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# The Study of Human Conditions and the Revolt Against Absurd Based on Sartre's Existentialism and Camus' Absurdism in Kafka on the Shore

# การศึกษาสภาวะของมนุษย์และการต่อต้านความไร้แก่นสารตามทฤษฎีอัตถิภาวนิยมของซาร์ทและความไร้แก่นสารของกามู ในเรื่องคาฟกา ออน เดอะ ชอร์ (Kafka on the Shore)

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## Abstract

This study aims to bring the key philosophical concepts of two existentialists, which are Existentialism by Jean-Paul Sartre and Absurdism by Albert Camus, to analyze Kafka, the protagonist of *Kafka on the Shore*. It examines his life conditions and his decision to continue living, and interprets the key message derived from these philosophical ideas. The novel revolves around the journey of a runaway boy who tries to escape his Oedipal prophecy, only to find it is harder to avoid fulfilling it. His responsibility and anguish stemming from his choice drive him to the brink of suicide, but he ultimately finds his way back to living with hope. Sartre's concept is used as it emphasizes human existence as inherently purposeless, with humans thrown into the world bearing the responsibility to fulfill their life with meaning. His explanation on various human conditions in his essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, is used to navigate Kafka's life conditions, including his freedom of choice, self-deception, moral responsibility, alienation, and anguish. Since the novel does not end in tragedy, as is often the case with most existentialist works, Camus' Absurdism is adopted to explain ways to confront life absurdities through revolt and

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acceptance. The results of this study could serve as a case study for character analysis to offer a deeper understanding of existentialism and absurdism in Kafka's life. Camus uses of the Myth of Sisyphus as an inspiring story can also motivate humans to be resilient and persist with hope, the same way as Kafka does.

***Keywords:*** absurdity, absurdism, existentialism, Sisyphus

**บทคัดย่อ**

การศึกษานี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายในการนำแนวคิดหลักของปรัชญาอัตถิภาวนิยมของซาร์ทและความไร้แก่นสารของกามูมาเพื่อวิเคราะห์ตัวละครเอกคาฟคา จากเรื่องคาฟกา ออน เดอะ ชอร์ (Kafka on the Shore) ในแง่ของสภาวะต่าง ๆ ในชีวิต การตัดสินใจที่จะมีชีวิตอยู่ต่อไป และตีความใจความหลักของนิยายผ่านสองปรัชญาดังกล่าว โดยเนื้อเรื่องเกี่ยวข้องกับการหนีออกจากบ้านของเด็กหนุ่มที่พยายามหลบหนีคำทำนายอิดิปุส แต่กลับพบว่ายิ่งหลบหนีเขากลับยิ่งเข้าไปติดกับคำทำนาย ความรับผิดชอบและความสิ้นหวังของตัวละครอันเป็นผลจากสิ่งที่เขาเลือกเอง ได้นำพาให้เขาไปสู่จุดที่คิดจะจบชีวิตตนเอง แต่โชคยังเข้าข้างเขา เขาได้พบกับหนทางที่จะใช้ชีวิตอยู่ต่ออย่างมีความหวัง ดังนั้น ทฤษฎีของซาร์ทจึงถูกนำมาใช้เพื่อเน้นย้ำว่า การมีอยู่ของมนุษย์เป็นเรื่องไร้จุดประสงค์ และพวกเขาต้องรับผิดชอบในการเติมเต็มชีวิตของตนเองด้วยความหมาย โดยในเรียงความเรื่อง "Existentialism is a Humanism" ได้ถูกนำมาใช้ในการนำทางชีวิตของคาฟกาตามสภาวะต่าง ๆ เช่น อิสระในการเลือก การหลอกตัวเอง ความรับผิดชอบทางศีลธรรม ความแปลกแยก และความสิ้นหวัง เนื่องด้วยคาฟกา ออน เดอะ ชอร์ ไม่ได้จบลงด้วยโศกนาฏกรรมดังเช่นนวนิยายอัตถิภาวนิยมอื่น ๆ ความไร้แก่นสารของกามูได้ถูกนำมาใช้ในการอธิบายหนทางที่มนุษย์จะเผชิญหน้ากับความไร้แก่นสารผ่านการปฏิวัติ และการยอมรับ ผลของการศึกษานี้สามารถเป็นกรณีศึกษาเรื่องการวิเคราะห์ตัวละครคาฟกาเพื่อสร้างความเข้าใจในเชิงลึกผ่านมุมมองของอัตถิภาวนิยมของซาร์ทและความไร้แก่นสารของกามู กามูใช้นิทานปรัมปราของซิซิฟัสเพื่อเป็นเรื่องเล่าแห่งแรงบันดาลใจที่จะช่วยสร้างแรงกระตุ้นให้มนุษย์มีการฟื้นพลังและใช้ชีวิตต่อไปได้ด้วยความหวังดังตัวละครคาฟกา

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## Introduction

*Kafka on the Shore* is written by Haruki Murakami, a famous Nobel Prize-winning author, known for his unique integration of surrealism and magical realism, coupled with deep, meaningful themes. The novel has gained popularity due to its fusion of popular culture, detailed human life, suspense, and its gradually unfolding plot. It highlights themes such as individual identity, inner struggles, self-discovery, the Oedipal complex, absurdity, and meaninglessness. These elements captivate readers by offering its unique and rich literary elements that resonates with contemporary human realities, many of which readers can relate to in this era.

