



REPRESSION AND NEUROSIS OF UNPROCESSED GRIEF: A PSYCHOANALYTIC INQUIRY INTO SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ISOLATION IN KAFKA'S THE METAMORPHOSIS AND THE TRIAL

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Abstract

*Grief is a complex psychological experience, which is often shaped and constrained by cultural norms and societal expectations. Individuals facing loss or existential crisis are often met with limited social acceptance for their grief which causes emotional repression and contributes to psychological distress. While grief has been well studied as part of the psychological realm, its literary expression, especially in the context of repression and neurosis, has been comparatively understudied. Therefore, using the five stages of grief by Kubler-Ross as a foundation of a wider psychoanalytic framework, the current study examines the journey of the protagonists in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* from unprocessed grief toward socio-psychological isolation.*

The findings reveal that Kafka's work offer insightful knowledge of the devastating effects of unprocessed grief, as the emotional response of repression starts neurotic patterns that further create isolation. In both texts grief first manifests itself as emotional repression, which slowly evolves into neurotic symptoms such as anxiety, obsessive thinking, guilt, and distorted perception. Gregor Samsa and Josef K. repress their emotional suffering to appear outwardly normal; nevertheless, this represses their psychological stability and sense of self. As the neurosis gets stronger and grief remains unanswered, this detachment of both protagonists from others and from themselves increases. Ultimately, the study shows that Kafka depicts repression and neurosis as central processes through which unprocessed grief results in an intense socio-psychological isolation and a breakdown of personal identity.

Keywords: *Socio-psychological isolation, Unprocessed grief, Repression, Neurosis, Mourning and melancholia, Kübler-Ross grief model, Modernist literature, Franz Kafka.*

Introduction

Grief is a profound individual psychological experience manifested variably from person to person, depending upon emotional ability, unconscious defense mechanisms, and internal coping structures. While grief is often seen as an innate response to loss, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes that how grief is worked through or repressed has long-term psychological consequences. When grief goes unacknowledged or emotionally unprocessed it does not disappear, but is internalized, repressed and transmuted into pathological states that cause disruptions in mental stability. Such unresolved grief often leads to repression, neurosis and a deep socio-psychological isolation as that person's psychic energy is redirected internally rather than expressed through conscious mourning (Freud, 1917/1957; Doka, 1989).



Sigmund Freud's seminal essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1957) presents a basic picture of the psychological consequences of repressed grief. Freud distinguishes between mourning, which is a healthy process in which the individual separates emotional energy from a lost object over time, and melancholia, which is a pathological term denoting the failure of that. In the case of melancholia, the loss is not consciously recognized but is rather taken into the ego itself leading to prolonged self-critique, emotional inhibition and neurotic suffering. Freud argues that melancholia is grief turned inwards, in which the process of repression displaces expression and creates psychological disturbance instead of resolution.

Complementing the psychoanalytic insights of Sigmund Freud, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's model of the five stages of grief including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance can serve as a means of comprehension for experiencing emotional stagnation when grief is not properly addressed and healed (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Although the model is non-linear, failure to pass certain stages like denial and depression often leads to emotional arrest. When it is applied to literary works, the framework of Kubler-Ross throws light on the psychological immobility of characters who are caught in an unresolved grief state, perpetuating a state of repression and leading to neurotic behavior.

Statement of the problem

Grief is a deeply personal yet socially influenced experience, and its expression is often constrained by societal expectations. In many cases, individuals struggling with loss or existential crises find minimal space for social acceptance of their grief, leading to psychological repression, alienation, and emotional turmoil. Despite that, the research on literary representation of the phenomenon is a bit lacking. Thereby, the current study aims to explore the journey of the protagonists in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* from unprocessed grief into socio-psychological isolation.

Research Aim

The current study explores how unprocessed grief in the protagonists of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* lead to repression and neurosis, resulting in socio-psychological isolation.

Research Gap

A review of the existing critical research on literary studies shows that no full-length study has been adequately conducted on the idea of the impact of unprocessed grief leading towards socio-psychological isolation, specifically on the texts selected by the researcher. Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate how Kafka portrays grief as a silent force that leads to psychological decline and social isolation in both texts.

Research objectives

1. To explore the repressive impacts of unprocessed grief leading towards socio-psychological isolation of the protagonists in the selected texts.
2. To elaborate the neurotic impacts of unprocessed grief leading toward socio-psychological isolation of the protagonists in the selected texts.

Research Questions

1. How does unprocessed grief repressively impact the protagonists, leading to socio-psychological isolation in the selected texts?



