024) examine *The Metamorphosis* through existential, psychoanalytic, and sociocultural perspectives, arguing that Gregor Samsa's transformation symbolizes both identity fragmentation and the oppressive influence of family and society. Their study suggests that Kafka's novella remains a significant commentary on modern psychological and social alienation. Similarly, Sharif and Parveen (2024) interpret Gregor's metamorphosis as a metaphor for

identity crisis and social exclusion. They contend that Kafka employs Gregor's physical transformation to reveal the emotional consequences of isolation and the struggle for selfhood in a society governed by external expectations. A recent study published in *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* (2025) approaches *The Metamorphosis* from a Nietzschean perspective, arguing that Gregor's transformation reflects a broader philosophical crisis concerning human existence, nihilism, and the collapse of traditional values. The article demonstrates that Kafka's work continues to generate new philosophical interpretations beyond existentialism alone. Comparative scholarship has also gained momentum. Dewangan (2025) compares the treatment of alienation in the works of Kafka and Camus, arguing that while Kafka foregrounds bureaucratic oppression and social dehumanization, Camus focuses on absurdity and humanity's search for meaning in an indifferent universe. This comparative perspective supports the present study by highlighting both the similarities and differences in the authors' treatment of modern identity. These recent contributions reinforce the continuing relevance of Kafka and Camus in contemporary literary studies. However, most current research either concentrates primarily on Kafka's representation of alienation or offers broad comparative observations without closely examining how alienation functions as a process through which modern identity is constructed in both *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger*. The present study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a sustained comparative analysis of the two novels through the interconnected frameworks of alienation, existentialism, and absurdism.

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed unprecedented social, political, and intellectual transformations that profoundly altered humanity's understanding of existence and identity. The devastating effects of industrialization, the two World Wars, the decline of religious certainty, and the rise of modern capitalism created a pervasive sense of uncertainty and isolation. Within this changing landscape, literature emerged as a powerful medium through which writers explored the anxieties of modern life, particularly the individual's experience of alienation and the struggle to find meaning in an

increasingly fragmented world. Among the most influential literary figures to address these concerns are Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, whose works continue to shape discussions of existentialism, absurdism, and modern identity. Alienation has become one of the defining characteristics of modern literature. It refers not only to social isolation but also to the individual's estrangement from family, work, society, and even the self. The concept has been explored from philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Karl Marx associates alienation with the dehumanizing effects of capitalist labour, while existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus emphasize the individual's confrontation with a universe that offers no predetermined purpose. In literary texts, alienation frequently appears through characters who fail to establish meaningful relationships with others or who struggle to reconcile their personal identity with social expectations.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) are among the most significant literary explorations of alienation in the twentieth century. Although written in different historical and philosophical contexts, both works portray protagonists who become outsiders within their own worlds. Gregor Samsa's sudden transformation into an insect symbolizes the gradual loss of identity brought about by social rejection, economic exploitation, and familial neglect. Once valued only as the family's breadwinner, Gregor is abandoned when he can no longer fulfil his economic role. His physical metamorphosis exposes the fragile foundations of human relationships and reveals how modern society often reduces individuals to their practical usefulness. Similarly, Camus presents Meursault as a man whose emotional indifference separates him from the society in which he lives. Unlike Gregor, Meursault undergoes no physical transformation; instead, his alienation stems from his refusal to conform to accepted social and moral conventions. His indifference toward his mother's death, his detached attitude toward relationships, and his rejection of religious consolation make him an outsider long before he commits murder. During his trial, society condemns him not only for his crime but also for his failure to display emotions considered socially acceptable. Through Meursault, Camus

demonstrates that modern society often judges individuals according to cultural expectations rather than genuine moral principles.