This novel portrays the internal transformation of a 15-year-old boy and addresses the proliferation of meaningless signs, society's materialism and capitalism, and the isolation faced by those who fail to meet the societal standards. Ultimately, it explores his journey towards the discovery of a new life and self-reconciliation (Ali, 2022). Wattanagun and Chotiudompant (2009) also argue that the protagonist's journey represents a quest for identity in a capitalist society, where humans are provoked to consume, yet remain perpetually unfulfilled and left with a sense of alienation. These circumstances provoke questions about the meaning of life, which sparks reflection on its purpose for the reader.

Despite being originally written in Japanese, the novel's exploration of life issues, human feelings, and conditions has a universal appeal. Readers from various cultures who may share the common struggles to those faced by the protagonist and other characters can connect deeply with its themes. The subjects such as suicide and self-doubts may seem depressed to some readers, but the novel can offer hope by reminding readers that when dealing with problems, there could be a rainbow after the heavy storm. It suggests that life can be meaningful and pleasurable when we understand our freedom and the absurdities of existence. With its contemporary and universal messages, this novel serves as a case study for analyzing these themes.

The significance of studying philosophical ideas in literature lies in the insights they offer into the complexities of the human condition, as well as the social and political influences on humans, morality, and human existence. These ideas are illustrated through literary elements including characters, themes, and plots. Literary works that employ philosophical ideas allow readers to observe the principles that characters uphold. For example, the philosophical concepts of nihilism and morality are explored in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment.* The protagonist of the novel shows a lack of concerns for others' emotions and murders a corrupt pawnbroker as he believes that this act benefits others, showing that he is a nihilist that follows utilitarianism. Likewise, Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* illuminates different conditions of human condition when they face crises that seem to lack reason. It explores how people grapple with freedom and absurdities of life, which always come with consequences and responsibility, as reflected through the protagonist. The novel exhibits existentialist and absurdist concepts through character analysis which allows readers to learn a positive outlook on how to realize personal freedom and how to deal with absurdity, insights that they can apply when facing life crises.

*Kafka on the Shore* presents the inner struggle of the protagonist, who believes his life is fated to kill his father and violate his mother. He tends to live as if he is cursed, despite trying to run away from his fate. Kafka does not know why this absurd fate happens to him. All he knows is that he has to leave his family to protect them, an action that shows his moral integrity, as it is done for the sake of others. Unfortunately, this decision causes him anxiety and anguish. Though the situation seems to offer Kafka limited choices, he gets to choose for himself. However, Kafka does not realize the freedom of choice he has. As the story unfolds, the struggles he faces show the consequences of his own choices, which demonstrates his responsibility. Kafka's experience of freedom and its consequences aligns with the philosophy of existentialism, especially Sartre's existentialism, which emphasizes individual freedom, choice and responsibility.

Even though all existentialists highlight the human freedom to choose, Sartre differs from others such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger in his belief that 'existence precedes essence' – meaning that humans first exist and later create their essence or meaning since there is no creator or God to assign essence or purpose (Baggini, 2002). Sartre also radically claims that although humans are free, they must also take full responsibility for their actions. Anguish follows this responsibility, as when we choose, our choice must also consider others. Some readers who lack a background in Sartre's existentialism criticize it as a "philosophy of despair which can provide no hope for life" (Baggini, 2002, p. 117). However, Sartre encourages us to live authentically by embracing radical freedom and taking responsibility for our choices without deceiving ourselves into believing that external authorities define our essence.

Sartre's concept continues to resonate in today's world. As Blackstock (2024) claims, Sartre's existentialism remains relevant to contemporary modern life in terms of anxiety over freedom, identity and self-creation, and social engagement and collective responsibility. He points out that people today are anxious about their freedom and the search for meaning amid rapid change, uncertainty, individual struggles, and the challenge of creating a purposeful life. Additionally, Sartre's philosophy promotes the idea of identity as an ongoing process of self-creation because he believes that humans do not have fixed essence. His concepts promote awareness of multiple identities in a globalized world. Lastly, existentialism highlights social engagement and collective responsibility because Sartre's idea of authentic living always involves engagement in social and political realities.

These modern life issues are shown in the novel, especially through Kafka, who initially fails to realize that he can create his own identity rather than remain a victim of fate. While running away, he finds freedom difficult to handle, as it comes with responsibilities too heavy for someone his age. Fortunately, Kafka eventually recognizes his freedom and stops viewing himself as a villain to his family. He develops the will to create his own essence, rather than follow a cursed fate from an unknown source.

Since the novel ends with Kafka looking forward to a brand-new day, despite the absurdities he believes his fate has imposed on him, it implies his rebellion against them. Camus describes the world as irrational, and when we confront this irrationality, we feel helpless, lonely, and even suicidal when trying to find a reason for it (Carban, 2021). Nevertheless, he also encourages people to revolt against the absurd by embracing it and finding happiness in the struggle.

