

International Baccalaureate

TED Ankara College Foundation School

Extended Essay English A

Research Question; How do Franz Kafka and Kevin Halligan use metaphors and imagery to convey the existentialism from the Freudian perspective through the description of an insect?

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Dedicated to ones who are seeking demise.

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Abstract

Besides being a well known for his existentialist, Franz Kafka also formed the “Kafkaesque”¹ impression with his pieces of writings. For being one of his most-famous novella, *Metamorphosis*, this study aims to analyse it with an extended perspective including a psychoanalysis from Sigmund Freud who has gathered the philosophical and the psychological understanding of the human existence. Moreover, the poem “The Cockroach” by Kevin Halligan shows remarkable similarities, such as the existentialistic approach towards the concept of life via the imagery of an insect.

Throughout the study, the perception of existentialism in both pieces is examined and then related to the studies of Freud’s psychoanalytic theories by breaking them in to parts.

The essay’s main aim is to explore the ways in which human existence and the problematic pain it causes is conveyed in the novella and the poem. The captivating correlations in both pieces and their endings, provoke the reader to think about the notion of life.

Despite the fact that many researches has been done on both the pieces, the addition of psychology to a philosophical opinion, allows the reader to comprehend the human existence in a more straightforward and solidified way.

¹ Schnakenberg, Robert. *Secret Life Of Great Authors*. Quirk Productions. 2008. Print.

Metamorphosis; a major change in the appearance or character of someone or something.² In the novella “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka, the transformation of Gregor Samsa is portrayed with metaphors, conflicts and imagery in order to illustrate the reaction of his selfdom to the dehumanizing suppression of the super-ego and the society on the individual from the Freudian perspective. The novella is based on the drastic change and its outcomes that elaborate existentialism masterfully. Whereas in the poem “The Cockroach” by Kevin Halligan, from the book *Stories of Ourselves*, the speaker is questioning the direction of his life by illustrating the distress and suffering he feels through the metaphor and imagery of a cockroach and its actions. The theme of identity is revealed gradually which depicts the Freudian understanding of having a purpose in life, thus existentialism. On the contrary, according to the novella, the absurdism of human existence can only be explained and understood when one is eluded from all the responsibilities and the drama that being a human causes, which are related with Sigmund Freud’s 3 concepts of personality; id, ego and super-ego.³ Franz Kafka illustrates the harsh reality and difficulties of losing functionality in the society, which is the consequence of conforming to the super-ego and annihilate his personality. Only when he’s transformed into a helpless beetle does he begin to develop a self-identity and understand the relationships around him. On the other hand, in the poem the negative emotions of the speaker reflect on the cockroach as it wanders around, moreover, the movements of the cockroach resemble the phases in his life. In consonance with Sigmund Freud’s *Psychoanalytic Theory of*

² Oxforddictionaries.com

³ McLeoud, Saul. Sigmund Freud’s Theories. *Simply Psychology*. 2013. Web.

*Personality*⁴, lack of goal play a crucial role in individual's character development. Only after watching the cockroach's abrupt stop, did he realize he's the cockroach itself, because then the cockroach has reached the phase of life of the speaker. Kevin Halligan does not include anyone other than the speaker and the cockroach in to the poem, so that the aimlessness will be considered in a personal perspective since the poem only deals with the problems and confusion that are caused by not having any ambition in life. However, in the novella, besides adapting to the new body he has, Gregor Samsa's one of the major problems is communication with other people whom allowed him to listen and observe others. He realizes his lack of identity made him numb to the world around him, which also cancelled out the will to make decisions and even tried to console himself by trying to love them. *"I am not pig-headed, and I am happy to work. Traveling is exhausting, but I couldn't live without it."* (Kafka 25)

For the novella, the very first sentence is rather unusual, starting with an anacoluthon, *"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."* (Kafka, 3) *Being one of the most famous opening lines*⁵, it indicates that the subject matter will not be treated differently since neither the sentences nor the actions of Gregor Samsa imply any oddness in the situation. Furthermore, Gregor keeps on living like it is an ordinary event therefore the narrator never raises the questions how or why throughout the story, as if everything is self-evident. Such acceptance is caused by the numbness due to his indifference towards his lack of identity. He is the victim of an evidently

⁴ McLeod, Saul. Sigmund Freud's Theories. *Simply Psychology*. 2013. Web.