Despite the extensive scholarship devoted to Kafka and Camus individually, comparatively fewer studies have examined how both writers employ alienation to construct modern identity through a comparative framework. While Kafka presents alienation as a force that gradually destroys the individual, Camus portrays it as a condition that ultimately leads to existential awareness and acceptance of the absurd. These contrasting perspectives offer valuable insights into the complexities of the modern human condition and reveal different responses to a world that appears indifferent to human aspirations. This study therefore undertakes a comparative analysis of *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* to investigate how alienation shapes identity and influences the protagonists' search for meaning. Drawing upon existentialist philosophy, absurdism, and theories of alienation, the paper examines the relationship between the individual and society, the breakdown of communication, and the crisis of identity experienced by Gregor Samsa and Meursault. Through close textual analysis, it argues that both novels expose the limitations of social institutions and challenge conventional understandings of belonging, purpose, and human existence. Ultimately, this study contends that Kafka and Camus present alienation not merely as a psychological or social condition but as an essential feature of modern identity. Their protagonists respond differently to isolation, yet both reveal the profound tension between the individual's desire for meaning and the indifference of the world. More than a century after Kafka and several decades after Camus, their works continue to resonate because they illuminate questions that remain central to contemporary life: Who are we in a world that often denies our individuality? Can meaning exist in the absence of certainty? And how should human beings respond to a reality that frequently appears indifferent to their hopes and aspirations? By addressing these questions, *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* remain enduring contributions to modern literature and philosophy.

Theoretical Framework: Existentialism, Absurdism, and Alienation

A comparative study of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* requires an understanding of the philosophical concepts that inform both texts. Although Kafka did not identify himself as an existentialist and Camus rejected the label despite being closely associated with it, their works explore many of the same concerns: alienation, freedom, identity, anxiety, and the search for meaning in a world that appears indifferent to human existence. This study therefore draws upon the concepts of alienation, existentialism, and absurdism as its primary theoretical framework. Alienation has long been a central concern in philosophy, sociology, and literary criticism. In its broadest sense, alienation refers to the condition in which an individual becomes separated from society, meaningful relationships, work, or even from one's own identity. Karl Marx explains alienation as a consequence of capitalist production, where workers become disconnected from the products of their labour and gradually lose their sense of individuality (Marx). Although Marx's theory is primarily economic, it has influenced literary criticism by highlighting how modern social structures reduce human beings to instruments of productivity. Gregor Samsa exemplifies this condition, as his value within the family depends almost entirely on his ability to earn money. Once he is no longer economically useful, he becomes isolated and ultimately disposable.

Existentialist philosophy extends the discussion of alienation beyond economic structures to the individual's relationship with existence itself. Existential thinkers argue that human beings are not born with a predetermined purpose but must create meaning through their own choices and actions. Jean-Paul Sartre famously states that "existence precedes essence," suggesting that identity is not fixed but continually shaped by individual freedom and responsibility (Sartre 22). This emphasis on personal choice becomes particularly relevant in *The Stranger*, where Meursault refuses to accept social conventions merely to satisfy others. Rather than pretending to experience emotions he does not feel, he remains faithful to his own perception of reality, even when such honesty leads to his condemnation. Albert

Camus develops a related but distinct philosophical position through his concept of the absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that the absurd arises from the conflict between humanity's desire for order, purpose, and certainty and the silent indifference of the universe (Camus 28). Human beings naturally seek explanations for suffering and death, yet the universe provides no definitive answers. Instead of escaping this reality through religion or false hope, Camus proposes that individuals should acknowledge the absurd and continue living with courage and honesty. Meursault embodies this philosophy. His refusal to invent comforting illusions ultimately allows him to accept death without fear, suggesting that freedom begins with the recognition of life's uncertainty.

Kafka's fiction, although written before existentialism became a clearly defined philosophical movement, reflects many existential concerns. His characters frequently encounter incomprehensible authority, fragmented communication, and overwhelming isolation. Walter H. Sokel argues that Kafka's protagonists struggle against systems that deny their humanity, making alienation the defining feature of their existence (Sokel 87). Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect is therefore more than a physical event; it symbolizes the collapse of personal identity within a society that values utility over individuality. His inability to communicate effectively with his family deepens his isolation and illustrates how alienation can erase one's place within both the family and society. Stanley Corngold similarly interprets Gregor's metamorphosis as a symbolic expression of psychological and social estrangement. According to Corngold, Kafka presents alienation not as an exceptional experience but as a universal condition of modern life, where individuals become trapped between personal desires and social expectations (Corngold 45). Gregor's gradual acceptance of his exclusion demonstrates the destructive consequences of internalizing society's rejection. Instead of resisting his isolation, he increasingly withdraws from human contact until death becomes his only escape.