Camus' view of absurdity differs from other existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre. Kierkegaard claimed that absurdity arises from the paradox of faith, as the act of believing in God despite a lack of evidence; thus, it requires a leap of faith beyond reason. While Nietzsche declared that God is dead, and thus individuals need to create their own meaning. Likewise, Sartre encouraged people to accept the absurd while recognizing their freedom to create their own meaning, as humans are abandoned by God.

However, Camus' idea of absurdity and how to deal with it can be a subject of debate. Polzler (2014) argues that Camus' absurdism contains a contradiction. While Camus explicitly denies certain moral values, he still seems committed to the existence of some values. Therefore,

Polzler suggests reinterpreting Camus' normative aspects rather than relying on universal moral claims. Similarly, Onwuatuegwu and Arinze (2020) question whether Camus' solution of revolt is enough to respond to life's meaninglessness. After analyzing Camus' solutions, they conclude that the absurd is human damnation, and individuals do not need a leap of faith or any higher power to give life meaning. Instead, people should live by accepting its meaninglessness.

Kafka's inevitable fate can be viewed as absurd, as the more he tries to avoid it, the more he is drawn into it. Kafka cannot find a reason why this fate is his. Thus, Camus' absurdism can be used to explain the absurdity Kafka faces and how he revolts against it.

By studying these two philosophies through a Japanese novel, this article can serve as a valuable resource for literature teachers to motivate learners to think critically about the similarities that Eastern and Western philosophies may share in a text. It can act as a bridge to connect local or regional philosophical or thought systems to others. In this case, one of the essential Buddhist teachings is the concept of impermanence, which suggests that human suffering arises when we resist the natural course of things that are beyond our understanding. Therefore, we should learn to accept things as they are. This religious philosophy aligns with Camus' idea of embracing absurdity, as one may never find concrete answers to certain existential questions, leading to feelings of despair. With this comparison, it can ultimately help learners develop their own interpretations and personal meaning-making.

Moreover, incorporating global literary texts like *Kafka on the Shore* can promote literary diversity, as learners do not have to always study western canonical works that they somehow struggle to understand or find relatable.

## Literature Review

### 1. A Plot Summary of Kafka on the Shore

Kafka Tamura is a fifteen-year-old boy who decides to run away from his fate on his birthday. He lives with a mysterious father, while his mother and his older sister left him when he was very young. This abandonment marks the starting point of his endless doubts about his mother's love and the reasons they left him in the care of a father he does not get along with. His father seems to neglect him, and Kafka tries his best to keep his distance and avoid him.

Since the beginning of junior high, he has been preparing himself, both physically and mentally, to run away when he turns fifteen, as he believes his fate has destined him to eventually commit patricide and incest with his mother. To achieve his plan, he hardly speaks to anyone to conceal his plan. He also has an imaginary friend, or alter ego, named Crow, who is always with him.

Crow represents a more critical side of Kafka who is both supportive, and at times, discouraging him. With Crow's criticism and skepticism, Kafka learns and overcomes obstacles throughout his runaway journey. Despite his attempts to act like an adult through self-sufficiency and conscience, he discovers that running away is absurd. Regardless of his good intentions, he unknowingly and uncontrollably fulfills the unfortunate prophecy. This drives him to the idea of ending his life and the absurdities that come with it. Fortunately, in a dreamlike world, he meets his mother again in a deserted forest. Their conversation helps heals his emotional trauma as he

begins to understand the absurdity of his life. After leaving the forest, he finds a will to live, which is what Crow refers to as "a brand new life".

**2. Sartre's Existentialism**

During World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher, published works that laid the foundation for the concept of existentialism. The concept emphasizes human freedom, which surprised the public since it seemed to contradict their living conditions (Warburton, 2011). Sartre proposed that humans have the potential to create an ideal society since they are nothing but what they make of themselves. His philosophy offered a notion that people have freedom even they seem to lack in different circumstances at any period, making existentialism consistently well-known and adopted in many works. In the section "Existence Precedes Essence" from "Existentialism is a Humanism", Sartre (2007) argues that humans are free from any predetermined purpose or essence and must create their own meaning through choices and actions. Life, he claims, is meaningless at first. Later, the essence is whatever humans choose to be, but they must always choose not only for oneself but also in a way that is good for others. That is human responsibility. Sartre further explains universal human conditions, such as meaninglessness, moral choice, self-deception, and anguish.

One well-known novella that presents the concept of Existentialism is *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. Moslehuddin (2021) points out that the novella presents a lack of free will in Gregor Samsa, the protagonist, who is compelled by familial and societal responsibilities rather than personal desire until he transforms into a bug. This transformation highlights the "human being's existentialist crisis as a social being" (Moslehuddin, 2021, p. 88). He comments on the hatred shown in the reference to Gregor as a bug as being absurd, yet the situation is feasible as long as humans cannot predict their future nor avoid the meaningless of life. Despite the popularity of Sartre's philosophy from many decades ago, his insights into the human condition remain profoundly relevant to people at any period because every human must at least ask themselves once about the meaning and purpose of existence. His philosophy reminds us to understand the freedom we have, the ability to create our own meaning or purpose, and the responsibilities that come with our choices.

