

## **Liminal Spaces and Shifting Identities: An Examination of Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis**

**Dr. Pankhuri Rathore**

Assistant Professor Galgotias University

---

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper's central premise is the abrupt and inexplicable transformation of the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, into a gigantic insect in the text, *The Metamorphosis* (1912) by Franz Kafka. This transformation creates a profoundly liminal space and experience for Gregor and the reader, as he navigates his new identity and reality. The novel explores the psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by Gregor as he grapples with his changed identity. His struggle to reconcile his human past with his insectoid present is a powerful exploration of shifting identities. In this transformation, the paper explores the theme of individuality. In the paper, an examination of the impact of individuality on relationships with family and society reflects on how Gregor's shift to a non-human form alters his relationships with each family member and how each family member also shifts in response to Gregor. Kafka's work often delves into the complexities of the human psyche. So, the focus of the present work is also on Gregor's psychological state how it evolves throughout the narrative, and how it relates to his changing identity.

**Keywords:** Space, Identity, Liminal, Liminality, Kafka

This paper aims to understand and elaborate on the concept of liminality and its relationship to the existing literature. Though the term originates in anthropology, it has not been confined till there. It has branched out and become the focus of various fields. About literature, liminality can be understood through a novella by Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1912). It begins with the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, who has turned into an insect one morning. The story depicts Gregor's pathetic condition and how his family and manager react to the situation. Gregor's transformation and his family's reactions to it provide an opportunity to delve into themes of expression and alienation. As Gregor's ability to communicate with his family diminishes, his sense of isolation deepens, and his expression becomes increasingly limited. *The Metamorphosis* is renowned for its surreal and symbolic elements, such as the bizarre and dreamlike narrative style. Kafka's use of symbolism and metaphor invites analysis of the novella's deeper meaning and its commentary on societal norms and expectations. The novella raises questions about how society views those who deviate from normative expectations. The text continues to remain a powerful allegorical narrative for discussions around identity, alienation, and transformation. Gregor Samsa's inexplicable metamorphosis into an insect has puzzled generations of readers and critics alike, not because it is unexplainable in a literal sense, but because of the symbolic weight it carries. The transformation is less concerned with physical alteration and more with the sociocultural and psychological implications of disintegration and the thresholds one crosses as self and society shift in tension. Kafka's use of absurdist transformation is a metaphor for modern disorientation—a hallmark of liminal experience. As such, *The Metamorphosis* becomes a critical site to investigate liminality: both as an anthropological term and as an existential

state. This expansion deepens the original study of liminality in the novella by integrating theories from existential philosophy, psychoanalysis, and spatial theory, while also comparing Kafka's narrative with other modernist and postmodernist explorations of identity crisis.

Kafka's narrative in *The Metamorphosis* focuses on Gregor Samsa's individuality or the crisis he is going through. This makes it unimportant to give a physical description of him. Gregor works as a salesperson who takes care of his family. He is the only earning member of the house and is responsible for his mother, father, and sister's living. The story starts when Gregor, on a morning, transforms into an insect. He has a hard time comprehending his situation. This transition from a human to an insect has been a matter of study for numerous researchers on existentialism, absurdism, or surrealism. The present paper will extend the study on this particular transformation and will use the paradigm of liminality. Liminality refers to the transitory phase between two situations, places, or events. As per the Oxford English Dictionary, it derives from the Latin noun "limen", which denotes the threshold. The term has been taken from anthropology and pertains to both the abstract and literal transition. The study of liminality in *The Metamorphosis* will also undertake both aspects. The anthropological roots of liminality, especially as developed by Van Gennep and Victor Turner, offer a foundational structure for understanding Kafka's fiction. Van Gennep's tripartite model of rites of passage—separation, liminality, and incorporation—parallels the narrative structure of *The Metamorphosis*, where Gregor experiences a rupture from his social role, inhabits a transitional identity, and ultimately dies without reintegration. This deviation from Van Gennep's third stage, incorporation, reflects the tragic absurdism Kafka often invokes.

