Literariness Journal
A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 2
March 2026

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Citation: Kaur, Navneet, and Rameez Ahmad Bhat. "Kafka: Existential Collapse and Breakdown of Selfhood." *Literariness Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Mar. 2026, pp. 1361–67.

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Kafka: Existential Collapse and Breakdown of Selfhood

MS NAVNEET KAUR
PhD Research Scholar
Sant Baba Bhag Singh University, Jalandhar, Punjab

DR. RAMEEZ AHMAD BHAT
Assistant Professor
Sant Baba Bhag Singh University, Jalandhar, Punjab

Abstract: Franz Kafka's writing contains one of the most rigorous literary explorations of existential collapse and the dissolution of selfhood in modern literature. This essay examines *The Metamorphosis* (1915), *The Trial* (1925), and *The Castle* (1926) as narratives structured around existential shifts—moments when identity destabilises, agency erodes, and the subject becomes alienated from the body, society, and meaning itself. Drawing on Kafka's *Diaries* and *Letters to His Father*, as well as major critical interpretations by Theodor W. Adorno, Stanley Corngold, Walter Sokel, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Harold Bloom, Albert Camus, and Gershom Scholem, the article contends that Kafka's protagonists experience a gradual countdown to collapse rather than a sudden catastrophe. These works depict the internalisation of authority, internalisation of guilt into an ontological condition, and the impossibility of cohesive selfhood within bureaucratic modernity.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Breakdown of selfhood, Alienation, Guilt, selfhood, Bureaucracy*

Introduction

Franz Kafka's literary imagination is haunted by the fragility of identity and the steady dissolution of the self in modern society. His protagonists begin with socially recognized identities—son, employee, professional, surveyor—but these identities gradually erode as they encounter opaque systems of authority and unintelligible social structures.

"Kafka's Diaries often reveal an underlying instability of identity that manifests itself in terms of ontological alienation in the world. When Kafka writes, "I am separated from all things by an emptiness," he declares not just feelings of isolation in his emotional space but points to an ontological condition in which "the self" is split from reality by an unplannable void. The "emptiness" represents the absence of any valid foundation of meaning in him; it marks the split in existence and consciousness to which all kinds of connection —social, emotional, and even semantic— remain doubtful. The world seems remote and illusory to him, and "himself" remains entombed in this inwardness, which remains marked with "fears, doubts, and observations of himself." This phenomenon of "existential remoteness" forms the emotional and philosophical basis of all of Kafka's writing it profoundly predisposes him to build the psychology of all his protagonists and the narrative structure of all his texts. The protagonists of all these texts—Josef K. in "*The Trial,"* Gregor Samsa in "*The Metamorphosis*," K. in "*The Castle*—all find themselves in worlds in which they are materially there yet "existentially absent" to themselves and to all possible systems—legal, family, and administrative and that— they move through. The world described in "Kafka's Diaries" could be translated in terms of "Kafka's worlds" to be impersonal, unintelligible realms in which all possible communication remains necessarily imperfect.

In addition, the aforementioned feeling of alienation unsettles Kafka's own definition of identity. This identity can neither be made whole nor integrated but is torn apart by the presence of guilt, fear, and an internal voice of condemnation. Kafka's literary works stem from the empty place he occupies but also transcend the space to create a universality of alienation in modernity, where the self is confronted with a world at the same time close and distant, belonging as well as estranged.

Kafka wrote during a historical period marked by the decline of traditional certainties and the rise of bureaucratic rationality. As a German-speaking Jew in Prague, Kafka occupied a marginal cultural position, intensifying his sense of alienation. His work does more than depict alienation; it traces the specific mechanisms through which selfhood dissolves. In Kafka, the dissolution of the self occurs incrementally, through existential shifts rather than dramatic revolutions, culminating in what can be described as a countdown to collapse.

The internalization of external authority is a defining feature of Kafka's work. Power in Kafka rarely manifests as overt violence; instead, it infiltrates the psyche, transforming into shame, self-doubt, and submission. This dynamic is rooted in Kafka's personal experience of paternal domination. In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka admits, "Before you, I lost my self-confidence; I acquired an endless sense of guilt instead" (*Letter* 36), a confession that bears inside its very structure the psychological origin of the author's lifelong experience of inadequacy and terror before authority. Here, the father becomes less a personal character and more a model of an omnipotent force that negates the self and substitutes for autonomy an eternal self-blame. This psychological pattern recurs throughout his fiction, where authority becomes diffuse, impersonal, and inescapable.

In Kafka's narratives, existential change often begins with a minor disturbance—such as an unexplained arrest, a delayed communication, or an incomprehensible metamorphosis—but develops into a full ontological crisis. Kafka depicts, as Theodor W. Adorno observes, "a world in which domination persists without a visible ruler" (Adorno 246). The subject internalises power so thoroughly that resistance becomes inconceivable. In such stories, authority is not exercised through overt violence or direct commands but through namelessness, procedural impenetrability, and infinite referral. Identity is eroded through compliance and uncertainty rather than explicit coercion.

Kafka's most direct representation of existential breakdown appears in *The Metamorphosis*. The opening line—"When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into monstrous vermin" (*Metamorphosis* 3)— abolishes causality and meaning. The absence of explanation signals a world in which rational frameworks no longer function.

Before his transformation, Gregor's identity is defined entirely by his labor. Even after becoming an insect, his primary anxiety concerns his job and his employer's disapproval. "The worries about making the train, about the boss's fury, returned with redoubled force," Kafka writes (*Metamorphosis* 7). This fixation reveals the extent to which Gregor's sense of self has already been hollowed out by economic obligation.

