**Exemplary Student Work**

**World Literature Paper 1**

**Topic: Nihilism Reflected in The Metamorphosis and The Stranger**

**Word Count: 1490**

       The term “nihilism” originally conveyed a sense of nothingness; it meant to deliver this message: we live in a universe where nothing has any worth. However, contemporary authors have given this word a new meaning: rejection of established religions, radical discontinuity of cultural conventions and defiance of all morals, and a perspective on life that closely resembles emptiness and/or self-destructiveness. These are the underlying concepts of modern-day nihilism, and the portrayal of these bleak ideas reflects nihilism in both Albert Camus’s The Stranger and Franz Kafka’s The Metamorphosis.

      Both of these texts speak against religion, and thus, endorse this grim ideology. However, each author expresses his views differently. They both, rebel against Christianity. Franz Kafka subtly alludes to Christianity, and makes a mockery of it in the process whereas Camus directly has the protagonist of his novel reject Christianity. Kafka never directly refers to Christianity in The Metamorphosis, but alludes to it by showing Gregor Samsa as a negative archetype of Jesus Christ, and whose resemblance to Christ, Kafka uses as a way to degrade Christianity. One similarity between Jesus and Gregor would be that both of them died because others scorned them. Samsa died with contempt from his father and Jesus died with contempt from the Romans. Furthermore, Gregor sacrifices himself for the needs of his family just as Christ sacrificed himself for humanity. In the end, however, Gregor dies in vain; he does not change the mentality of his family, and his family forgets about him after his death, which implies that Christ died in vain as well, for his teachings were forgotten after his death, and humanity continued to sin. Kafka makes implicit berating allusions to Christianity, which emphasize the novel’s nihilistic theme.

      Camus’s method of ridiculing Christianity is far more direct than Kafka’s in The Metamorphosis. Unlike the central character of The Metamorphosis, the protagonist of Camus’s The Stranger, Meursault, openly refutes Christianity. For instance, upon Meursault’s arrest, the magistrate questions him, and in this interrogation, the magistrate brandishes a crucifix at Meursault and demands to know whether Meursault believes in God – “You do believe, don’t you, and you’re going to place your trust in Him, aren’t you?”(69)Whereupon, Meursault bluntly reasserts his atheism by stating, “Obviously, I again said no.”(69) Meursault also points out “that was his [the magistrate’s] belief [all men believe in God], and if he [the magistrate] were ever to doubt it, his life become meaningless”(69). The magistrate appears to symbolize society (not only early 20th century Algeria, but everywhere Christianity was/is accepted), and therefore, in this scene, Meursault’s refutation of Christianity appears be threatening society at large. Scorning and rebutting established religions are prime traits of Nihilistic writing. By rebuffing and mocking religion, both authors adopt a nihilistic view towards life in their works.

      The Metamorphosis and The Stranger both far go beyond defying morals and cultural conventions by taking all moral and cultural values and throwing them out of the window. In The Metamorphosis, for example, Gregor turns into a filthy insect, and as the story progresses, his transformation starts to irritate his family. His family, feels that he should be thrown out of the house, and his sister, especially, feels strongly for that decision and keeps reiterating, “We must get rid of it”(124) and “He must go”(125). They spit in the face of all of cultural conventions and morality when they disregard the fact that Gregor is a part of their family, and consider throwing him out of their home solely because they have to work a little now because something strange has happened to Gregor that has rendered him incapable of working. The cultural norm in our society and in Kafka’s early 20th century working class Europe has/had always taken this order: the parents work and help their child grow, and nourish him/her until he/she is ready to leave on his/her own. However, in this story, that order does not ensue. The son, Gregor, has to work in order to please his family and pay off his father’s debts. The son is the main source of income in the family rather than the parents! Gregor’s family doesn’t abide by the basic moral and cultural values, for they make their child support the household; hence, adopting one of the main aspects of Nihilism – radical discontinuity of cultural conventions and defiance of all morals.

