

From Humans to Animals: The Embodiment of the Alienation Theory in Kafka's Metamorphosis

Lanxin Li*

University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

**Corresponding author*

Abstract: The turn of the 20th century witnessed tremendous changes in western social and spiritual life. With the rapid expansion of capitalism, the life of the proletariat is oppressed. Modernist literature gradually developed under this background. Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) is a representative work of European modernist literature in the early 20th century. By describing the story of the alienation of small people from the bottom of society into animals, the writer fully exposes the oppression of ordinary people by capitalism. Through describing the alienation of humans and animals to explore the living conditions of the general public in a capitalist society. Combining the alienation theory, this study deeply analyzes the alienation phenomenon of the protagonist Gregor from three dimensions, including man's relation to his productive activity, self-estrangement, and his fellow men. Through this analysis, a dialectical understanding and in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of humans alienating into animals is carried out. This study provides new research perspectives about the alienation of humans into animals. Readers can also have a new understanding of alienation in modernist literary works in the early 20th century.

Keywords: Alienation Theory; Metamorphosis; Alienation; Capitalism; Animals

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, major Western countries entered rapid economic development and international expansion. From 1914 to 1918, the First World War had made sense of life being dislocated and fragmented. Meanwhile, the loss of faith, which began noticeably with Darwin's theories of evolution and was intensified by the development of modern science, continued with greater intensity

into the twentieth century. As Yaoxin Chang summarized in *A Survey of English Literature*, "High Modernism cut in and began to dominate the world of literature and art" (2006, p. 157). This new, varied experience of the period demanded a new varied expression. Under the multiple influences of war and modern science and technology, writers and sensitive minds began to take a fresh look at man and his life, and discovered substantive changes in the relationship between man and man, between man and nature, and between man and self.

1.1 Franz Kafka and Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka (1883 – 1924), was a novelist in the 20th century, Jew He is widely considered to be one of the founders of modernist literature. Kafka began to publish novels in 1904, and he created many works in his life, such as *Metamorphosis*, *Castle*, *The Trial*. There are many novels about animals among them. Regarding animal images in Kafka's novels, Pietro Citati notes that "he sensed an animal within him. Again and again, composing with the figures of his unconscious a bestiary just as immense as a medieval one" (1990, p. 59, cited in Harel, 2020, p. 1). As one of the representatives of modernism, through describing the alienation of humans and animals, Kafka reflects people's depression, despair, and emotional turmoil in the early 20th century.

As one of Kafka's representative works describing the alienation of human beings into animals, *Metamorphosis* tells the story of an employee Gregor who alienated into a vermin under the dual pressure of society and family, and was finally abandoned by his family and died tragically. To be more specific, this work is "a philosophical treatment of life, the reflection of it in the self, the loneliness and the absurdity of life" (Ali, 2025, p. 1582), which describes the alienation of the low-level characters into animals in the capitalist society.

1.2 The Alienation Theory

In the 19th century, in *Economic And Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx systematically interpreted the phenomenon of human alienation in capitalist society. According to Ollman's (1976) interpretation of the theory of alienation:

The theory of alienation is the intellectual construct in which displays the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and on the social processes of which they are a part (131).

Regarding the research object, the alienation theory discusses the links between one man, his activity and products, his fellows, inanimate nature and the species through focusing on the acting individual. *Metamorphosis* also talks about ordinary workers who alienated into animals and this story describes the relationship between the protagonist and his work, family and colleagues. In other words, this work is the embodiment of the theory of alienation in literary works. Therefore, using this theory can better study the causes of the alienation of the protagonist into an animal and the performance of the alienation of man in a capitalist society.

2. Alienation in *Metamorphosis*

The protagonist of *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa, is a travelling salesman. His job requires running around very hard, for instance, "travelling day in and day out ... worries about making train connections" (Kafka, 2016, p. 4), but his boss in the company does not value him. His father is bankrupt, his mother is sick, and his sister needs money to learn violin. Gregor worked hard to pay off his father's debts and support his family and the heavy family burden made him breathless.

Under such a social environment and family environment, "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin" (Kafka, 2016, p. 3). Physically turning into a vermin, Gregor's body is getting worse and worse, but he is still worried about paying off his father's debt. Because Gregor could no longer make money, such a kind and responsible person was eventually abandoned by his relatives. Many reasons caused Gregor's alienation and his death. Kafka divided the whole story into three parts, and from each part, it can be seen that Gregor's alienation is deepening step by step.