The title of the novella, *The Metamorphosis*, itself suggests a transformation of one thing into another. This transformation is complete at the physical level, but the mental or psychological level is under the process of change. Gregor turned into an insect; he could not move or even get off the bed in the morning. Before the story starts, he is a salesman who regularly travels for his work. This immobility because of the condition has made him question his 'being'. His family, when they get to know about his condition, receives a great shock at the situation that is incomprehensible to them. This leads to understanding in this paper, how people treat someone who can do nothing for them. The importance of a person is directly related to what they can do for others. Samsa's family projects this working of the barter system most appropriately. Initially, the sister does help out Gregor by taking care of him. She gives him food, cleans his room, and organises the furniture to open up the space for him. Whereas his father shows utter disgust for his son, his mother could not even bear the sight of him. But, eventually, even the sister grows out of the little respect or love for him. She stops cleaning his room, eating pans, or even noticing him at all. Thus, this novella pokes the reader to think about one's position in other people's lives.

The theory of liminal space begins with the study of ritual. In *The Rites of Passage* (1960), Arnold Van Gennep lays the foundation for the study of threshold ritual. Van Gennep, concerned with "ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another," divides such rites into three subcategories: "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (Gennep 11). All of these rites may apply either to an individual or a social group, including an entire culture. For the individual, rites of separation involve a physical removal from the activities of daily life. Rites of transition involve time spent in a space apart from one's society, often in the company of a mentor with

whom the participant exchanges knowledge, objects, gazes, or more—Van Gennep likens this exchange to communion (31). Rites of incorporation involve a reintegration into society with the knowledge needed to fulfil a particular role (typically in a hierarchy). In “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage” (1967), Victor Turner pushes Van Gennep’s argument further by analysing the second category, rites of transition. During the liminal phase of a rite of passage, participants are often rendered symbolically invisible and forbidden to interact with non-participants. They become “not yet classified” and are symbolised by their cultures as embryos or newborns (Turner 236). In this way, a participant loses any ties to his or her socialised self, at least temporarily. As beings invisible to their cultural structure, the participants are regarded as close to their conception of infinite power (perhaps a deity) (236). They are compensated for this isolation with complete equality to all other participants in the ritual. By the end of this phase, Turner claims, participants are supposed to have been imbued with gnosis, the “arcane knowledge” of their culture that will allow them to take their place among their peers (239). This passage through the ritualised threshold, whether part of a coming-of-age ritual or a graduation, is a point of no return. Participants have been permanently altered, either in their own eyes or in the eyes of their culture. After temporary dissolution, those who undergo threshold rituals return not to their old selves but to new ones—albeit embedded within the same society (Engel 1-2). Turner’s elaboration of liminality as a phase of ambiguity and invisibility aptly describes Gregor’s condition. Once transformed, Gregor is no longer legible to society—he becomes an object, to use Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic term. The object refers to what disturbs identity, system, and order; it is what society must cast out to preserve the integrity of the symbolic structure. Gregor’s insect body represents abjection par excellence—a form both familiar and alien, recognizable yet horrifying.

The term liminality is studied in two aspects in the present paper: abstract space (about the identity) and actual space (related to literal space). The former is about the aftermath of Gregor’s metamorphosis, and how his identity is on the brink of transformation. From being a human to an insect, his identity perception is changing, which falls under the scrutiny of this paper. Psychological liminality is associated with changes in an individual related to self-discovery, life-growth, or other significant changes. Secondly, the present research also discusses the liminality in the actual physical space of Gregor’s room. He was confined in his room after his metamorphosis. He wanted or desired to go to the living room and sit with his family. But because of the varied responses of his family members to his situation, he could not come out of his room. So, the entrance of his room stands as the literal liminal space of ‘betwixt and between’. As Turner says of liminality,

*The attributes of liminality or liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and an eclipse of the sun or moon. (What is Liminality? n.p.)*

Turner's liminality confines to the ritualistic understanding which has been democratised by the Hungarian Sociologist, Arpad Szokolczai. He gives potency to the term by analysing modernism that depicts the era of liminality. This pertains to the in-between, unnameable stage of breaking down old patterns and the birth of new ones. Neither the breakdown has completely happened nor the birth has entirely taken.

Kafka's exploration of identity dislocation in *The Metamorphosis* is not merely physical but intensely psychological. The mind-body dualism is disrupted as Gregor's consciousness remains intact while his body mutates beyond recognition. This discord manifests a unique psychological liminality, as Gregor is suspended between the memory of his human self and the instinctive impulses of his new form. The paper understands liminality in organisational settings. In doing so, it creates a twofold understanding which highlights the liminal spaces.