The relationship between alienation and identity has also received significant attention in modern literary criticism. William Barrett argues that existential literature portrays human beings as

isolated individuals who must confront uncertainty without relying on traditional systems of belief (Barrett 134). In such literature, identity is never stable; it develops through confrontation with freedom, responsibility, and mortality. This perspective illuminates the contrasting journeys of Gregor and Meursault. Gregor loses his identity as others cease to recognize his humanity, whereas Meursault preserves his identity by refusing to conform to social expectations. Martin Esslin further observes that twentieth-century literature reflects the collapse of traditional religious and moral certainties, leaving individuals to face an apparently meaningless world (Esslin 17). This condition is evident in both novels. Gregor receives neither sympathy nor justice despite his lifelong sacrifice for his family, while Meursault's trial demonstrates that society values conformity more than truth. Their experiences reveal the fragile nature of identity when individuals are judged solely according to social norms rather than their intrinsic humanity.

The present study adopts these theoretical perspectives to examine how Kafka and Camus portray alienation as a defining feature of modern existence. Rather than treating alienation merely as loneliness or social exclusion, the paper understands it as a multidimensional condition involving psychological, existential, and social estrangement. Through this framework, Gregor Samsa and Meursault emerge as representative figures of the modern individual, each confronting a world that fails to provide security, belonging, or ultimate meaning. By integrating theories of alienation with existentialism and absurdism, this study demonstrates that both *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* transcend their historical contexts. They continue to resonate because they address enduring questions concerning identity, freedom, responsibility, and the human search for meaning. While Kafka emphasizes the destructive consequences of social alienation, Camus presents the acceptance of the absurd as a means of achieving personal authenticity. Together, these works offer complementary perspectives on the challenges of modern identity and establish alienation as one of the central experiences of twentieth-century literature.

Alienation in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is widely regarded as one of the most significant literary explorations of alienation in modern fiction. First published in 1915, the novella presents the extraordinary story of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman who awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect. While the transformation is physically shocking, Kafka's primary concern is not the cause of Gregor's metamorphosis but its consequences. Through Gregor's changing relationship with his family, his work, and his own identity, Kafka exposes the dehumanizing effects of modern society and demonstrates how alienation gradually erodes an individual's humanity. From the opening sentence, Kafka places Gregor in a condition of isolation. Instead of expressing fear or disbelief at his transformation, Gregor's first thoughts concern his work and the possibility of missing his train. His immediate anxiety reflects the extent to which his identity has become dependent upon his occupation. As the sole breadwinner of the family, Gregor has sacrificed his personal desires to support his parents and sister. Walter H. Sokel argues that Gregor's identity is defined almost entirely by his economic function, making him valuable only as long as he remains productive (Sokel 89). His transformation merely reveals a form of alienation that already existed before the physical metamorphosis.

Kafka presents Gregor's profession as another source of alienation. His occupation as a travelling salesman deprives him of stable human relationships and personal freedom. Gregor complains about the exhausting routine of endless travel, difficult customers, and constant supervision by his employer. The appearance of the chief clerk at Gregor's apartment after only a few hours of absence demonstrates the oppressive nature of the bureaucratic system. Rather than expressing concern for Gregor's health, the company immediately questions his reliability. Karl Marx's theory of alienation is relevant here, as Gregor's labour has reduced him to a mere instrument of economic production. His worth is measured solely by his usefulness to others, not by his humanity. Gregor's transformation also symbolizes the crisis of personal identity. Although his body changes dramatically, his thoughts and emotions remain distinctly human. He

worries about his family, regrets disappointing his employer, and hopes to return to normal life. This contrast between his human consciousness and insect-like appearance creates a profound identity conflict. Stanley Corngold observes that Kafka's metamorphosis functions as a symbolic representation of psychological estrangement rather than a simple fantasy event (Corngold 51). Gregor's inability to reconcile his inner self with his outward appearance reflects the fragmented identity of the modern individual.

One of the most painful aspects of Gregor's alienation is the breakdown of communication. Shortly after his transformation, he discovers that his speech has become unintelligible. Although he understands every word spoken by his family, they can no longer understand him. Language, the primary means of human connection, collapses completely. As a result, Gregor becomes increasingly isolated within his own home. His room gradually changes from a private living space into a prison where he is hidden from society. Kafka suggests that alienation begins not merely with physical separation but with the inability to communicate one's thoughts and emotions. Gregor's relationship with his family illustrates the fragile nature of human affection when it is based upon economic dependence. Before his transformation, his parents and sister rely entirely on his income. They appreciate his sacrifices but rarely acknowledge his emotional needs. Once Gregor becomes incapable of working, their attitude changes dramatically. His father responds with violence, repeatedly driving him back into his room and eventually injuring him by throwing apples. His mother is overwhelmed by fear whenever she sees him, while Grete, who initially cares for her brother, gradually loses sympathy and begins to view him as a burden.