2.1 Gregor's Alienation of his Productive Activity

First of all, Gregor's work did not bring him freedom and happiness, and on the contrary, this job caused him to suffer significant physical and mental torture. Gregor is just an inconspicuous clerk in the company. Gregor's work is hard, and he is travelling day in and day out. The business pressure is heavy, and the food during his work journey is poor. All these make Gregor want to escape from his work; therefore, when he found out that he had become a vermin, he sighed about his work in bed, "what a strenuous career it is that I've chosen!" (Ibid, p. 4). Work is one of the humans' basic activities, but work can't show inner freedom and lack of warmth for Gregor. Man's alienation in a capitalist society is reflected in his labor because the benefits that the worker creates are not for himself but the capitalists, so Gregor's sales job is alienated. As Marx said in *Manuscripts*, "Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague" (1988, p. 74). Under such working conditions, labor is external to the worker. To be more specific, a worker like Gregor does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop his physical and mental energy freely but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. Therefore, this production activity is not voluntary but coerced. In other words, it is forced labor. "The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself" (Marx, 1988, P.74). Gregor was forced to work to pay off his father's debts, but it was not his voluntary production activity. So when Gregor found out that he became a vermin and didn't have to go to work, he had the idea that let it all go to hell! Such a real idea further confirms that Gregor's production activities do not belong to him and that the products or benefits generated by his work do not belong to him too.

Regarding the comparison of Gregor's behaviour before and after, Deleuze mentioned similar comparisons in *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), that is, "the bent head" represents a blocked, oppressed, or oppressing, neutralized desire, while "the straightened head" represents a desire that straightens up or moves forward, childhood block or animal block. This is Deleuze's point of view after analyzing the two actions of Gregor in the *Metamorphosis*. On

the one hand, Gregor glues himself to the portrait of the woman in fur and bends his head toward the door in a desperate attempt to hold onto something in his room; on the other hand, he leaves his bedroom, guided by the sound of the violin and tries to grab upon the uncovered neck of his sister. One lowered his head, and the other raised his head. The seemingly small movements express the changes in Gregor's mentality before and after. This can also explain that Gregor, mentioned in the previous paragraph, likes to hang on the ceiling after becoming a vermin, and "he was used to sleeping on his right" (Kafka, 2016, p. 3). Because Gregor used to get up early to catch the bus for work, he couldn't sleep well. Gregor, in the past, was oppressed. After becoming a vermin, Gregor can freely control his limbs and hang upside down and breathe freely on the ceiling.

2.2 Gregor's Self-estrangement

Second, Gregor transformed from a human to a vermin is self-estrangement. "Self-estrangement" is an essential part of the alienation theory, that is, under the suppression of forces alien to others, the individual is suppressed and loses the characteristics of human beings. In "Estranged Labor," "man is a species being ... because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being" (Marx, 1988, p. 75). Free, conscious activity is man's species character, but now, people's production activities in a capitalist society have just lost their freedom.

Gregor could not decide his own destiny. Under the pressure from society and family, he alienated from a human to a vermin. This alienation from human to animal appearance seems to happen suddenly. In fact, Gregor's thinking is gradually becoming animalized with the change of appearance. "If taken in the context of alienated activity, product alienation appears as a result alongside the ruination of the worker's won body and mind" (Ollman, 1976, p.141). As the analyze above, Gregor's production activities have been alienated, therefore, the alienation of Gregor's appearance and thought is also reasonable.

On the one hand, conscious production activities distinguish humans from animals. "Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being" (Ibid, p. 76). Animals do not distinguish themselves from their life

activities, but humans can engage in conscious life activities. However, in alienated labor, this relationship is reversed – it is precisely because of one's conscious awareness that one's life activities become just a means of maintaining one's existence. In this way, there is no difference between humans and animals. Gregor's life reflects such an upside-down relationship. The work he consciously engages in is to maintain the family's life, which is the same as that of animals, which carry out production activities under the control of the needs of the flesh.

On the other hand, the self-alienation is not only manifested in appearance (a vermin), but also in Gregor's behaviours and thoughts. After becoming a vermin, Gregor gradually lost the functions that belonged to humans, but he retained animal functions. The first and the most obvious thing about the loss of human characteristics is "language". From the very beginning, when Gregor answered his mother's question, he could only utter a few vague words. Later, when his colleagues came to the house, everyone could not understand his voice at all. Gregor lost his human language. Kafka described an example contrary to Gregor in his other animal story A Report to an Academy. The protagonist of this story, Red Peter, is an ape. He finally turned into a human story by learning human movements and language. "The language he uses in the story is what makes him seem most human" (Dekoven, 2016, p. 20). The becoming – human⁷ the story, Red Peter learned the pronunciation of human languages, so he became a human being. On the contrary, Gregor could not make a human voice, then he alienated into a vermin. This manifestation is like the self-estranged man (1988, p.74):

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.

Gregor gradually lost human nature, such as the ability to speak and autonomous production activities but kept animal instincts such as crawling with limbs and eating leftovers. Gregor won't even complain that the food during the trip is not good enough as he used to do when he worked, and now he eats even the broken apples

and leftovers without distinction. The distortion of human nature and his alienation caused Gregor to deviate from the essence of man.

