

A Hunger Artist



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANZ KAFKA

Franz Kafka was the son of Hermann and Julie Kafka, the eldest of six siblings in his middle-class Ashkenazi Jewish family. He had a relatively isolated upbringing as his parents worked long hours away from home, often leaving the young Kafka in the care of governesses and servants. His family was frequently in tragic circumstances: two of Kafka's brothers died in infancy (and his three sisters were to perish in the Holocaust many years later). Kafka's father had little time for his son's creativity, and Kafka felt his mother was too devoted to domestic life to understand his dreams of becoming a writer. Kafka did not live on his own until the age of 31. After a solid early education, Kafka went to university to study law, where he found a kindred spirit in his friend Max Brod, who shared and encouraged Kafka's interest in literature. After graduation, Kafka took employment in the insurance industry, working on his writing during the evenings. Though wracked by self-doubt, Kafka was well-liked by his peers and was twice engaged to marry his girlfriend, Felice Bauer, though they eventually separated in 1917. From a young age Kafka was frequently ill, suffering from migraines, anxiety and insomnia. Kafka contracted laryngeal tuberculosis in 1917 and spent much of his later years in sanatoriums in an attempt to improve his health. He lived in Berlin for a while, under the care of his new girlfriend Dora Dymant, before returning to Prague. In 1924, having traveled to a sanatorium in Vienna, Kafka died, likely from starvation brought about by the extreme throat pain caused by his illness. He had published very little at the time of his death. In fact, it is only because of Max Brod, who disobeyed Kafka's request to burn his unpublished manuscripts, that some of Kafka's best-known work survives (including the renowned novels *The Castle* and *The Trial*). Kafka's reputation quickly rose after his death, as his work's themes of isolation, paranoia, and bureaucracy grew increasingly pertinent to a Europe dealing with the fall-out of world war and the tensions in countries living under Communist rule. He is now considered one of the foremost writers of the 20th century, and such is his influence that "Kafkaesque" has entered the general lexicon of the English language.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Hunger Artist" was one of Kafka's final texts. In fact, he was working on it on his deathbed. There is also some truth to the story itself: hunger artistry was a genuine phenomenon that once drew large crowds, peaking in popularity in the 1880s. More widely, Kafka's experience of growing up as a Jew in

Prague contributed to a general distrust of authority found throughout his work. Though Prague was a civilized and cosmopolitan city, Jews were frequently ostracized from society and Kafka did not feel an affinity with the ruling Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many critics have noted how Kafka's ability to create a sense of organized terror in his writing foretells the approaching horrors of the 20th century, namely Stalin's Soviet Russia and Hitler's Nazi regime.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kafka's writing is so distinctive in its quiet paranoia and elusive meaning that his body of work is often considered to be singular and completely of its own world. That said, Kafka was an avid reader from an early age. The German writers Thomas Mann and Heinrich von Kleist had a big influence on him, as did foreign authors like Charles Dickens (although Kafka found much to dislike in his work), Gustav Flaubert, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Kafka was an isolated figure, publishing little in his lifetime—but the writing that eventually did find a readership had such a profound impact on the literary world that Kafka, along with Shakespeare and Orwell, is one of the few writers whose name has become an adjective in the English language. "A Hunger Artist" has much in common with Kafka's other work, however. It has a fable-like quality without clear resolution, its central character cuts a solitary figure, and there is little evidence of empathy from any of the characters—these, along with the complicated bureaucratic structures in books like *The Trial*, are the narrative elements now thought of as Kafkaesque. It is difficult to find authors after Kafka that weren't influenced by him in some way; Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Milan Kundera are just two of the 20th century's most significant writers to acknowledge a huge debt.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "A Hunger Artist" (German: "Ein Hungerkünstler")
- **When Written:** 1922
- **Where Written:** Prague
- **When Published:** 1922 in German, 1938 in English
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** A nondescript "Europe", probably in the 19th century
- **Climax:** The death of the hunger artist
- **Antagonist:** The Audience / The Impresario
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Language Complications. Franz Kafka had a tense relationship with his language, German, which he spoke with a Czech accent. It is sometimes claimed that Kafka's spare and economic style comes from his 'Prague German', but this probably owes more to a 19th century myth: that "proper" German was spoken by the socially conservative population of the countryside, and that city-dwellers spoke a corrupted and inferior form of the language.

Tragic Reality. Kafka made his final edits to "A Hunger Artist", a story of starvation, on his deathbed — as his tuberculosis prevented him from eating properly.



PLOT SUMMARY

"A Hunger Artist" is a bleak, fable-like story without any clear moral at the end. It tells the tragic tale of the hunger artist, a man so utterly dedicated to fasting that he denies himself anything else in life. He spends his life in a **cage**, only leaving if someone makes him. The narration is mostly told retrospectively—hunger artistry has already had its hey-day when the story begins. The reader is given a sense of its former popularity, a time when whole families would go and witness the hunger artist's fasts. Though it was popular, it was never seen on the terms that the hunger artist would have wished. Sometimes his thinness scared people, and sometimes it was just "a bit of fun"—kids, understandably, found it terrifying. Much to the hunger artist's frustration, it was never seen as high art, and people found it difficult to believe that he wasn't cheating.

During this heyday, members of the public keep vigil over the hunger artist. They don't take this job too seriously, though, and it frustrates the hunger artist that some of his warders deliberately try and give him a chance to sneak a snack—to him, the honor of his art is far too important to do so. Some of the warders take it more seriously, shining their torches at the cage all night, conversing with the hunger artist, and gratefully receiving a breakfast at his expense in the morning (a source of great pride for him). But as no-one will ever be willing to watch him throughout an entire fast, there is always a suspicion that the hunger artist is dishonest.

In those days, the hunger artist is "managed" by an impresario, whose care for him is really about protecting his investment rather than genuine concern. The manager imposes a forty-day limit to the fasts: the length of a town's attention span when it comes to the artist. This always infuriates the hunger artist, who feels he is capable of much greater fasts. In fact, the hunger artist prides himself on never leaving his cage of his own free will—"that people had to concede." At the end of these forty-day fasts, the impresario orchestrates big, gaudy displays

that are not in the spirit of the hunger artist's work. These end-of-fast "celebrations" culminate in the hunger artist being carried to a little meal set at a table, and the manager raising a toast to the audience.