⁵ Blog.shmoop.com

purposeless and random metamorphosis, which he treats as though it were not completely extraordinary, suggesting deep down, he expects the world he lives in to be an irrational and chaotic place. *"How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense", he thought, but that was something he was unable to do because he was used to sleeping on his right, and in his present state couldn't get into that position.*" (Kafka 4) However despite the poem is not clearly parted into stanzas, as read through, the word choice shifts the tone and breaks down the poem in four main parts, which suit the structure of a sonnet which is 4,4,3,3. Even though it is not divided into parts originally the changing points in the meaning hint the four main parts as; "Childhood, Growing, Adulthood and Epiphany".⁶ During the childhood phase, the cockroach seems to be acting randomly and impulsively without any hastiness. This carefree, confident and relaxed manner ends with the *line "But soon he turned to jog in crooked rings"*. (Halligan 5) Starting a line with the word "But" shows a difference in the mood thus, the cockroach has entered the Growing phase. The cockroach is drawing circles with an increasing speed that depicts the loss of direction and impatience that lead it to repeat his actions. The Adulthood phase begins with the line *"Of restlessness that worsened over time"*(Halligan 9) Tiresome is the outcome of the multiplication of the pointless actions that lead the cockroach to stop. *"And stopped. He looked uncertain where to go"* (Halligan 11). Adulthood phase ends with the full stop embedded in the middle of the line. The last three lines is the phase where the speaker has an epiphany by relating himself with the cockroach.

Existentialism in the novella stresses the disturbance in the balance of the individual side and the commitment to the society side. According to the Freudian

⁶ IGCSE Blog

perspective, if a person chooses himself over society, he will lose the support from the society that represents the boosted super-ego; however, if a person chooses society over himself, he will lose his individuality, which will damage his characteristic ego.⁷ Gregor initially chooses society over himself, which in turn converts him into the working drone he was. His concern for money and the anxiety that comes with it are represented in the first part that also gives hints about the important responsibility Gregor has towards his family. The transformation is the aftermath of his ego being restrained between the super-ego and his id. Since the space that ego requires to structure the characteristics of him is crushed by the super ego, it should be ruptured. However, Gregor Samsa does not expose any kind of reaction, what's more, he adheres to the doctrines and demands his family expose on him. Eventually his individuality is shattered under the repression, thus only his id and super-ego are left behind. The lack of ego between the two, leads them to collide; moreover, the pressurized id is loosened for the first time in a long time. Although the super-ego is potent enough to compel them both, the metamorphosis takes place during his sleep when only his subconscious is awake thus neither his ego nor his super-ego are present to push down the urges. For the absence of common sense and awareness of the responsibilities the id is set free that lead to Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis. This alteration helps him shift the focus to himself from his obligations and the society. The physical variation enforces his character. As a result of being an insect, he is isolated by the society. For he is now a useless individual in the society, not contributing through work and leisure. *"Do you understand a word of it? There was no human voice."* (*Kafka 20*) The words of chief clerk depict the devaluating of the useless individual so much that the society considers him as an animal rather than an

⁷ Sayar, Kemal. Varoluş ve Endişe. PsikeArt Magazine. January-February 2014. Print.