      Just as in Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, Camus also shows a complete disregard for morals and cultural conventions in The Stranger. Camus goes against what is “right” in Western culture and what was “right” in his early 20th century Algeria – a man shouldn’t beat a woman, and that each person deserves a fair trial in a court of law. In The Stranger, however, neither of these cultural conventions is followed. Two examples of this disregard of cultural principles would be Raymond beating his girlfriend furiously – “The woman was still shrieking and Raymond was still hitting her”(36) – and the unfair trial that Meursault receives. For example, Meursault, in his trial, states that the prosecution is basing its entire case upon facts irrelevant to the proceedings, “The director then…and said…that I hadn’t cried once”(89). The prosecution deems Meursault guilty simply because he didn’t cry at his mother’s funeral. In our society and even in Camus’s early 20th century Algeria, this case would be considered invalid because both of these societies dictate/dictated that a fair trial should be based purely upon facts and evidence, but Meursault’s trial seems to be based purely on what emotions he chose not to exhibit. To deem someone guilty solely based upon which emotions he or she exhibited or did not exhibit would be regarded as immoral. Clearly, The Stranger, along with The Metamorphosis, strongly exhibits discontinuity of cultural conventions and defiance of morals, which are two of the main themes of nihilism.

      Another theme of nihilism – emptiness and/or self-destructiveness – is prominent in both works, The Stranger and The Metamorphosis. Kafka, in The Metamorphosis, portrays a sense self-destruction whereas Camus, in The Stranger, shows more of a sense of emptiness. For example, in The Metamorphosis, the author uses Gregor’s numerous occasions of hurting himself to convey a sense of self-destruction. For example, after Gregor turns into an insect, he bangs his head trying to get out of bed. He then breaks his jaw on the doorknob. Later on, after receiving a scolding from his father, he injures himself horribly re-entering his room. Each subsequent example of Samsa harming himself resonates a bleak theme of self-ruin. Above all, his conscious decision to die so that his family wouldn’t have to care of him – “The decision that he [Gregor] must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister”(127) – shows Gregor’s self-destructive – nihilistic – tendencies. Nihilism is clearly reflected in The Metamorphosis through reoccurring scenes portraying a bleak theme of self-destruction.

      Camus, unlike Kafka in The Metamorphosis, presents a strong sense of emptiness in The Stranger to bring forth the philosophy of nihilism.  For instance, Meursault , the protagonist of The Stranger, exhibits only a few human emotions and reflects apathy towards almost everything. In other words, Camus depicts Meursault (essentially, the anti-human) as emotionally emptyinside because he shows a lack of emotion in most situations. For example, at his mother’s vigil, Meursault does not shed a single tear, which connotes that he is devoid of all feeling. Meursault is even accused of showing “‘insensitivity’ the day of Maman’s [his mother’s] funeral”(64). Furthermore, after shooting the Arab, he does not feel an ounce of remorse nor any complacency for killing a man; he simply feels “kind of annoyed”(70). He seems completely indifferent towards the situation. A “normal” human being – one not bereft of all emotion – would’ve felt at least somewhat sad at his mother’s funeral, and felt *something* after murdering a fellow human being, whether remorse or sense of accomplishment. The emptiness shown by Meursault brings out the very essence of the nihilism – a strong sense of emptiness – just as the dismal idea of hurting oneself repeatedly in The Metamorphosis portrays one of the core ideas inherent in nihilistic philosophy – self-destruction.

      Clearly, both authors are exploring nihilistic philosophies in these two works, but their exploration has a distinct impact on the reader – how he/she views the age the author lived in – and on the reader’s philosophy towards life. Reading either of these books gives neither a pleasant view of the authors’ eras nor the authors’ lives. One may conclude, after reading either of these novels, that most people held a pessimistic, bleak (essentially, nihilistic) view in early 20th century Algeria (Camus’s period) and 20th century Europe (Kafka’s time). Unquestionably, the prominence of nihilistic themes in these two works raises questions about the authors’ mentality – whether they embraced nihilism in reality, or only in their works. Furthermore, reading either of these two pieces may alter how the reader views the world, for the works we read often have a significant impact on our lives.