Grete's changing attitude represents one of the novella's most tragic developments. At first, she brings Gregor food and attempts to understand his needs. However, as time passes, compassion gives way to frustration. She finally insists that the family must remove Gregor because he is no longer her brother but an obstacle to their future. This rejection marks the complete destruction of Gregor's identity. He is no longer recognized as a member of the family but as an unwanted creature occupying valuable

space. Kafka thereby demonstrates that identity depends not only upon self-perception but also upon recognition by others. The symbolism of Gregor's room further reinforces the theme of alienation. As furniture is removed, the room loses every trace of his previous human existence. Objects associated with memory, comfort, and individuality disappear one by one. Gregor desperately clings to the framed picture of the woman in furs, perhaps his final connection to his former identity. This symbolic act reveals his desire to preserve some remnant of his humanity despite the overwhelming forces of dehumanization.

Kafka also criticizes the utilitarian values of modern society. Gregor's family quickly adapts to life without him by finding employment and becoming financially independent. Ironically, the person who devoted his entire life to supporting the family becomes unnecessary once he can no longer work. His death is greeted not with grief but with relief. The family immediately begins planning a brighter future, suggesting that Gregor's existence had become an inconvenience rather than a source of affection. Such a conclusion exposes the conditional nature of social acceptance in a materialistic world. From an existential perspective, Gregor's tragedy lies in his inability to redefine himself after losing his social role. Unlike Camus' Meursault, who eventually embraces the absurdity of existence, Gregor remains emotionally attached to the identity imposed upon him by family and work. He never openly rebels against his circumstances nor questions the values that have shaped his life. Instead, he quietly accepts rejection and gradually withdraws from human contact until death appears as the only possible resolution.

Kafka's portrayal of alienation extends beyond Gregor's personal experience to become a universal commentary on modern existence. Martin Esslin argues that twentieth-century literature frequently presents individuals trapped within incomprehensible social systems that deny authentic human relationships (Esslin 20). Gregor's experience reflects this broader condition. His physical transformation merely externalizes the loneliness, anxiety, and emotional isolation already present in modern life. The grotesque fantasy therefore functions as a realistic representation of psychological truth. Eventually, *The Metamorphosis* demonstrates that

alienation is not simply the result of physical difference but the consequence of a society that values individuals according to their usefulness rather than their humanity. Gregor's transformation exposes the instability of identity, the fragility of familial love, and the destructive effects of social exclusion. Kafka suggests that when human beings are reduced to economic functions and denied meaningful communication, they become strangers not only to society but also to themselves. Gregor's tragic fate thus stands as one of the most powerful literary representations of alienation in modern literature and provides an essential foundation for understanding the crisis of modern identity.

Alienation and the Search for Meaning in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) is one of the most influential novels of the twentieth century and a landmark text in modern existential and absurdist literature. Unlike Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where alienation is symbolized through a physical transformation, Camus presents alienation as a psychological and philosophical condition. The protagonist, Meursault, is not isolated because of an extraordinary event but because he refuses to conform to the emotional and moral expectations of society. Through Meursault's detached outlook, his rejection of conventional values, and his ultimate acceptance of death, Camus explores the relationship between alienation, identity, and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe.

From the opening line of the novel - "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know" (Camus 3) - Meursault appears emotionally detached from the world around him. His uncertainty about the date of his mother's death immediately distances him from conventional social expectations. Rather than expressing grief, he observes physical details such as the heat, the sunlight, and his physical exhaustion. Critics have often interpreted this emotional detachment as evidence of alienation. However, Camus does not portray Meursault as incapable of feeling; instead, he refuses to display emotions merely to satisfy social conventions. His honesty separates him from others and establishes him as an outsider from the beginning of the narrative. Meursault's alienation becomes more evident through his relationships with other people. His interactions with

Marie, Raymond, and his neighbours remain largely detached and uncomplicated. When Marie asks whether he loves her, Meursault replies that love "doesn't mean anything," though he is willing to marry her if she wishes. His response illustrates his rejection of romantic idealism rather than an inability to care for others. Meursault consistently refuses to pretend that his emotions are deeper than they actually are. This commitment to honesty distinguishes him from those around him but also intensifies his social isolation.