*one where actors feel they are going through a transformational change from one 'identity position' to another; the other where actors see themselves as in between two identity positions for a prolonged period. The liminal experience as it pertains to a phase in between two periods in time might be addressed as transitional in-betweenness, while the experience of those actors who feel placed in more or less permanently liminal conditions, in-between two or more social categories, could be addressed as perpetual in-betweenness. (22)*

The former case of transitioning identity is pertinent in understanding Gregor's psychological process. The transformation of him from a human to an insect invokes the study of changed identity, which involves the understanding of psychological liminality. Initially in the text, it is seen that Gregor, after his physical transformation, takes some time to comprehend his position. He rants about his job and why he makes so little money while other people in the same venture are living a luxurious life. He is tired in the morning to get up, not realising his metamorphosis. He has a hard time doing the simplest tasks he could as a human, like opening the door, getting out of bed, and standing straight. So, he is in between the phase of fully internalising the change.

About the other type, Gregor's character has a persistent feeling of being in between the different identities is exemplified through his oscillating thoughts depicted in the text. Gregor is at one point concerned with his new condition, then he invokes the memory of being the central member of the house. He even compares his present and before conditions.

[Gregor] felt a great pride that he was able to provide a life like that in such plenty a nice home for his sister and parents. But what now, could have if all this peace and wealth and comfort should come to a horrible and frightening end? That was something that Gregor did not want to think about too much, so he started to move about, crawling up and down the room. (44)

His thoughts constantly oscillated between the past, present, and future. This movement between the thoughts is conceptualised by Sierk Ybema et al (2011) in their paper, where they discuss 'transitional liminality and temporal identity talk'. It is reflecting on past, present, and future 'selves'. "Social actors may find themselves to be transitionally liminal when they are in between who they used to be (a former identity) and who they might become (a future identity). The focus here is on a person's sense of in-betweenness and ambiguity amid an identity reconstruction process" (2011). Gregor has undergone a similar situation. In one instance in the text, Gregor's sister thought of removing all the furniture from his room with a

benevolent thought. Gregor did not like the empty spaces after the furniture removal; he could not relate to the room that was his for such a long time. His identity was at stake, getting either changed or renewed after that. So, the narrative suggests Gregor's condition is fundamentally dead. Gregor's time is lost in futility and desire and empty hope; time spent waiting; and time wasted seeking love and respect from family members. Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) is pertinent here. The uncanny emerges when the familiar becomes unfamiliar, when something repressed resurfaces in distorted form. Gregor's insect form is not wholly alien to him; he gradually acclimatizes to it, crawling on walls and hiding under the sofa. But his persistent human thoughts and emotions jar against his new behaviour, creating a self-divided against itself. The idea of liminality, or the halfway point of an identity shift, illustrates the conflict that accompanies this altered condition. The liminal individual is rarely able to communicate well because of the outsider status that characterises liminal phases; this results in a glaring lack of understanding and fuels increased conflict. Kafka's portrayal of psychological liminality also resonates with R.D. Laing's theory of ontological insecurity. Laing describes individuals who are "uncertain of their own boundaries and afraid of losing themselves in the world" (Laing, 1960). Gregor, trapped in his room and denied recognition, becomes uncertain not just of his social role but of his entire being. Kafka writes: "He would have used his arms and his hands to push himself up; but instead of them he only had all those little legs continuously moving in different directions..." (3). This physical incompetence stands as a metaphor for his fractured agency—neither human nor fully animal, Gregor becomes psychologically unreadable.

The analysis of physical space has to be done under the liminal space that pertains to the literal space. Liminal space is read according to what Cornis-Pope has written of liminality. According to him, it refers to a state of transition or a threshold where boundaries are blurred, and traditional structures are challenged (1997 n.p.). Liminal spaces are the transitional points that occur in the places where the protagonist's previous behaviours, convictions, and sense of self dissolve, and they have the opportunity to reinvent themselves entirely. Though the discomfort, waiting, and metamorphosis are frequently present. Along with being disorganised, these areas are also packed with the protagonist's failed attempts to ease the tension that the triggering occurrence has produced. One such recurring motif of liminality that is present in the text is the door of Gregor Samsa. "His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls" (Kafka 15). Throughout the whole story, he is shown standing in between his room and the living area of the house. He gets to listen to his family's discussions, views, and feelings only by standing at the door of his room. When Samsa's family realised Gregor's position, they kept him locked in his room all the time because of his horrible condition. Gregor would peek from the crack of the door and observe his family involved in the regular chores. Thus, Gregor's bedroom emerges as the primary liminal space in the narrative. It is the literal borderland between the social and the private, the living and the dead, the human and the inhuman.

