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## Sympathy for Protagonists of The Stranger and Metamorphosis

In Camus' *The Stranger* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the protagonist finds himself in an extraordinary situation that challenges his will. In both novels, this initially unsympathetic character struggles to redeem himself. In so doing, his identity develops and his positive qualities become evident. The characters thus become unexpectedly sympathetic to the reader, and each novel concludes with a hopeful tone.

In *The Stranger*, the protagonist Meursault can be judged as a cold-hearted killer who is emotionally detached from the world around him. His alienation from society and indifference to love and sorrow are blatant. "Mother died today," he comments, "Or maybe yesterday, I don't know." He treats others callously: "She asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so." Meursault only focuses on the physical aspects of life, especially relating to light and heat: "There wasn't a shadow to be seen and every object... stood out so sharply that it was painful to my eyes."

The *Stranger's* central event occurs when Meursault shoots the Arab. The language used in this passage is so elaborate and rich in simile – "The steel... was like a long, flashing sword," for example – almost detaches the act from Meursault and causes the reader to question whether he did it with intent or not: "That's when everything began to reel. The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire... The trigger gave." Camus detaches Meursault from the action with "The trigger gave," further insulating Meursault against intent or consequence – and therefore against blame.

In prison, Meursault's positive qualities become apparent. He has the opportunity to get away with a minor sentence but instead, with "It was because of the sun," admits his guilt. He also appears more sympathetic in contrast to the unlikable judge who "sees nothing but a monster" in Meursault. The reader, who has come to see the killing as unpremeditated, feels defensive of the protagonist when the judge wishes the death sentence upon Meursault and states: "Never before have I felt this onerous task so fully compensated and counterbalanced, not to say enlightened by a sense of urgent and sacred duty." The reader feels the judge is being overly harsh to Meursault, misjudging his inherently decent (if detached and alienated) character. When the climax is reached and Meursault is sentenced to death, we therefore feel sympathetic to this formerly unpalatable character.

Gregor of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* comes across as self-involved and unsympathetic at first.

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Some evidence suggests that Gregor, unlike Meursault, acts this way intentionally. For example, his primary reason for working so hard and supporting his whole family is to appear as a hero: "If I didn't have to hold my hand because of my parents I would have given notice long ago." He even prioritizes it over romantic relationships, as the picture in his bedroom shows no personal companion or even a sensuous image but rather shows "a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright."

Gregor's transformation into a beetle can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand we feel pity that he should, for no specific reason, be turned into a repulsive beetle. On the other hand we feel that he deserves it, considering that his life seemed very hollow and unimportant before his transformation. In either case, Gregor's real transformation takes place throughout the story as he comes to realize that what truly makes him happy is not his "strenuous career" but rather things such as his sister playing the violin "so beautifully."

The point of view used in *Metamorphosis* is the limited omniscient, which functions to help Kafka create sympathy for Gregor. If we were given accounts of Gregor only by his family, our opinion of him would be limited. At first his parents appear to care for him: "'Oh dear,' cried his mother, in tears, 'perhaps he's terribly ill;'" but after seeing him as a beetle, they show no sympathy for him at all: "Pitilessly Gregor's father drove him back, hissing and crying 'Shoo!' like a savage." By using the limited omniscient instead of the third person point of view, Kafka provides insight into Gregor's sometimes unselfish ideas: "It was a secret plan of his that [his sister] should be sent next year to study [the violin]... despite the great expense."

As the reader's sympathy builds for Gregor, he, like Meursault, becomes a victim. Now that Gregor is just an "old dung-beetle," his family may as well pelt him with apples until he dies. What is he worth if not providing a comfortable life for the family?

Just as the prosecutor in *The Stranger* is made to appear unsympathetic, so too is Gregor's family in *Metamorphosis*. By using these comparisons, the protagonists are made to seem like heroes, even if only for a short time, and therefore more sympathetic. In addition, both Gregor and Meursault go through a transformation throughout their stories and become wiser: "As if that blind rage has washed me clean, rid me of hope," one says. "For the first time... I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world." Their emotional evolution is another reason that readers become more sympathetic to them.

Camus and Kafka also show their characters' awareness and fear before their deaths, their vulnerability making the reader feel even more compassion for them. The previously unemotional Meursault has become fearful: "I explained to him that I wasn't in despair. I was simply afraid." Just as he begins to make sense of the world, life is stolen from him: "The presiding judge told me in a bizarre language that I was to have my head cut off in a public

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square...” But Camus has resigned himself to his fate: “The presiding judge asked me if I had anything to say. I thought about it. I said, ‘No.’” Gregor reacts in a similarly odd, detached manner when he is left to die: “‘I’d like to eat something,’ said Gregor anxiously, ‘but not anything like they’re eating. They do feed themselves. And here I am, dying!’” By concluding the novels with death, Camus and Kafka show symbolically that the characters have completed – as best they can – the journey to find true identity.

Camus’ and Kafka’s decision to make their characters sympathetic carries the implication that there is hope within all of us – that we can change our views toward what might have once seemed unsympathetic or simply distasteful. We see Meursault and Gregor struggle through circumstances beyond their control only to fail in the end, making them seem, paradoxically, almost heroic. Their positive qualities gradually emerge – not least at the time of their deaths, when Gregor for example thinks of his family “with tenderness and love” – and the reader is left feeling unexpected sympathy for both characters.

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