Over the years, however, the hunger artist's popularity wanes. Eventually, seeking a new audience and still naively believing that his greatest days are ahead of him, the hunger artist parts ways with his manager and joins the circus. Unfortunately for him, he is low priority for the circus staff, and is placed near the animal cages. He isn't very visible to the general public, and most of his audience interaction comes during the intermissions in the main circus show, or when people are trying to get elsewhere on site. Finally he is free to fast beyond the forty-day limit and achieve his greatest heights as an artist, but without anyone to witness his fasting and give it meaning, even the hunger artist loses track of how many days he has been without eating.

Wondering what was wrong with a seemingly decent cage, an overseer and other staff look inside to find the long-neglected hunger artist close to death. The hunger artist says that he's always wanted their respect, but when they offer it to him he chastises them for doing so. His last words are that he only fasted because he couldn't find food that he liked.

Almost as soon as the artist he dies, the circus replaces him with a young **panther**. The panther is much more captivating than the hunger artist, and the last image of the story is of the audience clustering round the cage, enraptured by the muscular vitality of this new exhibit.



CHARACTERS

The Hunger Artist – The unnamed protagonist of the story, the hunger artist is a man with one sole purpose in life: to starve. He believes this to be his one true calling, and he rejects all other worldly concerns to concentrate on his fasting. There was once a time—as there was in reality—when hunger artists drew huge crowds, and the reader learns that this particular artist had many years of great "success." But although his shows are successful in the sense that they are well-attended and turned a profit, the hunger artist is never fully satisfied. People come to see him out of morbid fascination, or for "a bit of fun," but not for the kind of deep and profound experience that the hunger artist believes his art is worth. Deep down, he embodies a contradiction: he wants the public to respect his art, but he also feels superior to them, and believes they can never fully understand his craft. He is proud of his ability to deny earthly pleasures and to suffer, but the world in which he pursues his art frustrates him deeply. Perhaps because of this, the hunger artist has never, "not after any feats of starvation—that people had to concede—left his **cage** of his own free will." As interest in him dwindles, the hunger artist splits with his manager and

takes his act to the circus, but is left to linger near the animal exhibits and rarely has any meaningful interactions with the crowd. He holds the conviction that he can fast well beyond the forty-day limit imposed on him by his original manager, and at the end of the story has the chance to see if that's true. But this opportunity comes about only because at the circus he is completely neglected. With nobody paying attention to him, even the hunger artist can't keep track of his fast as he wastes away into the straw of his cage. His dying words to the circus staff neatly sum up his contradictory way of life—he says he only ever wanted to be respected, and when they tell him that he is, he says that they mustn't. He finally gives the enigmatic statement that he only fasted because he couldn't find anything he liked to eat—which immediately seems at odds with the dedication to his art that he has shown throughout his life. Almost as soon as the hunger artist is dead, he is replaced in his cage by a **panther**. Compared to him, it seems full of life, and the audience finds it far more captivating.

The Audience / Public – Comprised of different people at different times, the audience defines what the hunger artist's work means outside of his own perceptions and beliefs. In the hey-day of hunger artistry, the audience is huge. Children “watch open-mouthed, holding each other by the hand for safety,” in awe and fear of the hunger artist. Adults, on the other hand, feel either that the act is a frivolous bit of fun, or distrust whether the hunger artist's fasts are really as long as is claimed. Despite their suspicions, the audience verifies how many days the hunger artist fasts by keeping vigil, but they don't take the role too seriously. The audience's tastes change with the times, and by the end of the story they don't care much for the hunger artist's act anymore. They're much more interested in the extravaganza of the circus, and the last image of the story is the audience clustered around the hunger artist's old **cage**, now holding the more impressive figure of the **panther**.

The Manager / Impresario – For most of the hunger artist's career—if it can be called that—the manager presides over his act, taking care of the business dealings and apparently looking after the well-being of his investment. But the impresario is a capitalist through and through, and only cares about the hunger artist as a means of making profit. He is also a deceitful figure: when the hunger artist complains angrily about being limited to forty-day fasts, the manager slyly convinces the public that his anger is due to his poor condition (when in fact it's because the hunger artist is depressed at having his “great art” interrupted). The manager is concerned with entertainment, not art. He orchestrates gaudy celebrations at the end of the forty-day fasts, complete with brass bands and flower garlands. He forces a meal on the hunger artist and squeezes him to make him seem even more weak and vulnerable. The public's changing whims ultimately get the better of the manager and his investment, however, and after dragging the hunger artist around Europe in desperate search

of an audience, they finally part ways.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE ARTIST AND SOCIETY

“A Hunger Artist” examines the relationship between the artist, their art, and the society in which that art is received. Though the artist in this case—whose act is simply the ability to fast—has a pure vision of his “craft,” he can only display his art within the context of an audience that frequently misunderstands and mistrusts him. While art is often held up as being something that “holds a mirror to society”—forcing society to recognize truths about itself—Kafka's story suggests that this is a flawed idea: the hunger artist and his audience, after all, continuously misunderstand each other. Ultimately, Kafka doesn't suggest that there is *no* role or value for art in society, but instead that it does not function in as clear a way as either the artist or audience expect.

There is no doubting the hunger artist's commitment to his art—he has abandoned everything else about his life to make fasting his one sole focus. By ignoring the things that are usually thought of as important in life (friends, family, being happy, etc.), he embodies the prevalent idea that sacrifice is essential to the creation of art that is meaningful and true. In fact, he takes this idea to its logical extreme by making his art about the sacrifice of the very thing that all life needs to go on living: nourishment. His art does not merely require sacrifice—it *is* sacrifice. His commitment to that sacrifice is total: “no hunger-artist would have eaten the least thing under any circumstances, not even under duress; the honor-code of his art forbade it.” Furthermore, he prides himself on never leaving his **cage** of his own free will—as the reader sees at the end, he is willing to go all the way to be truly great.

The audiences in the story don't really understand why the hunger artist is so committed to starvation. It interests them to a degree, but there's no indication that they think of it as great art, and their tastes are subject to change on a whim. They don't understand his sacrifice, nor necessarily *want* to understand it. They see him more as an entertainment, although occasionally he disgusts them too (for instance, when the two women help him to his meal table at the end of his fast). Because of this misunderstanding between audience and artist, the members of the general public don't trust that the artist is genuine—how could someone truly wish to go that long

without eating? They think he must be sneaking food, and part of the entertainment becomes trying to catch him doing it (the men guarding him to ensure he keeps fasting even seem willing to let him sneak food). They've also got more going on in their lives than to be truly dedicated to verifying the authenticity of the hunger artist—they'd have stay with him the whole time in order to do so. The audience's view of the hunger artist's work as entertainment, then, stops them from even being able to perceive it as art.

