

22.0- The Paradox of Identity: Creation, Conformity, and Collapse in Modernist Fiction

- **Ria Gupta**, M.A. English, Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi
Email- ria2605gupta@gmail.com

Abstract

*Modernist literature captures a deep unease with what it means to exist as an individual within the demands of a changing society. While questions of identity have long shaped literary thought, the early twentieth century, marked by psychological theories of Freud, the existential search for meaning, and post-war disillusionment, offered writers new ways to interrogate the self. This study examines how Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* reconfigure identity as a socially mediated process rather than a stable essence. Through comparative close textual analysis informed by psychoanalytic, existential, and sociological theories, the paper explores how characters such as Gregor Samsa, Septimus Smith, and Clarissa Dalloway embody the tension between inward consciousness and outward performance. The analysis demonstrates that the erosion or withdrawal of social recognition destabilizes the self, revealing identity as an ongoing negotiation between autonomy and belonging. Drawing on the frameworks of Judith Butler and Erving Goffman, the study concludes that modernist writing anticipates contemporary anxieties about visibility, conformity, and fragmentation by redefining selfhood as relational, fragile, and continually constructed within social expectations. The paradox of identity that modernism exposes thus remains central to our understanding of human experience, reminding us that every act of belonging is also an act of negotiation.*

Keywords: authenticity, conformity, identity, negotiation, selfhood

Introduction

Modernist literature emerges from a historical moment marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, and the collapse of stable frameworks of meaning. In the early twentieth century, developments in psychoanalysis, the aftermath of war, and shifting social structures prompted writers to reconsider the nature of the self. This paper examines how Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* represent identity not as a fixed essence but as a socially mediated and continually negotiated process. Through the figures of Gregor Samsa, Clarissa Dalloway, and Septimus Smith, the paper demonstrates how identity depends upon recognition and performance within social structures and becomes fragile when recognition is withdrawn or refused.

Literature review

Modernism grows out of a moment when people are forced to see themselves and their world differently. After the First World War, old frameworks about nation, class, religion, and progress no longer felt reliable. Critics like Bradbury and McFarlane (1976) describe this period as marked by "a shattering of cultural unity" (p. 27). When familiar frameworks fall apart, identity stops feeling like something given and starts to feel like something to be rebuilt, often painfully. Kafka and Woolf write directly into this atmosphere.

Their work does not turn away from the confusion of the age; it examines what it does to a person's sense of self.

Freud's theories had a strong impact on this generation of writers and critics. His ideas about repression, dreams, and the divided self, offered a new language for inner conflict. Corngold (1972), for instance, reads *The Metamorphosis* through Freud and treats Gregor Samsa's transformation as an outward sign of inward guilt and anxiety. This paper draws upon Corngold's insights but moves beyond them by arguing that Gregor's breakdown is also social: his identity collapses when he can no longer occupy the role of breadwinner that structures his family's life.

With Woolf, critics often pay close attention to performance and social pressure. Zwerdling (1986), for instance, argues that *Mrs. Dalloway* shows how people in post-war England hold themselves together through careful, practiced behavior. Clarissa Dalloway is a central case: her public self is built from the actions she maintains - the party, the house, and the greetings in the street. In contrast, Septimus Smith's breakdown shows what happens when a person cannot or will not perform the identity society expects from him as a returned soldier and "normal" citizen.

Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990) develop this idea of enacted identity in different but complementary ways. Goffman describes everyday life as a kind of performance in which people manage impressions and present versions of themselves depending on the situation. His notion of a "spoiled identity" is especially helpful for thinking about Gregor. Once Gregor cannot work and provide, he no longer fits the script his family relies on, and their treatment of him changes sharply. Butler, meanwhile, argues that selfhood is formed through repeated acts rather than through some pre-existing inner core. Her theory of performativity clarifies Clarissa's daily social rituals as not just empty gestures, but as small, repeated acts sustaining her coherence within society.

Felski (1995) and Berman (2001) extend this social understanding of identity, especially in relation to gender and community. Felski shows how modernity shapes women's roles in restrictive ways, tying them to ideals of respectability and service. Clarissa's need to remain composed and pleasing, even when she feels invisible or uncertain, fits closely into this pattern. Berman focuses on recognition and community, arguing that identity often depends on being seen, heard, and acknowledged by others. This theme of recognition is central to both Kafka and Woolf.

