

Absurdist Fiction

Absurdist fiction uses illogical or irrational events to point out that life is mysterious and can not be easily comprehended. In the early Twentieth Century science has shown man that he is not king of the animals, that Earth is not at the centre of the universe and that God and heaven do not exist. All the things that gave a man's life meaning before have been pulled from under him and Absurdist Fiction seeks to reflect that meaninglessness. Bizarrely, it also finds humour in this situation – some compensation at least.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armour-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed-quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

'What has happened to me?' he thought. It was no dream. His room, an ordinary human room, if somewhat too small, lay peacefully between the four familiar walls. Above the table, on which an assortment of cloth samples had been unpacked and spread out – Samsa was a commercial traveller – there hung the pictures which he had recently cut out of a glossy magazine and put in a pretty gilt frame. It represented a lady complete with fur hat and fur stole, who was sitting upright and extending to view a thick fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished.

Gregor's eyes turned next to the window, and the dull weather – raindrops could be heard beating on the metal window-ledge – made him feel quite melancholy. 'Suppose I went back to sleep or a little and forgot all this nonsense.' He thought, but that was utterly impracticable for he was used to sleeping on his right side and in his present state he was unable to get into that position. However vigorously he swung himself to the right he kept rocking on to his back again. He must have tried it a hundred times, he shut his eyes so as not to have to watch his struggling legs, and only left off when he began to feel a faint dull ache in his side which was entirely new to him.

Taken from 'Metamorphosis' by Franz Kafka

Comment [K1]: The bald statement of this impossible fact clearly shocks the reader and draws them into the story. Immediately questions are raised as to how or why this happened and indeed whether it really happened at all or is some kind of dream or metaphor. These questions are never answered.

Comment [K2]: The neutral, almost scientific tone contrasts with the bizarre content and emphasises the peculiarity of the situation

Comment [K3]: The mention of this every-day detail that the reader can easily visualise injects an element of humour

Comment [K4]: Bald factual statements reinforce the idea that this metamorphosis is just something that we have to accept – much like we have to accept the unpredictability of the world and the brute fact of our existence

Comment [K5]: Again – the familiar everyday details contrast with the bizarre situation. Notice, also that nothing has happened so far. There have been no screams, no hysterics, no giant cans of Baygon and this further enhances the power of this scene.

Comment [K6]: This massive understatement (he has after all just been turned into a bug) continues the contrast and further introduces a gentle humour

Comment [K7]: The 'all this nonsense' phrase sounds something like a Mum would say when she was trying to take a child's mind off a small problem – humour arises again because this is clearly not a small problem.

Comment [K8]: Not only is this a comical image of a giant bug trying to sleep on its side but once again the complete lack of focus on the key issue is not only humorous but forces the reader's attention to dwell on it even more. By this point the reader is surely thinking 'Why are you wasting time worrying about not being able to sleep on your side when you have far more pressing problems to deal with. YOU ARE A BUG!!'