A Hunger Artist Study Guide

A Hunger Artist by Franz Kafka

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Introduction

Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" was first written in 1922 and published in a collection also entitled *A Hunger Artist*. Although Kafka died in 1924, as he was still in the process of correcting the galley proofs, the collection was nevertheless published that same year. "A Hunger Artist" is one of the few manuscripts which Kafka did *not* request that his friends burn or otherwise destroy after his death.

"A Hunger Artist," which takes place in an unspecified time and place, is about a man worldfamous for his public performances of the act of fasting, for as much as forty days at a time. Even at the height of his career, the hunger artist is unsatisfied with his work and frustrated by both his manager and his audiences, who never fully appreciate his true talent or the purity of his "art." The hunger artist struggles internally with his sense of dissatisfaction with himself and his feelings of alienation from the world outside the "cage" in which he fasts. As the years go by, the hunger artist's profession goes out of vogue, while audiences move on to newer trends in mass entertainment.

Kafka's stories are often described as fables or parables, and "A Hunger Artist" certainly shares this quality. It is just absurd enough to suggest that its meaning is symbolic rather than literal. As in many of Kafka's stories, "A Hunger Artist" also explores themes of self-hatred, inadequacy, and alienation. "Hunger" becomes symbolic of both a lust for life and a spiritual yearning. The circumstance of the protagonist confined in a claustrophobic space is also a common motif in Kafka's work. The hunger artist's "cage" functions as both a refuge from the outside world and a barrier between the artist and the rest of humanity.

Author Biography

Franz Kafka was born into a Jewish family in Prague in 1883. He earned a law degree in 1906 and worked for the Workers Accident Insurance company for most of his adult life. His writing was first published in 1909, and he continued to publish short stories, all written in German, until his death in 1924, shortly before his forty-first birthday. Kafka's literary style is best captured by the term, "Kafkaesque," which has gained broad circulation in common parlance. While this term can mean different things to different people, it is generally used to describe situations which evoke the dark, angstridden, claustrophobic, oppressive, and nightmarish mood of most of his stories.

One of the most significant influences on Kafka's life and work was his domineering father. Kafka's stories often contain themes drawn from the burden of his father's tyranny in his home life, depicting settings of confinement as well as convoluted systems of punishment and other expressions of seemingly all-powerful authority. Nevertheless, Kafka lived with his family for most of his life, moving out for only short intervals. His personal life, meanwhile, was marked by a series of broken and delayed engagements, as well as temporary love affairs.

Kafka has been strongly associated with the city of Prague, as its atmosphere haunts much of his work. He lived in Prague's Jewish ghetto, one of the oldest in Europe, which served as a means of segregating Jews from the rest of the population. Consequently, the ghetto proved a haven of Jewish culture. Kafka once described the ghetto as "my prison cell my fortress."

Although it is never referred to directly, Kafka's Jewish identity in an atmosphere of anti-Semitism is thought to be an underlying theme of his work. His interest in Jewish culture lead him to attend lectures on Judaism as well as to study Yiddish and Hebrew. In the last few years of his life, he lived with Dora Diamont (or Dymant), with whom he considered moving to Palestine. In 1942, long after Kafka's own death, all three of his sisters, as well two of his lovers, were killed in German concentration camps. Had he lived long enough, Kafka himself would likely have died in a concentration camp as well.

In 1917, Kafka showed the first symptoms of tuberculosis and was in and out of sanitariums for the rest of his life. Shortly before he died, Kafka made requests to both Dora and to his close friend Max Brod to burn all of his unpublished writing. But Brod was wise enough to appreciate the potential contribution of Kafka's work to world literature and made great efforts to edit, translate, and publish much of this material. As a result of Brod's diligence, Kafka, who died in relative obscurity, is now considered to be one of the most important writers of the twentieth century.

Plot Summary

This story is told primarily from the perspective of a "hunger artist," who fasts for up to forty days at a time while sitting in a cage scattered with straw, which is placed on display in a public location, as a form of mass entertainment. In the opening line, the reader is informed that public interest in the "art" of fasting has declined in recent years.

At the height of the hunger artist's career, and of public interest in his performances, things were different. The whole town would "take a lively interest" in his performances; most people made a point of looking at him at least once a day, and the children, most of all, were enthralled by him. To prove that he was not sneaking any food, local men, usually butchers, were assigned to guard the cage at night. The artist was always frustrated by those who made a point of giving him the opportunity to sneak food, which he never did because, "the honor of his profession forbade it." This mistrust of the purity of his art was frustrating to the artist, who preferred those who watched him diligently throughout the night.

The sources of the hunger artist's lifelong dissatisfaction with his performances were many. Since no one could ever really know for sure that he was not cheating, that perhaps he was secretly sneaking food, only the artist himself could fully appreciate the purity of his fasting, as a result of which he was "bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast." But this was not his only source of dissatisfaction. He was also dissatisfied with himself because he found it incredibly easy to fast. Yet he had to "put up with" the fact that no one would believe him that it was so easy, and so "his inner dissatisfaction always rankled." Furthermore, his impresario limited his fasts to forty days. Although the artist was sure he could fast for much longer, the public's attention could not be maintained for longer than that. As a result, the artist never "left his cage of his own free will." Since the end of his fast was a key part of his "performance," the artist had to put up with the impresario's insistence on emphasizing to the audience that the fast had actually been extremely difficult. Worst of all, the artist was forced to eat his first bite of food before the public, as part of the performance, although he had no desire at all to eat. While the crowds were perfectly satisfied with his performances, the artist himself remained "unsatisfied." This all added to his frustration at not being allowed to break his own record with a performance "beyond human imagination."

In all the "rush and glitter of success," the artist failed to notice that his profession had declined in popularity. In fact, "a positive revulsion from professional fasting was in evidence." Audiences had moved on to newer forms of entertainment, as a result of which his career was in rapid decline. When they could no longer deny this change, the artist and the impresario, "his partner in an unparalleled career," went their separate ways, and the artist was reduced to the status of circus sideshow.

For the artist, hiring himself to the circus was the ultimate humiliation. His cage was placed at the entrance to the menagerie so that the only people who noticed him were the crowds waiting impatiently to see the animals. As a result, he was increasingly passed over by his potential spectators. Eventually, even the circus managers forgot him and neglected to change the sign announcing the number of days of his fast.

One day, a circus overseer notices the seemingly empty cage and discovers the hunger artist, on the verge of death, buried in the straw. No one would ever know how long he'd been fasting. A skeletal figure, the hunger artist whispers his last words in the overseer's ear: "I have to fast, I can't help it." When asked why he can't help it, the artist explains, "because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else."

The hunger artist is buried with his straw, and a young panther takes his place in the cage. In the panther, unlike the artist, "the joy of life streamed with ardent passion." Also unlike the hunger artist, who is emaciated and never satisfied, the panther's body is "furnished to the bursting point with all that it needed." The circus spectators "crowded around the cage," and could not stop looking at him.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Interest in professional fasting is declining. The professional, or hunger artist, is becoming as disillusioned with his audience as they are with him. He watches from the barred cage where he sits in straw with only a clock for company. He sips from a glass of water, answering questions "with a constrained smile." He dresses his pallid body in black tights. His bare ribs protrude. Occasionally, he stretches out an arm so a visitor can feel how thin it is. He recollects the glorious days when villagers bought season tickets to his performances, and he weighs those memories against the current reality that only children still marveled, that adults found him "a joke that happened to be in fashion."

