

The fragmentation of subjectivity: a comparative study of the concept of 'self' in Emerson and Kafka

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Abstract. In 19th-century America and early 20th-century Europe, the awakening of individual consciousness emerged as a central concern of literary exploration. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance* advocates for independence, self-affirmation, and inner moral sensibility, constructing an idealist philosophy of subjectivity. In contrast, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* exposes the alienation, isolation, and collapse of the modern individual within familial and social structures. From a comparative literature perspective, this paper analyzes the notion of the "self" in these two works through the lenses of intellectual lineage, textual style, and sociocultural context. It aims to reveal the divergences in subjectivity shaped by differing cultural backgrounds and present a cross-temporal and cross-spatial dialogue of ideas.

Keywords: Emerson, Kafka, subjectivity, alienation, comparative literature

1. Introduction: the awakening and fragmentation of subjectivity

The 19th century witnessed a paradigm shift in Western literature, centering around the emergence of the "self" as a core ideological concern. Whether in American Transcendentalist literature or in European modernist works, the tension between individual subjectivity and social order became a key focal point of literary creation. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a leading figure of American Transcendentalism in both philosophy and literature, in his seminal essay *Self-Reliance*, promotes trust in one's own experience, rejection of traditional authority's suppression of individual thought, and emphasizes achieving spiritual independence through introspection, self-discipline, and intuition. His ideas not only affirm the value of individualism in 19th-century American literature but also construct an idealized and moral conception of the subject.

A century later in Europe, Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* tells the story of Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect, only to face isolation, humiliation, and abandonment. Through its symbolic and absurdist narrative, the work unveils the alienation of modern individuals in the structures of family, society, and language. Gregor's "metamorphosis" is not only physical but also psychological and social, portraying the disintegration and fragmentation of the "self" under the pressures of modernity.

Juxtaposing Emerson and Kafka in the same research framework may appear to be a vast leap, yet their explorations of the "self" are equally profound. While Emerson constructs an idealized model of the free individual, Kafka dissects the tragic fate of the individual in the modern world. Both authors contribute to the literary construction of subjectivity and expose the potential for its fragmentation under different cultural conditions. Through close textual reading and cultural comparison, this paper analyzes the representations, ideological cores, and social responses surrounding the "self" in *Self-Reliance* and *The Metamorphosis*. It further explores the cross-cultural similarities and differences in literary conceptions of the "self," and what these differences reveal about broader sociocultural ideologies.

2. Theoretical foundations and textual overview

Comparative literature is not only a literary dialogue that transcends language and national boundaries but also a profound exchange of ideas, consciousness, and aesthetics across different cultural contexts. Before analyzing how Emerson and Kafka depict the concept of the "self" in their literary works, it is necessary to briefly review the intellectual backgrounds of both writers and the core content of their representative texts.

2.1. Emerson and Self-Reliance: a spiritual cartography of individualism

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a central figure in the 19th-century American Transcendentalist movement. In his essay *Self-Reliance*, Emerson's call to "trust thyself" is not only a moral philosophy but also a form of cultural faith. Transcendentalism emphasizes the divinity within human beings and their harmony with nature, advocating for the pursuit of truth through inner intuition. Emerson opposes blind conformity to tradition and social pressure, arguing that the individual should become "a law unto themselves" and achieve spiritual freedom through independent judgment and self-cultivation. His notion of subjectivity embodies both a rational pursuit and a quasi-religious belief in self-redemption, constituting a quintessential vision of American-style individualism.

2.2. Kafka and the metamorphosis: the absurd predicament of modern man

In stark contrast to Emerson's idealized vision of self-liberation, Kafka presents a "self" that is repressed, distorted, and ultimately alienated. In *The Metamorphosis*, protagonist Gregor Samsa, after transforming into a giant insect, gradually loses his ability to speak, his social connections, and his functional role, falling from the family's breadwinner to its burden, and finally being utterly discarded. The novella symbolizes the process of dehumanization in modern life and offers a profound reflection on capitalist structures, family dynamics, and societal values. Kafka's prose is austere and detached, filled with a "realism of the absurd," highlighting the collapse of subjectivity under structural oppression. His modernist narrative challenges traditional myths of selfhood and reflects a deep-seated identity anxiety in the 20th century.