Yet despite the purity of the hunger artist's dedication to his art, he *needs* an audience. Though the story makes clear the profound way that an artist can never fully communicate with an audience *and* all the ways that an audience can further contribute to that misunderstanding, it also shows how the artist is completely dependent on the audience. The artist is in an impossible bind: through his art, he seeks to go beyond the confines of society, but he needs his art to be witnessed by that society in order for it to be meaningful in the world. As all these potential witnesses are imperfect, the artist can never truly communicate the full meaning of his work. This further isolates the hunger artist, pushing him to more and more extreme acts of starvation, ultimately culminating in his greatest (and most meaningless) work—his own death. The one time he is allowed to starve beyond forty days is not due to an audience wanting to see him achieve something great and true—it's because they've moved on and are no longer watching or caring at all.

Within the context of the story, then, the prospect for art and the artist seems bleak. The hunger artist is never able to communicate to his audience. His art is never understood, and it's never even seen as being art. And yet, there is an audience that *does* understand the hunger artist more fully than the people in the crowd ever do, and that can recognize the art in his starvation—the readers of the story. The story, then, suggests that art can never truly communicate what it was originally meant to, even as its very nature seeks communication with an audience. In that paradox, the story obliquely asserts that even if the outcome is never what is intended, and never understood, the effort at communication, and the devotion and sacrifice necessary to that effort, have meaning that must be recognized.



THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

“A Hunger Artist” is a deeply philosophical text that is a prime example of Kafka's overall approach to his literature. As with many of his other stories,

interpretations of the text vary widely, and for good reason: Kafka deliberately creates tales that are almost fable-like, except that, unlike the typical fable that has a clear moral, the “point” of Kafka's stories are rarely obvious. For Kafka, life is a set of unresolvable questions, and no one way of living can provide solid, tangible answers to the absurdities of existence. The hunger artist pursues some approaches towards finding

meaning in life, while his audience and manager take an entirely different approach altogether.

The hunger artist is clearly concerned with the greatness of his achievements. He feels that if he can only reach a certain length of days in a fast he will reach the height of his craft. That is, as with many people in life, he strives to better himself (in one very specific area) with the ultimate goal of being—and being recognized as—the best. He prides himself on his strength of will, on the superiority of his fasting ability: “he had never yet, not after any of his feats of starvation—that people had to concede—left his **cage** of his own free will.” He much prefers being watched by those warders who guard him very closely, shining their torchlights on him throughout the night, and loves nothing more than demonstrating how different he is from them: “What made him happiest of all was when the morning came and a lavish breakfast was brought up to them at his expense, on which they flung themselves.”

Though the artist's skill and craft mark him as different from the average person, the story makes it clear that it's not that simple. Firstly, the hunger artist is dependent on others recognizing his achievement. He is always mindful, therefore, of his popularity and how he is being viewed and perceived. Secondly, he feels that the only way to continue to have meaning is to achieve even more, to give even more of himself to his craft. Of course, because he is a hunger artist, the outcome of such continued achievement is stark: he eventually achieves so much starvation that he dies, and he does so without any audience at all. The quest for achievement, the story seems to suggest, can give one a sense of meaning, but that sense is fleeting and ultimately self-devouring.

The hunger artist also seeks meaning in another way that has traditionally been seen as more profound and authentic than the quest for achievement. He denies himself, and more importantly denies his body and his physical needs. In fact, fasting is often associated with rejection of the material and superficial, and as a means to achieve spiritual understanding of oneself and the world. In other words, it is often seen as a route to finding a higher meaning. It is no coincidence that the hunger artist's fasting performances last forty days. That length of time connects the hunger artist's fast most clearly to Jesus's fast of forty days in the desert. During that fast, Jesus was tempted again and again by Satan. After Jesus refused all temptations, Satan left him, and Jesus returned to Galilee to begin his ministry. In other words, Jesus fasted, denied his body, and found the truth in himself and the world such that he felt ready to begin to preach. The hunger artist, too, seeks a truth and meaning beyond what society has to offer. It frustrates him that his manager won't let him go beyond the forty days and prove his greatness—he thinks that going beyond that limit would be both a source of pride and help him find true meaning. When he does eventually fast for more than forty days, though, after essentially being forgotten in a cage at the circus, he dies

without any revelation at all, having long ago lost the ability to keep track of the length of his fast.

There are glimpses of other ways of life in the story. The card-players, the family that see the hunger artist at the circus, the manager—all of these have a different set of more immediate and less lofty concerns than the hunger artist. They fail to comprehend his total dedication, and live life without a desperate search for meaning or great achievement. The reader, then, is left with no easy moral—were the hunger-artist's efforts totally in vain and pointless, or is he the only character with a true sense of purpose? Kafka deliberately leaves this question unresolved, because for him that is a closer representation of actual life. But the text itself is an examination of its own attempt to generate meaning—to represent life—further strengthening the sense that instead of an answer there is only a question—but that there is meaning and value in asking the question, even without hope of an answer.



ART, ENTERTAINMENT, AND CAPITALISM

The hunger artist's refusal to do anything other than his art is a rejection of capitalist ideals: he refuses to have a job, to engage with money, or to consume. But, of course, this is not as simple as it sounds. Though he might have rejected the most immediate interactions with capitalism, and is literally barred within his **cage** from the rest of the world, the hunger artist is still very much under society's constraints. Put more bluntly: the impresario has commodified the hunger artist's art (that is, he has turned it into something with monetary value), and in doing so interferes with the hunger artist's vision and greatness by protecting his investment and always limiting the show to forty days. However, without the manager to organize the spectacle (through finding a venue and promoting the show to the public), the hunger-artist would have no audience for his art—and, as the reader sees at the end, would simply waste away. In a very real sense, then, the artist and impresario depend on one another. And through their dependence, the story portrays the way that art and entertainment are always inextricably intertwined.

The first thing the reader learns in the story is that the “interest in hunger-artists has suffered a marked decline.” Fashions for entertainment are changing, and unfortunately this means the hunger artist is destined to be left behind. Further demonstrating that the hunger artist is isolated in how much he cares about his art, no one can even remember how the decline in hunger-artistry came about: “because by then the shift in taste referred to above had taken place; it was almost sudden; perhaps there were profounder reasons for it, but who cared to find them out.” The hunger artist's literal value is generated by how much people are willing to pay to see him, but having witnesses to his fasts is also how his act acquires any meaning

at all. Trends—and value—come and go: “one day the pampered hunger-artist saw himself abandoned by the pleasure-seeking public which now flocked to different displays.”