2. What are the neurotic impacts of unprocessed grief that contribute to socio-psychological isolation of the protagonists in the selected texts?

Significance of the Research

This study is significant because it addresses a critical gap in Kafka scholarship by examining *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* through the lens of unprocessed grief, a theme often overshadowed by discussions of alienation and existential dread. By integrating Freud's psychoanalytic theory with Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, the research offers a nuanced understanding of the protagonists' emotional decline, showing how suppressed grief fuels psychological repression and social isolation. This study is an addition to existing discourses in psychoanalytical literary studies.

Literature Review

The world of Franz Kafka is a world of unspoken losses and invisible wounds. In his major narratives, most notably *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and *The Trial* (published posthumously in 1925), grief rarely manifests in the conventional form of bereavement following a death. Instead, it permeates the existential fabric of his characters' lives as a pervasive, multifarious, and often unnamed psychic condition. It is a grief for a lost self, for an eroded social standing, for the impossibility of genuine communication, and for a humanity that is systematically denied recognition and validation. This grief, because it does not conform to socially sanctioned scripts of loss, remains unprocessed which turns into a toxic, internalized residue that festers and ultimately catalyzes a complete socio-psychological disintegration.

Both Gregor and Josef K. are quintessential victims of disenfranchised grief. Gregor's loss of his humanity is so radical that it falls outside any conceivable cultural script for mourning. His family cannot hold a funeral for a son who is still, technically, alive. Their response is not empathy but shame, embarrassment, and a pragmatic desire for him to disappear. They refer to the insect as "it," systematically denying his enduring consciousness. Josef K.'s loss of his legal innocence and social standing is similarly disenfranchised. There is no public trial, no opportunity to face his accusers, no community outrage at the injustice. His plight is a private, shameful secret. As Doka argues, disenfranchised grief intensifies suffering because the griever is denied the "grief passports" of ritual and social support, forcing them to grieve in isolation and often leading to complications like chronic depression and somatic illness.

Pauline Boss's (1999) concept of "ambiguous loss" powerfully complements Doka's work. She identifies two types: Type 1, physical absence with psychological presence (e.g., a missing soldier, a divorced spouse), and Type 2, physical presence with psychological absence (e.g., a person with severe dementia). Ambiguous loss is particularly torturous because it freezes the grief process; without clarity or closure, the tasks of mourning cannot be completed.

Kafka's narratives are masterful studies in ambiguous loss. Gregor Samsa is a perfect example of Type 2 ambiguous loss. He is physically present but psychologically absent in the eyes of his family. They see the insect, not their son. This creates a state of "boundary ambiguity" where the family doesn't know how to relate to him, is he Gregor, a pet, a monster? This ambiguity paralyzes them and prevents any adaptive grieving. Josef K. experiences a form of Type 1 ambiguous loss. He is physically free for most of the novel, but his former self, the innocent, autonomous Josef K., is psychologically absent, foreclosed by the indictment. Robert Neimeyer (2001), a leading figure in narrative grief therapy, argues that adapting to loss is not about "letting



go" but about "relearning the world" and reconstructing a coherent self-narrative that can incorporate the loss. The core task of grieving, in this view, is reconstruction.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological structure employed to examine the portrayal of unprocessed grief and socio-psychological isolation in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. It will outline the research design, theoretical framework, analytical framework, and the methods used for data collection and data analysis in conducting this study. The primary goal of the methodology is to establish a clear and academically rigorous pathway for analyzing the two novels through Freudian psychoanalysis and Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief model.

This study follows a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research design, which is appropriate for exploring psychological and emotional themes in literary texts. Since the research does not rely on numerical data but instead on conceptual interpretation, the qualitative design enables a deeper engagement with symbolic meanings, character behavior, narrative structure, psychological patterns, and emotional transitions.

The study is also comparative, as it places the two works, *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, side by side to identify shared patterns of grief, repression, emotional deterioration, and social alienation. The comparative nature helps highlight how Kafka constructs similar psychological journeys across different narrative contexts.

This design also allows flexibility in interpreting the characters' mental states, emotional disruptions, and responses to societal pressures. As emotional experiences are subjective, the qualitative approach offers the most suitable means of analyzing grief as a multidimensional phenomenon embedded in literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model of grief to examine the psychological effects of unprocessed grief in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) provides the primary psychoanalytic lens, explaining how suppressed grief becomes internalized and leads to repression, melancholia, and neurotic disturbance. When loss is not consciously processed, it is absorbed into the unconscious, resulting in emotional paralysis, self-blame, and fragmentation of the self. Key Freudian concepts applied in this analysis include repression, melancholia, and defense mechanisms such as denial and rationalization, which help explain Gregor Samsa's self-erasure and Josef K.'s neurotic distress.