Camus develops this theme further through the philosophy of the absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he argues that the absurd arises from the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's silence (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 28). Human beings naturally seek purpose, justice, and certainty, yet the world offers no final answers. Meursault embodies this philosophical position. He neither searches for divine purpose nor attempts to justify existence through religion or morality. Instead, he accepts life as it is, recognizing that death is the inevitable destiny of every human being. The murder of the Arab on the beach represents the novel's central turning point. Significantly, Camus avoids presenting the act as a carefully planned crime. Instead, environmental conditions - the intense heat, the blinding sunlight, and Meursault's physical discomfort - play an important role in shaping the moment. The oppressive atmosphere contributes to the irrational nature of the event, emphasizing the unpredictability and absurdity of human existence. The shooting is not portrayed as the product of evil intention but as an event that resists simple moral explanation.

The courtroom scenes reveal the deepest form of Meursault's alienation. During the trial, the legal authorities devote surprisingly little attention to the actual murder. Instead, they focus on Meursault's behaviour at his mother's funeral, interpreting his emotional restraint as proof of moral corruption. The prosecutor portrays him as a man without a soul because he did not cry at the funeral or display conventional signs of grief. As Jean-Paul Sartre observes, society condemns Meursault less for killing another man than for refusing to participate in its accepted system of values (Sartre 58). His greatest offence is therefore not violence but authenticity.

Religion also becomes a significant source of conflict between Meursault and society. While awaiting execution, he rejects the prison chaplain's invitation to seek God's forgiveness. Meursault insists that he has no reason to believe in a divine order that explains suffering or promises eternal salvation. This rejection reflects Camus' philosophy of the absurd, which encourages individuals to confront reality without relying on comforting illusions. Meursault's refusal to accept religious consolation is not an expression of despair but of intellectual honesty. By refusing false hope, he affirms his freedom to define his own response to existence.

Meursault's acceptance of death marks the climax of his existential development. In the final chapter, he realizes that death is universal and inevitable. Since every individual must eventually die, no life possesses greater objective significance than another. This realization frees him from fear and regret. Rather than seeking meaning beyond life, Meursault embraces the present moment and accepts the indifference of the universe. Camus suggests that genuine freedom begins when individuals abandon the illusion of absolute meaning and courageously confront reality as it is. William Barrett argues that existential literature frequently presents characters who discover authenticity only after confronting death (Barrett 142). Meursault exemplifies this pattern. His imprisonment strips away the distractions of ordinary life and forces him to reflect upon existence itself. Ironically, it is only after society condemns him that he achieves complete self-awareness. His acceptance of the absurd transforms alienation from a source of suffering into a source of liberation.

Unlike Gregor Samsa, whose identity is gradually destroyed by the rejection of others, Meursault maintains his sense of self despite social condemnation. He refuses to alter his beliefs merely to gain sympathy or avoid punishment. His authenticity distinguishes him from those who sacrifice truth for social approval. In this respect, Camus presents alienation not only as a condition of exclusion but also as a form of resistance against hypocrisy and conformity. The contrast between the individual and society remains central throughout the novel. Meursault's honesty exposes the artificiality of many social customs. Society expects grief to follow

prescribed rituals, love to be expressed through familiar language, and morality to conform to established traditions. Meursault refuses these expectations, choosing instead to acknowledge only what he genuinely experiences. His alienation therefore results from a conflict between personal authenticity and collective norms. Modern critics have recognized *The Stranger* as one of the most significant literary explorations of identity in the twentieth century. Martin Esslin argues that modern literature often portrays individuals confronting a universe in which traditional systems of meaning have collapsed (Esslin 24). Camus extends this idea by demonstrating that meaning cannot be discovered in external authorities but must emerge from the individual's honest engagement with existence. Meursault does not overcome the absurd; rather, he learns to live with it.

