

World Literature Paper 1

**The role and significance of symbolism in depicting the protagonist's  
ultimate condemnation in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger*.**

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While perusing a novel, there are times when the reader wonders whether he/she is reading superficial descriptions extraneous to the story - or whether he/ she has come across meaningful, symbolic passages highly relevant to the story. Would it really make a difference whether a single word in the text was interchanged with a similar word? Even seemingly common images can be the most effective symbols in works of literature. *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus, and *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka, are both novels that highlight the role and significance of symbolism in depicting their respective protagonists' ultimate fate. In these novels, symbols serve as an outlet for character conflicts, manifests the protagonists' internal conflicts, and foreshadow their condemned lives.

The protagonists' internal conflicts are manifested in symbolism in *The Stranger* and *The Metamorphosis*. In *The Stranger*, textual references to the sun and heat, which initially do not seem to be ominous symbols, prove to be associated with Meursault, the protagonist, and his various encounters with death. He first 'encounters' death at his mother's funeral, where, interestingly, he does not shed a tear. It is also clear that Meursault is painfully aware of the sweltering heat of the sun; he seems more aware of that 'bothersome' heat than his own mother's funeral. Likewise, as the intense heat of the sun disorients Meursault, his thoughts are distracted and clouded by it; most notably at the beach, he rationalizes that "The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman...it was all this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that *made me move forward*" (Camus 58). "The 'cymbals of sunlight crashing on [his] forehead' (Camus 59) galvanizes him into action, and he shoots and kills an Arab man. His agitation towards the sun indicates that he is not pleased by what many consider 'pleasing'. For example, 'sunny' weather is a connotation for 'good' weather; this is the positive way society generally perceives 'the sun'. Also, when one is described as having

a 'sunny disposition', many would picture a caring, sympathetic, and loving character full of life. Yet Meursault is quite the opposite; he is apathetic, and does not even feign warmth or sympathy to others-because he simply does not care to.

Unlike symbols in *The Stranger*, where light and heat seem to affect only Meursault in a discomfoting manner, the symbol of the bug in *The Metamorphosis* affects all the characters, inspiring a general and unanimous repulsion, except for the protagonist, who has in fact become that very symbol of repulsion. Curiously though, Gregor seems more shaken by how his family members perceive his bug-appearance than by the fact that he is an insect. Immediately following his transformation, he is too preoccupied by thoughts of work to feel disgusted by his appearance. He laments, 'If I didn't hold myself back because of my parents, I would have quit long ago' (Kafka 12); yet, as Gregor rambles on, it is apparent that he does not have enough courage to actually quit his job until his parents' debts are paid off, which 'should still take five or six years'(Kafka 12). The ostensibly unintentional transformation implies that Gregor already feels like a bug prior to his transformation; internally, he *is* a bug, existing without purpose. Gregor feels the weight of his familial duty, and it was this choking pressure of responsibility that manifests itself into the metamorphosed symbol of a bug. His bug body limits and confines him to his room, preventing him from being able to carry out his daily routine, thereby stripping away whatever 'relevance' he did have. Gregor's unconscious self-oppression is constantly masked by his ridiculous fixation of his clerk job; it is a crutch falsely resembling 'purpose'. Even as a bug, Gregor attempts to dissuade his chief clerk from firing him by rambling unintelligibly, "I'll get dressed right away..." (Kafka 21) and commencing a long speech about his supposed merits.

The authors apply symbols to justify the protagonists' unreasoned actions and their 'inhumanity' of being. In *The Stranger*, the sun is used as a feeble excuse by Meursault for his senseless murder of an Arab, and indirectly, for his remorselessness. When in close proximity to death as he is both at the funeral and at the beach, the repeating symbol of the scorching sun appears to leave the strongest and most unsettling impression on Meursault. In relevance to him, the sun is a steady, virtually omnipresent constant, starkly contrasting the violated earth that cycles it in eternal motion. This is reflective of Meursault's philosophy and apathetic state of mind; the bright sun remains unchanged and unparalleled in significance while the earth dynamically evolves, and everything that *was* and is will be forgotten or rendered meaningless. It is a symbolic channel through which Meursault subconsciously discharges his stance on life and relevance. During his poorly defended trial, Meursault, '...realizing how ridiculous [he] sounded, [he] blurted out that it was *because of the sun*.' (Camus 103) This clarifies that he cannot, and will not, conventionally vindicate himself of murder or for displaying indifference at his mother's funeral.