Though the hunger artist doesn't care about money, his manager certainly does. Without his manager to organize the shows and their publicity, the hunger artist would have no audience at all. The only other major character in the story, the manager/impresario is a capitalist through and through. His prime concern is for money, and he only looks after the hunger artist insofar as he needs him to generate a profit. He is willing to go to any lengths to make money, deceiving both the public and the hunger artist. The impresario sets the terms on which the hunger artist can exist, and makes sure they are favorable to him, the impresario. He also limits the hunger artist's fasts, not out of genuine concern, but because over time he has realized that forty days is the best fasting length to generate a profit. The manager, by making the hunger artist's act about profit rather than meaning per se (he's not bothered about the quality or message of the art), reduces the act to mere entertainment and encourages the whims of the audience. The hunger artist wants his *art* to be the subject of the audience's interest, but the impresario makes sure that it is the audience's interest in the spectacle of the hunger artist himself that is piqued and then satisfied.

But the manager is not, ultimately, presented as some all-powerful nefarious villain exploiting the hunger art. That is not to say that he *isn't* exploiting the hunger artist. He certainly is. Rather, the story implies that the impresario is just one aspect of the broader capitalist forces that move the world. Further, the story shows how the hunger artist, despite his idealism, artistic vision, and force of will, is *himself* beholden to the main driving force of capitalism: supply and demand. When the hunger artist fires his manager and joins the circus, it's in part because he still naively believes that his great art can find a great audience. But he's also following the basic principles of capitalism himself, taking his act where it has the greatest chance of making money (a chance that is unfortunately all too slim). The hunger artist wants an external verification that can only be brought about by an audience willing to pay to see him—but they'll only pay if he's worth the money and entertains them. As the audiences dwindle, the hunger artist's “value” drops, verification and meaning become impossible and, most tragically of all, the cage becomes more valuable than his life. So, though the hunger artist aspires to go beyond society and its material concerns, the success of his act is governed by those very things. His art has been overshadowed by the “spectacle” of the profit-making show (e.g. the gaudy display at the end of the forty-day fasts). In this way, the story shows the depressing dynamic through which the artist and their art are always doomed to be captured and exploited by capitalist forces, reduced and packaged into entertainment, and then discarded when they cease to make a profit. This outcome, the

story suggests, will always be the story of art in the world, because it is the only way that art can ever reach a wide audience. It is the price that must be paid. When the hunger artist finally achieves his greatest ever fast, it is because he has been literally forgotten as some sideshow in a circus. It is art, but (and because) no one is watching.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE CAGE

There isn't a single instance of the hunger artist leaving his cage in the story. Both symbolically and literally, the cage serves to completely separate the hunger artist from the rest of society, allowing him to focus entirely on practicing his "art." The cage demonstrates his rejection of all other pursuits: his art is on the inside, and all other worldly (and to him, unworthy) concerns remain on the outside. This purity of separation is only violated when others, like the manager, cross the threshold and prevent the hunger artist from taking his starvation as far as he would like. In this sense, then, the cage is the tool that liberates the artist from the rest of the world. In the same way that mankind uses cages to separate itself from animals, the artist uses the cage to distinguish himself from the petty concerns of everyday life. Of course, this is extremely paradoxical—the whole point of cages is that they *imprison* their contents, restricting movement and possibilities of escape. The cage, then, is also the hunger artist's entrapment—he is trapped by his own ideals, the audience's perceptions of him as mere entertainment, the manager's economic interests and, later, by his own irrelevance. More widely, the cage stands as a symbol of the separation between artist and audience; specifically, between artists' intentions and audience responses. Kafka's use of the cage suggests that no matter how hard an artist tries, they can never control how their work is received: society will decide what that artist's work *means*, and from those perceptions construct the cage that ultimately defines the artist's life. The story is neither sympathetic to nor critical of this idea, but instead shows it in its full complexity. The hunger artist thinks he's free, but willingly keeps himself in the cage, and can never truly know what it is like to perceive his work from the other side of the bars.



THE PANTHER

There could hardly be a more contrasting creature to the hunger artist than the panther. The hunger artist is emaciated, weak, and denying himself bodily concerns,

while the panther represents the force of nature's vitality, muscular and primal. The panther's "noble body furnished almost to bursting point with all it required seemed even to have brought its own freedom with it." The most important word in this quote is "seemed"—yes, the panther embodies animal nature, but it is still imprisoned in the same **cage** that once held the hunger artist. Though the audience may be mesmerized by this display of sheer strength, the panther is trapped by the same things that held the hunger artist captive: the audience's wish to be entertained and the impresario/circus's aim to make money from their exhibit. On the one hand, the panther represents a life lived according to sensory desires. It seems happy enough to roam around its cage, especially now that the circus staff make sure to satisfy its huge appetite. Eating is the panther's prime concern, in stark contrast to the hunger artist's preoccupation with fasting, and so here, for now, it is fulfilled. On the other hand, it's very unlikely that this majestic creature is going to continue being happy without the space in which to move around. And just because there is a crowd on one particular day, refusing to "budge," doesn't mean that they won't get bored of the panther too (after which it will surely suffer a similar neglect as the hunger artist). In being trapped by its value as entertainment, the panther is prey to the same logic that brought about the hunger artist's untimely end—if the audience gets bored, the panther will lose its place at the circus. Kafka, then, suggests that even a life lived according to more immediate, primal interests is no guarantee of meaning and purpose in the difficult, money-driven world of modern society.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Schocken Books edition of *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories* published in 1995.

A Hunger Artist Quotes

Over the last few decades, the interest in hunger-artists has suffered a marked decline. While it may once have been profitable to put on great public spectacles under one's own production, this is completely impossible today. Times really have changed.

Related Characters: The Hunger Artist

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote the reader is immediately introduced to the link between art and its profitability, setting up the main conflict in the story: the artist's "pure" vision of his craft vs. how society receives his art. The hunger artist believes that dedication to his art will produce greatness, but his art means nothing unless there's an audience around to bear witness to it. Also, tastes change—the story begins after the glory days of hunger artistry have already been and gone. Art is associated with profundity and depth of meaning, but in order to have this meaning it depends on society's changing whims and fashions to generate an audience, and in this case the audience has already moved on.

...scorning the use of a chair he sat on the scattered straw, pale, in a black vest, with startlingly protruding ribs, now nodding politely, answering questions with a strained smile, or poking his arm through the bars so that its thinness might be felt, but repeatedly collapsing into himself, not caring about anything or anyone.