The hunger artist also remembers those most familiar with him and his profession, who believe in his truth without need of proof. They stand in stark contrast to the relay teams of watchers who keep vigil to ensure that the hunger artist does not cheat. They are usually butchers and have various motives for taking part, but none seem to believe in the legitimacy of the hunger artist. At night, when the scene is lit dramatically with torches, they often huddle for a card game giving the hunger artist many opportunities to sneak food. This practice annoys the hunger artist most. In an effort to overcome their suspicions, he musters his strength and sings. Still, the watchers would not believe; they only wondered at how he was able to fill his mouth even while singing.

The hunger artist prefers the spectators who sit close to the bars, shine a bright light on him and stare intently. He cannot sleep anyway. Therefore, he is happy to exchange jokes and stories with these watchers – anything to keep them awake while he proves himself.

His happiest moment is in the morning when onlookers devour an enormous breakfast he provides. Even then, there are those who argue that the breakfast is a bribe. Perhaps it is, but not for the reason that people suspect. Watchers who are asked to take a night's shift without being promised breakfast, make themselves scarce.

The hunger artist tries to reconcile himself to the suspicions of others. He recognizes that no one can watch continually so only he can be completely "satisfied" with his fast. Yet, the hunger artist is not satisfied and speculates as to reasons other than fasting that might account for his skeletal thinness.

He even says to others that it is easy for him to fast, to do something others might find difficult or impossible, although he does not say why. People respond to his honesty with disbelief. They dismiss him as modest or suspect him of cheating or of seeking publicity.

The hunger artist then describes the end of a fast. The period, fixed by his manager, the impresario, is always 40 days. The flower-bedecked cage is opened amid fanfare. Two doctors measure the results of the fast, which are announced through a megaphone. A band plays. Two ladies appear to lead the hunger artist to his repast. He refuses to stand, longing instead to continue his fast, to beat his record, to turn in a performance beyond human imagination. If he could endure it, why should he disappoint his public? More realistically, he was tired, though comfortable in the straw. He was nauseated by the thought of food. The impresario comes forward, raises his arms heavenward as if to beseech a blessing, grasps the hunger artist around his waist with exaggerated caution while secretly shaking him so that he could hardly stand. The hunger artist lets his head loll on his breast, hollows out his body and scrapes his feet on the ground as he is thrust into the reluctant arms of one of the waiting ladies. She stretches her neck unsuccessfully to avoid contact. The other lady, clutching his bony fingers, bursts into tears and has to be replaced. The impresario then offers a toast to the crowd, supposedly prompted by a whisper from the hunger artist. The spectators disperse. No one is left dissatisfied except the hunger artist.

Part 1 Analysis

Franz Kafka wrote "A Hunger Artist" in 1922 as part of a four-story collection published shortly after his death 1924. All four stories dealt with the subject of artists in relationship to society. Typical of Kafka, "A Hunger Artist" asks the reader to accept as real an impossible story line in search of the truth contained in the lie. The dark parable also contains his typical protagonist, a character misunderstood and even victimized by his society.

This story also feels real because of its autobiographical nature. Kafka was thin, frail and preoccupied with food. He said he became a vegetarian for humanitarian reasons. He once remarked to fish in an aquarium, "Now I can look at you in peace; I don't eat you anymore." However, critics contend his preoccupation with food was a reaction to feelings about his father's powerful physique. Alternatively, they suggest, it might have been a means of rejecting the physical strength he would never have, much the way the hunger artist denied himself food he would never like. In 1917, Kafka was diagnosed with the tuberculosis that would kill him.

Kafka also felt unappreciated and misunderstood, as did the hunger artist. He lived in cramped housing, forced to take an office job he hated in order to support his family. Likewise, the hunger artist confined himself to a cage and hired himself out to a circus, where his art was not understood. Both the author and his character can lay claim to the same identity: the misunderstood artist whose work is compromised by the need to earn a living.

The hunger artist is the only one who can truly understand his art because he alone knows what he suffers; the gluttonous butchers simply assume he cheats, devouring their breakfast even as he continues his fast. The paradox is that the audience does not understand, but is pleased with the performance while the artist understands, but remains displeased.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

The hunger artist continues to fast for years, his performances broken only by short periods of recuperation. He still feels the glory and honor of his profession but continues to be "troubled in spirit," especially when people do not take his troubles seriously or accuse his profession of being the source of his melancholy.

At times, he reacts angrily, but the impresario works his cage rattling into the act by agreeing with the audience that fasting is responsible for the irritability they witness. He goes on to say that the hunger artist can barely endure his forty-day fast. The hunger artist silently disagrees, believing instead that he is sad because he is not allowed to continue fasting when he is in his best form. The impresario wraps up the routine by producing pictures of the hunger artist – for sale to the public – that show him apparently near death at the end of a fast. The hunger artist collapses on his straw and the people draw near again. In time, the people abandon the hunger artist for other attractions. He tours remote parts of Europe with the impresario hoping to find his audience elsewhere. When this fails, the two part company.

Part 2 Analysis

While the hunger artist needs his audience to validate his art with their presence, their lack of understanding continues to frustrate him. Yet, their inability to understand his art also insulates him from criticism. If they fail to understand his art, then how can they pass judgment? It is a vicious cycle. The more the hunger artist suffers, the less his audience understands, and the more he suffers. The hunger artist dreams of pushing himself to limits beyond human imagination even after his audience has deserted him for other attractions and no one is paying him any attention.

If the hunger artist's art is a metaphor for suffering, then his admission that fasting is easy is an acceptance of that suffering. Artists, notably writers, often use their art as a means of catharsis and sharing. It is also a selfish, self-centered practice, often inflicting the same pain it seeks to relieve. At times, artists seem to want their audiences to suffer as they do—as it is with the hunger artist, who wonders why his audience would not endure what he is willing to endure.

There are parallels drawn between the hunger artist and Jesus Christ, the paramount figure of suffering. The impresario limits the hunger artist's fasts to forty days, referencing two significant biblical events. The first reference would be to Christ's temptation by the devil in the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days and forty nights. The second would be the forty years of wandering, a punishment to Jews for idolatry while searching for the Promised Land.

The hunger artist is also described as a suffering martyr. The first two definitions seem to support the comparison with Christ. They define a martyr as one killed for refusing to renounce a religion or one who sacrifices something of great value for a principle. However, it is the third definition that may be more applicable in terms of the hunger artist. It defines a martyr as a victim or one in great or constant sufferer.

Despite the impresario's limits, initially the hunger artist is free to script his own performance, nodding courteously, withdrawing into himself or answering questions "with a constrained smile." Then, as his frustration with the limits of his fast and his audience grows, the hunger artist cannot contain his anger until his closest ally deserts him as well.

The impresario lies about the hunger artist's irritability and anger. He even uses photographs to "prove" that fasting causes the hunger artist's disposition and that he could not possibly continue beyond the limits placed upon him. The audience accepts this evidence that they can hold in their hands even more than the man who stands before them. The audience is not interested in private suffering, but is compelled by the public spectacle. For example, they are delighted when one of the ladies cries. The same audience that is fascinated with pictures of suffering cannot be engaged in that suffering.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

The disillusioned hunger artist tells himself he is too old to learn a new profession and too important to do small village fairs. In hopes of preserving his art until it comes into vogue again, he joins the circus.

His cage is positioned outside the main tent on the way to the menagerie. Gaily-printed placards frame his cage and a notice board keeps track of the number of days in his fast. At first, he looks forward to the crowds who pour out of the big top after a performance. However, the narrow gangway divides the audience into two warring factions: those who want to visit with him and those who want to get past quickly to see the animals. The ensuing commotion is hard to bear, as are the usual comments of disbelief, chicanery and now and then, an older patron recalling more thrilling performances than his.

In addition, the hunger artist must endure the stench of the animals and the raw lumps of meat they eat, their restlessness at night and the roaring at feeding time that he finds particularly depressing. He doesn't complain because he has the animals to thank for the small attentions he receives and because he fears where he might be secluded next if management came to see him as no more than an impediment to the crowd on the way to other attractions.