**3. Albert Camus' Absurdism**

One important theme of Existentialism is the absurdity of human existence – the belief that life lacks meaning. Albert Camus, a French writer and philosopher, argued that the more people seek meaning in life, the more they are confronted with indifference of the universe. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (1955) asserts that "[man] feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (p. 20). When people are pushed to the edge by this contradiction, some may view death as an escape from the absurd. However, Camus contends that suicide, as a response to life's lack of meaning, only deepens the absurdity of existence and constitutes an affront to one's very being. Instead, he proposes three results drawn from the absurd, including "my revolt, my freedom, and my passion", where he insists on refusing suicide (Camus, 1955, p. 22). "My revolt" means refusing suicide despite the absurd. "My freedom" is to make oneself free from imprisonment

by religious or others' moral codes. Lastly, "my passion" is being wholehearted in the pursuit of living fully and experiencing all aspects of life. Through this approach, one can find happiness and the meaning of life through the search itself, once they acknowledge the absurdity in the search for meaning. His encouragement reminds us not to seek what is impossible to find, but rather to have a positive outlook on life by being resilient in the face of discouragement and failures.

This concept is still essential to people, especially in this decade, where they have experienced stress, anxiety, a pandemic, and loss in fighting against the doubts and hopelessness that gnaw at them from within. The concept of absurdism is also explored in characters in the novels *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. Lognion (2024) states that the characters in *Wuthering Heights* are entrapped by their own individual struggles and their attempts to rationalize their situations, but they are caught in unhelpful thought patterns and violence; thus, they never seem to get anywhere in their lives, as all of them are victims of the absurd. In *The Trial*, Mondal (2018) points out that the story presents an ugly, dark, and meaningless world through what happens to Joseph K., who is arrested despite having done nothing wrong. The whole trial process is strange and never seems to end. The novel depicts the absurd world K. faces, where there seems to be no solution for him except to accept the truth forced down his throat. As a result, K. is secretly and senselessly executed in the end. These characters from two novels become trapped in their situations or meet a tragic end because they do not know how to cope with the absurdity.

**4. The Myth of Sisyphus**

To illustrate Camus' concept, he uses *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) to show how man should cope with the absurdity of life and find meaning in living. According to Camus' essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Sisyphus becomes more famous for being "the futile laborer of the underworld" than for what he does in his life. Camus recounts that Sisyphus is punished for stealing secrets from the gods, specifically when Jupiter abducts Aegina, the mortal daughter of Aesopus. Aesopus complains to him after being shocked by the disappearance of his daughter. Knowing the identity of the kidnapper, Sisyphus agrees to reveal the truth in exchange for Aesopus giving holy water to the citadel of Corinth. Moreover, Sisyphus puts Death in chains. This causes great wrath among the gods, while Sisyphus enjoys wealth and prosperity for himself and his people. Because Pluto is also furious to see his deserts and silent empire, he sends the god of war to free Death from her conqueror, and Sisyphus is sent to the underworld to receive his punishment. He has to pay the price for the passions of the earth by using the full effort of his body to push a huge stone to the top of a mountain a hundred times over. Once the stone rolls back down, he has to descend to the plain and start again, endlessly.

The penalty looks merciless and futile, but what strikes Camus is that Sisyphus does not give up. He does not choose death. Though he appears to be powerless, he is rebellious. During his toiling moments, Sisyphus realizes that what does not kill him, makes him stronger. In fact, the one who keeps rolling the stone is stronger than the stone itself. Thus, he understands that "he is superior to his fate", and he is "the master of his days", because no fate can withstand scorn.

Camus encourages us that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus is happy" (Camus, 1955, p. 23-24).

Camus (1955) encourages people to take Sisyphus as an example. The act of rolling the stone is like humans facing the absurdity of life, which may seem endless, but we should not despair, as happiness can be found depending on the choices one makes through the continuous task of living.

Based on the existing research about *Kafka on the Shore*, there is limited discussion that explores 1) Kafka's condition before and after he makes choices throughout his runaway journey based on Sartre's Existentialism, and 2) Kafka's revolt based on Camus' Absurdism. Therefore, this research aims to study the influences of these two major existentialists on the protagonist. The main focus is on Kafka alone, to show his existential conditions, choices, and different ways of revolting against the absurdities before ultimately finding a bright hope to live for.

## Research Objectives

The aim of this paper is to explore how the two philosophical concepts from Sartre and Camus can be used to explain Kafka's life conditions, choices, and revolt against the absurdities in his runaway journey. The study focuses on the following objectives:

1. To examine the protagonist's runaway journey and compare his life conditions in terms of meaninglessness, moral choice, self-deception, and anguish, as outlines in the section "Existence Precedes Essence" from Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism".

2. To examine how Kafka revolts against his absurd and inevitable Oedipal fate based on Camus' Absurdism and The Myth of Sisyphus.