individual. The same perspective can be seen in the behaviour of his parents and sister as well, however they do not realise it yet. “*Gregor tried to imagine to himself whether anything similar to what was happening to him today could have also happened at some point to the chief clerk. At least one had to concede the possibility of such a thing.*” (Kafka 14) These sentences solidify the fact that he is not the only one in this vicious circle of life and the systems that were invented by the society, however he is the only one to understand the meaningless of it due to his transformation. On the contrary, the speaker in the poem is fully aware of these facts and has internalized the life as it is, which leads him to have an existentialist perspective. Therefore, the poem conveys an existentialist dilemma with a philosophical, metaphysical perspective rather than the beginning of the existentialistic thoughts of an individual. Since an existentialist believes in free will, freedom of choice and autonomy to do what they want⁸, the speaker is having conflicts between the freedom and aimlessness, which was supported with the word choice; *flipping, jog, circling*. Hence, the absence of any destination for the cockroach speaks for the speaker’s inner thoughts about the uncertainty of the life and its ending. “*Restlessness worsened over time.*” (Halligan 9) Unlike the novella, the poem emphasizes the futility of human existence directly with a hopeless and despair mood. The main distinction between the approaches to the hollow life is because of the absence or the presence of ego. Gregor Samsa fails to use his reason caused by eliminating his ego to cope with the poignant life he had nonetheless, the speaker acknowledges the insignificance of living for he has the ability to think reasonably due to the presence of ego. Referring to the *Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory*, the speaker has developed a character during his time of living without a purpose, which

⁸ Mr Boucher. The Cockroach by Kevin Halligan. *English with Mr Boucher*. April 2013. Web

Gregor Samsa didn't have the chance thus he didn't come to the phase that one loses hope and accepts the life as worthless, unlike the speaker.

As stated before, Gregor Samsa does not think turning into a giant insect is weird because he quitted questioning to survive the excruciating pressure of living meaningless. The primary reason for him not questioning anything and blindly obeying is that the dearth of ego. With the lack of identity, he was able to survive through the tormenting life of just existing without any humaneness. Destitute of any signs of emotional kind of humanity, he was *just another brick in the wall*⁹ that attributes to the system he was in. He meant nothing more than a “beetle” to the system, thus he indoctrinated this idea as a way of coping with a life without any psychological satisfaction. After transforming into an insect, he has the opportunity to develop an ego, a character that can appease the longing of existing by wielding the capability of thinking. In time, he realizes that rather than the metamorphosis, the system he used to be in, was what he got used to, not what he preferred. Turning into a giant insect may have seemed to be a horrible situation at first but it was only because of the vague possibilities that he couldn't understand or give meaning to with the great shock of the metamorphosis. Since he had been in a vicious circle, the only way to escape it was to turn into a beetle. As Franz Kafka said: “*A first sign of beginning to understand is the wish to die.*” (*Kafka 13*)¹⁰ Gregor Samsa turned to himself since he had no place in the society anymore. The existentialistic approach begun when he endures the life that eliminates little joys, he has grasped that they are not important and rather senseless. However, in the poem, the speaker relates to the cockroach without any external forces just by observing the movements of it. The

⁹ Pink Floyd – Another Brick in the Wall. Song.

¹⁰ Kafka, Franz. *The Zurau Aphorisms*. Print.

lines indicating the Growing phase, “*Circling the rusty table leg and back, /And flipping right over to scratch his wings-/As if the victim of a mild attack*” suggest that the act of cockroach seems voluntarily which in fact the reaction to a “*victim of a mild attack*”. This contradiction, supported with an oxymoron “*mild attack*”, implies that the speaker did not internalized existentialism with his own will, as a matter of fact was imposed to do so by the purposeless and meaningless life he has. That is why; the cockroach seems to be acting both intentionally and unintentionally. The confusion that the cockroach creates on the speaker leads him to link himself with it since he has become an existentialist because of the decision he made, by not having any goals in life. “*Except I thought I recognized myself.*” (Halligan 14) Despite the Freudian perspective suggests that the only way to happiness is death, for the attempts to give meaning to one existence and life are futile¹¹, the speaker sees himself in a cockroach which has the ability to survive nuclear bombs and an unquestioned longevity. The irony in the poem is not only caused by the choice of the cockroach but also the way poem ends. Halligan does not even let the cockroach end on its death, it just stops, confused.