What remains less developed in much of this criticism is a sustained focus on identity as negotiation: the idea that characters are constantly adjusting who they are to meet social, emotional, and moral expectations. Many readings of Gregor or Septimus lean heavily on psychological or clinical perspectives, which are valuable but sometimes underplay how deeply their crises are tied to specific societal roles: provider, soldier, wife and hostess.

This paper responds to that gap. It argues that in both *The Metamorphosis* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, identity is not merely a psychological or clinical struggle but a daily negotiation with the world, a balance between what the self wants and what society demands. When that negotiation fails, the recognition is withdrawn. Once the required performance becomes unbearable, the self does not simply "break down"; it loses the support of the social institutions that once sustained it, especially in a world still trembling after the war.

Constructed selves in a modern world

Modernism often lingers on quiet moments when people realize they can no longer fit in the roles laid out for them. The characters in Kafka and Woolf feel their identities fracturing not from internal collapse alone, but because the world keeps demanding coherence at exactly the moments, they feel most divided in. Their narratives resonate even today: the pressure to appear stable, useful and to perform a role convincingly, remains. These concerns continue to define modern anxieties surrounding validation.

In both texts, identity appears fragile and constantly in motion. Woolf shows this in the way Clarissa Dalloway moves through London, feeling both fully present and strangely absent. Clarissa has status, friends, and a respected husband, yet she feels only partly recognized. She holds herself together through small rituals such as buying flowers, greeting neighbors, and throwing pompous parties, because these repeated actions let her feel continuous or rather relevant in her world.

Kafka presents the same fragility through a sharper, more surreal image. Gregor Samsa wakes transformed, but what unsettles him the most is not the new body itself; it is the thought that he will become a “burden” to his family. He notices “his room, a proper human room...between its four familiar walls” (Kafka, 2016, p. 4). Even in crisis he looks for signs that his world is still familiar. His sense of self rests on his routine, duty, and the approval of his family and employer. When those supports fall away, he no longer knows how to think of himself apart from the world which once defined him.

Nietzsche’s (1992) remark that “one must become who one is” (p. 31) becomes harder to follow in this setting. Modernist writing suggests that becoming “who one is” is never a purely private enterprise. It is always complicated by what others need, expect, or demand. Clarissa and Gregor show how identity is pulled between inward feeling and outward performance, and how easily that balance can tilt towards anxiety, invisibility, or collapse.

Gregor Samsa and the failure of social recognition

Gregor’s real tragedy is not the transformation itself but his sudden uselessness. His family’s affection has always rested, quietly but firmly, on his ability to earn. Once he can no longer work, they begin to see him as a burden rather than a son. Their withdrawal shows that nothing in Gregor’s inner life has changed at first; what has failed is his social role. He is no longer recognizable as the provider and responsible child they depended upon.

Kafka makes this collapse especially clear in the violin scene. Gregor listens to his sister Grete playing violin from the doorway:

Was he an animal if music could captivate him so? It seemed to him that he was being shown the way to the unknown nourishment he had been yearning for. He was determined to make his way forward to his... as no-one appreciated her playing here as much as he would. (Kafka, 2016, p. 58)

In this poignant scene, by reaching for the music, Gregor reaches for beauty, intimacy, and recognition. The scene reveals a painful irony: his capacity to feel deeply marks him as human yet the narrow vision of the three gentlemen and his own family views him as an insect, not a human still longing for a loving, connective touch. Inside this ordinary household, the “unreasonable silence of the world” takes the form of looks averted and doors

shut. Gregor's identity collapses not because he becomes less human, but because no one around him acknowledges that humanity in him; without recognition, the self slowly fades.

As Robertson (1985) observes, Kafka's fiction maps the psychological burden of "living in an age of systems," where individuals remain trapped in incomprehensible social structures that dictate their worth (p. 264). Gregor's tragedy thus stems from his abrupt uselessness within these systems: once stripped of his role as provider, his family withdraws recognition, denying the humanity his inner life still longs for. This failure of social acknowledgment and not the metamorphosis itself, robs him of his selfhood.