3. To analyze how Kafka becomes resilient and embraces the absurd after realizing his freedom.

## Research Methodology

The research is conducted through a close reading of Haruki Murakami's novel *Kafka on the Shore*. The main focus is merely on Kafka, the protagonist who believes he is bound by a cursed fate and feels he has no choice but to run away from fulfilling the prophecy. Kafka's life and his journey are compared to life conditions as stated in Sartre's *Existence Precedes Essence*, particularly in terms of his meaningless and absurd existence, moral choice and self-deception, and the anguish stemming from his freedom of choice. His meaningless and absurd life is analyzed through his characterization, especially considering his perception of life and fate before deciding to run away from home. Kafka's moral choice to flee in order to protect his family from the prophecy of his Oedipal fate reflects his self-deception, as he refuses to recognize his freedom and lives in hiding, confused by the choice he has made. Finally, the anguish Kafka experiences – leading him to contemplate suicide – is explored as a consequence of his existential decisions.

Since death is not the path Kafka ultimately chooses, Camus' Absurdism and *The Myth of Sisyphus* can be used to illustrate how Kafka changes his mind and carries on with hope at the end. Based on Camus' Absurdism, Kafka chooses to cope with the absurd through "revolt", "freedom", and "passion". With Kafka's "revolt", he stops running from his fate, confronts his mother, and

accepts her decision to abandon him. The fact that he decides to carry on regardless of societal norms or expectations is considered his expression of "freedom". At the end of the novel, Kafka's changed outlook on his cursed fate, leading him to see that he will become part of a brand-new world, reflects his "passion" to continue living. Lastly, Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* is applied to the reading of Kafka's character at the end of the novel, as it helps elucidate Kafka as an absurd hero, like Sisyphus, which can be seen in his continued task of living, embracing the absurd, and finding happiness in the search for meaning. Using Sartre's explanation on universal conditions in a meaningless world and Camus' encouragement to fight against the absurd provides a deeper understanding of Kafka's choices and his revolt against absurdity.

## Findings and Discussions

The findings of this research are organized into the following five subheadings:

1. Kafka's Meaningless and Absurd Life: This section discusses Kafka's absurd fate, where he believes that he is forced to live as a victim of his destiny by running away from his family. It shows his inability to realize that he is free because human life is meaningless according to Sartre's existentialist concept.

2. Kafka's Moral Choice and His Self-Deception: This section analyzes Kafka's decision to flee from home, which has been influenced by societal morality. While such a decision is seen as very common, it blinds him to what he truly wants and causes him to keep running away from the problem, based on existentialist concepts.

3. Kafka Inevitable Anguish from Moral Choice: This section explores how Kafka's decision, drive by morality, causes him to feel anguished, based on Sartre's existentialist concept.

4. Kafka's Absurd Life and Fate: This section explains Kafka's absurd life and fate based on Camus Absurdism. It shows how Kafka's runaway journey and his efforts to protect his family from himself ultimately lead to nothing, causing him to contemplate suicide.

5. Kafka's Revolt against the Absurd and His Resilience: This section presents how Kafka revolts against his absurd fate based on Camus' three ways to handle the absurdity and the *Myth of Sisyphus*. It shows that, by the end, Kafka becomes resilient as he chooses to take responsibility for his actions, embrace the absurdities, and look forward to living.

### 1. Kafka's Meaningless and Absurd Life

As a 15-year-old boy, Kafka seems to totally believe the prophecy, and his goal is to distance himself from his family. He does not realize the freedom he has, making him different from Sartre's concept. The novel starts with Kafka's plan to run away from home to avoid fulfilling his fate of killing his father and being with his mother and sister, as Kafka describes: "My father told me there was nothing I could do to escape this fate. That prophecy is like a timing device buried inside my genes, and nothing can ever change it. 'I will kill my father and be with my

mother and sister'" (Murakami, 2005, p. 217). He fails to realize his freedom and instead allows the prophecy to lead his runaway journey.

This experience reflects what happens to many people, as Sartre (2007, p. 22) explains in "Existentialism is a Humanism" that "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself". He adds that humans are unlike other objects in that they first exist in this world, and then must create their own essence or find a purpose or meaning for their life. Sartre also emphasizes that humans are condemned to be free, but they need to be responsible for their actions. However, many people, like Kafka, may not be aware of this freedom. Believing that his life is predetermined to destroy his family, Kafka tends to live accordingly.

This belief is also reflected in Kafka's guilt. He feels guilty even before the prophecy is proven true. The condition of having a meaningless and absurd life, as Sartre claimed, can happen to anyone. Considerably, there is no answer as to why Kafka is fated to ruin his family. This mirrors the human experience that we sometimes must encounter unclear situations without any understanding of their cause. This lack of clarity appears absurd, but what we do know is that we need to be responsible for our own actions.

In terms of freedom, one piece of evidence that shows Kafka can choose how to live and who he wants to be is his decision to adopt the name "Kafka" during his escape. He tells the librarian, Oshima, that he chose this name because he likes Franz Kafka's novels, for they resonate with him regarding life and its complexity in ways he cannot express to anyone. He explains, "What I mean is, that's his own device for explaining the kind of lives we lead" and "Kafka's complex, mysterious execution device wasn't some metaphor or allegory---it's actually here, all around me. But I don't think anybody would get that" (Murakami, 2005, p. 60-61). Most importantly, Kafka chooses to escape his fate, despite having other options, such as confronting it or seeking help from others. These decisions show his ability to make choices freely.