One underexplored dimension in the study of *The Metamorphosis* is the ethics of care. Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984) argue that moral action is rooted in relational responsiveness. Care ethics values empathy, connection, and responsiveness over rules or utility. Grete's initial care for Gregor reflects this ethical stance. However, when care is no longer voluntary but burdensome, it collapses. The withdrawal of care is also the withdrawal of moral responsibility. Moreover,

Gregor's invisibility is not physical but ethical. He is visible as an object of disgust but invisible as a subject of care. In this way, Kafka critiques the utilitarian worldview that values individuals only for their productivity. Once Gregor is no longer economically useful, he becomes ethically disposable. His death, far from being tragic for the family, is treated as catharsis, even liberation. Spatial theorists like Michel Foucault and Gaston Bachelard offer useful tools to unpack the metaphorical significance of this space.

Foucault's concept of heterotopia—spaces of otherness that mirror and distort all other spaces—can be applied to Gregor's room. His room contains elements of a 'proper human room' but becomes progressively alien as Gregor changes. His room becomes both a refuge and a prison—a heterotopia in Michel Foucault's terms. Foucault describes heterotopias as "real spaces that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert all other real spaces" (Of Other Spaces, 1986).

Gregor's room—once a symbol of domestic comfort—becomes a site of exile. As his family removes furniture and keeps the door shut, it evolves into a non-space, void of identity or belonging. His liminality is marked by spatial exclusion: "He would often lie there the entire night through, never sleeping a moment, just scratching at the leather for hours on end" (17). The removal of furniture, the layering of filth, and the restricted access transform it into a symbolic space of decay and erasure.

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) emphasises how rooms, corners, and thresholds contain deep psychic resonances. The crack in the door through which Gregor listens to his family is a symbolic aperture: it allows auditory presence but not physical participation. It marks his semiotic existence—spoken about, observed, but not acknowledged. The door, in particular, functions as a mobile symbol of liminality. Opened briefly, then slammed shut; it vacillates between inclusion and exclusion. When it is finally crossed—when Gregor emerges to listen to his sister's violin—it becomes the moment of transgression, not liberation. His crossing of that threshold does not reunite him with humanity but confirms his irrevocable alterity.

The door became his window to the familial world. "Although Gregor wasn't able to hear any news directly, he did listen to much of what was said in the next rooms, and whenever he heard anyone speaking, he would scurry straight to the appropriate door and press his whole body against it" (Kafka 49). Gregor was almost abandoned by keeping him away from the family. But, after some time, the door of his room, which was supposed to be shut all the time, began to be left open at night. Another layer of analysis must include the shifting identities within the Samsa family. Gregor's transformation triggers a reorganisation of familial roles. His father, previously passive and dependent, becomes active and authoritarian. His mother oscillates between compassion and horror. Most strikingly, his sister Grete undergoes her own metamorphosis—from nurturing sibling to indifferent adult, eventually declaring that Gregor is no longer her brother. His deteriorating condition got better after the little act of inclusion by his family. One day, his sister, Grete, was playing Violin for the tenants of the house. Listening to the mesmerising music, he finally came out into the living room and unknowingly made his presence felt by the people. The door, which has the transitory border of his safe space (room) and the living area, was crossed, and metaphorically, he accepted himself fully. So, as Cohen stated in the article, "uncertainty can be very uncomfortable, lonely, overwhelming, paralyzing, emotionally demanding and

mentally exhausting.” Gregor did undergo all these perplexing situations (Neumann 2024: n.p.). Here, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and social recognition can be helpful. Judith Butler’s argument in *Undoing Gender* (2004) is that identity is socially constructed and maintained through recognition: “We are not only constituted by recognition, but we are undone by the lack of it” (2). Once Gregor is no longer “useful”—as a wage earner—he becomes expendable. His sister Grete, who initially cares for him, ultimately declares, “We must try to get rid of it” (45). This shift marks the final collapse of social identity.

Butler would argue that without acknowledgment, Gregor ceases to exist as a subject. His death is not merely physical—it is existential erasure. Identity is not an intrinsic property but a performance recognised and upheld by social structures. When Gregor can no longer perform his role as provider, he is stripped of social recognition. He ceases to be a “son,” “brother,” or “worker” and becomes simply an “it.” His family’s language shifts accordingly—from Gregor to “the creature” or “the thing.”