In time, his dirty illegible placards are torn down; his notice board is no longer updated. Now, even the hunger artist has no idea of his accomplishments. He has fasted as he wanted, but felt cheated of his reward by the fickle and cynical audience that had deserted him.

One day, circus attendants inspecting an apparently empty cage find his withered body in the straw. The hunger artist asked them to forgive him, that he had wanted them to admire his fasting. They respond that they have admired it. No, the hunger artist explains, they should not have, that he did not eat simply because he never found the food he liked. He dies, and he is buried. In his cage, the attendants place a young panther. The once-free and fierce beast is hard to watch, but the audience that is drawn to it never wants leave.

Part 3 Analysis

The hunger artist, who once sought legitimacy for his art form, is now bowing to the will of a fickle audience who simply wants to be entertained. The strategic location of his cage proves to be nothing more than an obstacle for an audience on the way to other attractions. His proximity to the animals in the menagerie rather than the people viewing the main attraction is further evidence of his debasement.

The hunger artist's aversion to hearing the animals eat is in stark contrast to his earlier happiness while watching the butchers eat their breakfast, something over which he exercised some control. His audience is no longer there; they are interested in the animals. The hunger artist knows he has become little more than a sideshow. His anger toward his audience is turned inward. The idea of the animals eating and their celebration of food—the roaring at meal times—now depresses him.

The hunger artist elaborates on how easy it is for him to fast, saying he has simply not found any food he likes. This could be Kafka's wry commentary on his own vegetarianism. The hunger artist implies that food was not made for him, that the world was not made for him. Thus, his suffering was a natural byproduct of his alienation, not something to be admired. He says if he had found some food he liked, he would have gladly stuffed himself. Perhaps, if the world had been meant for him, he might have been more a part of it. Nevertheless, the hunger artist feels the world has cheated him of his reward.

In his dying conversation with the circus attendants, the hunger artist claims that he wanted to be admired, but his actions betray his true desire when he speaks "with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer's ear." He had lived his life as a symbol of suffering while longing for the love he barred.

The panther replaces the hunger artist as the next attraction. Kafka paints the animal as the antithesis of the hunger artist – a symbol of hunger, freedom and life – with phrases about its "noble body, furnished almost to the bursting point with all that it needed," the freedom lurking in its jaws and "the joy of life" streaming from its throat. The last line describes a spectacle from which the audience "did not want to ever move away" and suggests that the panther has supplanted the hunger artist as a much more understandable, commercially viable art form. It is written with such conviction that the reader is left to wonder if the audience will someday desert the panther as it did the hunger artist.

Characters

Hunger Artist

This story is told primarily from the perspective of the main character, known only as a "hunger artist," a world-famous performer, the "record hunger artist of all time." He travels the world, "performing" his fasts publicly, as a form of mass entertainment. Although the best of the best, the hunger artist continues to be unsatisfied with his performances. Even at the height of his career, he feels that his "work" is never adequately appreciated by his audience, who fail to recognize his true potential. Furthermore, he feels thwarted in his efforts to break his own records, by both the attention span of the public and by the promotional strategies of his impresario (manager). His personal frustrations with his audience and his own "work" are expressive of those felt by many types of artists, who often see their audiences as unable to appreciate their true talent. As the hunger artist ages, his "art" goes out of vogue, and he is relegated to an insignificant space in a circus, where he is eventually forgotten by the circus managers and virtually ignored by the crowds, who are more interested in seeing the "menagerie."

Impresario

The hunger artist's "impresario" is his manager and publicity agent (much as popular musicians today have managers who book their performances and oversee their public image). The impresario, "his partner in an unparalleled career," is clearly a shrewd and invaluable promoter of his work, as well as a buffer between the artist and his audience. Unlike the artist, the impresario's motivation is to develop the artist's career by creating a public image designed to please the crowds. The impresario limits the artist's fasting performances to a maximum of forty days, because he knows that the crowds lose interest after this point. Although the artist's career success is dependent upon the impresario, he is continually frustrated by these limitations, which he sees as a violation of the purity of his art. When it becomes clear that there is no longer a public demand for the art of fasting, the impresario and the hunger artist go their separate ways.

Themes

Alienation & Isolation

"A Hunger Artist" is the story of one man's feelings of intense alienation and isolation. This state, however, is partly self-imposed, a necessary condition of his "art." The hunger artist spends his fasting performances, and therefore most of his life, in a cage, on display before nameless crowds. Beck has observed that his need to fast is "symbolic of his isolation from the community of men." The cage itself symbolizes the barrier between the artist and the rest of the world. During most of his fasts (which last for up to forty days), the artist sits in a meditative state, "withdrawing deep into himself, paying no attention to anyone or anything." His personal life is therefore almost completely internally, although he is constantly on public display.

Spiritual Yearning

References to spiritual yearning and religious symbolism in "A Hunger Artist" are subtle but pervasive. Critic Meno Spann has analyzed the food imagery in Kafka's writing and concluded that "for Kafka, physical deprivation or hunger represents spiritual hunger and is associated with the 'unknown nourishment' so many of Kafka's characters seek."

The hunger artist is also described as a religious "martyr," although his martyrdom is based on his own professional frustrations rather than any spiritual enlightenment. At the public spectacle which ended each fast, the impresario "lifted his arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the straw, this suffering martyr, which indeed he was, although in quite another sense." The hunger artist's professional success does not make up for his spiritual emptiness as he spends much of his life "in visible glory, honored by the world, yet in spite of that troubled in spirit, and all the more troubled because no one would take his trouble seriously." Ironically, while fasting is associated with devotion to God, the hunger artist's fasts seem only to exacerbate what Max Brod has maintained to be a central concern of Kafka's writing: "the anguish and perplexity of modern man in search of God."

The Joy of Life

In addition to spiritual hunger, the hunger artist also suffers from an inability to engage in "the joy of life." In spite of his professional success, the hunger artist is "never satisfied." Food, for obvious reasons, symbolizes life, and the hunger artist's inability to find "the food that I liked" symbolizes his inability to muster a passion for living. The relationship between an appetite for food and a "passion" for life in this story is best illustrated by the final image of the panther who replaces the hunger artist in the circus cage. In contrast to the hunger artist, the panther's hearty appetite is a measure of his *joi d'vivire* (joy of life), for "the food he liked was brought him without hesitation," and his "noble body" was "furnished almost to the bursting point with all that it needed." In keeping with the panther's satisfaction with his meals, "the joy of life streamed with ardent passion from his throat."

Change and Transformation

"We live in a different world now," the opening paragraph proclaims. The hunger artist's professional downfall is due to circumstances beyond his control: "it seemed to happen almost overnight." Times are changing and the form of entertainment he provides is no longer popular with the masses, who have moved on to "other more favored attractions." In fact, his "art" comes to be despised, as "everywhere, as if by secret agreement, a positive revulsion from professional fasting was in evidence." The artist's frustration with the whole world is partly due to his feeling that these inevitable cultural changes are simply unfair. He can hardly accept that he has been outmoded.

The Suffering Artist in the Modern World

The artist's sense of alienation is partly a function of his lifelong struggle over the feeling that no one but he himself fully understands and appreciates his art. As one critic has explained, the hunger artist represents "a symbol or allegory of the suffering artist in society." He alone knows the truth about his accomplishments: "to fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of nonunderstanding, was impossible." "Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting! Anyone who has no feeling for it cannot be made to understand it." He in fact blames the "whole world" for not granting him the "satisfaction" he feels her deserves: "It was not the hunger artist who was cheating, but the whole world was cheating him of his reward."