With the freedom he chooses, responsibility is the price he must pay. One of the challenges of having freedom is learning how to handle it because freedom always comes with responsibility. According to Sartre (2007), he points out that freedom is not easy to handle as humans are "condemned to be free," and from the moment they are "thrown into this world", they are responsible for everything they do. For Kafka, this means he must take care of his well-being, which is a significant burden for a 15-year-old boy. His responsibility does not begin the moment he runs away but from the very decision to do so. Before leaving home, he trains himself physically to prepare for a life alone and studies diligently, as he knows he may no longer have access to formal education. Furthermore, he must cut off his relationship with others at school to keep his plan a secret (Murakami, 2005).

**2. Kafka's Moral Choice and His Self-Deception**

Kafka's decision to flee from his fate can be viewed as a poor choice for a boy his age to handle life on his own. However, his actions can be considered as morally sound, as they are based on the idea that a son should be grateful to his parents and should never hurt them. How he chooses can be compared to the condition all humans face, in the sense that although humans are free to make their own choices, the choices they make should be good for others because it is their

responsibility. As Sartre (2007, p. 24) said, “in choosing for himself he chooses for all men”. He further argues that what a person chooses matters, as it must be based on his moral choice. It is also impossible for humans not to choose because not choosing is still a choice. The center of existentialism is that man has the freedom to commit, but this commitment is shaped by cultural patterns and a sense of responsibility toward humanity. In the story, Kafka does not only think of himself, he also considers his whole family. He knows he must leave his father, but he cannot be with his mother or sister, despite longing for them. By making this decision, Kafka is following the existentialist condition. He is now burdened with a weight of moral responsibility, though he does not yet fully understand where his choice will lead him.

Making a moral choice can somehow lead to self-deception. Sartre (2007) refers to this self-deception as “bad faith”, which he explains that it is the act of denying one’s own freedom and responsibility by convincing oneself that their choices are bound by external circumstances. Cox (2019, p. xii) simplifies the term “bad faith” as a failure “to confront reality, to ignore problems rather than address them, to wish for change without doing anything”. This self-deception occurs because many people believe their freedom is bound by core values such as religion, social norms, morality, and institutional expectation. As a result, people tend to convince themselves that they have no choice but to do what seems most righteous. Despite their internal dissatisfaction, they must still take responsibility for their decisions. Such bad faith is also reflected in Kafka’s first choice of running away from his fate, which leads him to fulfill it in the end.

Kafka’s departure from his father’s house at the beginning of the novel illustrates bad faith because it stems from his fear of killing his father (Murakami, 2005). His decision reflects a denial of his own freedom and responsibility, as he blames everything on a cursed fate, pretending that he does not have control over his life. This avoidance helps him escape the anxiety of exercising true freedom. In doing so, he limits his own possibility of living a normal life to avoid facing the consequence and responsibility if he had killed his father. However, he must be responsible for his distress and well-being during the escape. For instance, Kafka must conceal his identity and rely on the library as a refuge. He lies to the librarian because he does not want others to label him as a bad boy wandering the streets and skipping school. This shows a chain of unpleasant situations resulting from bad faith.

Another major instance of self-deception is shown from the incident in the woods. Kafka wakes up to find that his shirt is covered with blood, yet he cannot recall what happened (Murakami, 2005). Although the novel leaves the event ambiguous, the blood on Kafka serves as evidence to prove that he killed his father, unconsciously fulfilling his cursed fate. His inability or unwillingness to recall what happened can be interpreted as an attempt to reject his action to avoid guilt and responsibility for his own deed. Kafka continues to deceive himself by insisting that he is destined to destroy his family, so he lives as “That curse is branded” on his soul even deeper than before (Murakami, 2005, p. 416).

The effects of this bad faith unfold through a series of incidents of running away, hiding, covering his identity, and refusing to recall what happened. These actions emphasize how Kafka's self-deception reinforces a false narrative that his decisions are justified by morality and fate. In fact, these are pure excuses, blocking him from seeing that he may have a better choice. If he had been able to confront reality from the start, he might have avoided the anxiety and fear that stem from his mistaken belief in a predetermined destiny.

**3. The Inevitable Anguish from Moral Choice**

Kafka's choice makes him miserable. One reason that may make any human feel so is that freedom always comes with complete responsibility, which can lead man to feel anguished. Sartre (2007) describes anguish as:

> A man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility.
>
> (Sartre, 2007, p. 25)

Sartre means that man has the freedom to choose, but when choosing, he must consider whether his choice is good for others. Thinking of or for others is a weight of responsibility humans must bear. Though Kafka's decision to be away from his family can be seen as a good moral choice, he still has to bear the responsibilities of his well-being, his anxiety, and the consequences of his own actions.