In *The Metamorphosis*, the physical debilitation of being a bug consequentially renders Gregor useless, thus inadvertently justifying himself of his denaturation, albeit unwillingly. Unlike Meursault in *The Stranger*, who uses the sun as a vent for his own stance on the absurdity of conformed and prejudiced society, rejecting it, Gregor resists his metamorphosed form, because he longs for societal approval. Gregor clings to his remaining humanity in the hope that his insistence will reward him and make him feel as though he belongs, though most people treat bugs with disdain. Other insects, like butterflies or bees, are sought out because of their 'value'-people admire the natural aesthetic of butterflies, or seek to obtain rich honey from bees; society *needs* such insects. 'Bugs', on the other hand, is an offhand term, and any insect we deem as a nuisance is referred to as one, as though they

aren't significant enough to be warranted a genuine name. This symbol epitomizes the state of Gregor's life- he is either avoided or frowned upon by those who surround him, never achieving anything 'praise-worthy' by his standards or anyone else's (he never gets the chance). Despite Gregor's newfound status as an unsightly bug, he still seeks acceptance from people he knows, especially his family, though he can not mitigate their revulsion with his attempts at 'friendliness'; his family are mostly 'in no mood to observe such niceties' (Kafka 37). In *The Metamorphosis*, the 'bug' is more a self-imposed reduction of Samsa as a 'consequence' of his inadequacy, whereas in *The Stranger*, 'the sun' is an absurd justification of Meursault's inadequate actions.

External perception of the protagonist's presence is reflected through symbols that foreshadow their fates. Meursault forebodingly observes that 'The trial opened with the sun glaring outside' (Camus 82); at this point, it is palpable that 'the sun' is heavily involved in the angst-ridden events that unfold throughout *The Stranger*, acting as a catalyst of events that lead to his eventual death sentence. The jury scoffs at Meursault's mention of the sun, his half-hearted means of justification. The skeptical responses of the 'majority' reveal that Meursault is seen as a perplexing and immoral being. To the aforementioned majority, 'the sun' seems trivial; it can hardly be seen as a motive for the parricide committed; on the contrary, it is seen as ridiculous. The warm, nurturing sun is something people enjoy and view as positive; therefore, it is seen as preposterous that Meursault brings it up in his murder trial as something negative. This exemplifies the absurdity that others see in Meursault, and encapsulates the alienation he experiences in society; he 'could feel how much these people hated [him]' (Camus 90). By referring to the sun, he has outcast himself with 'unacceptable' reasoning, and irreversibly condemns himself by his weak trial defense.

Gregor's physical pain also heightened his emotional anguish of the cold treatment he receives from his family. In the agony that Gregor experiences, he realizes that his demise is inevitable- and so does his family. His sister Grete, who has put up with his plight thus far, is the one to declare 'We have to try and get rid of it' (Kafka 47), no longer referring to Gregor as a brother, but a mere 'it' - as though 'he' is already dead to her. This signifies the Samsa family comes to accept that they can no longer rely on their disfigured son, and that they must move on by themselves. In *The Stranger*, Meursault was accused of having buried his mother with 'crime in his heart' because of his insensitivity and unconventional behavior, and is essentially sentenced to death for being a societal outcast. *The Metamorphosis* presents a similar isolation of the protagonist; when Mr. Samsa hurls apples at Gregor in a bout of outrage, though not necessarily with murderous intent; yet, the apple embedded onto Gregor's back did cause death. This literarily foreshadows his tragic fate, as his body and soul-in bug form- is chiefly deteriorated by this indirect filicide.

*The Stranger* and *The Metamorphosis* are novels that utilize seemingly common images as symbols to layer intricate complexities in the plot. The 'sun' and the 'bug' add thought-provoking dimensions to the respective protagonists, Meursault and Gregor, by depicting internal and external character conflicts, and ultimately their condemnation through death. It is through the highly intentional and prognosticating nature of these symbols that the stories are enriched, and analysis is incited for readers.

## Bibliography

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