Related Characters: The Audience / Public, The Hunger Artist

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The hunger artist actively *performs* his art—he knows that much of the audience's interest in him comes from his physical wretchedness, and so makes sure that this is made as obvious as possible. The narration might say that he doesn't care about anything or anyone, but the rest of the story makes clear that he really does care about he is perceived (more so than he might admit). The hunger artist uses this public display to create an aesthetic of suffering by offering his bony arms through the cage, but he's also demonstrating his strength and superior fasting ability—that's why he refuses to use his chair, and answers the spectator's questions with a smile.

He much preferred those invigilators who sat right in front of his bars, who were not content with the dim night-light in the hall, but aimed at him the beams of electric torches that the manager had left at their disposal...What made him happiest of all was when the morning came and a lavish breakfast was brought up to them at his expense, on which they flung themselves with the healthy appetite of men who had spent an entire night without rest.

Related Characters: The Audience / Public, The Hunger Artist

Related Themes:  

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Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This passage gives further evidence that the hunger artist entirely depends upon his audience. When he receives this kind of close attention he is at his most authentic (because his observers can vouch that he isn't cheating), and it's fair to say that these moments are about as happy as he gets throughout the story. He wants to perform his art in the literal glare of society, so that people can see the purity and strength of his commitment. This kind of attention really helps him demonstrate how different he is from most people, and how they can't do what he does. That's why he loves to buy these "invigilator" breakfast: the sight of them devouring their food after only one night without eating just shows difficult it is to go hungry like he can.

No one was capable of spending every day and every night with the hunger-artist as an invigilator without a break, and therefore no one could know from the direct evidence of his own senses whether the hunger artist had starved himself without a break, without a lapse; only the hunger-artist himself was in a position to know that, only he therefore could be the spectator completely satisfied by his own hunger.

Related Characters: The Audience / Public, The Hunger Artist

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The hunger artist's main problem is his need for external

verification. This strengthens the main dilemma posed by the text: art can't have meaning without an audience, but the artist has very little control over that audience's response. Only the hunger artist can know for sure that he hasn't cheated, and therefore the true "meaning" of his art is his and his alone. Without other people around to testify to his authenticity, there is little chance of people believing he fasts for as long as he does. An ideal "invigilator" would have to stay with him the whole time (without sleep!), practicing the same kind of self-denial that the hunger artist demonstrates. That person doesn't exist, because only the hunger artist truly believes in the value of what he's doing. For the rest of society, it's a curious entertainment that ultimately they can take or leave.

☞ He had never yet—that people had to concede—left his cage of his own free will. The maximum period of starvation had been set by the manager at forty days, he permitted no longer stints than that, not even in major cities, and for a very good reason. He had learned from experience that by gradually intensified publicity the interest of a city could be kept alive for forty days, but at that point the public failed, there was a perceptible drop in the level of interest.

Related Characters: The Manager / Impresario, The Audience / Public, The Hunger Artist

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The hunger artist believes himself capable of much longer fasts than the forty days imposed by his manager. His willpower, he believes, sets him apart from the rest of society and is strong enough to take him well beyond the limit. But market forces of supply and demand dictate that if his fast were to go on longer, the audience interest would start to wane, making him less profitable and, in the light of the previous quote, less verifiable. This demonstrates that, for the manager and the audience, what the hunger artist does is not art—it's just entertainment. Once it stops being entertaining, the manager takes the show elsewhere; that's how he makes the most of his investment. The hunger artist, though, wants to achieve greatness. Kafka makes a clear comparison between the hunger artist and Jesus, whose famous fast was also for forty days. But whereas Jesus

came away from his fast with renewed purpose and meaning, the hunger artist just goes through it all again, repeating his experience until, tragically, he is finally allowed to take his art to his desired extremes.

☞ So then on the fortieth day the door of the flower-garlanded cage was thrown open, an excited audience filled the amphitheatre, a brass band played, two doctors entered the cage to perform the necessary tests on the hunger artist, the results were relayed to the hall by means of a megaphone, and finally two young ladies, thrilled to have been chosen for the task, came to lead the hunger artist down a couple of steps to where a small table had been laid with a carefully assembled invalid meal.

Related Characters: The Manager / Impresario, The Hunger Artist, The Audience / Public

Related Themes: 

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Explanation and Analysis

The manager orchestrates a gaudy, sensory extravaganza whenever the hunger artist's fast comes to an end. He knows how to put on a show that brings a good crowd, and leaves them satisfied at the end. He has totally different values than the hunger artist, whose very purpose in life is to deny "satisfaction" altogether. The music and visual display conjure up a feeling that the hunger artist's act is more a kind of magic than art, more of an illusion than a reality (and thus contributing to people's general suspicion of the act's authenticity). The manager makes the doctors use a megaphone to announce the test results to the hall, further contributing to the sense of theatre and occasion. If he really cared about the hunger artist's wellbeing, he wouldn't "celebrate" the end of the fasts in a way so opposite to the hunger artist's cherished sense of purity and commitment. The manager cares about the hunger artist only to the extent that he cares about making a profit, and must keep his investment (just about) alive so he can make the most out of it.

Because by then the shift in taste referred to above had taken place; it was almost sudden; perhaps there were profounder reasons for it, but who cared to find them out; be it as it may, one day the pampered hunger artist saw himself abandoned by the pleasure-seeking public which now flocked to different displays.

Related Characters: The Audience / Public, The Hunger Artist

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The audience's interest in the hunger artist was always superficial and fleeting. There are more pleasurable things to do than go and look at someone in the hunger artist's state. The audience members never really wanted to be reminded of the fragility of life, and now that their curiosity has been satisfied they have no problem moving on. Kafka suggests that the individuals that constitute the audience don't necessarily think for themselves all that much, preferring to behave like a "flock" of sheep and follow one another. Unlike the hunger artist, they aren't seeking a deep meaning in their lives (at least through appreciating this kind of "art"), and they're not interested in making any great sacrifices. There probably are "profounder reasons" behind the hunger artist's decline, but they don't care enough to think about them. Kafka, then, sets that as the challenge for the reader, while also making a cynical and ultimately tragic observation about the general apathy of all people.

...the hunger artist gave perfectly credible assurances that he was just as good at starving as he had ever been...he was only now finally ready to throw the world into justifiable astonishment—a claim that, in view of the temper of the times, which the hunger artist was apt in his enthusiasm to forget, raised a smile with the experts.

Related Characters: The Hunger Artist

Related Themes: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The hunger artist is blindly devoted to his task, as is often expected of artists more generally. He is so removed from society by this point that he has no ability to see that his

glory days are over—those who work at the circus just think his optimism is amusing, but don't correct him. As he has thought all along, he believes that if he can only prove his full fasting talent he will finally provoke the reaction that he's always wanted from the world. But as the story has demonstrated, when the hunger artist is not being framed as an entertainment, the world is just not that interested. His solitary pursuit has not only removed him from society; it has also taken him away from reality.