Style

Point of view

"A Hunger Artist" is written from a thirdperson limited perspective, meaning that the narrator is an abstract voice, not a character in the story. But the story is told mostly from the perspective, or point-of-view, of the hunger artist. Only in the final paragraph, as the hunger artist is dying, does the narrational perspective broaden out.

Imagery and Symbolism

Hunger. The most prominent symbolic motif in "A Hunger Artist" is hunger. This "hunger" motif is characterized by the hunger artist's lifelong feelings of dissatisfaction. No matter how successful and famous he becomes, the hunger artist remains "unsatisfied" and "troubled in spirit." Hunger symbolises both a lust for life and a spiritual yearning. The Hunger Artist's dying admission is that, "I have to fast, I can't help it.... I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." His inability to find the food that he likes is symbolic of his inability to engage in "the joy of life" or find spiritual fulfillment.

The Cage. The hunger artist spends most of his life sitting in a display "cage." The image of the cage strewn with straw, set finally at the entrance to the "menagerie" in a circus, draws a parallel between the hunger artist and the caged animals in the circus. When he is particularly frustrated by his audience's questions, the hunger artist would "shake the bars of his cage like a wild animal." The setting of the "cage" is also reflective of the settings of entrapment and images of claustrophobia in a number of Kafka's stories where the main character (whether animal or human) is confined to, or nearly imprisoned in, a single room or other cage-like location. In this case, it represents not just a literal cage, but a psychological and spiritual cage of his own making. In other words, he freely chooses to maintain a profession which bars him from humanity and the flow of life, its physical, social and even spiritual pleasures.

The Panther. The powerful image that ends this story, that of the panther who replaces the hunger artist in his cage at the circus, brings together the symbolic implications of the hunger imagery which runs throughout the story. Unlike the hunger artist, whose body is emaciated, and who lives in a figurative as well as literal cage, on the verge of starvation and death, the panther's "noble body, furnished almost to the bursting point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it." Furthermore, unlike the hunger artist, whose lack of appetite symbolizes a lack of lust for life, in the panther "the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it." Finally, the hunger artist, while literally free (he chooses to be put in a cage), is a prisoner of his own mind; the panther, by contrast, while held in captivity, carries "freedom" within his own body.

Allegory and Parable

Allegory. Allegory is the general term used to describe stories in which the meaning is not so much in the literal elements of the story, but is to be understood on a symbolic level, hidden or buried beneath the surface meaning. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines allegory as expressing "spiritual, psychological, or abstract intellectual concepts in terms of material and concrete objects." In allegories, the details of the story "are found to correspond to the details of some other system or relations." The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that Kafka's stories represent "the most original use of allegory in the 20th Century." Kafka's use of allegory is particularly enigmatic as his stories are "not susceptible of any single or precise interpretation." "A Hunger Artist," with it's absurd premise that fasting is in fact an "art," which for the hunger artist is central to all of life's dilemmas, invites the reader to search for a greater meaning than simply the internal thoughts of a hunger artist. The central symbol of "hunger," for instance, suggests themes of spiritual, social, psychological and existential yearnings.

Parable. "A Hunger Artist" can more specifi- cally be described as a type of allegory called a "parable." Kafka's use of parable has been described in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "one of the most enigmatic in modern literature." While this story clearly invites us to search for a deeper or more abstract meaning, it leaves us with no sense of certainty about what that meaning might be.

Absurdism

This story shares a quality of "absurdism" practiced by a number of writers in the twentieth century, of which Kafka is one of the foremost. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the absurd element of a story is that of "the tragicomic nature of the contemporary human image and predicament," and is primarily represented through images of the "grotesque." The hunger artist builds his profession on his ability to display his own emaciated body as a "grotesque" form. At the point of death, he is hardly a human figure. His life of alienation from human society and perpetual dissatisfaction with himself and others is depicted as "tragic." But this story also has an element of humor which gives it an absurd quality. While sympathizing with the hunger artist's feelings, how can one not break into a wry smile at the very notion of fasting as an "art" which can be "performed" as a source of entertainment? How can one not experience a nagging feeling that perhaps the hunger artist is taking his art a little too seriously?

Historical Context

The Hunger Artists

It may come as a surprise that "A Hunger Artist" is partially based on the real historical phenomenon of "professional fasting." While most critics have failed to note this, Breon Mitchell, in his article, "Kafka and the Hunger Artists," has brought to light the history of a world famous "hunger artist" whose coverage in local newspapers may have inspired Kafka's story. Mitchell points out that "almost every detail" of Kafka's story corresponds to "the actual profession of fasting for pay." He states that, "The correspondence with reality is, in fact, so close that Kafka could not possibly have written the tale without some direct or indirect knowledge of the best-known hunger artists of his time."

The phenomenon of "professional fasting" lasted from 1880-1922, roughly the years of Kafka's lifespan. The first professional fast was accomplished by Dr. Henry Tanner, an American who was said to have gone for forty days under medical observation without food. The most famous of his European imitators was Giovanni Succi, on whom Kafka's story was most likely based. Giovanni "performed" fasts at least 30 different times, for periods of up to 30 days, in various European cities. Many imitators followed in the path of Anderson and Succi, achieving varying levels of success as professional fasters.

Although not in cages, these hunger artists were generally displayed in some form of confinement. Like Kafka's hunger artist, some of them even sold photographs of themselves at various stages of previous fasts. However, in general, these professional fasters had normal body types and looked relatively healthy (not the least bit emaciated) both before and after their fasts. In light of this, Kafka may have combined a different type of entertainer with the professional fasters in creating his character. Claude Ambroise Seurat, "The Living Skeleton," whose anatomy was excessively bony and skeletal, was exhibited in "freak show" type performances, very different from that of the professional fasters.

With the development of twentieth-century forms of mass entertainment, the place of "hunger artists" had indeed declined by the time Kafka wrote his story. And, in fact, this decline occurred simultaneously with the newer practice in circus entertainment of displaying wild animals, often big cats such as lions and leopards. Mitchell concludes that "from beginning to end, Kafka's tale accurately reflects an actual development in the history of European popular culture."

Prague's Caf Life and Literary Salons

Prague boasted an active caf culture during this time, where artists and intellectuals met at informal "salons." The Caf Continental, of which Kafka was a regular attendant, was a well-known location for one such salon. Others he frequented included the Caf Arco, Caf Central, and the Caf Louvre. Max Brod, Kafka's friend and editor, described these meeting places as "free and open to ideas, crammed together in four or five rooms, smoky, stifling, thick with the fumes of mocha coffee." More organized forums for literary discussion were various literary meetings and clubs. Kafka became associated with the "Prague Circle," an internationally recognized literary society of German-Jewish authors.

German Literary Movements

While Kafka never explicitly subscribed to any particular literary movement, he was associated with the fashionable literati of his day and his writing is now understood as representative of several schools of literature. Prominent schools of thought in the early part of the twentieth century included Expressionism and Symbolism, both of which Kafka is now considered a key example. Expressionism, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, was the "key movement in German literature" in the World War I era. The expressionist style "emphasized the inner significance of things and not their external forms." Kafka's influence by, and contribution to, expressionism took the form of a "negative vision," in which "with the stark clarity of a nightmare, he depicted the horror and uncertainty of human existence." Like expressionism, the symbolist movement emphasized the inner world, creating a literary style described as dreamlike or nightmarish.

Prague

At the time of Kafka's birth in 1883, the city of Prague was ruled under the Hapsburg Empire, as part of the Kingdom of Bohemia. World War I, however, brought about significant changes in Prague's national identity. The war, which began with the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand, resulted in the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire. During the first two years after the war, Prague became the capitol of the newly formed Republic of Czechoslovakia. As part of this New Republic, Prague changed from a city dominated by German language and culture to one dominated by Czech language and culture. However, because he spoke Czech as well as German, Kafka was able to keep his job, even though he was the "token" Jew in his company.

