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Modernistic Perspective on Kafka's Metamorphosis

Muhammad Hasnain * Muzaffar Qadar † Muhammad Mubashir ‡

Corresponding Author: Muzaffar Qadar (Lecturer, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: muzaffarqadir786@gmail.com)

Abstract: *This study explores Kafka's "Metamorphosis" using a modernistic lens. The study employs a qualitative method, analyzing textual lines through the ideas of modernism presented by Berry (1995). Findings reveal that Kafka employed experimental writing techniques of symbolism and stream of consciousness to depict elements of hope and the human connection with himself. Moreover, "Metamorphosis" contains modernistic themes of dehumanization, existential crisis, fear, violence, and absurdity. All these themes signify the degradation of Samsa to the extent that he ultimately meets his death. This study paves the way for academia to perceive literature in a broader sense rather than confining it to a single lens of interpretation.*

Key Words: Alienation, Dehumanization, Existential Crisis, Metamorphosis, Symbolism, Stream of Consciousness

Introduction

Franz Kafka is one of the most influential modern writers, famous for his writings that converge contemporary world themes. Only a tiny portion of his writings got published. One significant aspect common in all his writings is the individual trapped in circumstances, unable to cope with them, pushed into dejection, decay, and death. His language is often considered the portrayal of negative, and the translations of his works made his writing more negative in narration. So, he was 'caught between languages and nations" (Spector, 2020). Martin Esslin(1961) claimed that Kafka's works portray modern man's anxiety, dread, and purposelessness. He introduced the theme of alienation to expose the follies of the modern world. 'Metamorphosis,' 'The Trial,' and 'The Castle,' every story, depict the concept of existential and identity crisis. Patil (2011)claims he is a neo-romanticist, an expressionist, and a surrealist. His novel themes are projections of society about individuals. Kafka cannot be categorized in one sustained theory. His writings embody the diversity of themes. Wallace (2007), in his book "Consider the Lobster and Other Essays," suggests that Kafka portrays "the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is, in fact, our home" (p.47). This establishes the actual theme of Kafka's stories. 'Metamorphosis' is a story in which the self does not seem separated from the "horrific struggle." Metamorphosis" is the story of a young man who wakes up in bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin. As he was the sole breadwinner of his family, his disability caused damage and shock to

* MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.
† Lecturer, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.
‡ Graduate, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

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the whole family. In response, the family abandoned him. He fell prey to alienation, dejection, dehumanization, and existential crises and finally died by the end of the story. These themes truly depict the core of modernism. His alienation results from the pressure of the external world, which exists under economic, political, financial, and industrial issues. "The modern world can learn a lot from Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis story" (Alkhafaji, 2020).

Modernism is one of the most crucial movements in the twentieth century. This was some sort of radical, revolutionary, and progressive movement that introduced many new trends in art and literature. Christopher Butler applies the term to some movements like imagism, vorticism, Dadaism, surrealism, expressionism, impressionism, futurism, formalism, and so on. Modernism appeared before the Second World War, and it focused on the microcosm rather than the macrocosm. It addresses individualism rather than society. Most of Kafka's writings were written during that time, which focused on the disjointed, disordered, and discordant part of society.

Problem Statement

Modernism is the movement, idea, and style that encapsulates numerous concepts, providing deep insights into the work of literature and reflecting true human nature. Although "Metamorphosis" has been studied through many perspectives, a modernistic reading of the novella has not been done. This research aims to fill this gap by providing deep insights into the modernistic elements woven into this piece of work.

Significance of the study

This study is significant as it provides a new dimension to understanding the work of literature. Deep insights into the text of "Metamorphosis" pave the way for other research on exploring other dimensions of modernism. Apart from these technical significances, the exploration of Samsa's deteriorating conditions gives a comprehensive overview of present-day humans and their dilemmas.

Research Questions

What are the different modernistic elements that can be analyzed in Kafka's "Metamorphosis"?

How does the use of modernistic elements in "Metamorphosis" help the writer and the reader to get a deep insight into Samsa's dramatic character?