The giant gap between the reality and the metaphors in the style of both pieces of writing is the main reason why there are so many different meanings that can be interpreted from the book and the poem. For the novella, according to the Freudian psychoanalysis¹², Gregor Samsa is afraid of being castrated by his father, for that reason he has eluded any kind of sexual desires, which is another casual human activity. Freudian approach suggests that the description of the picture that he had cut

¹¹ McLeod, Saul. Sigmund Freud’s Theories. *Simply Psychology*. 2013. Web.

¹² McLeod, Saul. Sigmund Freud’s Theories. *Simply Psychology*. 2013. Web.

out from a magazine; “(...) *a lady fitted out with a fur hat and fur boa who sat upright, raising a heavy fur muff that covered the whole of her lower arm towards the viewer.*” (*Kafka 3*) depicts his sexual life. He has given exaggerated meanings to the picture and made a frame for it with special effort as if he knows that is the only way to have a woman in his life. Another thing is that his hobby is doing wooden frames, which indicates that even his hobbies are shaped around his life of confinement. He expresses his constricted mood by making framework, which again symbolizes the boundaries in his life. He limits his sexual desires by carving a frame for the woman in the picture and cramps them all in there. He feels suppressed and stressed by all the expectation and dehumanizing of his family and boss, which symbolise the society itself. Later in the story, his sister, removes the picture from his room, pointing out that he didn't need it anymore. This act of hers, indicates the change in his role; from a brother to an insignificant insect. The importance of this scene is that the last anchorage of being a human –which was his sister – is gone too. On the contrary, for the poem, the cockroach metaphor was used as a tool to describe the phases of life with the intention to draw attention to the feelings of uncertainty, living his life to no defined end. The cold reality of knowing he will die, discourages the speaker and tends him to live without a meaning. For he has been aimless in his Childhood and Growing phase, he continues that way with knowing that he will disappear as if he has never existed, depresses him, which reflects on the word choice; ball of dust, crooked rings, rusty table, victim, attack, restlessness, vicious crime.

In the second part of the novella, Gregor kept on walking the endless road, that he had been pushed into, only for the sake of his unexplainable attachment to his sister, appointed with practical fears. For he was already “dead” as a state of mind, he

didn't care about being "dead" for the society. As a result of being in a comatose mentality, he does not question any incident or any thought that leads him to have an unconcerned attitude towards being an insect or being dead at all. Perceiving these tragic situations as normal, meaningless or unnecessary indicates that he has already given up on his life, which leads to him being thrown away by the society. The Freudian perspective suggests that if one cannot obtain a healthy balance between the 3 concepts, the balance shall be provided without the will of the individual.¹³ That is why he had undergone such a transformation. Nevertheless, the indifferent approach to the cases continued though he began to build up a character due to the apple that got stuck into his back. In the second part, the focus is mainly on the family and their attitude towards him. The conflict between the remaining humanity in Gregor and the fact that he has turned into an insect struck him and his acquaintances. For example, the father throws apples in his anger tantrums towards insect-Gregor; one of them gets lodged into his flesh, which leads to his death. This act of defence or jittery reaction indicates that he still is facing inner conflicts about whether "it" is his son or just an insect that makes his wife faint. He is perplexed about the identity of the creature in front of him. Had he acknowledged Gregor as an "insect", he would have decided to get rid of the "thing" that creates various problems in the house. Instead, he attempted to frighten him as if he was still "his son". *"So it [the apple] remained there as a visible reminder of his injury. He had suffered for more than a month, and his condition seemed serious enough to remind even his father that Gregor, despite his current sad and revolting form, was a family member who could not be treated as an enemy. On the contrary, as a family there was a duty to swallow any revulsion for him and to be patient, just to be patient."* (Kafka, 66) This statement is rather bitter

¹³ McLeod, Saul. Sigmund Freud's Theories. *Simply Psychology*. 2013. Web.

because he is aware of the fact that he is causing problems and sadness to his family yet he lacks the urge to fulfil the demands or care about the consequences of him being an insect, since his super ego was destroyed by his id by transforming him into a beetle. He has put himself in the centre of his life, which points out the internalisation of the existentialistic thoughts. He has come to realise the unimportance of the petty aspects in life that the majority of the society value insensibly. Finally getting the chance to actually live and not just exist and then gradually demising because of an apple thrown by his own father is bitterly tragic. Starting and finishing off the novella with tragedies implies the existentialism by illustrating the unavoidable pathetic and miserable facet of life. Dying was not the end for him, its just another condition he was in. Only when he turned into an insect did he realize he was already one.

