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How do Kafka and Tolstoy portray the absurdity of a life without deeper meaning?

The idea of the absurdity of life is laced throughout both *The Death of Ivan Illyich* by Leo Tolstoy and *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. Both authors show that a life without deeper meaning is absurd. The motivations of both main characters are shallow, and their lives end up feeling ultimately void. In the case of Ivan Illyich, this vanity ends up causing him great fear at the end of his life. In contrast to *The Metamorphosis*, *The Death of Ivan Illyich* deals with a feeling of hopelessness that presents itself at the end of one's life. In the case of Gregor Samsa, vanity is not seen in the face of death, but in the face of an altered state of being. His altered state sheds light on what is truly most important to him, and to many people today. I believe that Tolstoy and Kafka are able to show that without some external hope or meaning, life on this planet is ultimately absurd.

Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis in *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka presents the reader with cases in which the vanity and absurdity of life are put on display. Gregor has found himself completely transformed into an insect, and his greater concern seems to be his job security. (Kafka 995). On page 995, Gregor says: "For the time being, though, I've got to get up, my train leaves at five." (Kafka 995). It seems that the demands placed on Gregor both by work and his family have driven him to a state in which work preoccupies him even in such a circumstance. Gregor faces pressure from his boss at work. On page 996, Gregor's words are: "When I go back to the boardinghouse, for example, to copy out the morning's commissions:

why, these gentlemen may still be sitting at breakfast. I'd like to see my boss's face if I tried that some time; he'd can me on the spot." (Kafka 996). Gregor feels that his boss treats him unfairly. This is a feeling that is common to many people. Furthermore, the text tells us that Gregor was working to pay off a debt that was incurred by his family (Kafka 995). This reflects on the idea that the everyday pressure which struggling for survival can place on all of us can sometimes become deeply ingrained in our psyche. In the case of Gregor, even in the form of a bug, his main priority remains his performance at work, and the security of his job. I believe the author is able to use Gregor's animal transformation to provide a living example of the so-called "rat race", which many can find themselves in. In the process of being driven to work for someone else ("running on the hamster wheel") we begin to view ourselves as of no more value than animals. This is the state in which Gregor finds himself, both physically and mentally. The following short passage from page 995, in which Gregor is trying to get out of bed, gives a good example of both Gregor's animal struggle and the way in which he connects his animal exhaustion to the exhaustion of his job. Kafka writes: "Perhaps a hundred times he attempted it, closing his eyes so as not to have to see those struggling legs, and relented only when he began to feel a faint dull ache in his side, unlike anything he'd ever felt before. 'Good Lord,' he thought, 'what an exhausting profession I've chosen.'" (Kafka 995). The author also uses this kind of scenario in the story as humor, which increases the feeling of absurdity. On page 1003, after Gregor's family and manager had been utterly shocked by seeing him in insect form, Kafka writes: "'Well,' Gregor said, quite conscious of the fact that he was the only one who had retained his composure, 'I shall get dressed at once, pack up my samples and be on my way.'" (Kafka 1003). Gregor still planned on going to work, after everyone including his manager had seen him as a bug and were shocked. It seems as if the author is communicating to the audience

that in life it does not matter what form we are in, what matters are the things that none of us are able to escape: work and responsibilities. These examples portray life in a meaningless light. It communicates to the reader that life has no greater purpose than the pressures placed on us by superiors. It communicates the opposite of what is self-evident to us all: our health is more important than our work. However, there are many who place their work before their health. This dynamic causes the reader to assess what is truly meaningful in life. The absurdity in the life of Gregor Samsa is that his job is more important to him than whether or not he is a human.

*The Death of Ivan Illyich* by Leo Tolstoy also speaks to the idea that life can feel meaningless and void. Unlike the story of Gregor Samsa, the story of Ivan Illyich presents this idea not in the face of workplace pressures, but in the face of a life threatening injury. The nature of the injury which ended up causing Ivan his life is one example of the absurdity of life found in this story. On page 794, Tolstoy writes: “Latterly he would go into the drawing room he had arranged—the drawing room where he had fallen—how venomously comic it was to think of it—for the arrangement of which he had sacrificed his life, for he knew that his illness had started with that injury;” (Tolstoy 794). Ivan’s death was ultimately caused because he fell and knocked his side while arranging a room in his home. His slow, terrible, and painful death, as well as his deep psychological anguish, were all caused by something as menial as knocking his side while doing housework. His life threatening injury seemed to have no deeper or meaningful purpose. On page 784, Tolstoy writes: “He admitted that after all the various unhappy events in his life the pleasure that burnt like a candle above all others was to sit down at vint...”(Tolstoy 784). Once again, the author draws attention to the apparent meaninglessness that was present in Illyich’s life. The most valuable experience to him was playing a card game. It is no surprise therefore, that Illyich begins to question the validity of his life. His feelings of fear based on

whether his life was of any meaning are feelings that many have at some point or other. The following short passage from page 802 of the story reflects Illyich's struggle with this thought: "So what is this? Why? It can't be. It can't be that life was so meaningless and vile. But if it was indeed so meaningless and vile, then why die and die suffering? Something is wrong. 'Maybe I have lived not as I should have'—the thought suddenly came into his head." (Tolstoy 802). At the end of his life Ivan Illyich began to realize that the way in which he had lived was ultimately void of meaning. He was filled with fear as he saw himself moving closer and closer to the end of his life. On page 803, Tolstoy writes: "Life, a sequence of increasing sufferings, flies quicker and quicker to the end, to the most terrible suffering of all. *I am flying.*" (Tolstoy 803). Without having an ultimate purpose and hope in his life, Ivan is faced with a very painful existence. In chapter nine of the story, Ivan has an interesting conversation. The author shares that it was "as if he were listening not to a voice speaking in sounds but to the voice of his soul, to the train of thoughts rising within him." (Tolstoy 802). In this conversation on page 801 of our textbook, Ivan expresses that he wants his life to return to the way that it used to be. (Tolstoy 801). However, in this moment of reflecting back on his life, he realizes that his memories are not filled with the pleasantness that they once were. He finds it harder and harder to find some joy in the memories of his past. Tolstoy writes: "And the further from childhood, the nearer to the present, the more worthless and dubious were the joys." (Tolstoy 801). As Illyich remembers the "lawfulness, the correctness, and the decorum of his life." (Tolstoy 804) he finds it hard to admit that he "had lived not as I should have." (Tolstoy 804). In my analysis, Illyich's memories did not contain enough purpose and meaning to give him a sense of joy at the end of his life. While *The Death of Ivan Illyich* and *The Metamorphosis* do not portray characters who face the same exact outward circumstances, they both show characters whose circumstances provoke the same

questions about the purpose of life. The idea of meaninglessness and absurdity in life is also found in *Candide* by Voltaire. On page 318, after finally ending their long journey, Pangloss gives the following advice to Candide: “All events are linked together in the best of possible worlds for, after all, if you had not been driven from a fine castle by being kicked in the backside for love of Miss Cunégonde, if you hadn’t been sent before the Inquisition, if you hadn’t traveled across America on foot, if you hadn’t given a good sword thrust to the baron, if you hadn’t lost all your sheep from the good land of Eldorado, you wouldn’t be sitting here eating candied citron and pistachios.” (Voltaire 318). The intense pain that Candide had gone through, the perilous adventures, and the losses he experienced, amounted to no greater purpose. The reader can conclude that the author wants to portray a secular view of life. Namely, the view that life is ultimately void of any substantial meaning, and that there is no rhyme or reason behind why things happen. This view is also presented by both Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Illyich* and Kafka in *The Metamorphosis*.