It is precisely the divergence in cultural traditions, historical contexts, and aesthetic orientations that creates a marked tension between *Self-Reliance* and *The Metamorphosis* in their portrayals of the self. The former emphasizes the affirmation and perseverance of the self, while the latter depicts its disintegration and alienation. These two works, like mirrored opposites, together delineate a spectrum of subjectivity stretching from idealism to modern existential crisis.

3. The construction and collapse of subjectivity: a dialogue between self-reliance and alienation

3.1. "I think, therefore i am" vs. "I transform, therefore I perish": a conflict of philosophical propositions

In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson inherits the Kantian philosophical tradition of subjectivity, elevating the power of the "I" to the source of all value judgments. He insists that "a man should rely upon himself, not tradition, society, or the opinions of others." [1] Within this logic, the self is the center of reason, morality, and creativity—the origin of all meaning. Yet Gregor's predicament serves as a direct negation of this proposition. Although he retains thought and emotion after his transformation in *The Metamorphosis*, the metamorphosis severs his ability to communicate with the outside world. His self still exists but becomes ineffective—unrecognized and unaccepted by others. This condition metaphorically reflects the modern denial of individual reason and will: a philosophical collapse of the self.

3.2. Inner sufficiency vs. external isolation: cultural divergence in the nature of the self

Emerson's self is an internally complete structure, capable of accessing transcendent truth through contemplation of nature and the voice of conscience. In *Self-Reliance*, the self is a spiritual subject that withdraws from the external world. In contrast, Kafka's self is an inescapably social being, one that must conform under the weight of familial and occupational obligations. Its mode of existence is passive, reactive, and subjected to structural oppression. The alienation Gregor experiences does not arise from inner emptiness but from systemic isolation and the invisible pressures of power mechanisms. Here, the self is not sacred and free but helpless and continually eroded by reality.

3.3. Individual agency vs. the uncontrollability of fate

In *Self-Reliance*, the individual is an agent of choice—the subject of action. Gregor, at the outset of *The Metamorphosis*, likewise possesses intent, a sense of duty, and a willingness to sacrifice for his family. However, his agency is swiftly stripped away by the transformation of his body: language fails, limbs mutate, and he ultimately becomes a powerless, voiceless "object." Kafka uses this symbolic device to unveil the absurdity and uncontrollability of modern human fate: individual effort is insufficient to withstand structural collapse. This stands in stark opposition to Emerson's belief that freedom can be attained through effort—a fundamental conflict of values.

4. Society, family, and the individual in conflict: the tension field of subjectivity

The “self” is never formed in isolation—it is both a philosophical proposition and a product of social relations. The construction of subjectivity in literary texts is often closely linked to the individual’s surrounding social, cultural, and familial structures. Literature is not merely the subject’s conquest of the object, but rather a free dialogue and harmonious coexistence between the subjective self and the other [2]. If Emerson’s “self” is a highly idealized, internally generated construct, then Kafka’s portrayal of the self is deeply entangled in the tensions of social systems and familial order. Their divergence on the social dimension of the self forms the key focus of this section.

4.1. Emerson’s social ideal and moral independence

In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson does not directly address social institutions, but by emphasizing the individual’s inner morality, he implicitly expresses a vision for a rationally constructed society. He believed that true social progress stems from individual moral development rather than institutional coercion. Each person should serve as the origin of morality, and only through a collective of such individuals can a healthy society be formed. Individuals should not rely excessively on external approval but remain true to their inner voice. He writes: “A man should speak what he thinks today in words as hard as cannon balls, even if it contradicts everything he said yesterday.” [1] Such a society, in essence, is a consensual space built by rational individuals—an ideal structure where freedom and responsibility coexist.

