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A Death Worth Living For

by

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A Death Worth Living For

Existentialism is a movement that “focused on the uniqueness of each human individual as distinguished from abstract universal qualities” (Honderich 255). This concept became very common around the middle of the twentieth century. The economy was bustling and capitalism was seen in everyday life, pressuring onto the social classes of society, positioning the proletariat to loathe the bourgeoisie. Within this dimension of society, citizens focus solely on business and obtaining profits. This mindset pushes society to treat each worker as one part of the whole working class machine, forming each person into a commodity rather than a human being. With the people of society being turned into commodities, individuals deteriorate into isolation as love quickly falls out of sight. The focus of society narrows down to making money rather than building friendships and the meaning of one’s life transitions from cultivating a community to harvesting a profit. Through their novels *The Metamorphosis* and *The Plague*, Franz Kafka and Albert Camus display the connection between capitalism, alienation, and love determining that only human connection ascribes wholesome meaning to one’s life.

Capitalist societies cause an alienation of individuals who blend into the industrial system, becoming nothing but one small part of the world machine. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa is alienated through his obligation to provide for his family and work as a part of the capitalist system. Before Gregor’s transformation into a dung beetle, his only purposes in life were to reduce the family debt and provide his family with financial support. He worked every day, hours on end, to make as much money as he could but was never thanked for his efforts. Gregor describes “the curse of travelling, worries about making train connections, bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know

anyone or become friendly with them” (Kafka 7). Gregor’s job was very demanding. He was constantly worried and could not create a real connection with anyone due to the lack of time he could spend with someone. Due to his shortage of friendships, Gregor was alienated from society. He was also made into a commodity because he was only needed for the financial services that he was providing. He was then alienated further by being trapped in his room as a beetle. Afterward, although Gregor’s door was opened, he still chose to remain “in the darkness of his room” so that his family could not see him. This act shows that he is alienating himself even though he is offered a chance to be less isolated with the opening of the door. Furthermore, before he was crippled, Gregor would listen to his family’s conversations through the door without any physical permission from his family as they secluded him from their lives. After his attack, he was given direct physical permission that was “quite [different] from before” because the door was left open. However, since his family had alienated him before, he began to self-alienate as seen in this scene. Gregor encounters many more times of alienation, pushing him to alienate himself even more. Just as he was commodified at the beginning of the novel, he continues to be less important to the people around him creating even more alienation. Kafka “reveals this alienation in its essence as [the total dehumanization of man] in which Marx saw the ultimate fate of man under capitalism” (Sokel, "From Marx to Myth" 5). Walter Sokel exemplifies the idea of turning Gregor into a commodity. As a part of the Samsa family as well as the industrialized system, Gregor was turned into a working part rather than a human being. Symbolism for this is found through Gregor’s physical transformation into a bug. Since Gregor was not treated as a human, but rather as a tool, he no longer lived as a human being.

In Albert Camus’ novel, capitalism overtakes the whole town of Oran, causing alienation to spread throughout the community. *The Plague* starts off with an anonymous narrator

illustrating the details of Oran, a French port on the Algerian coast, before the fatal plague hit them. The most important characteristic of this town is the way the people of the town function. The people of Oran exhibit every aspect of an industrial and capitalist society. They are constantly consumed with their business, and their number one priority is to make money. The people of Oran are “bored, and devoted [themselves] to cultivating habits. Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, ‘doing business’” (Camus 4). Everyone in Oran adopts the tendencies of industrialization and capitalism. Camus uses the term “cultivating habits” to describe the actions of the townspeople. When one calls something a habit, it is often to refer to something negative that is repeated over and over again. To call a habit, “cultivating” is to say that this repeated activity is performed to improve the growth of something. With reference to industrialization, the cultivation of a capitalist society is to improve the economy. Therefore the “cultivating habits” of the people of Oran is to improve the economy through repetitive work. The narrator of the story further describes that the citizens of Oran work to make profit. This parallels the main goal of a business, further illustrating the connection of the individual in Oran to a corporation.

As the people of Oran are completely consumed with working, they focus less on embracing the community, resulting in alienation throughout. Andrew Edgar explains that “the uncanny plays a central part in the modernist self-understanding of the contemporary human condition as one of alienation” (315). The “uncanny” is described as a window that modernity shows itself through. During the time that *The Plague* was written, most modern type of social structure was capitalism. The town of Oran, consumed by capitalism, is a “community of strangers that is thrown together by the accident of the plague, and thereby exemplifying the very

uncanniness of human contact, is not to be read as an ontological or universal human condition, but rather as a particular social configuration” (Edgar 316). As modernity, or capitalism, is shown through the uncanny, Edgars is explaining that capitalism has a direct effect on “human contact.” The social configuration that Edgars is referring to touches upon capitalism as well. Capitalism is seen in *The Plague* as a “social configuration” created through political and economic systems. This means that the town of Oran is engulfed by industrialism through the choices of the people of Oran as they further alienate themselves from each other.