> I'm free, I think. I shut my eyes and think hard and deep about how free I am, but I can't really understand what it means. All I know is I'm totally alone…like some solitary explorer who's lost his compass and his map. Is this what it means to be free? I don't know, and I give up thinking about it.
>
> (Murakami, 2005, p. 46)

It is obvious from the excerpt that freedom, though desired by people in general, is very challenging to handle. This is because what leads Kafka to feel anguished does not solely come from these factors alone. Warburton (2011) explains that Sartre believed human life is full of anguish, which arises when we realize that we cannot make excuses and must take full responsibility for everything we do. What is worse about anguish is that we often stick to the template of living life the way we think others should. This is reflected when Kafka sees other teenagers going to school to study, while he must study alone in the library. He thinks to himself, "Am I really doing the right thing? The thought makes me feel helpless, isolated. I turn my back on the schoolkids and try not to look at them anymore" (Murakami, 2005, p. 36). Even though he thinks he could be free from becoming a threat to his father's life, there is an inevitable or suffering consequence of his free will in choosing to protect his father. Kafka's ignoring the other schoolkids may imply that he regrets not

conforming to the norm people his age, but he may feel that what he chose to do will likely yield better consequences for all of his family members.

Another part that shows Kafka's anguish is when he realizes that his runaway journey leads him to kill his father as he was fated. He cannot accept the fact that he might be a murderer, so he considers death as another escape by saying, "If only I could wipe out this me who's here" and "Then my battle would be over" (Murakami, 2005, p. 417). To evaluate the situation here, a decision made based on good moral choice does not guarantee a happy result. Kafka faces anguish and despair from choices he believes are best for his family. This is the price humans must pay, counted as a part of our life conditions because "it is anguish pure and simple, of the kind experienced by all who have borne responsibilities" (Sartre, 2007, p. 27). Such pure anguish leads Kafka to thoughts of committing suicide, which he believes could end his worries and suffering and serve as a way to show his responsibility.

**4. Kafka's Absurd Life and Fate**

Living without knowing the meaning of life and its absurdity makes humans feel despair. The worst is that some may never find the answer to certain profound questions concerning their existence, which makes their absurd life even more absurd. This clearly explains Kafka's feelings when he cannot make sense of what is happening to him: why he is born with such a cursed fate, why he cannot escape fulfilling the prophecy, and why his mother does not love him. His runaway journey is a result of those absurdities. He cannot find the answer to why he is fated to be evil and why he must be the one who pays for his good intentions, as he feels that "The world is a huge space, but the space that will take you in---and it doesn't have to be very big---is nowhere to be found. You seek a voice, but what do you get? Silence" (Murakami, 2005, p. 9). What strikes him harder than anything is the question: "Why didn't she love me? Don't I deserve to have my mother love me?" (Murakami, 2005, p. 429). This causes him to feel that his existence is utterly absurd and meaningless.

The absurdity of Kafka's existence leads him to the question of suicide and the meaning of life, which are philosophical problems that Camus (1955) sees as very serious. For Camus, dying voluntarily implies that one has to come to instinctively realize there is no profound reason to continue living with everyday agitation and the uselessness of suffering. This can be seen when Kafka goes into the woods, considering suicide to take responsibility for his actions and to end his suffering, as he mentions, "Thinking it over, I reach into the rucksack and take out the hunting knife […] If need be I could use it to slash my wrists and let every last drop of blood inside me gush out onto the ground" (Murakami, 2005, p. 418).

However, when people are pushed to the edge and about to kill themselves, there is always a consciousness that somehow holds them back. As Camus (1955, p. 5) explains, one day when you confront the "why" question, it brings you weariness, but at the same time, it initiates the impulse of consciousness. What follows is "the definitive awakening", which results in choosing either suicide or recovery. This also occurs to Kafka. When reaching this existentialist crisis, Crow, Kafka's alter ego, reminds him of the fact that Kafka failed to consider by stating that:

> "It's not that your mother didn't love you", the boy named Crow says from behind me. "She loved you very much. The first thing you have to do is believe that. That's your starting point."
>
> (Murakami, 2005, p. 430)

His alter ego encourages him to understand his mother's situation and the reason why she abandoned him, without getting the true answer from her mouth. Crow suggests that Kafka recover and embrace reality by keeping the scar of absurdity:

> You can patch up your wounds, lift up your head and move on. But for her that's not an option. The only thing she'll ever be is lost. It doesn't matter whether somebody judges this as good or bad - that's not the point. You're the one who has the advantage. You ought to consider that.
>
> (Murakami, 2005, p. 430)

This excerpt shows that, in his conscience, he chooses to recover according to Camus. The moment when Kafka can truly forgive his mother is when he understands both her and his own conditions. He confronts such absurdity by accepting the truth that he may never know the exact reason for being abandoned and that he will never be with her.

**5. Kafka's Revolt against the Absurd and His Resilience**

The way Kafka deals with the absurd shows how he revolts against his absurd fate, where death is no longer his option. His decision echoes Camus' ways of dealing with the absurd, as Laskar (2004) explains Camus' encouragement that:

> Revolt becomes the foundation of any ethics; it gives meaning to how one faces the absurd and engenders the passion to live life intensely. Suicide is an evasion of the absurd and rejection of the human need for meaning.
>
> (Laskar, 2004, p. 411)

From the moment Kafka chooses to recover, he begins to deal with the absurd. First, he revolts against the absurd by having the will to find new meaning in his existence. He chooses to confront his mother and talk to her. However, Kafka does not seek an answer as to why she abandoned him. He knows she may have her own reason and that she will not choose to be with him, as he says, "A question wells up inside me, a question so big it blocks my throat and makes it hard to breathe. Somehow, I swallow it back, finally choosing another" (Murakami, 2005, p. 475).