This vision of society is deeply rooted in 19th-century American cultural soil, especially in the Protestant ethic that upholds self-redemption and responsibility. Within this framework, the individual and society are not antagonistic but mutually reinforcing. In Emerson’s view, the family is not a space of repression but a realm for practicing moral cultivation and nurturing a sense of responsibility.

4.2. Kafka’s mechanized society and familial discipline

In stark contrast, *The Metamorphosis* presents society as cold, regimented, and repressive. As the family’s breadwinner, Gregor Samsa bears the entire financial burden, yet the moment he loses his capacity to work, he is swiftly marginalized. Kafka meticulously portrays the family’s shifting attitudes: from initial shock, to growing unease and disgust, and finally to active rejection. This progression reveals the fundamentally utilitarian structure of the family. No longer a haven of emotional support, the family becomes a microcosmic social mechanism operating on rules of value exchange. Once Gregor loses his “economic function,” his humanity is stripped away, and his subjectivity collapses entirely.

Social pressure, meanwhile, is even more insidious. Gregor’s job is a constant source of oppression; he is compelled to work tirelessly to repay debts. His boss is harsh and indifferent, sending someone to interrogate Gregor on the very first day he misses work, with no trace of compassion. This coercive social structure is omnipresent, turning individuals into “cogs in the machine” rather than agents of free will. Through extreme symbolic means, Kafka brings the alienation of modern society to its peak: a speechless insect lies in bed, abandoned by family, and ultimately dies in loneliness.

4.3. The life and death of subjectivity amid conflict

In Emerson’s writing, the self shines within society and acts as a driving force for justice. In Kafka’s work, the self disintegrates under the dual pressure of society and family. This stark contrast underscores the cultural divergence in their respective contexts: the American conception of the self is deeply influenced by Puritanism and a tradition of individual liberty, whereas early 20th-century Central European literature—particularly during the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—reflects profound anxiety over bureaucracy, familial repression, and the loss of identity.

In terms of literary technique, Emerson employs a rational, deductive prose style, constructing a value system through philosophical aphorisms. Kafka, in contrast, uses symbolism and absurdity to depict existential paradoxes that defy conventional logic. Both authors offer profound reflections on the relationship between the individual and society, but their approaches are entirely different—one constructive, the other deconstructive; one idealist, the other modernist.

5. Behind language and style: the “self” in the mechanism of expression

Literary language is not merely a vehicle for content but also a generative mechanism for thought. Although Emerson and Kafka possess vastly different styles, both integrate the concept of the “self” into their texts through distinctive linguistic strategies. The modes of expression, narrative standpoint, and stylistic choices not only reflect the authors’ creative orientations but also reveal their differing understandings and constructions of subjectivity.

5.1. Emerson's prose style: rationality, aphorism, and enlightenment

Self-Reliance is a philosophical essay characterized by a strong rhetorical and logical style. Emerson skillfully employs parallelism, antithesis, rhetorical questions, and aphoristic sentences to enhance the persuasive power and emotional resonance of his language. For example: "A man must be a nonconformist to himself before he can be a nonconformist to others." [1] Such language is concise and forceful, simultaneously expressing philosophical thought and moral exhortation. This style reflects Emerson's trust in a rational world; he believes language can point to truth, and writing is the externalization of logical thought.

Moreover, the "I" in Emerson's text is always a clearly identifiable rational subject—the source of thought, the basis for judgment, and the guardian of spiritual freedom. This textual confidence stems from the American cultural reverence for individualism. Consequently, language in his work functions as a "constructive force" capable of creating order, guiding morality, and inspiring autonomy.

5.2. Kafka's narrative language: estrangement, austerity, and absurdity

In stark contrast, Kafka employs an extremely "de-emotionalized" narrative style in *The Metamorphosis*. The opening sentence—"When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect." [3]—presents an absurd event with a calm, matter-of-fact tone. This "cool absurdity" is a hallmark of Kafka's language. He refrains from moral judgment, simply reporting events to create an alienating and unsettling atmosphere.