Literature Review

Similar Literary Works

There are numerous novels and short stories in literature that represent themes and characteristics similar to modern writings. In American literature, Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and T. S Eliot's works portray the same themes of loss, isolation, and destruction. Earnest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" (1926) addresses the themes of the aimlessness of the new generation, transformation, insecurity, and destruction of the male sex. "Barn Burning" (1939) by William Faulkner explores the problem of a family of a certain social class by pointing out the prevailing feelings of fear, resentment, dejection, and loss. Plath's "Ariel" (1965) portrays a similar kind of transformation, but in her case, the transformation allows an escape from the boundaries of reality. "Waiting for Godot" (1954) also represents absurdity, confusion, and exploitation in a manner similar to "Metamorphosis." Additionally, post-modern and post-colonial literature contains several elements representing transformations. In "Exit West" (2017), the role of "doors" becomes magical and helps people transport to far-off places. In contrast to "Metamorphosis," where a prison is a magical element for Samsa, in "Exit West," doors serve as a means of transporting people across borders and aiding their escape. Moreover, in terms of socio-historical context, novels like "White Nights" (1848) also represent a similar theme of alienation in the character of the "young man."

Recent Literature on Metamorphosis

Kohzadi (2012) investigated the story realistically and delved into the philosophical and psychological notions of "Metamorphosis," finding numerous interpretations that can be drawn from its in-depth study. Later, Minar (2017) examined the idea of shame and alienation, exploring the dynamics of how Gregor was subjected to alienation by his family. In contrast to Minar, Wardani (2022) studied the effect of Gregor's alienation on his family, pointing out the problems they encountered. Alkhafaji (2020)

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examined Samsa's alienation from family and society as the result of prevailing industrialization, which, at the stake of his loss of identity and physical as well as mental transformation, contributed to his separation from social practices. Bhattacharya (2022) focused on exploring the deformed Samsa and attempted to delve into his pains and sufferings. Roopa (2018), negative effects of Samsa's alienation. The researcher further highlights the importance of social and family relationships in the existence and survival of an individual. The study shows how Samsa's life was filled with alienation, hatred, and fear when he began to lose his social and family relationships. Suther (2022) examined "Metamorphosis" as a modernistic tragedy and observed the snatched freedom of Gregor Samsa. Moreover, Raja and Dasghosh studied the effect of bourgeois oppression, which results in the alienation and repression of Kafka's desires.

Research Methodology

Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative method. Textual lines are subjected to analysis using modernistic ideas.

Theoretical Framework

Defining modernism is a challenging task as it can be approached in various ways. In the present context, Berry (1995) defines modernism as the movement that brought an earthquake in twentieth-century history, breaking the established notions of music, arts, and literature. On the contrary, another dimension of modernism is defined by Parmar (2018): "Modernism is closely associated with the new charm of life at every stage. It is the perceptive enigma of the human mind, which is ever set and overset as a configuration of new things and transcendent of life" (p.294). The former definition is more related to "modernism" as the term encompasses literary and stylistic changes in the first half of the twentieth century as a whole, while the latter term is more concerned with the concept of "modernity," reflecting the conditions of the world in terms of socio-political and socio-economic developments.

Insights for the theory have been drawn from Berry (1995) in the "Post-Modernism" chapter. While he discusses Post-Modernism, he clearly provides the model on which modern writings are built. He outlines five characteristics of modernist writings. Firstly, he mentions a "new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity" (Berry, 1995, p.79). This point is closely related to the techniques of modernism, where symbolism and the theme of absurdity are identified. The second point is "Away from objectivity and fixed narratives" (Berry, 1995, p.79), exemplified by the stream of consciousness. Thirdly, "blurring of the genre," "discontinuous narrative," and "self-reflective" themes are associated with absurdity and reality, socio-historical themes, and self-based themes like existentialism.