Jews in Prague

During Kafka's lifetime, Prague was "a city of three peoples." In 1900, the city of a half-million people was populated mostly by Czechs. Germans, however, while only about six percent of the population, made up the dominant culture of Prague. At five percent of the population, the Jews in Prague spoke German and identified themselves with German culture. Most Jews, however, like Kafka, lived in Josefov, the Jewish "ghetto," a walled-off section of the city which served to maintain segregation of Jews from the rest of the population.

Many Jews at this time, like Kafka's father, were assimilationist, meaning that they largely ignored their Jewish identity in hopes of blending into the dominant German culture. However, anti- Semitism from both Czechs and Germans meant that neither accepted the Jews as their own. As a result, Jews in Prague were always seen as the scapegoats of either ethnic group in times of crisis, and waves of anti-Semitic rioting swept through the Jewish ghetto in times of national unrest. The Czech population, for instance, went through waves of nationalist sentiment, during which they targeted the Jews as the most visible and hated element associated with German culture. Other riots on the part of anti-Semitic German sentiments also swept through the ghetto.

Critical Overview

Kafka's Lifetime

Though not widely recognized during his lifetime, Kafka was well-respected within his small literary, intellectual circle in Prague, the members of whom were aware of his considerable talents. Kafka published his first prose pieces at the age of 25 in *Hyperion*, a journal edited by his close friend Max Brod. Throughout his brief life, he continued to publish in journals, as well as several small volumes of his stories.

Posthumous Publications

Kafka was one of those classic literary figures who lived and wrote in relative obscurity, only to be hailed as one of the foremost writers of his century years after his death. Shortly before his death, Kafka requested that his female companion, Dora Diamant, burn all of his unpublished writing, echoing a similar request to his close friend Max Brod. Brod, however, was wise enough to see the potential importance of Kafka's work to international literature and subsequently acted against his friend's dying wish. Brod spent years organizing and editing Kafka's many manuscripts, which were generally in fragments and multiple drafts with chapters unnumbered and out of order, assigning them titles, and seeing that they were translated and published.

The Nazi Regime

During the Reign of Adolph Hitler, Kafka's writing was both reviled and celebrated, depending on which part of the world one is referring to. In Nazi Germany, where Kafka's three sisters and two of his lovers perished in concentration camps, Kafka's surviving work was unavailable; anything which didn't escape the Holocaust with Max Brod was destroyed or banned. Max Brod escaped the Holocaust in 1939, with Kafka's work in tow, and eventually settled in Palestine. Many more of the late Kafka's manuscripts, however, left in Prague with his female companion Dora Diamant, were destroyed in 1933 during a Nazi raid on her apartment. None of Kafka's publications were available in Prague for ten years after his death. In France and the English-speaking world, meanwhile, Kafka was gaining international notoriety (thanks to Max Brod).

The Post-War Era

During the post-War era, Kafka's work was once again available in Germany and Austria, where it became an important influence on German literature. But, under the communist regime that ruled Prague after 1948, Kafka's work did not fare so well. The dominant artistic school of "socialist realism" dictated a style of writing which was completely "realistic," in the sense of maintaining the values of socialist ideals. Of course, Kafka's surreal parables did not conform to this aesthetic, and his work was accused of expressing bourgeois decadence. But for those living under this regime who managed to get a hold of a smuggled copy of his book *The Trial*, Kafka did indeed seem to be representing a realistic image of the nightmarish and oppressive bureaucracy which characterized the Russian system of government. This even furthered the government's reasons for banning his work. Nonetheless, Kafka's literary reputation throughout the world was becoming widespread and influential.

The 1960s

From 1963-1968, Kafka's work did enjoy a brief period of renewed legitimacy in his homeland, based on the efforts of a group of intellectuals to redeem him in the eyes of Czech communists. In 1968, however, a series of events referred as "Prague Spring," during which Russian tanks rolled into Prague against ardent protest by its citizens, once again lead to the banning of Kafka's books.

The 1990s

With the end of the Cold War, signified by the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, Prague was released from communist rule and made the capitol of the newly formed Czech Republic. The city's association with Kafka has since become a tourist attraction, and the area of the city which was once Kafka's loved and hated Jewish ghetto has become an American-influenced tourist trap, complete with Kafka t-shirts, souvenirs and guided tours. As David Zane Mairowitz has cynically, although perhaps realistically, described this phenomenon, Kafka is now "finding his place amidst the KITSCH." Zane Mairowitz goes on to explain that, "After years of ignoring him or treating him as a pariah, the new Czech Republic is finally discovering its strange Jewish son, no longer a threat and suddenly BANKABLE, as a tourist attraction." He concludes, "the irony would not be lost on him."

International Literary Reputation in the Late 20th Century

Franz Kafka is indisputably one of the most important and influential writers of the twentieth century. However, as to the *meaning* of his stories, there is little in the way of critical consensus. As Franz R. Kempf explains, "Kafka critics only agree on one thing, and that is that they are not in agreement." Perhaps as a result, there is no sign of retreat on the part of critics from adding to the mounds of published critical material on Kafka. A noteworthy addition to this stockpile is a series of new translations of his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, published in 1998, based on newly restored and re-edited editions of the original manuscripts and edited by Breon Mitchell.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan. In the following essay, she discusses possible interpretations of "A Hunger Artist" in light of key factors in Kafka's life.

Critical Essay #2

Kafka was a master of the enigmatic. In his book, *Everyone's Darling: Kafka and the Critics of His Short Fiction, Franz* R. Kempf states that, "Kafka critics only agree on one thing, and that is that they are not in agreement." Kempf points out that Kafka valued this resistance in his work to specific interpretations, as he "understood writing to be a consciously created ambiguity." Walter Benjamin has even asserted that Kafka "took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings." Even Kafka himself, Kempf explains, "found his work to be incomprehensible."

Yet, while Kafka's work resists definitive interpretation, there has been no end to the critical material written about Kafka and his work. In his book *Introducing Kafka*, David Zane Mairowitz claims that, "no writer of our time, and probably none since Shakespeare, has been so widely overinterpreted and pigeonholed." Kafka's work, interpreted and over-interpreted by countless critics over the decades is described by Kemp as "the kaleidoscopic carnival of Kafka criticism." A brief discussion of some of the possible interpretations of "A Hunger Artist" in light of Key themes in Kafka's life will provide a glimpse of several of the many patterns of meaning created by this "kaleidoscope."

As "ambiguity" is "the very core of Kafka's art," his stories invite us to speculate about possible meanings or interpretations, without providing a sense of certainty that any one reading is the reading. Kafka's work, therefore, is best interpreted while keeping in mind this built-in ambiguity. Entertaining several possible interpretations, without having to choose one as the definitive "meaning" of a Kafka story, produces the richest and most meaningful way of discussing his work.

Critical Essay #3

As an allegory, "A Hunger Artist" employs many symbolic motifs which, although interrelated, may be examined separately. The motif of "hunger," for example, takes on a highly symbolic, yet ambiguous, significance in the story. Surprisingly, however, this story is also based on the real historical phenomenon of "professional fasting." While most critics have failed to note this, Breon Mitchell, in his article, "Kafka and the Hunger Artists," has brought to light the history of a world famous "hunger artist" whose coverage in local newspapers may have inspired Kafka's story. Mitchell points out that "almost every detail" of Kafka's story corresponds to "the actual profession of fasting for pay."