...the hunger artist starved himself as he had once dreamed of doing, and he succeeded quite effortlessly as he had once predicted, but no one counted the days, no one knew how great his achievement was, not even the hunger artist himself, and his heart grew heavy. And if once in a while a passer-by stopped, and mocked the old calendar and said it was a swindle, that was the most insulting lie that indifference and native malice could have come up with.

Related Characters: The Audience / Public, The Hunger Artist

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The hunger artist finally has his chance to go beyond the forty-day fasting limit: he is free from the confines of entertainment and can finally achieve the greatness he's always longed for. But as the story has consistently reinforced, he can't practice his art in a vacuum—he needs his art to be witnessed to make it meaningful. As he loses his ability to interest the public, the ways of keeping track of his fast are neglected. The length of the fast on the calendar seems unbelievable, further confirming his status as an irrelevant sideshow. Even he senses this now—that the ultimate achievement of his starvation is his own annihilation, and that this disappearing act also vanishes away any chance he once had at being meaningful to anyone but himself. His heart growing metaphorically "heavy" is another good example of Kafka's morbid sense of humor—the last thing that's happening to the hunger artist is any weight gain.

●● “I always wanted you to admire my starving,” said the hunger artist. “We do admire it,” said the overseer placatingly. “But you’re not to admire it,” said the hunger artist. “All right, then we don’t admire it,” said the overseer, “why should we not admire it?”

Related Characters: The Audience / Public, The Hunger Artist

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The hunger artist, now on his deathbed, is confused. He spells out the contradiction that he’s always lived by—that

he needed an audience, but that they could never give him what he truly needed. The circus staff say what they think he wants to hear, caring little about the art and more about putting the cage to good use. No one could fault the hunger artist’s incredible commitment, but Kafka suggests that commitment alone is not enough to produce art. In theory, the artist needs to have a better understanding of the relationship between art and audience—no amount of purity can make art meaningful unless it has people to interact with it. So in attaining the ultimate heights (or depths) of his art, the hunger artist has destroyed any possibility for it to mean something to wider society. He has, ironically, been consumed by his own refusal of consumption, and has paid the ultimate price.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A HUNGER ARTIST

The story opens with a contextualization of hunger as an art form. The narration tells the reader that, though it was once a popular and profitable spectacle, the art of hunger has suffered a “marked decline” over the “last few decades.”

The story’s particular hunger artist was once one of the most successful in his field. Back then, “the whole town got involved with the hunger-artist.” People keep vigil day and night, sitting in front of the **cage**, fascinated by the hunger artist’s “startlingly protruding ribs” and his “strained smile.”

Though some adults see him as “just a bit of fun,” the hunger artist is deeply and morbidly fascinating to children, who watch “open-mouthed, holding each other by the hand for safety” whenever the hunger artist comes near. The hunger artist revels in this attention, offering his arms through the **bars** so that their thinness might be felt, rejecting the use of his chair, and taking no nourishment other than the occasional sip of “water from a tiny glass, to moisten his lips.”

Kafka situates the story not at the heyday of hunger artistry, but during its decline. This provides more focus on the hunger artist’s struggle—his motives for starvation are placed under the microscope. Already the reader can sense a division between art and entertainment, as suggested by the emphasis on popularity and profitability.



The hunger artist’s earlier success is to a large degree dependent on the engagement of his audience, the general public. The closer they scrutinize him, the more authentic his act. He is not only separated from them by his cage, a clear symbol of division, but his stark physical appearance also provides a source of mystery and intrigue. By reducing his physical form, the hunger artist becomes less and less like other people—but in doing so, he provokes (or tries to provoke) questions about life and death. It’s not clear whether the hunger artist smiles because he’s popular, or because his act is affecting people in the way he would like.



Despite his physical weakness, the hunger artist is still a performer. The offering of his skinny arms and the rejection of his chair are both theatrical gestures, designed to “perform” his hunger. Even though the hunger artist prides himself on the purity of his art, it’s clear that he also enjoys the attentions of the audience. He scares the children in much the same way that ghost stories do, offering them a first sense of their own mortality. But the fact the adults see the act as more fun than fearful predicts the coming decline in its popularity (they’re becoming immune to its shock value).



As well as those spectators, the hunger artist is also watched by a publicly-nominated team of “warders,” who observe him around the clock to make sure he isn’t sneaking any food and cheating the public. Funnily enough, these warders are usually butchers. Those in the know—“the cognoscenti”—view these guardians as merely a formality. To them, no hunger-artist would ever cheat, because the “honor-code of his art forbade it.”

Much to the hunger artist’s annoyance, not all warders are as respectful towards the authenticity and nobility of his art. Some groups aren’t committed enough to keep their full attention on him at all times. They sometimes play cards in the corner with the “plain intention of permitting the hunger artist to have a little snack that they supposed he could produce from secret supply somewhere.”

This lack of respect for his art torments the hunger artist, depresses him and generally makes his starvation much more difficult. Sometimes he gathers the strength to sing in order to demonstrate that he isn’t eating, but this doesn’t bother the warders (or “invigilators”) much. They “merely registered surprise at his rare talent for eating even while singing.”

To give his act the meaning he so longs for, the hunger artist needs external verification in the form of warders. Without them, he lacks any proof of his fasting—he depends on them. But they clearly don’t take his act as seriously as he does, assuming that he probably cheats. This cheapens the honor that the hunger artist holds so dear—he knows, as do the hypothetical “cognoscenti,” that his art is too noble to be demeaned by sneaking food. It’s ironic, too, that the warders are usually butchers, people whose livelihoods are so closely involved with food. Unfortunately for the hunger artist, no single individual cares enough to watch him for an entire fast (they’ve got other things to do, including sleep!). Logically speaking, then, the hunger artist’s act can never be perceived as 100% pure and authentic (even though it is), because in the audience’s eyes there’s always a chance either he or one of his warders might be lying.



These are the warders the hunger artist resents the most: because they don’t pay him their full attention, they delegitimize his act. They also seem to trivialize him by playing cards—but they want to entertain themselves, because watching the hunger artist is, in all honesty, quite boring. Entertainment, then, takes precedence over art. To these warders, life is not about some all-encompassing pursuit of greatness—they’d rather have fun, socialize with their peers, and not take life too seriously. On either side of the cage’s bars, then, are two utterly distinct ideas of what gives life meaning.