Data Analysis

Symbolism

Kafka, being a modernist writer, opted for techniques of his age. One of the most popular techniques of modernism is the use of symbolism. In Metamorphosis, Kafka uses the window as a symbol of nostalgia, connection, and disconnection to the world, as well as escape and hope. The most important function this window symbol signifies is nostalgia. It can be seen in Gregor's feelings as "he was quite depressed to hear drops of rain hitting the pane." (p.2). The word melancholy is not used as a derogatory term here. Rather, it is used to describe the intensity of his loneliness. This becomes evident when Kafka says, "He would peek out the window at such moments, trying to see as clearly as possible, but sadly, the view offered him neither confidence nor cheer and even the other side of the small street was shrouded in morning mist. " (p.5). Desperate, he wants to escape from harsh realities and suffering through windows; these become the way of disconnecting from the world as what's on that side is not visible to the world. As Samsa was disabled, he got sight from his windows: "It was a hospital — was easy to be viewed, with its typical windows starkly disturbing the facade" (p.39). These lines show a sharp similarity between binaries, a patient, and his treatment place in a hospital. However, the role of windows here is as a barrier between the disabled man and the hospital place. Moreover, its role in igniting a sense of memory of good times happens through an emotive process as "he would prop himself against the window, perhaps with a recollection of a feeling of liberation he had once had from staring out of the window" (p.50). And, finally,

this window serves the purpose of hope: "They arose, moved to the opening, and stayed there, arms encircling each other" (p.74). This also hints at the hope of getting a better future ahead. Embracing each other while looking through the window also hints at the hope of acceptance from the world that the window is offering.

Stream of Consciousness

"Metamorphosis" is a story written from the third-person omniscient point of view, but it has a touch of experimentation in point of view. "It struck him, what a demanding career I've chosen! Moving throughout the day. Deal-making carries a lot more stress than running a home-based firm. In addition, I have to endure the agony of traveling." (p.29). It is a characteristic of stream of consciousness to show what is going on in a character's head. In this case, the same is happening as Samsa expresses his regret about choosing the profession of a commercial traveler. His anxiety, worry, and sincerity toward his family can also be seen in the stream of consciousness when he thinks about his family's debt and financial conditions. "I haven't given up hope completely, though; I will pay back my parents' obligation to him as soon as I have the necessary funds, which should take five or six years. The big break will then occur" (p.30). His words seem so true to every man who is struggling and keeps thinking about family and life plans. Amid these thoughts, Gregor is also aware of his family's changing routines, and he comments, "Gregor thought to himself, 'What a calm life the family enjoys regardless."I'm hungry," Gregor muttered to himself in anguish, "but not for these things. How these gentlemen enjoy their food when I pass away (p.65).

Class, Desires, and Aspirations - An Age of Materialism

Modernism is a time when revolutionary theories in the field of economics, especially concerning materialism, developed. This materialism is opposed by movements like communism and socialism, which were proposed by the Russian revolutionary Karl Marx. However, that is not debated here. Only a few incidents indicating classes, class struggles, power struggles, and survival are discussed.

The first incident that can be analyzed from this lens is the depiction of Gregor's room, which seems to be deliberately expressed as the room of a middle-class family member. "His room, a suitable, human being's room, rather cramped, sat calmly between its four known walls" (p.29). This depiction is very parallel to the pictures of a middle-class family room, which is probably small in size but often peaceful. Another thing confirming Gregor's status as a middle-class family member is his job status in the story. "Samsa was a commercial traveler" (p.29). When we reach this moment of guessing Gregor's class or status, we can easily say that Gregor is the representation of the middle class, who, in the struggle to gain power and raise standards, suffered physically and mentally.

The way he was exploited is expressed as "The anxiety around train delays, inadequate and erratic food, and human interaction that is constantly shifting, fleeting, and never quite warm. Screw it all!"(p.29-30). This exploitation is the product of the age and class systems prevalent in society, which force one to conform in the way they want them to conform. That's why he, even being exploited at the hands of the firm, still worked for them. This raises the question, "Why?" "Why was Gregor the only one destined for serving in an organization where the smallest error aroused the biggest doubt?" (p.34). The answer to this is very simple: it was the only thing that let him support his family amid the age of materialism, where his little responsibility could affect his status within the family. This is rightly expressed as "Yes, indeed, the boy concentrates on nothing but his job."(p.35). He thinks of nothing else because it probably becomes his core concern. That's why when he became a monstrous vermin, he wanted his parents to stop the chief clerk; otherwise, his family would have to face hard times."The senior clerk must be incarcerated, calmed, persuaded and finally won over" (p.41). Convincing the upper hierarchy is the only way forward to survive among them. Until he was in a normal position, "Gregor earned so much wealth that he was in an advantageous position to take on the financial obligations of his entire family — and accomplished so" (p.49). This indicates his role as a hero for his whole family, dealing with everything in their life at the expense of his own deterioration. This is confirmed by Kafka in the words, "Who, in this tired and worn out family,

had time to show concern for Gregor more than was needed?" (p.49).