Analysis:

Unprocessed grief happens when a person's loss is not acknowledged or validated by others. Without social recognition, people lose the stories, rituals, and shared support that help them move through grief. Modern research shows that mourning does not follow a straight path, that finding meaning is central to healing, and that keeping emotional bonds with the dead or with past versions of oneself can be healthy. Kafka's fictional worlds remove these supports entirely, leaving his characters to face grief in isolation.

When grief cannot be expressed, it often shows up in the body. What cannot be said is felt instead. People who struggle to recognize or describe their emotions, a condition known as alexithymia, often experience more emotional distress and less connection with others, which makes it harder to rebuild relationships after loss (Koppelberg, Kersting and Suslow, 2023). Some



forms of loss are seen as worthy of mourning, while others are ignored (Butler, 2004). This leads to a kind of social death, where a person's identity, connections, and recognition slowly fade away (Patterson, 1982).

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa wakes one morning to find he has turned into an insect. This transformation can be read as grief made visible, a physical expression of his inner collapse. His family hides him from guests, removes his furniture, and treats him as something dirty. He loses every ritual that could help him grieve the loss of his human body, his work, and his place in the family. When his father throws apples at him, one stays lodged in his back and begins to rot, turning hidden anger and shame into a real wound. For a brief moment, music stirs something human in him, but the disgust of the lodgers ends it. By the end, the cleaning woman calls him an "it," and his death is treated not as the loss of a son but as the removal of a burden (Kafka, *Metamorphosis*).

In *The Trial*, Josef K. is arrested without being told his crime. He loses his legal identity, yet his loss cannot be acknowledged or mourned. Nothing is named, and no authority recognizes his suffering. His situation represents an ambiguous loss; he is neither guilty nor innocent, only trapped in uncertainty. In "Before the Law," a man waits his entire life before a gate made only for him, but he never enters. Waiting replaces mourning. As the story continues, K. accepts the court's watchful silence and carries on as if nothing has changed, even as shame grows within him. His final execution, "like a dog," is the ultimate act of dehumanization; a death without dignity, ceremony, or grief (Kafka, *The Trial*).

Across both works, a similar pattern appears. There is a loss that is never recognized, emotions that turn inward or show up in the body, difficulty expressing feelings, stigma, and finally, complete isolation. Psychoanalysis helps explain how grief that cannot be spoken about often turns into hostility toward oneself. Studies on psychosomatic illness also show that the body can express grief through physical change or exhaustion when the mind cannot process loss (Lipowski 1988; Perez and Szabo 2025). Theories of stigma and grievability remind us that culture decides whose pain is worthy of attention and whose loss is ignored (Butler 2004).

When mourning is blocked, repression keeps pain out of awareness, yet it continues to shape behavior. This hidden suffering weakens the social connections people need to heal (Freud 1917). The result is a painful cycle of self-blame, physical symptoms, emotional numbness, repetitive routines, shame, and withdrawal. Both Gregor and Josef K. end in a kind of social death, denied the recognition that might have allowed them to grieve and reconnect with others.

In *The Metamorphosis*, repression shows up right from the beginning. Gregor wakes up and realizes he has turned into a giant insect, but instead of facing this shocking loss of his human life, he pushes away his feelings. He says, "If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would have quit long ago" (Kafka, 2007, p. 10). Here Gregor is not thinking about the horror of his transformation but about his job and his family. Freud explained that in melancholia, the person represses their grief by holding it in the unconscious (Freud, 1917/2005). Gregor is doing exactly this. He should be mourning the fact that his body and identity have changed forever, but instead, he represses his fear and clings to his work responsibilities. This repression means his grief remains unprocessed. Since he never accepts or expresses his sadness, he begins to feel more and more isolated. His family avoids him, and he becomes psychologically trapped in silence. This is



sociopsychological isolation, he is socially rejected by his family and psychologically shut off from himself.