As the narrative progresses, Gregor's body becomes a site of estrangement. A decisive existential shift occurs with the loss of language: "What came out was no longer human speech" (*Metamorphosis* 11). Deprived of language, Gregor is unable to assert recognition or articulate subjectivity, a loss constitutive of the last stage of his existential erasure. While he remains at the level of human consciousness, he is no longer able to speak intelligibly, cutting off the main medium for assertion of identity, agency, and social belonging. In Kafka, words are inalienably bound with acknowledgement; once Gregor can no longer speak understandably, he is removed from existence as a subject and exists only as an object or nuisance. The wealth of his interior life is retained, reflectively

convoluted, yet doomed to silence, sharpening the growing difference between self-awareness and social reality.

As Stanley Corngold argues the metamorphosis externalizes "a self already experienced as degraded and inhuman" (Corngold 114). Gregor’s metamorphosis is less about the phenomenon of alienation and more about revealing a state of affairs that actually occurs before this—the transformation of Gregor into a functional unit of the workplace and the domestic economy as well. Clearly, well before he becomes pestering vermin, he has incorporated this experience of worthlessness based solely upon his productivity and useful subsistence to others.

Gregor's dehumanization is confirmed by his family's response. His father's violent rejection, which drives him back into his room, symbolizes his final expulsion from the social order. As Walter Sokel notes, "Gregor dies not because he is an insect, but because he is no longer acknowledged as a self" (Sokel 158).

In *The Trial*, Kafka moves existential degradation from the physical to a juridical level, where subjectivity itself is constructed and deconstructed through an illogical order of law. The initial arrest, “without having done anything wrong,” Kingston Milner indicates a Foucaudian notion of disciplinarily, where guilt is interiorized before transgression itself takes place.

Josef K. confronts a legal system that is opaque, inaccessible, and self-perpetuating. Guilt exists independently of action and precedes judgment. "The proceedings gradually merged with the punishment," Kafka observes (*The Trial* 92). This fusion reflects the transformation of guilt into an ontological condition. Despite the absence of formal charges, Josef K. gradually internalizes the court's logic and begins to doubt his own innocence.

This existential trap is crystallized in the priest's parable "Before the Law." After waiting his entire life for access, the countryman is told, "This entrance was meant only for you. I am now going to shut it" (*The Trial* 215). For Adorno, this episode epitomizes Kafka's vision of modernity: "The subject is destroyed by the very institutions that promise justice" (Adorno 248).

The annihilation of selfhood culminates in Josef K.'s execution. He is killed "like a dog" (*The Trial* 231), denied narrative closure, dignity, and explanation. Harold Bloom interprets Josef K.'s death as "the extinction of the self without transcendence or redemption" (Bloom 87).

Kafka extends his exploration of existential collapse in *The Castle*, a narrative governed by perpetual postponement. Upon arrival, the protagonist declares, "I am the land surveyor summoned here" (*The Castle* 9), asserting professional legitimacy. This claim is immediately questioned, and every attempt at verification leads to contradiction and delay.

The bureaucracy of the Castle communicates endlessly yet incoherently. Messages conflict, letters arrive late, and authority remains inaccessible. "Everything was ambiguous; every explanation raised new doubts," Kafka writes (*The Castle* 67). Identity becomes provisional, dependent upon recognition that is endlessly deferred. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe K.'s struggle as that of "a subject trapped within a system designed to postpone legitimacy indefinitely" (Deleuze and Guattari 41).

Unlike Gregor Samsa or Josef K., the protagonist of *The Castle* is not granted a definitive end. Instead, his identity erodes through exhaustion and interminable waiting. Gershom Scholem characterizes this condition as "existence suspended between hope and negation" (Scholem 143).

Kafka's fictional representations of existential collapse are inseparable from his personal writings. "I am nothing but literature, and I can and want to be nothing else," Kafka confesses in his *Diaries* (45), articulating a sense of fragmentation that is both creative and existential. In *Letter to His Father*, Kafka attributes his psychic paralysis to paternal authority: "Your mere physical presence crushed me" (*Letter* 41). The courts, fathers, and castles that dominate his fiction mirror this formative experience. The breakdown of selfhood in Kafka thus functions simultaneously as personal confession and universal allegory.

Although Kafka predates existentialist philosophy, his work anticipates many of its central concerns. Albert Camus famously describes Kafka as a writer who "gives the absurd its most lucid expression" (Camus 132). Yet Kafka diverges from later existentialists by rejecting affirmation or rebellion. His characters undergo collapse rather than achieving autonomy. Existential shifts in Kafka lead not to authenticity but to deeper entanglement within structures of power. The dissolution of selfhood is not a transformation but terminal, reflecting Kafka's profound scepticism toward modernity's promises of rational order and individual freedom.

Conclusion

Franz Kafka's fiction constitutes a sustained meditation on existential collapse and the disintegration of selfhood in the modern world. Through Gregor Samsa's bodily estrangement, Josef K.'s juridical nightmare, and K.'s interminable deferral of identity, Kafka charts a countdown to breakdown driven by shame, uncertainty, and internalised authority. Rooted in Kafka's own psychological struggles yet universal in scope, these narratives expose the vulnerability of identity under modern conditions. Kafka's enduring significance lies in his unflinching portrayal of a world in which the self disappears not through catastrophe, but through quiet, relentless attrition.

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