The hunger artist tries to take matters into his own hands. By singing all the time, he thinks he can allay the doubts of the disrespectful warders—surely if he’s singing he can’t be eating at the same time. It’s important that he chooses to sing rather than some other method of keeping the warder’s attention—he’s like a caged bird, whose singing is a small act of freedom in defiance of its imprisonment. But in this case, the hunger artist doesn’t sing as an act of liberation; instead, his singing attempts to make his art purer and more authentic. In other words, he is so defined by his single-minded commitment that it actually holds him captive.



The hunger artist's preferred invigilators are those who don't take their eyes off him, those who sit "right in front of his **bars**" and keep their torches on him during the night. The hunger artist doesn't mind the harsh light, as he rarely sleeps anyway. He likes to converse with these more attentive warders, joking with them, telling them his stories of "life on the road," and hearing their own stories—all with the aim of making them see "that he was capable of starving as none of them was capable of doing."

Nothing makes the hunger artist happier than buying these warders a lavish breakfast the morning after, "at his expense," and watching them devour it as would be expected of hungry people. Some cynics would intimate that this is effectively a bribe by the hunger artist, but they usually shut up when asked if they would like to take over guarding the **cage** without any breakfast as reward ("but they still clung to their suspicion").

This mistrust of the hunger artist is to be expected. No one person is capable of being with him all the way through an entire fast, so his art is never completely verifiable, and thus is also subject to suspicion. The hunger artist doesn't completely sympathize with this mistrust, because to him starving "was the easiest thing in the world." Even when he tells this to the public, they either think he is being modest or is merely a cheat.

Again, Kafka reinforces the idea that the hunger artist needs the attention of others to make his art meaningful. He knows that the presence of these warders, who hardly take their eyes off him, make his act generally more believable. Furthermore, it's in these moments—when his art is most respected—that he is also most human, enjoying the company of others and swapping stories. That said, these interactions are still defined by his desire to prove the superiority of his fasting abilities—even when he gets the desired attention, the hunger artist is still constantly self-conscious about how he is perceived.



The hunger artist loves these occasions because they make the difference between him and the average person most apparent. These warders can hardly contain their hunger as they devour their breakfasts, thus helping the hunger artist demonstrate his superior ability to fast. That he relishes being the one who buys the breakfast further proves that his pride in his work is closely linked with how society perceives him. But as mentioned above, even these committed warders can't stay with him all the time, so his art can never be as completely pure as he would like. This suggests that art is dependent on its audience, but also that the artist never has total control of how their work is received.



Although the hunger artist performs his art under such extreme, self-imposed conditions, he tells people it's easy. But of course, it's anything but—it's only "easy" to him because he literally doesn't do anything else. Because hunger is the absence of eating, all he has to do is stay true to his spirit of self-denial—it's more about what he doesn't do than what he does (and it's not really a skilled craft like painting or sculpting). But on another level, perhaps this is the hunger artist's way of verbally expressing the fact that he sees life in a starkly different way from the rest of society. Maybe he really does think living a "normal" life of work, family and friends etc. is harder than his solitary pursuit. The public can't understand that point of view, and therefore the gulf between the artist and his audience grows ever wider.



The hunger artist never leaves his **cage** of his own free will. It is always his manager that brings an end to his fasts. The manager has realized that forty days is the maximum time a town will take interest in the act, so it is then time to pack up and move on to the next place.

One of the core elements of capitalism is supply and demand—providing a product to match how much it is desired by society. The manager, whose primary concern is making a profit, follows this philosophy to its core. The length of fast that he permits the hunger artist to keep is purely dictated by how long the act holds the attention of the public—and it’s typical of Kafka’s dark sense of humor that this just so happens to be the same length as Jesus’s fast in the desert. But whereas through his forty days and nights Jesus found a deep strength and meaning that he wished to share, the hunger artist finds only frustration that he isn’t allowed to realize the true greatness that his “talent” would allow. His status as entertainment, then, prevents him from realizing what he sees as the zenith of his art.



On the fortieth and final day of the fasts, the manager orchestrates a big, garish ceremony to entertain the audience. There are brass bands, the cage is “flower-garlanded,” and doctors theatrically examine the hunger artist. Two young ladies lead the hunger artist, against his will, to a small meal laid out on a table. Out of politeness, the hunger artist does not cause a scene (he is too weak to do so anyway). The manager uses his showmanship to create a sense of occasion, and the ladies are terrified by the physical appearance of the hunger artist, much to the audience’s delight. The manager feeds a few morsels to the hunger artist and “propose[s] a toast to the spectators” before they go on their way.

These tacky, faux celebrations go against everything the hunger artist stands for: purity, denial of the sensory pleasures, and artistic commitment. The manager, however, knows they’re what the public wants, and indulges their basest desires. To him, it’s all theatre—entertainment—not art. The hunger artist doesn’t really need the help of two ladies, but the manager knows that they will be horrified by the emaciated man’s appearance and that this in turn will amuse and excite the crowd. Likewise, the doctors aren’t there to actually take care of the hunger artist, but to add drama. It’s all a show—to everyone except the artist himself.



This is how the hunger artist lives for many years: “in apparent splendor,” and drawing huge crowds. But the hunger artist is rarely happy, because no one really respects or truly understands his art. When “kind-hearted individuals” suggest out of concern that perhaps his sorrow is due to his hunger, the artist responds with fits of “rage.”

What the hunger artist really wants is for his art to be understood—but his art is also predicated on him being the best, on no-one else having the kind of dedication it requires. Even though his “show” is playing to huge crowds and receiving a lot of attention, it’s the wrong kind of attention for the hunger artist. But a society that truly understood him would be a society full of other hunger artists—his “art” can only exist because it depends on taking place outside the norms of society, both in terms of the philosophy it requires and the physical separation of the cage. In fact, it enrages the hunger artist when the public tries to empathize with him, especially when they think he’s unhappy because he’s hungry.



The impresario has a crafty solution to these angry outbursts. He explains to these concerned spectators that the hunger artist's fury is indeed the result of his lengthy starvations. Furthermore, the manager claims that the hunger artist's belief that he can fast longer than forty days is respectable but wrong. To prove his point, the manager shows people photographs of the hunger artist, "almost extinguished with debility," in bed during the breaks between fasts. This greatly angers the hunger artist, as his bad condition is, to his mind, the result of the *termination* of his fast, not its length—but he never has the energy to argue, and just "lapse[s] back into the straw with a sigh."

Once the popularity of hunger artistry has fallen a few years later, the public talk about why this happened, surprised that it had done so almost imperceptibly. It was "as if by tacit arrangement a positive aversion against hungering had formed." During those years of decline, the manager takes the hunger artist all over Europe, but has little success. Perhaps one day the "vogue for hunger" will come around again, the narrator says, but its hey-day has now passed.