Age of Psychoanalytical Discoveries

As it was the age of the discovery of theories, Samsa's character is introduced with a "dream," not an ordinary one, but an uneasy one indicating turmoil in the unconscious, irritating Samsa even in his dreams and transforming him from a human to a monstrous insect. "As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin" (The Metamorphosis and Other Stories, 2009, p.29). This indicates the activation of the unconscious, which Freud defined as the storehouse. Starting with this mental agony, Gregor suffered throughout the story with mental, physical, social, and psychological trauma, becoming alienated and eventually dying in the course of time. Another interesting thing is that the story starts with the theme of anxiety and trouble related to dreams, but by the end, the same dreams served the purpose of hope; as Kafka said, "They realized it was like an affirmation of their newly acquired ambitions and admirable goals until, at the end of their voyage, their daughter was the first to rise from her chair and stretch out her small body." (p.74). It seems that dreams serve the purpose of both life and death. For him, it brought him death because of continuous torture and aloofness, and for them, it served the purpose of hope for a better future.

Another dimension of psychoanalytic theory, which is displacement from reality, can also be seen in this story, as said by Kafka, "family back from transferring site was far more their absolute desperation, and the realization that they were afflicted with a catastrophe like no one else in their whole sphere of friends and relatives" (p.61). It was a displacement from reality as they started posing superstitions rather than facing the reality that they were the ones to neglect Samsa, pushing him and themselves into the dark. "Metamorphosis," to some extent, contains elements of nostalgia as part of Gregor's personality. "The boss, the head clerk, the junior clerks, the interns, the ridiculous porter, two or three friends from other organizations, a chambermaid in a hotel in the region, a beautiful, fleeting memory, a girl, and the cashier in a millinery shop were among the figures that reappeared in the background of his mind after a prolonged period of absenteeism." (p.62). This shows how a self suffered ceaselessly with memories when people around him abandoned him. Moreover, projection can be seen in his father's behavior, who blamed him for violence and actually attacked him with apples.

Absurdity

Modern literature, especially late modernism, contains an extreme kind of absurdity. The cause of this absurdity is the events that happened during the first half of the twentieth century. World wars and the Romani Holocaust changed people's perception of life, leaving them in a situation of an absurd world where everything is meaningless and incomprehensible. This absurdity and meaningless state are expressed in the physical transformation of Gregor Samsa. It's described as he is lying on his back which is an "armor-like back", and when he tried lifting his head he saw his "curved brown abdomen", which was divided by "arch-shaped segments" (p.29). His physical transformation raises many questions, such as how it is possible for a human to be transformed into a monstrous insect. This also shocked him, leading him to ask, "What has happened to me?" (p.29). This is the most asked question after the World Wars when the world was questioning, "What happened to me?" Gregor asks the same question in response to the crisis he fell into. It is not just his physical appearance that has changed over time; his social relations also deteriorated as his family abandoned him. It seems clear when Kafka writes, that after the first two weeks of metamorphosis, his "parents could not bring themselves to come into him" (p.52). These things again pose questions on the social institution of family. When the meaning of one's own identity is abandoned, the same goes for the institution of the family when Gregor says to himself that they are not going to open the door "seized by some sort of absurd hope" (p.34). Even after losing his body form and his family's support, he still had 'hope.' Hope for the recovery of relations and life, just like people in the world have such an absurd hope of recovering the same world that existed before the world wars.