Gregor's repression continues when he hides his anger. When his sister stops caring for him and even wants him gone, Gregor still does not show any anger. She says, "*We must try to get rid of it. That's the only way, Father*" (Kafka, 2007, p. 48). Instead of shouting back or fighting for his worth, Gregor represses his feelings. Freud wrote that in melancholia, the anger people feel about their loss does not go outward but is turned inward as self-hatred (Freud, 1917/2005). Gregor proves this when he begins to believe that his family will be better off without him. His anger becomes silent suffering. This is unprocessed grief again. Because he never deals with the pain of losing his family's love, he represses it and sinks deeper into loneliness. His sociopsychological isolation grows stronger because he feels unwanted by others and worthless.

The repression in Gregor also shows through his depression. He gives up on food, movement, and even living: "*He would hardly eat anymore; the leftovers from his meals lay untouched*" (Kafka, 2007, p. 39). This is not just sadness; it is Freud's melancholia. Instead of mourning the loss of his place in the family and finding a new meaning, Gregor represses all feelings until his body becomes weaker and weaker. His grief remains unprocessed, and he believes he has no value. This leads to total sociopsychological isolation. He stays hidden in his dark room, no one talks to him, and he no longer feels connected to life. His repression has destroyed his ability to be part of society or even to care about himself.

In *The Trial*, repression is also a main part of Josef K.'s experience. When he is arrested without reason, instead of facing the seriousness of what has happened, he represses his feelings through denial. He says, "*It's not a trial at all; if I just keep calm, everything will be fine*" (Kafka, 2009, p. 28). This shows repression because Josef pushes away his fear and grief. Freud explained that repression keeps the person from working through loss (Freud, 1917/2005). Josef should be mourning the loss of his freedom and dignity, but by repressing it, the grief stays unprocessed. He acts like nothing is wrong, and this makes him unable to connect with others who might help him. This is the start of his sociopsychological isolation, he is socially cut off from real help and psychologically cut off from his own fear.

Josef also represses his anger. A normal reaction to injustice would be outrage. But Josef hides this emotion and tells himself the trial is not serious: "*You don't need to accept everything as true; you only have to accept it as necessary*" (Kafka, 2009, p. 111). This is repression because he refuses to express anger at the system. Freud said that in melancholia, anger is turned inward, and the person begins to attack themselves (Freud, 1917/2005). Josef shows this as he becomes more passive, more guilty, and more ashamed. His unprocessed grief makes him weaker instead of stronger. The repression of anger leads to sociopsychological isolation, because he cannot connect to others through shared outrage, and he cannot face his own feelings of injustice. He becomes trapped in silence and guilt.

Finally, repression shows in Josef's depression. As the trial goes on, he becomes hopeless, but he represses even this despair. At the end, when the men lead him to his death, he does not resist: "*With failing eyes, Josef K. saw the two men, cheek by cheek, close in front of his face, watching the final act*" (Kafka, 2009, p. 231). His last words, "*Like a dog!*" (Kafka, 2009, p. 231), shows his complete self-hatred. Freud's idea of melancholia explains this perfectly: the grief is never processed, and it destroys the person's sense of worth (Freud, 1917/2005). Josef represses



his grief until it consumes him. This repression leaves him completely isolated. Socially, no one stands up for him, and psychologically, he accepts shame as his only identity. He dies of total sociopsychological isolation.

Both Gregor and Josef show how repression of grief leads to isolation. Freud explained that repression causes melancholia, where grief is unprocessed and becomes self-destructive (Freud, 1917/2005). Gregor represses his grief about losing his humanity, his family's love, and his place in society. Josef represses his grief about losing his freedom, justice, and dignity. In both stories, this unprocessed grief builds up inside them until they can no longer connect with the outside world or even with themselves. Gregor hides in his room and dies alone. Josef walks silently to his execution, shamed and abandoned. Their repression makes them victims of sociopsychological isolation.

Gregor shows neurotic impacts almost right after his change into an insect. Instead of reacting like a normal person who just went through something strange, he only worries about his job. He thinks, "If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would have quit long ago" (Kafka, 2007, p. 5). This shows obsessive thoughts about work, even though he has lost his human body. Freud said that in melancholia, people often become stuck in unhealthy thought patterns that they cannot escape (Freud, 1917/2005). Gregor is a clear example. He cannot deal with his new reality or the unprocessed grief of losing his human life. Instead, his mind goes back again and again to work. This shows the neurotic impact of his grief.