2.3 Gregor's Alienation of Interpersonal Relationships

The third aspect of Gregor's alienation is the alienation of interpersonal relationships. The result of the fact that man is alienated from his labor products, his life activities, and his species being is the alienation between people and their fellow men. "If a man is confronted by himself, he is confronted by the other man" (Marx, 1988, p. 78). Gregor's work as a travelling sales is alienated labor. The products he produces or the benefits for the company do not belong to him but belong to capitalists. Therefore, in the alienated relationship caused by alienated labor, the worker and the capitalist are opposed.

At the bottom position of the company, Gregor often goes out, he meets a lot of different people, but nobody gets to know others, not to mention becoming friends with them. As Gregor said, "The office assistant was the boss's man, spineless, and with no understanding" (2016, p. 5). The boss only cares whether Gregor goes to work on time to create benefits for the company. Gregor's colleague, the chief clerk, comes to visit him not because he cares about whether Gregor is sick but asks Gregor if he can go to work since the boss suspects him to be lazy. In the boss's eyes, Gregor is just a tool to make money for him. Besides, colleagues did not lend a hand when Gregor became a vermin. The indifference in interpersonal relationships is vividly demonstrated here.

In addition to the company, Gregor's relationship with his family also shows the alienation of interpersonal relationships. When Gregor first became a vermin, the tone of his mother's questioning was "gentle," and his younger sister went to the door to care about her brother. However, when family members discovered that Gregor had become a vermin and could no longer go out to make money, they changed their attitude. The food is given by his sister, from the beginning of "sweetened milk" 8 and "little pieces of white bread" to the later "old, half-rotten vegetables" and "bones from the evening meal." The family was highly disgusted with Gregor. His mother was frightened by him, his father threw him the apple, and even the maid in the house did not respect him. "They had been good times and they had never come

again" (Kafka, 2016, p. 30). Before alienation, when Gregor made money, the family was delighted and used to be full of warmth, but now became indifferent and self-interested. Gregor died in indifferent interpersonal relationships, but his family thought they had thrown big trouble and moved to a new home, enjoying themselves well. Like Gregor's boss, in the eyes of his parents and sisters, Gregor is a machine for making money for them, and family relationships have been alienated to be measured by money.

Whether it is the change of Gregor's relationship with his boss or his family, Gregor's interpersonal relationship is alienated. This is a true portrayal of the relationship between people in a society dominated by money. A typical manifestation of the theory of alienated labor. "The theory of alienation explains the paradox of social power and isolation that characterizes contemporary capitalist societies, in which feelings of powerlessness and loneliness are intensified despite objective increases in humanity's social power and interdependence" (Øversveen, 2022, p. 440). By criticizing the alienation of people, the writer articulated the principle of interest in interpersonal relations in capitalist society and revealed the opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

3. Conclusion

In the 19th century, based on Hegel's idealism and Feuerbach's materialism, Marx raised the issue of the alienation of people in capitalist society. Later scholars such as Ollman and Cohen systematically analyzed Marx's theory of alienation by sorting out a host of Marx and Engels' masterpieces, such as the Manuscripts and *Das Kapital*. From the perspective of the mode of production in a capitalist society, Marx explained the phenomenon and reasons of human alienation in capitalist society from the four levels, which includes "the alienation of people and production activities," "the alienation of people and products," "The alienation of man and others," and "The Self-alienation." From the 19th century till now, criticism and analysis of the nature of capitalist society are still worth learning.

Based on the alienation theory, this study analyzes the alienation phenomena of the hero in *Metamorphosis*. Through the discussion the production in capitalist society, first of all,

Gregor, as a proletarian worker, does not work for himself and the products he produces and the profits he creates do not belong to him. Therefore, in capitalist society, the production activities of workers are alienated. Then, the relationship of production under this alienated activity, that is, the relationship between workers and capitalists, is also alienated. Finally, under the multidimensional influence of society, bosses, colleagues, and family, people themselves have also been alienated.

All in all, in the 20th century European modernist literature, there is an in-depth exploration of literature about the alienation of humans into animals. The alienation theory can be said to be the theoretical representative of this type of literary works. Therefore, it is very feasible to use the alienation theory to explore literary works with the theme of human alienation in capitalist society. By analyzing different phenomena of alienation under the same social background, this research reveals the physical and spiritual control of the capitalist society on people from the three main levels of society, the relationship between people and themselves. By analyzing alienation in *Metamorphosis*, this paper provides a multi-level interpretation of the phenomenon of alienation. Of course, this study has only investigated one representative work, and hope that more dimensional research on this topic can be conducted in the future.

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