The withdrawal of recognition mirrors Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, where identity depends on reciprocal acknowledgment. Without the other’s gaze, one cannot be fully constituted as a self. Gregor, denied this reciprocal gaze, withers both physically and spiritually.

Kafka’s exploration of liminality resonates with many modern and postmodern works. Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1953), for instance, features a narrator trapped in an indeterminate state between language and silence, life and death. Like Gregor, Beckett’s narrator occupies a threshold without resolution. In literature of migration and diaspora, liminality is a central theme. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Salman Rushdie explore cultural in-betweenness and identity hybridity. Although Kafka was not explicitly writing about migration, his identity as a German-speaking Jew in Prague offers a historical lens of cultural liminality that likely influenced his themes. Furthermore, postcolonial critics such as Homi K. Bhabha have expanded the idea of liminality into Third Space theory—a space where hybridity and new forms of identity emerge. Though Gregor never finds a redemptive hybrid identity, his transformation opens a critical space to discuss the failure of such possibilities in oppressive systems.

In many of Kafka’s works, the theme of alienation is directly addressed. Similarly, Gregor has been put into the central light of existential crisis due to his literal metamorphosis. The change is not limited to his physical form but it extends to his identity as well. Gregor faces his existential crisis when he undergoes a sudden and clear shift from being a dutiful son with little to becoming nearly a non-entity. Thus, the narrative is infused with a quest for balance and self-exploration of existential identity. This theme is elaborated with the help of the concept of liminality. The novella is pivotal in understanding the shifting perception of the self and the viewing of Otherness.

Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is a quintessential narrative of liminality—of bodies in transition, identities in crisis, and spaces that refuse categorization. Through Gregor’s inexplicable transformation, Kafka opens a critical interrogation into how identity is constructed, deconstructed, and socially negotiated. The power of the text lies not in its answers but in its provocations. It compels us to ask: What anchors identity? Who gets recognized as a subject? How do we treat those who cease to fulfill normative roles? And, ultimately, what does it mean to change beyond the limits of return? The expanded analysis in this paper shows that *The Metamorphosis* is not simply a surreal tale of transformation—it is

a philosophical meditation on what it means to exist on the margins of language, society, and the self. Kafka's liminal vision continues to speak to modern anxieties and remains a vital text for the study of shifting identities.

### Work Cited:

"liminal", Oxford English Dictionary. Ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. OED Online Oxford 23, 2007.

"What is Liminality?" 15 September 2023. The Living Philosophy. 21 July 2024. <https://thelivingphilosophy.substack.com/p/what-is-liminality>.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, 1994.

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.

Cornis-Pope, Marcel. "Rethinking Postmodern Liminality: Marginocentric Characters and Projects in Thomas Pynchon's Polysystemic Fiction." *Symploke* 5 (1997): 27-47. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40550399>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2024.

Engel, Adam J. "BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE FUNCTIONS OF LIMINAL SPACE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE". The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Pro Quest Dissertations Publishing, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.17615/a47z-ef67>.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. Penguin Modern Classics, 2003.

Kafka, Franz. *Metamorphosis*. Trans. David Wyllie. Fingerprints Classic, 2018.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1982.

Laing, R.D. *The Divided Self*. Penguin, 1960.

Marshall, Author Lillie. "What is a Liminal Space, and Why is it So Powerful?" January 2023. *Around the World*. May 2024. <https://www.aroundtheworldl.com/why-liminal-in-between-spaces-between-cities-are-great/>.

Neumann, Kimberly Dawn. "Liminal Space: What Is It And How Does It Affect Your Mental Health?" September 2022. *forbes.com*. May 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/what-is-liminal-space/>.

Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. University of California Press, 1984.

Sierk Ybema, Nie Beech & Nick Ellis. "Transitional and perpetual liminality: An identity practice perspective". *Anthropology Southern Africa* (2011): 21-29. 10.1080/23323256.2011.11500005

Turner, Victor. "Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage". *Forest of symbols: aspects of the Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell UP. (1967). pp. 23–59.

Ybema, Sierk, et al. "Transitional and Perpetual Liminality: An Identity Practice Perspective." *Anthropology Southern Africa*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 21–29.