Comparative Analysis: Alienation and Modern Identity in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger*

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* are among the most influential works of twentieth-century literature because they explore the complex relationship between alienation and modern identity. Although the novels differ in narrative style, philosophical orientation, and historical context, they share a common concern with the individual's struggle to exist in a world that appears indifferent, hostile, and devoid of stable meaning. Through the experiences of Gregor Samsa and Meursault, Kafka and Camus demonstrate that alienation is not merely a social condition but a defining feature of modern existence. One of the most striking similarities between the two protagonists is their separation from society. Gregor Samsa becomes physically isolated after his transformation into an insect, while Meursault is psychologically isolated because of his emotional detachment and refusal to conform to social expectations. In both cases, society rejects individuals who fail to satisfy its norms. Gregor is excluded because he can no longer contribute economically to his family, whereas Meursault is condemned because he refuses to display the emotions expected of a grieving son and a remorseful criminal. Their experiences suggest that modern society often values conformity over individuality.

Despite this shared condition of alienation, Kafka and Camus present fundamentally

different responses to it. Gregor's alienation is imposed upon him. His transformation deprives him of the ability to communicate, work, and participate in ordinary human life. Although he continues to think and feel like a human being, others gradually cease to recognize his humanity. His identity is therefore shaped by external forces over which he has little control. Meursault, by contrast, accepts his separation from society rather than resisting it. His alienation results largely from his commitment to honesty and authenticity. He refuses to pretend that he believes in values he does not genuinely hold, even when such honesty leads to his execution. Another important point of comparison concerns the relationship between identity and work. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's identity is almost entirely defined by his occupation. He works tirelessly to repay his parents' debts and sacrifices his personal ambitions for the welfare of his family. Once he loses the ability to work, he also loses his social identity. Kafka thus exposes the dehumanizing effects of a society that measures human worth through economic productivity. In contrast, Meursault's identity is not determined by his profession or social status. His sense of self emerges through his personal experiences and his refusal to compromise his beliefs. Camus therefore shifts the discussion of identity from economic function to existential authenticity.

Family relationships also reveal significant differences between the two novels. Gregor's family initially depends upon him but gradually abandons him after his transformation. Their love proves conditional upon his usefulness. His father's violence, his mother's fear, and Grete's eventual rejection illustrate how fragile familial bonds become under economic and social pressure. In *The Stranger*, however, family relationships receive far less emphasis. Meursault's mother has already been placed in a nursing home before the novel begins, and her death serves primarily as a catalyst for revealing society's expectations rather than exploring family dynamics. Camus is less interested in domestic relationships than in the conflict between the individual and society as a whole. Communication functions as another significant point of comparison. Gregor's alienation is intensified because language itself becomes impossible. Although he understands others, they cannot understand him. His inability to

communicate transforms him into a prisoner within his own home. Meursault, on the other hand, speaks clearly throughout the novel, yet meaningful communication still fails. Society listens to his words but refuses to understand his perspective. During the trial, his honesty is interpreted as evidence of moral emptiness rather than sincerity. Both authors therefore suggest that alienation arises not simply from silence but from the failure of genuine human understanding.

The philosophical outlooks of Kafka and Camus also differ considerably. Kafka's vision is deeply tragic. Gregor never discovers a meaningful response to his alienation and ultimately dies in isolation. His death offers relief to his family rather than recognition of his humanity. The novella therefore presents alienation as a destructive force that erases identity and human dignity. Camus, however, offers a more affirmative conclusion. Although Meursault is sentenced to death, he attains a profound sense of freedom by accepting the absurdity of existence. Instead of seeking false consolation, he embraces the indifference of the universe and finds peace within himself. Alienation, for Camus, becomes the beginning of existential awareness rather than the end of identity. The role of society in both novels further illustrates their contrasting perspectives. Kafka portrays social institutions—family, work, and authority—as mechanisms that dehumanize individuals by reducing them to their practical usefulness. Gregor's tragedy exposes the cruelty of a world in which human value depends upon economic contribution. Camus similarly criticizes society but focuses on its moral hypocrisy. Meursault is judged not solely for committing murder but for failing to display socially acceptable emotions. His trial demonstrates that society often punishes nonconformity more severely than genuine wrongdoing.

