

Reimagining Alienation and Mental Health: A Comparative Study of Kafka's "*The Metamorphosis*" and Baek Sehee's "*I Want to Die, but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki*" in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This paper explores the reconfiguration of alienation and mental health in the digital age through a comparative study of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and *I Want to Die, but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki* by Baek Sehee. By situating these texts within the framework of Digital Humanities, the study investigates how digital platforms transform literary interpretation and reader engagement. It argues that while Kafka's work reflects existential alienation intensified by modern technological systems, Baek Sehee's memoir embodies therapeutic discourse amplified through digital cultures of confession and empathy. Through blogs, social media, and digital annotation tools, readers actively reinterpret these texts, creating collaborative and affective reading communities. The paper highlights how digital environments simultaneously deepen isolation and foster emotional connection, thereby reshaping literary meaning and mental health discourse in a globally networked society.

Keywords: Alienation, Mental Health, Digital Humanities, Franz Kafka, Baek Sehee, Social Media, Digital Reading, Empathy

Introduction

The emergence of Digital Humanities has fundamentally transformed the study of literature, shifting it from traditional, archive-based research to technologically mediated analysis. Earlier literary scholarship relied heavily on printed texts, physical archives, and solitary reading practices. However, the integration of digital tools, online databases, and global communication networks has redefined how texts are accessed, interpreted, and shared. Digital Humanities enables

both *close reading* and *distant reading*, allowing scholars to combine detailed textual analysis with large-scale pattern recognition. More importantly, it fosters collaborative and participatory forms of interpretation through blogs, forums, and social media platforms. In this context, literary works are no longer static artifacts but dynamic entities continuously reinterpreted by readers. This paper examines how two seemingly disparate works—Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Baek Sehee’s *I Want to Die, but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki*—are reimagined within digital culture. While Kafka’s novella explores existential alienation through the surreal transformation of Gregor Samsa, Baek Sehee’s memoir presents an intimate account of dysthymia and therapeutic self-reflection. When viewed through digital frameworks, both texts acquire renewed relevance, reflecting contemporary experiences of isolation, identity, and mental health.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology grounded in Digital Humanities approaches. It employs **comparative textual analysis** to examine themes of alienation and mental health in both primary texts. Additionally, the study incorporates **digital discourse analysis**, drawing from blogs, online reviews, and social media interactions to understand how readers reinterpret these works in digital spaces. The research also utilizes **reader-response theory**, focusing on how digital platforms transform passive reading into interactive engagement. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and online critiques, support the analysis. This interdisciplinary method allows for a nuanced understanding of how technology reshapes literary meaning and emotional reception.

Digital Humanities and Transformative Reading Practices

Digital Humanities extends beyond technological assistance; it actively reshapes interpretive practices. Through platforms such as blogs, annotation tools, and social media, readers engage in what may be termed *interactive criticism*. This participatory culture democratizes literary analysis and fosters what can be described as “cosmopolitan empathy.” Blogs serve as hybrid spaces where personal experience intersects with literary critique. Readers reinterpret *The Metamorphosis* as a metaphor for digital-age alienation, comparing Gregor Samsa’s transformation into an insect with the dehumanizing effects of technological systems. Similarly, Baek Sehee’s memoir resonates with the culture of online confession, where individuals share vulnerabilities and mental health struggles. Digital annotation tools further enhance engagement by allowing readers to “talk to the text.” These platforms recreate the

tradition of marginalia in a collaborative form, enabling users to highlight, comment, and reinterpret texts collectively. Such practices transform reading into a shared, dialogic process.

Kafka's Alienation in the Digital Age

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's transformation symbolizes profound existential alienation. In the digital age, this alienation is reinterpreted as reflective of contemporary experiences shaped by technology. Online discussions frequently compare Gregor's isolation to the paradox of hyperconnectivity, where individuals remain constantly connected yet emotionally detached. Social media fosters what may be termed *self-imposed alienation*, where curated identities replace authentic interaction. Gregor's inability to communicate mirrors modern experiences of "mute communication," where visibility does not guarantee understanding. Furthermore, Kafka's critique of economic utility resonates strongly in today's gig economy and algorithm-driven work culture. Gregor's reduction to his productive value parallels how individuals are evaluated through digital metrics, reinforcing feelings of disposability and alienation.

Baek Sehee and Digital Confession Culture

Baek Sehee's *I Want to Die, but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki* offers a contrasting yet complementary perspective on mental health. The memoir's structure, based on therapy conversations, aligns closely with contemporary digital confession culture. Online platforms amplify the book's impact, transforming it into a shared emotional resource. Readers relate to Baek's exploration of dysthymia, self-doubt, and societal pressure, often sharing their own experiences in response. This participatory engagement normalizes discussions of mental health, particularly in cultures where stigma persists. At the same time, digital reception introduces critical tensions. Some readers argue that social media risks aestheticizing or trivializing mental illness. Nevertheless, the memoir's widespread circulation demonstrates how digital environments can foster empathy, awareness, and collective healing.

Comparative Analysis: Alienation and Empathy in Digital Spaces

Both texts, when viewed through digital frameworks, reveal the dual nature of technology. Kafka's work highlights the intensification of alienation, while Baek Sehee's memoir illustrates the potential for connection and emotional support. Digital platforms act as both isolating and unifying forces. On one hand, they reproduce Kafkaesque conditions of invisibility, surveillance, and dehumanization. On the

other, they enable Baek-like spaces of vulnerability, dialogue, and therapeutic engagement. This tension underscores a central paradox of the digital age: technology simultaneously deepens loneliness and creates opportunities for empathy. Through blogs, annotations, and social media interactions, readers actively co-create meanings, transforming literature into a living, evolving discourse.

Conclusion

The digital age has reimagined literary texts as dynamic sites of interaction and reinterpretation. Through the lens of Digital Humanities, *The Metamorphosis* and *I Want to Die, but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki* emerge as powerful commentaries on alienation and mental health in contemporary society. Kafka's portrayal of existential isolation finds renewed relevance in technologically mediated lives marked by disconnection and productivity-driven identities. In contrast, Baek Sehee's memoir reflects the possibilities of digital empathy, where shared experiences foster understanding and healing. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that digital environments do not merely transform how literature is read—they reshape its meaning. By bridging individual experience and collective interpretation, Digital Humanities enables literature to remain deeply relevant in addressing the emotional complexities of the modern world.

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