The phenomenon of "professional fasting" lasted from 1880 to 1922, roughly the years of Kafka's life span (1883-1924). The first professional fast was accomplished by Dr. Henry Tanner, an American who was said to have gone for forty days under medical supervision without food. The most famous of his European imitators was Giovanni Succi, on whom Kafka's story was most likely based. Giovanni "performed" fasts at least 30 different times, for periods of up to 30 days, in various European cities. Although not in cages, these hunger artists were generally displayed in some form of confinement. Mitchell states that, "The correspondence with reality is, in fact, so close that Kafka could not possibly have written the tale without some direct or indirect knowledge of the best-known hunger artists of his time."

But the fact that "hunger artists" were a real historical phenomenon does not lessen the legitimacy of the story's allegorical meanings. Rather, it adds depth to our understanding of the richness of Kafka's story. As Mitchell suggests, "A Hunger Artist" is both "the powerful literary testament to an inner world," and a means of "linking his own sense of spiritual solitude and artistic mission to figures from the margins of history."

Kafka himself had significant experiences of hunger during the course of his life, due to both illness and poverty. "A Hunger Artist" was written in the last two years of Kafka's life, during which time he was in and out of sanitariums and suffered a variety of treatments for tuberculosis of the larynx. To add to this, Kafka experienced hunger, during the six months he spent in Berlin, due to astronomical inflation resulting in "the total uncertainty of his material existence." He and his female companion Dora Diamant were nearly desperate for food, which only further compromised Kafka's failing health.

Because of the location of the illness in his throat, Kafka was barely able to eat, drink or even speak toward the end of his life. Although he had originally written "A Hunger Artist" before this stage of his illness had set in, it can easily be seen as partly inspired by Kafka's various health and diet regimes over the course of 17 years of tuberculosis. Like the hunger artist, it became increasingly diffi- cult for him to "find the food that I liked." As he himself was, in effect, starving to death, Kafka was still correcting the galley proofs for "A Hunger Artist" at the time of his death in 1924, two months before the story was published.

The symbolic significance of "hunger" in "A Hunger Artist," however, goes well beyond any literal referent. Hunger in this story suggests symbolic references to spiritual yearning. References to spiritual yearning and religious symbolism in "A Hunger Artist" are subtle but pervasive. Critic Meno Spann has analyzed the food imagery in Kafka's writing and concluded that "for Kafka, physical deprivation or hunger represents spiritual hunger and is associated with the 'unknown nourishment' so many of Kafka's characters seek."

Understanding Kafka's religious orientation helps us to make sense of this symbolism. Although he did not practice it as a religion. Kafka developed a great interest in studying his Jewish culture. As with most religions, many Jewish rituals and traditions revolve around food. Fasting is an equally important ritual during the holiday of Yom Kippur. Evelyn Torton Beck has suggested that the hunger artist's fasting suggests "a grotesque distortion of the fasting associated with Yom Kippur, which, ironically, is intended to have the opposite effect of bringing Jews together before God." The hunger artist fasts for periods of 40 days, a time period evocative of biblical events. After Noah built his ark, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. After escaping slavery in Egypt, the Jews wandered in the desert for 40 years.

The hunger artist's fasting and lifelong sense of dissatisfaction is in part symbolic of a hunger for spiritual fulfillment. The hunger artist is also described as a religious "martyr," although his martyrdom is based on his own professional frustrations, rather than any spiritual enlightenment. At the public spectacle which ended each fast, the impresario "lifted his arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the straw, this suffering martyr, which indeed he was, although in quite another sense." The hunger artist's professional success does not make up for his spiritual emptiness, as he spends much of his life "in visible glory, honored by the world, yet in spite of that troubled in spirit, and all the more troubled because no one would take his trouble seriously." Ironically, while fasting is associated with devotion to God, the hunger artist's fasts seem only to exacerbate what Max Brod has maintained to be a central concern of Kafka's writing: "the anguish and perplexity of modern man in search of God."

The meaning of the hunger symbolism in this story is best illustrated by contrasting the hunger artist to the panther who replaces him in the circus cage. In contrast to the hunger artist, whose mouth and throat rarely admit sustenance, the panther eats heartily, and carries "freedom" in his "noble body," and "the joy of life streamed with ardent passion from his throat." Whereas the panther's hearty appetite is associated with "freedom" and the "joy of life," the hunger artist's fasting and inability to find "the food that I liked" is manifest in an emaciated body, "troubled in spirit," and bereft of any sense of the "joy of life."

Critical Essay #4

Many critics have interpreted Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" as an allegory in which the hunger artist serves as a symbol of "the suffering artist in society." His dying words, "I always wanted you to admire my fasting," express the hunger artist's inner torment and lifelong feelings of alienation. This stems primarily from the distance between his own appreciation for the purity of his art and a modern world concerned only with newer forms of mass entertainment. The hunger artist's internal vision of himself as a virtuoso "artist" is perpetually at odds with his public image. While his impresario limits his fasts to a maximum number of 40 days, he longs for the opportunity to "beat his own record by a performance beyond human imagination." Yet, even at the height of his career, his enthusiastic audiences all over the world fail to appreciate "the honor of his profession"; they are always in doubt as to whether or not he may be a fraud, sneaking morsels of food to sustain himself through the fasts. Only the artist himself knows for certain that his fast has been "rigorous and continuous." And so, he suffered to be "the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast."

A closer look at Kafka's own personal experience as a writer will illuminate the significance of such an interpretation, for Kafka has come to be known as the quintessential "suffering artist" of the twentieth century. Kafka's suffering came in many forms, not least of which were his parents' neutral reaction to his minor successes and his own inner torment stemming from self-doubt about the quality of his writing. Kafka suffered from his parents' complete lack of appreciation for his talents. When he proudly handed his father a bound copy of his first published collection of short stories, he was met with indifference and told to set it on his father's nightstand. Any attempts to impress upon them the importance of his writing must have been futile, as the hunger artist knows: "Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting! Anyone who has no feeling for it cannot be made to understand it."

Furthermore, their dismissive attitude towards their son's needs as a writer contributed in part to the terrible conditions under which Kafka wrote— in a small, cramped household with no privacy and dominated by the almost continual sounds of his father's habitual yelling. His bedroom was between that of his parents and the central room of their apartment, so that he was subjected to almost constant noise as he struggled to write during his free time after work. In addition to writing at night, Kafka developed an ability to tune out the chaos around him, which David Zane Mairowitz has referred to as "a kind of self-hypnosis," much as the frustrated hunger artist escapes from the unappreciative crowds by sitting in a meditative state, "withdrawing deep into himself, paying no attention to anyone or anything."

Although Kafka is now indisputably one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, he met with only marginal success during his lifetime and died in relative obscurity. While his talent was appreciated by the small coterie of writers and intellectuals with whom he was associated, his publications were few and his circle of admirers small. Kafka wrote "A Hunger Artist" at the end of a five-year period during which he refrained from all writing intended for publication. As Joachim Unseld has discussed in *Kafka: A*

Writer's Life, attempts to publish his work had become "futile," and he spent much of this time receiving medical treatment for the Spanish Flu. But in January of 1922, Kafka began moving into a "new creative phase." By that Spring, he had completed "A Hunger Artist," which was accepted for publication in the fall. This minor success "signified a landmark in the history of his publications"; his "selfesteem as a writer" was boosted and he began to see himself as a professional. Even so, he described the finished story as "'bearable' presumably the most positive description the author could elicit in evaluating his own work."

Kafka's internal self-doubt about the quality of his work was most famously expressed through his written requests to both his female companion Dora Diamont and his friend and editor Max Brod that they burn all of his unpublished manuscripts upon his death. However, the suspicion that Kafka may have secretly counted on his friends reluctance to carry out such a wish has been suggested by the writer Jorge Luis Borges in the comment that, "If he really wanted a bonfire, why didn't he just strike the match himself?"