As the story moves forward, Gregor's grief becomes heavier, and his neurotic symptoms get worse. He starts to act in irrational ways. For example, instead of trying to talk to his family, he hides under the couch or crawls on the ceiling: "He was especially fond of hanging from the ceiling" (Kafka, 2007, p. 27). This shows that his mind is breaking down. Freud said that when grief turns into melancholia, the sadness goes inward and destroys the self (Freud, 1917/2005). Gregor does this when he refuses to eat, becomes weaker, and finally lets himself die. His family's rejection makes the pain worse. His sister says, "He must go" (Kafka, 2007, p. 53). This proves that Gregor has not only lost his human body but also his place in the family. His unprocessed grief leads to neurotic behavior, and this pushes him into sociopsychological isolation. He is completely cut off from his family and even from himself.

Josef K. in *The Trial* also shows the neurotic impact of grief. From the first moment he is arrested, he feels strong anxiety. He says, "I'm under arrest, and I don't even know why" (Kafka, 2009, p. 10). These words show his fear and nervousness. He feels guilty even though he does not know his crime. Freud explained that in melancholia, people feel guilt and sadness without clear reasons (Freud, 1917/2005). Josef's anxiety proves that his grief is unprocessed. Instead of finding meaning, he drowns in worry.

Soon, Josef's anxiety turns into obsessive thoughts. He cannot stop thinking about the trial. Even when he tries to focus on his job, his thoughts go back to his case: "The trial never left him, it was always there" (Kafka, 2009, p. 118). His mind is trapped in a cycle, just like Freud described. Josef's unprocessed grief over losing his freedom and dignity becomes a neurotic symptom. It eats away at him and makes him weaker.

Josef also shows irrational behavior as his case goes on. Instead of staying calm, he starts to act out. He shouts at the court and calls them corrupt: "You are nothing but corrupt officials!" (Kafka, 2009, p. 86). This makes no sense because it only makes his situation worse. Freud said



that melancholia often makes people lash out or hurt themselves (Freud, 1917/2005). Josef's irrational actions show that his grief has taken control. At the end, he accepts his death without fighting back, saying, "Like a dog!" (Kafka, 2009, p. 231). This line shows how much his neurotic grief destroyed him. He dies in sociopsychological isolation, with no one to help him and no dignity left.

Both Gregor and Josef show how dangerous unprocessed grief can be. Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* helps us see that their stories are not only about turning into a bug or being arrested. They are really about what happens when grief is not faced. Their grief turns into neurotic symptoms like anxiety, obsessive thoughts, and irrational behavior. These symptoms grow until they are fully isolated. Gregor is rejected by his family and dies alone. Josef is swallowed by his trial and executed alone. Both end in sociopsychological isolation, cut off socially, emotionally, and mentally.

Both Gregor in *The Metamorphosis* and Josef K. in *The Trial* show how Freud's ideas in *Mourning and Melancholia* and Kübler-Ross's stages of grief connect together. Both characters go through some of the stages of grief, but the stages do not help them heal. Gregor shows denial and depression that become obsessive and irrational. Josef shows denial, anger, and depression that also turn into neurotic impacts filled with anxiety and irrational behavior. Neither of them ever reaches the stage of acceptance. Freud's theory explains why. Their grief is unprocessed, and because of this, it turns into melancholia instead of normal mourning. This creates neurotic effects like obsessive thoughts, anxiety, irrational actions, and deep sadness. Over time, these neurotic effects grow stronger until they destroy the characters completely. In the end, both Gregor and Josef are left in total sociopsychological isolation, showing the terrible impact of unprocessed grief on the human mind.

Conclusion

This paper examined Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* through a psychoanalytic lens to explore how unprocessed grief evolves into socio-psychological isolation. By integrating Freudian theory, grief models, and modern affect studies, the research demonstrated that the emotional experiences of Gregor Samsa and Josef K. can be understood as complex psychological responses to losses like, the loss of identity, agency, social belonging, and symbolic order. Rather than presenting grief in a conventional or overt manner, Kafka embeds it within the emotional fractures, behavioral distortions, and existential pressures that shape his protagonists' lives. In this way, the novels reveal grief not simply as a personal reaction to death, but as a pervasive condition produced by oppressive social structures and internalized expectations.

In conclusion, this paper asserts that Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* offer compelling representations of how unprocessed grief becomes a force that shapes, and ultimately destroys, the human psyche. By foregrounding the psychological mechanisms of repression, anxiety, and neurosis, Kafka's fiction invites readers to reconsider the significance of grief as a fundamental human experience. His narratives remind us that healing requires recognition, connection, and emotional openness, the elements absent in the lives of Gregor Samsa and Josef K. Their stories stand as enduring warnings about the psychological cost of silence, the emotional consequences of social indifference, and the deep isolation that emerges when grief remains unresolved.



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