Fear and Violence

Modernism is the age when mass destruction occurred globally in the first half of the century. Many authors in the West explicitly depict fear,

terror, violence, and destruction at the societal level. On the other hand, there are authors who endured endless suffering and expressed it in their characters' lives. Kafka's Gregor Samsa is one who feared and was victimized by his own family. He was usually viewed with skepticism by his family despite having spent his whole life earning for them tirelessly. After his sudden transformation, they consider him a human enemy capable of harming them. Kafka expressed his father's views to his family as he always expected harm from Gregor "but you women didn't intend to listen" (p.54). This expresses concerns of fear of violence and oppression, but in reality, it is ironic, as his father is the one who committed violence against expectations. He attacked Gregor, and his gestures could be rightly defined by Gregor in the following words: "As soon as he entered, he exclaimed, "Aha!" in a voice that suggested he was simultaneously ecstatic and furious." (p.57). Such rage and anger are products of the era's frustration and violence, resembling the intent of the Allies during the world wars. His father's attack with the apple on Gregor can be juxtaposed with the Allies throwing bombs at each other, some of which damaged the population and others did not. Kafka described the father's attack as "something tossed lightly flew down" and it was landing around him continuously. It was an attack of apples. This image is reinforced by its intensity "at once a second flew after it" (p.58). This is not only the intent or gesture of violence but also a conscious attempt to depict what actually happened during that age. The picture of terror and violence is reinforced when he is hit by one of the apples, "One badly thrown apple skimmed Gregor's back" (p.58). This throw did not harm him but the next one was hilarious as it "literally penetrated Gregor's back" (p.58). This illustrates how a single bomb if it hits the population, could cause significant harm to the whole nation in the form of death, decay, and destruction.

Dehumanization

Another important technique and aspect that modern writers experimented with was the use of dehumanization to show how humans were treated like animals in the age of revolutions and wars. Both industrialists and the state treated them like animals, exploiting them in the name of money and nation. Gregor is defined as "the boss's creature" (p.31). These remarks clearly illustrate how humans are devalued in the modern age. Furthermore, he is depicted as a "spineless creature," not a human being but an animal. Moreover, dehumanization seems at its peak when Kafka writes that "he hadn't once been ill till now" (p.31), indicating his status considered as an object, not a human who could be ill anytime during the course of years. Their bosses think of them as creatures and expect them to work even when they are sick because, for them, "one can get rid of the illness without resting at home" (p.37). These elements of dehumanization only stress the dimension of modern-age materialism, but this dehumanization is also part of World War games, where people were slaughtered like animals.

Ill-treatment of humans as animals is rightly expressed in the character of Gregor as Gregor was attacked by his father described in the words "his father used his feet to stamp more forcefully." (p.42). Moreover, to make a powerful impact on this dehumanization technique, Samsa is actually transformed into an insect, which is itself a critique of the standards of society that considers the middle class not more than animals. This reinforcing effect is given in the explicit words when Gregor's voice is compared to an animal, "That was an animal's voice.'" (p.37). Transforming him after "uneasy dreams" and calling his voice an "animal voice" is an indication of the changed status of Gregor Samsa. Moreover, the way his father treated him is similar to how people are usually treated by their nation's leaders as animals who could cause them to suffer. He was so vulnerable after the strike that "he would not have been able to move of his own accord" (p.43). This strike was physical but showed in the same sense as people in the real world are struck by the orders of their leaders. This is further confirmed by how these kicks caused them to suffer, just like Samsa suffered during the story. Apart from this, another dehumanizing act is when he loses his room and sees it getting transformed into a storage room as expressed by Kafka that "they were depriving him of everything that was dear to him" (p.54).

The last act of dehumanization that should be mentioned is the attack that caused him to suffer and eventually die. His father, while throwing apples, forgot the status of Gregor as his son and kept throwing apples, "Gregor stood still in terror" (p.59) amid bombardment from the father who was standing by the side of the fruit bowl and "threw apple after apple" (p.59) which hit Gregor

and caused his death. This shows how the dehumanizing technique is used to depict the changing status of human relations in modern times. This is further expressed when finally Gregor's sister abandons accepting his transformed status anymore, stating, "I will not utter my brother's name in front of this monster" (p.68), and she further suggested to get rid of it. This abandonment is not only of entirely giving him up as a brother but also giving up his presence among them.