The dual interpretations of "A Hunger Artist" as a parable of both the "suffering artist in modern society," and, as Brod maintained, "an elaborate quest for an unreachable God," can be brought together by an understanding of how Kafka himself viewed the relationship between his writing and spiritual fulfillment. As quoted by Unseld, Kafka's companion Dora Diamont expressed the strong connection between writing and spirituality for Kafka: "For him literature was something holy, absolute, uncompromising, something great and pure." And the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that Kafka understood "his writing and the creative act" to be "a means of redemption," a "form of prayer."

Unlike the hunger artist, who's "art" was out of vogue by the time of his death, Kafka's art did not come into vogue until nearly 40 years after his death. The hunger artist dies behind the times while Kafka died ahead of his time.

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Neumarkt explores the effect a "borderline" existence has on the human psyche, focusing on the isolation of the title character in "A Hunger Artist."

Kafka's collection of short stories which has come down to us under the heading of *Ein Hungerkuenstler* represents the author's last creative production. In each of these stories the ego finds itself largely isolated; yet, there are varying degrees of relatedness by means of which the ego gauges its isolation. In "A Hunger Artist," Kafka has carried this predicament to its most plausible conclusion. The aim of this paper is to explore a psyche exposed to the vicissitudes of a border-line existence. By dwelling on the potential of this unique phenomenon in terms of individuation, I will try to elucidate its concomitant triumph, and pitfalls within the wider framework of the collective setting as it affected Kafka's personality.

Critical Essay #6

"A Hunger Artist" may be divided into two parts. The first is dominated by the "contract" between the hero and his impresario while the second deals with the period between the dismissal of the impresario and the death of the Hunger Artist. This division is not arbitrary but closely follows the course of the particular neurosis in this story in which the pathological background remains paramount.

Students of the psyche are aware of the fact that neuroses are seldom cured in a sense that they are completely removed. What usually happens is that the neurosis is outgrown and loses some of its acute gravity, as the patient moves on to different situational settings. In this process of reorientation, the neurosis is displaced, or better, deprived of its natural habitat and thus relegated to a dormant state for an indefinite period of time. The possibility of reactivation, however, remains an ever present challenge to the ego sphere. If the advance of the neurosis is not expertly checked, the condition may worsen to an extent that makes it impossible for the person to extricate himself. The psychic dilemma of the Hunger Artist lies in his inability to transcend his pathological setting towards new goals, or as we would say in colloquial terms, to come to grips with his neurosis by putting it in its proper place. This pathological streak in his psyche pervades the entire story like a *basso ostinato* that reverberates mightily throughout the composition.

We are dealing here with the Leitmotif of a "Liebestod," that is, flirtation with the finality of death. If "the instinct to eat ... is one of the most elementary of man's psychic instincts," we must *ipso facto* assume that the hero's abstinence from food is his own, mainly unconscious choice in his preparation for death, even as he has consciously chosen the profession of Hunger Artist. His protracted exercises in going hungry constitute, in fact, a process of self-dissolution which bears the distinctive mark of nostalgic regression. The longing to consummate "marriage" with death is, however, constantly thwarted by the letter of the "contract" which forbids the fast to go beyond its forty-day limit. This is an indication that defensive, that is, positive forces within the psyche are still active and strong enough to frustrate any sudden surprise move by the ever present destructive elements. The Tristan and Isolde syndrome we are dealing with in this context has a Wagnerian tone. The chromatic, tension- evoking technique of the musical scale appears in Kafka as a literary device. Each time the fast is interrupted by the impresario, it is as if the Hunger Artist has been cheated out of his natural propensity to complete the cadence on a note of final rest. The "contract" is the lease of life, the *modus operandi*, that remains in effect as long as the association between the artist and impresario is not questioned. Thus the show will go on, for the "impresario ... is present in every man, the essence of the forces that inevitably and without question cling on to life." The setting is existential. Being means being with others, and as such is a sort of contractual assurance that the performance will continue. The possibility of upheaval, that is, of a severe disturbance of the delicate psychic balance with a sudden swing to the dialectical alternative is, as I have pointed out elsewhere, an ever present challenge. Kafka is only too aware of this psychological insight, for no sooner has the Hunger Artist taken leave of the impresario—termination of contract is implicit within each such formal agreement—than the show is fatefully interrupted, and the final marriage with death is about to be consummated. Herbert Tauber alludes to the negative forces as the "falsity of the forces deriving from the negative." However, the term 'falsity' in its contextual association with the negative, is a psychological misnomer. The negative contents of the psyche are just as formidable as reality itself and can never be discounted, as anyone dealing with matters of the unconscious must be aware of.

The trauma of the Hunger Artist furthermore harbors a synchronistic element which is not causally related to his very being: the refusal of the collective to let him continue the fast to his heart's desire. His yearning is "to set the world agape," to fulfil himself in this world which, however, is utterly disinterested in his private desires. "Kafka realized," states Harry Slochower, "that the laceration of individuality could be circumvented only by communal attachment." The trauma of this realization, however, lies in the very essence of "this hopeless Kafkaesque world of blind necessity ... this absurd world." The human stage and its background which is the *sine qua non* of the genuine artist, is suddenly transmogrified into a circus setting with the cage of the Hunger Artist being hardly discernible among the animal stables that hold the attraction of the audience during the intermission. While he is actually begging for a pittance of attention, he has the bitter experience that his cage is "strictly speaking only an obstacle in the path of the stables" around which the people throng. In this synchronistic juxtaposition of artist and world, the latter is completely unrelated to his efforts. The dilemma of the Kafkaesque personality is that "he finds no reliable witness" for his despair. This is reminiscent of the world of Camus' *The Stranger* from which the dialectical struggle has vanished. "Each event of this absurd world is simultaneously real and unreal, possible and impossible." The meaningful causal relationship between the artist and his world has irrevocably been supplanted by a non-causal, hence, indifferently synchronistic coexistence between actor and stage, or as Slochower states: "Kafka reaffirms the paradox of co-existing opposites."

The phenomenon of a "Liebestod" or a nostalgic regression in its encounter with the "contractual," that is, life-affirming postulates leads us further to the assumption that there may be a latent homosexual tendency within Kafka's personality. The contract with the impresario, the father-figure, who makes decisions for the Hunger Artist, is terminated as soon as the absurdity of his circus-existence has dawned upon him. Hand in hand with the collapse of the meaningful outside world goes the unconscious rejection of the father image and its substitution by contents indigenous to the maternal, pleromatic sphere. It is at this particular juncture that the latent homosexual tendency within Kafka can be discerned.