More importantly, the "I" is almost absent in Kafka's narration. The entire novella is told in the third person, the protagonist's voice is silenced, language gradually fails, and communication breaks down. This linguistic muteness symbolizes the dissolution of "self-awareness." Kafka recognizes the unreliability of language itself—it not only fails to fully express "who I am" but may even accelerate the self's disintegration.

5.3. The logic of subjectivity behind stylistic choices

Stylistically, Emerson's prose belongs to a clear, rational discourse system with orderly structure, steady sentence construction, and rigorous internal logic, expressing confidence in the "knowable self." Kafka's style, by contrast, embraces "cracks in narration," using irony, symbolism, and silence to generate uncertainty. His linguistic strategies suggest the presence of an "unknowable other." This stylistic divergence mirrors the authors' differing judgments on the mode of existence of the "self"—Emerson firmly believes in the self's self-establishment, whereas Kafka doubts the self's very reality.

Language thus not only serves the expression of ideas but also embodies the authors' modes of engagement with their times and the world. Emerson's language projects a vision of an ideal society, while Kafka's language indicts the alienated modern world. One constructs a "temple of subjectivity" through language; the other deconstructs the "illusion of subjectivity."

6. Cultural foundations and philosophical origins: the clash between transcendentalism and existentialism

As a core theme in literature and philosophy, the notion of the "self" is deeply shaped by cultural traditions and philosophical thought. Although Emerson's idea of Self-Reliance and Kafka's depiction of alienation both revolve around the concept of subjectivity, their underlying philosophical foundations are fundamentally different, representing 19th-century American Transcendentalism and 20th-century European Existentialism, respectively.

6.1. Emerson and American Transcendentalism: the self as divinity

Emerson was one of the leading figures of American Transcendentalist thought, profoundly influenced by Kant's transcendental philosophy and Eastern religious ideas. He believed that humans possess an inherent "divinity"—namely conscience and intuition—through which, by attuning with nature, individuals can directly face the truth and achieve spiritual fulfillment. The emphasis on the "individual" in *Self-Reliance* is not merely a pragmatic value but a spiritually charged "declaration of independence." He wrote: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." [1] This indicates that, for Emerson, the "self" is not only an ethical subject but also a spiritual entity embedded in the cosmic order.

This thought is rooted in early American culture, especially shaped by the Puritan tradition and the pioneering spirit of the New World, fostering a "self-value recognition." The individual is the foundation of social transformation, and institutions such as education, democracy, and religion are built upon the ideal that "man can perfect himself." Therefore, Emerson's celebration of the "self" is both a philosophical ideal and a cultural manifesto.

6.2. Kafka and European existentialism: the self trembling in the void

In contrast to Emerson's idealistic image of the self, Kafka's writing is deeply influenced by modern European philosophy—particularly existentialism. Although Kafka did not explicitly identify with any philosophical school during his lifetime, existentialist thinkers such as Sartre and Camus highly praised his works. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's transformation symbolizes the individual's "absurd" predicament in modern society. There is no essential connection between man and the world; the individual's existence is utterly uncertain. Gregor wants to express himself, to resist, and to retain a shred of dignity but is powerless. The world is indifferent, language is ineffective, and the self ultimately moves toward nothingness in silence.

Kafka portrays precisely the "solitary self" emphasized by existentialism: "Man is thrown into the world," and must take responsibility for his own existence. Although Gregor harbors good intentions, he cannot alter his fate; he is expelled by his family and abandoned by society, rendering his existence "meaningless." As Camus stated, "The absurd is not in man's stupidity but in man's futile quest for meaning in the universe." [4].

6.3. The ideological tension between idealism and nihilism

The intellectual divergence between Emerson and Kafka is reflected not only in their texts but also in their overall judgments of the human spiritual condition. Emerson believed in "progress"—that individuals could achieve spiritual growth through education and moral discipline, thereby improving society. Kafka, however, reveals "failure"—that despite one's will, destiny cannot be changed; amid the rupture between man and the world, the self is doomed to isolation and helplessness.