Both novels also challenge traditional religious and moral beliefs. Kafka presents a world in which suffering appears meaningless and justice remains absent. Gregor receives neither sympathy nor redemption despite his sacrifices. Camus likewise rejects religious certainty but proposes that meaning can emerge through the individual's acceptance of the absurd. Meursault's refusal to embrace religion reflects his determination to confront reality honestly

rather than seek comfort in illusion. Thus, while both writers question traditional systems of meaning, Camus offers a philosophical alternative that Kafka leaves unresolved. From the perspective of modern identity, Gregor and Meursault represent two contrasting models of the individual. Gregor symbolizes the victim of social and economic alienation whose identity is gradually erased by forces beyond his control. Meursault represents the existential individual who preserves his authenticity despite social condemnation. Together, these characters illustrate the diverse ways in which modern literature explores the crisis of identity. One loses himself because society refuses to recognize his humanity; the other discovers himself precisely because he refuses to surrender his individuality. Kafka and Camus demonstrate that alienation is inseparable from the modern condition. Whether experienced through physical transformation, emotional detachment, economic exploitation, or philosophical rebellion, alienation forces individuals to confront fundamental questions concerning identity, freedom, and meaning. While *The Metamorphosis* presents alienation as a tragic process of dehumanization, *The Stranger* portrays it as an opportunity for existential self-realization. These complementary perspectives enrich our understanding of the modern human experience and explain why both novels continue to occupy a central place in literary and philosophical discourse.

Conclusion

Alienation remains one of the defining concerns of modern literature, reflecting the individual's struggle to establish identity and meaning within an increasingly fragmented world. Through a comparative study of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, this paper has examined how alienation shapes the lives of Gregor Samsa and Meursault and how their experiences illuminate different dimensions of the modern human condition. Although the two novels emerge from distinct literary and philosophical traditions, they converge in portraying individuals who are estranged from society, isolated from meaningful relationships, and compelled to confront the uncertainty of existence. The analysis of *The Metamorphosis* exposes the conditional nature of

human relationships and criticizes a society that values productivity more than compassion. Gregor's inability to communicate, his growing isolation, and his eventual death reveal the tragic consequences of a world in which individuals are judged according to utility rather than intrinsic human worth.

In contrast, Camus presents alienation as a philosophical condition through the character of Meursault. Camus argues that although life lacks inherent meaning, individuals can achieve authenticity by rejecting illusion and embracing the realities of human existence. Meursault's journey illustrates that freedom arises not from discovering universal truths but from accepting uncertainty without surrendering one's integrity. The comparative analysis reveals that both novels challenge conventional assumptions about identity, belonging, and purpose. Gregor and Meursault are marginalized for different reasons, yet both expose the limitations of social institutions that define individuals according to external expectations rather than personal authenticity. Kafka emphasizes the devastating effects of economic exploitation, familial rejection, and failed communication, whereas Camus highlights the conflict between individual honesty and collective morality. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that alienation is not simply a personal experience but a structural condition of modern life. This study also shows that the search for meaning remains central to both texts. Gregor continually seeks acceptance within the family and society but is denied recognition even after years of self-sacrifice. His tragedy suggests that meaning cannot be sustained in relationships founded solely upon economic dependence. Meursault, by contrast, abandons the search for external meaning and instead embraces the absurd nature of existence. His acceptance does not eliminate suffering but transforms his understanding of life and death. Through these contrasting responses, Kafka and Camus offer two distinct yet complementary visions of the human struggle for identity in the modern world.

Furthermore, the application of existentialism, absurdism, and theories of alienation provides a deeper understanding of both novels. Kafka's portrayal of Gregor reflects the psychological and social consequences of alienation in a bureaucratic and materialistic society, while Camus'

philosophy of the absurd explains Meursault's rejection of conventional values and his ultimate affirmation of existence. These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that modern identity is neither fixed nor predetermined but is continually shaped by the individual's relationship with society, freedom, and mortality. The relevance of Kafka and Camus extends far beyond the historical circumstances in which they wrote. In an age characterized by technological change, social fragmentation, economic competition, and increasing feelings of isolation, their works continue to speak to contemporary readers. Many individuals still experience alienation within families, workplaces, and communities, while questions concerning identity, purpose, and belonging remain as urgent today as they were in the twentieth century. The enduring significance of *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* lies in their ability to capture these universal experiences with remarkable psychological and philosophical depth.

In conclusion, Franz Kafka and Albert Camus present alienation as an essential aspect of modern existence, but they differ in their understanding of its consequences. Kafka portrays alienation as a tragic process that destroys identity through exclusion and dehumanization, whereas Camus views it as the beginning of existential awareness and personal authenticity. Despite these differences, both writers challenge readers to reconsider accepted notions of humanity, morality, and meaning. Their novels remain enduring masterpieces because they illuminate the complexities of modern identity and remind us that the search for meaning continues even in a world that often appears silent and indifferent.

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