Clarissa and Septimus: performance and the social gaze

Clarissa Dalloway doesn't turn away from the world. She meets it with calm grace—parties, polite nods, a perfect hostess smile. But deep down, she fears being overwhelmed, a fear born at Bourton with Peter Walsh. His love demanded too much: "everything had to be shared...everything gone into," until it felt "intolerable." Even Sally Seton, her bold friend, tested those limits. Clarissa still recalls Sally's kiss "full on the lips" in the garden, a raw moment of joy she chose to leave behind for something safer.

Richard Dalloway offers that safety. Steady and respectable as an MP, he gives her "a little license, a little independence" that Peter, with his "failure" of a life, could never. She trades passion for position, becoming the poised Mrs. Dalloway society expects. Critic Alex Zwerdling notes how Woolf depicts Clarissa's identity "held together by performance", her social acts keep her real.

On Bond Street, the strain emerges:

This body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown... this being Mrs. Dalloway, not even Clarissa any more, this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (Woolf, 2020, p. 24)

The repeated "nothing" lays it bare: her role makes her seen, but at the price of her private self. She's in the crowd, yet somehow outside it.

Septimus Warren Smith parallels Clarissa when performance breaks. The shell shock renders London threatening. The sky-writing episode depicts how far he has drifted from shared reality: "The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" Skywriting seems to signal him and time traps him in "no past; no future; only an anxious present." Doctors brush it off: "nothing whatever the matter," and insist upon acting normal (Woolf, 2020, p. 145). But Septimus knows his old self is gone.

Berman (2001) emphasizes that Woolf links identity to recognition and community: people become themselves through the ways others see and respond to them. Clarissa, for all her doubts, still lives in a world that reflects her back: shopkeepers, neighbors, Richard, and finally the guests at her party. Septimus, by contrast, moves in a world that refuses to recognize his suffering as meaningful. Sir William Bradshaw and Dr Holmes treat his breakdown as a problem to be "managed" and "hidden", and not as a testimony to what war has done to the self. Septimus does not perform a reassuring, "proportionate" identity he no longer believes in, and the social order cannot tolerate that refusal. Septimus could have been Clarissa's double, but he rejects conformity by choosing suicide, revealing how identity is sustained through performance but destabilized when recognition fails.

Identity as negotiation: a comparative argument

“Man is nothing but what he makes of himself.”

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946)

Kafka and Woolf, though stylistically distinct, share a core belief: identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic relationship between the self and the world. Both authors depict characters striving to remain whole while society measures, shapes, and sometimes discards them. Yet neither Gregor, Clarissa, nor Septimus constructs themselves in a vacuum. They create and negotiate their identities amid social pressures they did not choose: family obligations, gender norms, wartime trauma, emotional demands, and class structures.

Conclusion

Modernist fiction reveals identity as continually shaped by social structures. Gregor's loss of meaning following his family's rejection and Clarissa's effort to sustain coherence through daily rituals remain strikingly relevant. Today, individuals navigate multiple roles: professional, social and digital, often performing stability while negotiating inner uncertainty. Unlike Clarissa's parties and Gregor's former role as provider, which secured recognition; Septimus's refusal of normalcy exposes the fragility of the self when recognition falters. Identity in modernist fiction thus emerges not merely as internally fractured but as socially negotiated and dependent on recognition, continuing to shape identity in digitally mediated social worlds.

References

- Berman, J. (2001). *Modernist fiction, cosmopolitanism, and the politics of community*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bradbury, M., & McFarlane, J. (Eds.). (1976). *Modernism: A guide to European literature 1890–1930*. Penguin Books.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Corngold, S. (2004). *Lambent traces: Franz Kafka*. Princeton University Press.
- Felski, R. (1995). *The gender of modernity*. Harvard University Press.
- Freud, S. (2010). *The interpretation of dreams* (J. Strachey, Trans.). Basic Books.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.
- Kafka, F. (2016). *Metamorphosis*. Penguin Classics.
- Lee, H. (1997). *Virginia Woolf*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Nietzsche, F. (1992). *Ecce homo: How one becomes what one is* (R.J. Hollingdale, Trans.). Penguin Books.
- Robertson, R. (1985). *Kafka: Judaism, politics, and literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1989). Existentialism is a humanism. In W. Kaufman (Ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. Meridian Publishing Company.
- Woolf, V. (1925). Modern fiction. In *The common reader*.
- Woolf, V. (2020). *Mrs. Dalloway*. Penguin Classics.
- Zwerdling, A. (1986). *Virginia Woolf and the real world*. University of California Press.