Consequently, in the last part, Grete joins the alliance with his father and mother. She reprimanded Gregor as he was trying to hide the picture. *“Gregor!” shouted his sister, glowering at him and shaking her fist. That was the first word she had spoken to him directly since his transformation.* ” (Kafka 48) This rebuke of hers implies that Gregor has lost his human identity long ago, since the picture is a reference to his human side he wanted to protect. Therefore, this part deals with Gregor’s inner thoughts after he turns to himself and orientates his new place. The dilemma of being a human-insect fades away as the novella ends and opens a door to his inner-self and search for a meaning. Grete was the only and last hope for Gregor to keep the human part alive. Now that she has changed sides there is nothing left for him to hold on. The resistance of his has lost its meaning and the gain of independence allows him fully to block any human contact or communication, but as

an insect. This independent state caused by the metamorphosis is an opportunity to construe his life. Not only did the biological needs threaten his existence but they also brought out the dilemma of being insect and human at the same time. Yet being an insect has predominated over the human needs since he began to realize the freedom that comes with it, since even the most delicious human meal does not appeal to him anymore. After a certain point, the hunger represents the aspiration of freedom. *“Did he really want the warm room, so cosily appointed with heirlooms, transformed into a lair, where he might, of course, be able to creep, unimpeded, in any direction, though forgetting his human past swiftly and totally?”* (Kafka 54) This question implies to the reader that he now has the free will on his actions despite the fact that he had to pay a price with the metamorphosis, which is being dead and useless for the society. The existentialistic approach suggests, one should sacrifice the human connection in order to acknowledge one’s existence, and to have a mind that is not confined within the boundaries of the society.¹⁴ Had he not injured, he would have had the mind-set of an existentialist for he was truly isolated from any human contact, just as the speaker in the poem.

The cruellest trick of human existence - only way to completely understand life is to die. In both Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” and Kevin Halligan’s “The Cockroach” the attempts to understand life are impractical, therefore those unsuccessful endeavours cause pain to the individual. One shapes his life around the factors relating to both the individual and the surroundings, which are basic desires, motivations and the obligations, thus the balance between them is provided with reasoning through the mind. In respect to Freudian psychoanalysis, these factors are

¹⁴ Robinson, Dave – Groves, Judy. Philosophy. Pasific Ofset. 2011. Print.

named as, id and super-ego; moreover ego is the reasonable suspension part between them. In *Metamorphosis*, the crucial aspects of the human psychology is portrayed through the protagonist Gregor Samsa, who lacks reason therefore has become a conformist member of the society. However, after he tragically turns into an insect, the development of character and sense led him to realize the vicious circle he was in then leads him to wonder about the meaning of life. Whereas, *The Cockroach* starts off where Gregor Samsa dies. Searching the meaning of life, through the random movements of a cockroach, the speaker has an epiphany about the similarities between his life stages and the actions of the cockroach's. Once again, the questions on life are left hanging in the end of the poem with the realization of him not being any better than a cockroach. The contents and the style differentiate as the publishing years differ. The poem consists of only one stanza that can be divided into four parts that symbolize the stages of life. The solid ending of the poem leaves question marks in the readers mind, depicting the confusion of the speaker because of he is still unable to answer the simple question about life. On the contrary, the narrating style in the novella, conveys Gregor's and his family's reactions or the lack of reactions to Gregor's metamorphosis in a psychoanalytic perspective which helps the reader to fully understand the influence of existentialism in the novella. All in all, Kafka and Halligan depict the major idea that there is only one illness in man and it is his own existence and the only cure for it is death. So, we see in *The Metamorphosis*, after his terrible metamorphosis, Gregor wish his death, just like the cockroach spontaneously stops because of the confusion.

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