This difference partly stems from cultural backgrounds—19th-century American optimism versus 20th-century European crisis consciousness—and also reflects a historical shift from Enlightenment rationality to modern skepticism. Emerson sought to construct a "tower of morality," while Kafka tore apart its foundation, exposing its emptiness and fragility.

7. Literary significance and contemporary insights: reflecting on the modern "self" through texts

The literary expressions of the "self" by Emerson and Kafka serve not only as spiritual totems within their respective cultural contexts but also provide profound insights for the construction of individual consciousness in contemporary times. Entering the 21st century, accelerated globalization, digitization, and identity politics have once again brought the "self" into sharp focus. From these texts, we can better understand the past and critically reflect on the present.

7.1. Educational dimension: cultivating individuals with a "self"

Emerson's ideas continue to exert a deep influence on modern education. His emphasis on cultivating individual intuition, critical thinking, and independent personality aligns closely with the core goals of current quality and creative education. In pedagogy, overemphasis on obedience and conformity stifles students' reflection and exploration of the "self." Conversely, encouraging students to express their authentic inner feelings and develop independent judgment truly realizes a "people-centered" educational ideal. This is precisely Emerson's notion of "self-reliance"—education should not be mere knowledge transmission but a process that inspires the individual's intrinsic potential.

Kafka's writing, however, serves as a caution: education can also become a mechanism of alienation. If education systems train students to be mere "cogs" in society and prioritize utilitarian goals over personality development, the outcome will be "Gregor-like" youths—compliant but hollow, diligent but numb. In this sense, *The Metamorphosis* functions not only as literary text but also as a mirror reflecting modern educational critiques.

7.2. Psychological dimension: the construction and crisis of self-identity

From a psychological perspective, Emerson's self-theory can be seen as a positive construction of self-esteem and self-efficacy. He encourages acceptance of imperfection, trust in intuition, and belief in the inner voice—principles closely aligned with modern positive psychology. Kafka's text, on the other hand, foretells the darker side of self-identity crises: the gradual collapse of individuals who are denied and rejected in silence. Particularly during adolescence, a critical period for establishing "who I am," lack of emotional support and social acceptance can easily lead to Kafkaesque "existential anxiety."

With rising mental health issues today, such as campus depression, identity confusion, and social anxiety, these phenomena find metaphorical echoes in Kafka's narrative of alienation. Thus, reading Emerson's "trust yourself" alongside Kafka's "existential doubt" can form a dynamic model of psychological growth—affirming the individual while acknowledging their struggles.

7.3. Social dimension: the place of the “self” in modern institutions

Socially, the contrast between Emerson and Kafka also reflects differences in institutional design and societal values. Emerson stresses individual self-governance as the moral cornerstone of a free society; Kafka presents institutional oppression and exclusion as the reality of modern alienation. In today’s consumer society dominated by algorithmic logic, individuals’ “selves” are often labeled, quantified, and thus easily controlled yet difficult to free. As people increasingly rely on external evaluation, social media, and normative templates to define themselves, a Kafkaesque “insectification crisis” quietly unfolds.

Therefore, reflecting on reality through literature, we must advocate not only for “subjectivity” but also critically examine how institutions create space for the growth of the “self.” This is literature’s highest significance—it not only offers aesthetic enjoyment but also provokes societal awareness.

8. Conclusion: the self in fission—a dialogue between two eras

Emerson and Kafka represent two extremes of the self’s fate: one embodies the hope of self-establishment, the other symbolizes the tragedy of self-dissolution. Crossing time and space, they write individual destinies in two polar ways. Emerson loudly proclaims in the wild freedom: “Be yourself”; Kafka quietly groans in the shadow of the city: “Am I still myself?” Though opposing, these two voices form a complementary relationship around the eternal question of the “self.”

Contemporary society calls for individuals who possess both subjectivity and self-adjustment. From Emerson, we draw inner strength; from Kafka, clear self-reflection. Literature offers more than aesthetic experience—it provides philosophical insight and life’s mirror. To understand Emerson and Kafka is to understand ourselves.

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