Still dedicated to his art, the hunger artist parts ways with his manager and joins the circus—not even bothering to look at his contract. This is a large circus with various acts and animals, and the hunger artist naively feels that his greatest achievements are yet to come. This is "a claim that, in view of the temper of the times, which the hunger artist was apt in his enthusiasm to forget, raised a smile with the experts."

The hunger artist isn't given a prominent position in the circus, and instead is "left outside in a readily accessible spot next to the animal stalls." Most people only look at him in the intermissions of the main circus performance, on their way to animals. Often he hardly gets a "sideways glance" as people "hurried past with long strides."

The manager takes advantage of the hunger artist's physical weakness. The latter is powerless to resist as the manager manipulates the spectators' perception of him, falsely confirming their suspicion that the artist's anger is due to hunger. In reality, these outbursts do not happen because the hunger artist lacks food; it's because the manager keeps stopping the fasts at the forty-day limit, preventing him from further "greatness." This reinforces the idea that art and entertainment are sometimes contradictory pursuits—the different desires of the manager and the hunger artist are ultimately incompatible.



Tastes in entertainment are subject to change, and unfortunately for the hunger artist, his art is no longer of much interest to the public. The manager tries his best to squeeze the most out of his investment, but the demand has fallen. Perhaps if people had cared more about hunger artistry—if it really meant something to them, and wasn't just a novelty—more would have been done to stop its decline.



The hunger artist, naïve in his beliefs, genuinely thinks there's a chance that his act might become popular again, and that he will achieve new levels of greatness. But that greatness needs an audience to appreciate it, and without one his art is meaningless. The circus is the hot new ticket in town, with acts that are much more exciting to the public, and the hunger artist is now more a figure of pity than respect. The hypothetical "experts" know that times have changed, but the hunger artist is too focused on his artistic vision to notice.



The hunger artist's placement in the layout of the circus reflects his diminished popularity and respect. His "art" is no more valuable than the "art" of the circus animals—who, of course, aren't even performers, just living creatures going through their usual bodily functions. For all his attempts to elevate humanity through his art, the hunger artist is quickly becoming a literal nonentity.



The hunger artist is too proud to complain to the circus management about the placement of his **cage** (not to mention the “smells of the stalls, the restlessness of the animals at night, the carrying past him of hunks of raw meats for the beasts of prey, and the roars and cries at feeding time that were a continual source of offence and upset to him”). But he knows that without the animals the circus wouldn’t have nearly the same the number of visitors—even if not many of those actually come to see *him*.

Neglected by the circus staff and the audience, who would rather watch the animals, the hunger artist is finally free from the forty-day constraint previously imposed on his fasting. But because no-one is watching, the length of his fasting isn’t measured, let alone authenticated. Over time, the signs marking his **cage** began to fade and the staff stop tending to his habitat. The hunger-artist knows he is achieving new heights of greatness, but “his heart grew heavy” that nobody is bearing witness to his work.

One day, an overseer on the circus staff comes across the hunger artist’s **cage**, wondering why it isn’t being put to good use. Upon finding the extremely weak hunger artist amongst the straw, a brief conversation takes place between the artist and the overseer, with other circus staff members present. The hunger artist asks them to forgive him, and the overseer says that they do. “I always wanted you to admire my starving,” admits the hunger artist, and then chastises the overseer for saying that he is admired. Finally the hunger artist claims that he only fasted because “I couldn’t find any food I liked.” After these last words, the hunger artist finally dies from his starvation.

There is a certain irony in what’s happened to the hunger artist. By trying to deny the most fundamental of human concerns, he has attempted to lift himself above society and provoke others to question what it really means to be alive. But the result of his “art” hasn’t been any kind of group revelation—instead, he has become more and more like the animals near his cage. He has, in fact, become sub-human, a caged creature that doesn’t even have any of the physical prowess or exoticism that makes the animals captivating.



Finally the hunger artist is free to take his art as far he has always wanted. But there is one fatal flaw: there’s nobody around to authenticate his fast, no way of measuring its length, and not enough concern for him to make sure he comes back from the brink of death. The main reason for the neglect of the hunger artist is that as a product, he’s no longer worth anything, be that money or care and attention. But if his act is dependent on his worth as a product, it raises the question of whether or not his art was ever the pure and noble practice that he thought it was in the first place.



The hunger artist is now so worthless to the circus that he’s been completely forgotten. He’s now less valuable than the cage that contains him, and it’s only because a member of staff thinks the cage should be put to use that he is discovered in his terrible state. No doubt this has been the greatest fast of his life—but it’s also the most meaningless, because nobody’s watching. This is further exemplified by the exchange between the hunger artist and the staff at the end. The staff are just trying to appease the hunger artist, saying on the one hand they respect him and on the other they don’t (depending on what he seems to want them to say). The hunger artist seems confused, but what he does actually makes sense—his whole life he’s been a contradiction, trying to go beyond society but always needing its attention to give his art meaning. It’s difficult to know what the reader should make of the hunger artist’s claim that he only fasts because he can’t find any food that he likes—that’s patently not true when the rest of the story is taken to account. Alternately, it could be a somewhat poetic statement about the artist’s fundamental disconnection from the rest of society—the “food” he was looking for was human connection and understanding, and he never was able to find that. Or perhaps these final words are Kafka’s absurdist joke for the reader, a darkly humorous challenge to find the meaning in the story that the public never truly found in the hunger artist, and that he never found in them.



The overseer of the circus quickly makes sure that they move on, and he has the hunger artist buried. They replace the hunger artist with a “young **panther**,” which quickly catches the imagination of the spectators, and which seems “not to miss freedom” now that it has all the food it wants. “Its love of life came so powerfully out of its throat that it was no easy matter for spectators to withstand it.” At least for a while, the public is enraptured by the new exhibit: “they steeled themselves, clustered round the **cage**, and would not budge.”

There is no time to mourn the hunger artist in the cut-throat world of entertainment, and the public certainly doesn't miss him. This new exhibit is much more captivating: the raw animal nature of the panther shows the audience something genuinely different from them, and something so much easier to understand than the hunger artist. There is no philosophy needed to enjoy the panther, and its physicality is much more impressive than that of the hunger artist. The panther is a creature in its physical prime, in all its muscular glory—quite the contrast with the previous inhabitant of the cage. The circus, then, supplies what the audience demands, following the market forces that once made the hunger artist a popular act but have since forced him into irrelevance and, ultimately, death.





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