Second is Kafka's freedom. He chooses to ignore what he might have done to his parents since running away, even though it might be perceived as wrong by societal standards. He recognizes his freedom by denying moral frames, as there is no way to turn back time and fix what happened in the past. This is evident when the Crow says, "You did the right thing" and "You did what was best. No one else could have done as well as you did" (Murakami, 2005, p. 505).

Lastly, Kafka's passion is shown when he accepts the idea of living his life like a living library to store both old and new memories, as Oshima tells him:

> And to understand the workings of our own heart we have to keep on making new reference cards. We have to dust things off every once in a while, let the fresh air in, change the water in the vase. In other words, you'll live forever in your own private library.
>
> (Murakami, 2005, p. 501)

The idea of treating life as a private library means accepting past mistakes and looking back at them to avoid repeating the same ones. It also suggests welcoming the future with a positive outlook in order to collect new experiences and memories. With this mindset, life becomes more hopeful and pleasant to continue living.

At the end of the novel, it shows how Kafka begins to accept the absurdities that have happened to him and realizes that his life is meaningless in the sense that he has no one, as reflected when he answers his mother:

> You can't understand this, Miss Saeki, but I don't have any world to go back to. No one's ever really loved me, or wanted me, in my entire life. I don't know who to count on other than myself. For me, the idea of a life I left is meaningless.
>
> (Murakami, 2005, p. 474)

Kafka and Sisyphus are similar in the way that they both realize their absurd lives and choose to carry on. They both know that this fight is for themselves alone, regardless of any other influences. The way Sisyphus keeps rolling the stone endlessly is the same as Kafka, who keeps living through life's difficulties and absurdities. Kafka does not know when his life will end, but as long as there is tomorrow, he has hope that something new awaits him. This aligns with Camus' suggestion that "we must imagine Sisyphus is happy" despite the hopeless task. Although the road ahead might be rough, Kafka chooses to look forward and live positively, as reflected in the last scene of the novel where Crow says, "You'd better get some sleep [...] And when you wake up, it's true. You are part of a brand new world" (Murakami, 2005, p. 505). Kafka's essence or purpose of living is not clearly defined at the end, but we can see the choice he makes for his existence. Finding his essence is a new and ongoing task, based on Camus' concept, and Kafka is certain that he will find happiness in the days ahead.

## Conclusion

Based on Sartre's Existentialism, Kafka's life and fate serve as an example of the different stages and conditions humans must face, along with the truth we should all bear in mind that we are free to choose, but freedom always comes with the weight of responsibility. This responsibility often ties us more closely to the societal templates of how life should be lived so that we will not feel alienated. Although Sartre and Camus suggest that life is meaningless and absurd, which may

sound depressing, their concepts ultimately encourage people to be resilient. The novel shows that humans must at some point experience suffering, alienation, anguish, or despair, but they should refuse to treat themselves as mere victims of their lives, culture, societal norms. Instead, they should recognize that they always have the freedom to choose, regardless of the undesirable consequences. At the very least, they can hold on to hope in their ability to handle the absurd, knowing they are the masters of their own lives.

This is reflected in Kafka's journey, particularly when he chooses to run from his fate, a decision rooted in bad faith, as he convinces himself it is the only way to avoid the prophecy. What he thinks is best for everyone results in personal anguish and leads him to contemplate suicide to escape his suffering. Camus' Absurdism asserts that life is absurd in that humans will only encounter silence when they attempt to impose order or find reasons in their existence. This mirrors Kafka's life and fate, as he is unable to find answer to why he is fated to kill his father, violate his mother, and be abandoned. The more he tries to make sense of his life, the closer he comes to fulfilling the cursed fate. These situations show the absurdities of human life, and Camus suggests the three results of which are "revolt", "freedom", and "passion".

As a result of Kafka's absurd life, he chooses to revolt by ceasing to run away and confronting his mother. He refuses to be a victim of absurd fate and does not label himself as a murderer or traitor. He embraces life with passion by seeing that tomorrow will be a new day, even though the task of living is not easy. This makes him an absurd hero, much like Sisyphus, who labors with the absurd task of rolling a stone up a hill. While the novel does not end with Kafka finding a new meaning to his existence, it implies that he, like many people, continues to make choices based on freedom and responsibility. Embracing the absurd may not provide clear answers, but it allows him to continue forward. This is one of the most impactful messages revealed through a close reading of the novel alongside the philosophical concepts of Sartre and Camus.

The implications for this study can be valuable for both teaching and learning contemporary literature. Firstly, this study could serve as a case study for *Kafka on the Shore* through the lens of Sartre's Existentialism and Camus' Absurdism. English teachers could use this framework to facilitate students explore philosophical themes through literary analysis. Secondly, the analysis could inspire students to explore meaning, purpose, and the human condition. Students could engage in philosophical discussion, insightful interpretation, and critical thinking. Lastly, as the novel has an open conclusion, it offers space for teachers and students to engage in active learning by seeking out creative interpretations, cultivating a profound appreciation of literature.

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