The meaning in life that capitalism provides is not as sustainable as the meaning that love provides. Existentialism goes hand in hand with finding a meaning in life. Within a capitalist society, a worker’s purpose is to create goods and services; however, their life has no deeper meaning. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa experiences the hardship of living within a capitalist society, but he never completely experiences true love, causing him to fall into a deep depression. Throughout the novel, Gregor’s journey can be viewed as a call for love from his family. Gregor lives his whole life trying to help his family financially, yet he is never appreciated. As a human, his family seemed to care for him. However, once Gregor turned into a bug, this myth disappeared as Gregor soon realized that his family did not actually love him for who he was but rather for the financial support that he brought to them. Gregor “seems to test his family, especially his sister, and his tragedy lies in their inability to pass the test, i.e., to recognize and love the son and brother in the monster” (Sokel, “Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’” 204). As Sokel explains, Gregor is testing his family to see if they actually love him as their son rather than for the capital he brings them. Although Gregor is turned into a “monster” that can no longer provide financial aid, he expects his family to still love him; however, they show evidence of the opposite. This reaction causes him to become horribly depressed, eventually starving

himself. However, if his family were to show their love for Gregor, he would not become depressed because a real human connection and a meaning for life was what he was searching for. Once the members of a capitalist society are able to find a type of human connection within their lives, they obtain meaning and depth to their lives.

The community of Oran in *The Plague* shows the existential choice to create a meaningful life. In the midst of the plague, Tarrou begins to recruit volunteers for his newly founded sanitation groups in order to help Doctor Rieux with his efforts. The sanitation leagues “enabled [the] townsfolk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that, now that plague was among [the town of Oran], it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it. Since the plague became in this way some men’s duty, it revealed itself as what it really was; that is the concern of all” (Camus 132). This group of people came about because the people of Oran realized that no one could fight the plague alone. The plague was “the concern of all” and the town, therefore, came together to fight it. Citizens involved, especially Tarrou and Rieux, show a tremendous amount of love for others by taking the time to help the sick. Tarrou, Rieux, and the sanitation groups all chose to help others, therefore, choosing to create a deeper meaning of their lives. In the people of Oran’s “experience of the uncanny the ill person is at once a stranger to themselves (as their everyday world fails to embrace the traits of illness or, crucially, their own self-deceptions); and they are strangers within the community (hampered, as much as are Camus’ characters, by the limitations of everyday)” (Edgar 316). Edgar describes the result of alienation as a connection to the unknown. He calls the people of Oran strangers “to themselves” and “within the community” illustrating the idea that once one is alienated, they are no longer aware of who they are and who the people around them are. With capitalism, a community is lost. As capitalism engulfs Oran so does the fatal plague, “[enabling] people to

understand that their individual suffering is meaningless” (“An Overview” 12). By calling individual suffering meaningless, this critic implies that suffering that is shared within communities provides meaning. The meaning they are referring to touches upon the connection between human beings. They are saying that when people choose to create loving communities in response to anguish, the significance of their lives will become strong and meaningful.

Although alienation seems to be inevitable in a capitalist society, one can be rehabilitated from isolation through human connection such as friendship and love. In Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor receives a small slice of love toward the beginning of his life as a bug. Gregor Samsa’s family was distraught at the sight of Gregor as an insect. However, soon after his transformation, Gregor’s sister showed acts of friendship toward Gregor through her attempts to feed him. First, Gregor’s sister brought him a bowl of sweetened milk; however, he could not consume it so she made another attempt. Gregor “was extremely curious as to what she would bring in its place, imagining the wildest possibilities, but he never could have guessed what his sister, in her goodness, actually did bring. She brought him a whole selection of things, all spread out on an old newspaper” (Kafka 21). As his sister continuously tries to bring Gregor food that he will enjoy, she also cleans up his room and attempts to make Gregor feel comfortable. If Gregor’s sister did not care about him, she would not have shown so much effort to help him. With the acts of love she shows, she lessens his isolation.

In *The Plague*, Camus uses an experience between the characters Rieux and Tarrou to illustrate that the connection between friends can free one another from the isolation found within a troubled and alienated society. After helping an ill man, Rieux and Tarrou talk about their pasts, sharing stories about themselves. They also explain why they have decided to help the people suffering from the plague. Once they profoundly debate the difference between being

a saint and being a man, the two men decide to go for a swim in order to celebrate the friendship that they share. The two characters undress and jump in, “Rieux turned and swam level with his friend, timing his stroke to Tarrou’s... For some minutes they swam side by side, with the same zest, in the same rhythm, isolated from the world, at last free of the town and of the plague... except at one point, where unexpectedly they found themselves caught in an ice-cold current. Their energy whipped up by this trap the sea had sprung on them, both struck out more vigorously” (Camus 257). Rieux and Tarrou swam, synchronized, for quite a while. This illustration of harmonization illustrates the beauty found within friendship. The symbolism that this current provides is that sometimes bad things can pull people away from their peaceful lives. With the current being “ice-cold,” the bad thing holding Tarrou and Rieux back can be concluded to be the fatal plague that has encumbered the town. Nonetheless, Tarrou and Rieux “both struck out more vigorously” and insisted on escaping the current holding them back. Although they encountered a tough spot in their experience of harmony, they did not let it prevent them from having a good time. Swimming together was an experience to celebrate the friendship that both Rieux and Tarrou had strengthened. Although they are facing some tough times, they know that they can get through it as long as they have their brotherly love.

Capitalism overwhelms societies who seek a thriving economy, and in return the connections between families and communities are slowly lost. Laborers obtain a life purpose that solely consists of being productive through making a profit. As industrialization becomes prominent, a human being misunderstands the meaning of their life. Franz Kafka and Albert Camus display that the only way a disoriented person can find the invigorating meaning in their life is through discovering love and friendship through human connections. Human beings “cannot successfully rationalize the impending and inescapable death sentence forced upon every

human” (“An Overview” 12); however, they can apply a meaning to their lives through uniting with others that will make the inevitable death worth living for.

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