Existential Crisis

An existential crisis is the major modernistic element in the story on which the whole plot stands, as it is the story of a man who transformed into a vermin, abandoned by society, alienated, dejected, decayed, and eventually dies. Gregor was a responsible man, and it can be guessed that even at his worst when he got transformed, he was thinking,"' Just don't stay uselessly in bed,' Gregor said to himself" (p.32).

His physical transition first affected his physical existence and body movements, which caused his crisis to start at the physical level. It is expressed as when he tried to move in the start he "bumped violently against the bottom bedpost" (p.32). It was not only the physical disability that affected Gregor. Gregor gets badly hurt by the abandonment he faces in society. His social relations deteriorated. He remained confined to a room. He lost his meaning in life. This eventually caused him to wander all the time in the prison (his own room) he was caught in. Kafka described his condition as he lost interest in lying, bearing, eating, and he became accustomed to creeping all over the walls and ceiling as a distraction." (p.52). Moreover, he was badly suffering from the wound he got from his father. It added to his dejection and decay "as a visible memorial in his flesh" (p.59). This physical and emotional pain kept hurting him for a long time.

During this time, when he had almost everything lost - his physical body, his social identity, and mental health - he left eating anything, indicating the ending era of his life. "Gregor was now eating almost nothing" (p.63) and even if it eats something "then mostly spit it out again" (p.63)? It was only the start as "He found that he could not move at all."(p.70). He was now almost done with his life, as he was left with nothing to live for. He remained in a peaceful state till three o'clock in the morning. Kafka described his death scene in the words, "He still lived to see the dark begin to grow generally lighter outside the window. Then his head sank down without his willing it, and from his nostrils, his last breath faintly flowed." (p.70). Kafka satirically described it as living in a peaceful reflection, indicating how much he suffered physically, socially, and mentally.

Discussion

The present study inclusively explores the use of different modernistic techniques, including realism, symbolism, existentialism, stream of consciousness, and psychoanalysis by Kafka in "Metamorphosis." He employed these techniques to explore the ongoing existential, social, racial, economic, and class crises in the modern age. The use of these elements not only allies the problem faced by modern man but provides a helping hand to the writer as well as the writer to dive into Samsa's character and his society by exploring the dehumanization and alienation of Samsa and the materialistic needs of his family.

The findings of the present research provide supporting evidence based on the results of recent literature. The findings of this paper are supported by Raja and Dasghosh (2022), who studied the effects of social structures or capitalism in the section "Age of Materialism." Both studies align at this point. Similarly, the idea of alienation raised by Minar (2017) supports the ideas raised in this study, especially dehumanization and existential crisis resulting from the family's alienation. Moreover, the psychological dimensions are supported by the study of Kohzadi (2012), who explored a similar theme in a more delicate way. Similarly, Bhattacharya's (2022) ideas support the notion of the pain and suffering of Samsa discussed under the dehumanization section. Devi's (2019) findings also provided a favorable ground for the present study. He found that due to rapidly prevailing modernistic thought, Samsa could not change himself according to those conditions that threatened his own existence by causing alienation and subsequent dehumanization of his character. Alkhafaji's (2020) study of "Metamorphosis" showed different results. His findings revealed that apart from industrialization, societal deterioration, and economic pressure, Samsa became the victim of moral delineation of his own family, which ultimately led him towards his ultimate death.

Finally, the story can be compared with Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" (1927) in terms of the use of stream of consciousness and symbolism, as the window of "To the Lighthouse" is comparable to Samsa's room window. Both serve the purpose of hope. In short, all the studies somehow support the findings in an individual sense and contradict them only in the sense that they explored the short story from a single perspective. However, this study is based on the exploration of wider perspectives encompassing all themes related to modernism.

Conclusion

This study delved into "Metamorphosis" using a modernistic lens and identified themes that exemplify the writing style of the era, such as symbolism and stream of consciousness. This study also explored the convolutions and complexities of the modern world under the influence of growing violence, fear, and materialistic approaches to family relationships. Additionally, themes related to socio-historical conditions, like dehumanization, existential crisis, and alienation, are vividly portrayed through Samsa's inner turmoil. In summary, the study illustrated the declining position of men in contemporary society under different social and economic circumstances in a capitalist society. This research also invites other researchers to explore "Metamorphosis" to get a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of modern themes employed by the author.

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