Critical Essay #7

It is not that highly ambivalent relationship of the artist with his father which is psychologically most relevant here, but his intricate, psychic reaction vis-a-vis his mother. While outwardly there is a classical oedipal potential in this particular setting, it would be misleading to analyze it merely as such because the actual resultant is not the author's marriage with the mother, or a mother-like figure, but his rejection of marriage as a suitable solution for himself. The reason for this may be gleaned from Kafka's entry into the diary dated 1911: "I was ... able to spend a good deal of time before falling asleep in imagining that some day, a rich man in a coach and four, I would drive into the Jewish quarter, with a magic word set free a beautiful maiden who was being beaten unjustly, and carry her off in my coach." If we take into consideration the fact that his mother "was untiringly busy helping his father in his business, and most probably irreplaceable," the aforementioned daydream about the rescue of the beaten girl becomes psychologically pertinent. Freud states that in "all male homosexual cases the subjects had had a very erotic attachment to a female person, as a rule to their mother, during the first period of childhood, which is afterwards forgotten." While the presence of a strong father would generally be beneficial for the adolescent to favor a proper decision in the selection of his object from the opposite sex, in this particular case, Kafka's father assumes archaic, monstrous dimensions and is thus instrumental in bringing about the opposite result. In his early years, Kafka was apparently driven into identification with his mother who, at this early stage of the novelist's life, appeared to his imagination as a young beautiful girl whom he desires to rescue from her exploiter husband. The mother for whose care and loving kindness he yearned, but whose love he was deprived of by his brutal father who virtually held her captive in his ghetto, i.e. business establishment, is no longer the object of his pity on a conscious level. Not the mother, but he himself, by way of identity substitution, is the one to bear the brunt of his father's ruthlessness. Freud suggests that "the boy represses the love for the mother by putting himself in her place, by identifying himself with her, and by taking his own person as a model through the similarity of which he is guided in the selection of his love object. He thus becomes homosexual." While I do not infer that Franz Kafka was actively homosexual, there remains the suggestion of such latent propensity in his psychic disposition. This is manifested by his frequent need to rationalize the merits and demerits of marriage as a solution for himself. Thus in a letter of November 1912 to Miss F., a young woman whom he, for a while, seriously considered as an eligible marriage partner, he conjectures that marriage was entirely impractical as far as he was concerned: "I must be alone a great deal. All that I have accomplished is the result of being alone.... Fear of being tied to anyone, of overflowing into another personality. Then I shall never be alone anymore.... Single I might perhaps one day really give up my job. Married, it would never be possible." One year later, in a letter, dated September 1913, Kafka writes: "The very idea of a honeymoon fills me with horror." In all this rationalization he is, however, not unaware that there is some imbalance in his psychic makeup that thwarts all his attempts to consummate marriage. Thus, with reference to the daydream in which he, now a man of twenty-eight, saw himself as a rescuer of the beautiful maiden, there is the dawning realization that his daydreams, "this silly make-believe ... probably fed only on an already unhealthy sexuality." If Kafka's dilemma is seen within the context of the "Liebestod" syndrome, activated by nostalgic regression and characteristic of the uroboric incest motive, the assumption of latent homosexuality is adequately substantiated. Kafka's border-line psyche is the tightrope walk of an ego in isolation. However, the tightrope walker must never permit himself—on a conscious level—to trip into the path of no return, because he is ever bound to cross the dangerous path anew in his never ending game of brinkmanship. Kafka was well aware of his predicament. In a letter to Max Brod, in 1913, he reports a short-lived episode with a Swiss girl. Again his yearning is blunted by his psychosexual dilemma which Kafka, in terms of border-line experience, expresses so aptly in the words: "always the longing to die and yet keeping oneself alive, that alone is love." Kafka's awareness of his "unhealthy sexuality" may be considered a safety valve which prevented him from crossing the border-line into the sphere of psychosis. Within the depth of the psyche, there are no clear cut borders and the analyst is forever in a quandary because he can never be "quite certain that a neurosis never steps beyond the danger-line." Kafka's awareness at times reached dimensions that might leave even the trained observer awestruck, as in the quasi casual conversation between the Inspector and the Hunger Artist:

I. "You are still fasting? . . . Will you ever stop? H.A. "I have always wanted you to admire my going hungry." I. "Well we admire it." H.A. "But you shouldn't admire it." I. "All right, then we don't admire it ... but why shouldn't we admire it?" H. A. "Because I have to go hungry, I can't help it." I. "And why can't you help it?" H.A. "Because I . . . have never found the right food to suit my taste. If I had ... I would have made no fuss and gorged myself as you and the rest of your kind."

The absurdity of this situation lies in the utterly uncoordinated synchronicity of artist and world. Since it cannot be visualized within a dialectical frame of reference, it forces the creative personality into a state of uncontested awareness of desolate, moribund isolation. It lies furthermore in what Max Bense defines as simultaneity of the "real and unreal, possible and impossible," in the dilemma of craving for admiration, yet simultaneously rejecting it as soon as it is expressed. Even on this level of border-line existence, however, the psyche puts up as much of a defensive counter-force as it can muster under the circumstances. If the process of harnessing the archaic, negative forces is to serve the life affirming mechanism of defence, it must relate meaningfully to the individual in question.

Critical Essay #8

If fasting is reflective of the ego in a state of unqualified isolation, then it is, in its widest possible application, simultaneously an expression of the author's relatedness to the world around him, a relatedness which evidently bears no longer the mark of collective standards but of a baroque, silhouetted reflection of the ego, cut loose from the common roots of life. In other words: the concept "meaning" has ejected its inherently collective content and, in terms of moral standards, is reduced to a thoroughly subjective, questionable abstract. Kafka is well aware of this psychic condition. In his story "Investigations of a Dog" the author states: "For today I still hold fasting to be the final, and most potent weapon of research. The way goes through fasting; the highest if it is attainable, is attainable only by the highest effort, and the effort among us is voluntary fasting.... My whole life as an adult lies between me and that fast, and I have not recovered yet." Kafka's confession may appear as if he were postulating fasting as a "most potent weapon of research." This is, no doubt, a neat bit of rationalization by means of which the conscious ego would justify its existence. The quoted exchange between the Inspector and the Hunger Artist stresses that the isolation depicted in this story is a finality, lacking an alternative. Van Gogh expresses himself in a similar vein in a letter to his brother Theo: "either fast or work less, and add to this the torture of loneliness." Thus fasting becomes a means of breaking away from the path of loneliness. In fact, it is within the process of creativity that the artist may go hungry without being aware of it. In this state of transcendence of the material stratum, in this state of weakened physical existence the artist, quite paradoxically, may reach the maximum in terms of productivity. Loneliness as used by Van Gogh and in an implied manner by Kafka, is the exact antonym of isolation, because the latter, within the context of fasting, is the conscious expression of the individual in terms of conative experience, while the former fundamentally reflects a state of deficiency within the individual's collective psyche. Isolation in this reference is the very existential setting of the artist. It is, as I have tried to demonstrate, a synchronistic datum that leaves the personality in a state of uncontested awareness of irreconcilable alienation.

Critical Essay #9

Kafka appraises this development appropriately when he states: "I can only see decline everywhere ... I do not mean that earlier generations were essentially better than ours, but only younger; that was their great advantage, their memory was not so overburdened as ours today." We may not relegate this apercu to the realm of a *bon mot* or chance remark. The artist quite aptly points his finger at a contemporary malaise, namely our "overburdened memory." The pathological symptoms concomitant with exaggerated stress on man's intellectual faculty could not but be seen as a danger signal by Kafka's sensitive psyche. It is for this reason that he warned: "they [our fathers] did not know what we can guess at contemplating the course of history: that change begins in the soul before it appears in ordinary existence." Psychologically speaking, Kafka hints here at the phenomenon of dissociation with reference to the conscious psyche, a process which, in terms of distortion and violence, will undoubtedly exact a more exorbitant price in the future than we are already paying now, if the necessary steps to check this "progress" are not taken in time. At the present stage there is little use for the unconscious, since we pursue the cult of consciousness to the exclusion of all else. Our true religion is a monotheism of consciousness, a possession by it, coupled with a fanatical denial that there are parts of the psyche which are autonomous. Actually, we are still possessed by autonomous, subliminal contents. What once used to be associated with the name God is today known as phobia, compulsion etc. The gods have become diseases.

From the vantage ground of such psychological introspection, Kafka had reason to acknowledge the changes that had started to register in his psyche long before they had reached down to and had become part of the level of experience of the social world. What affected him immediately and intimately would manifest itself in mass-hysteria, psychosis, and other expressions of insanity engulfing mankind as a whole. The psychogenesis of schizophrenia is alluded to by Kafka. If the pathogenesis of schizophrenia were to be stripped of its professional jargon and shifted to a more literary form of expression, I cannot think of a better example than Kafka's description of the overflowing river that "loses outline and shape, slows down the speed of its current, tries to ignore its destiny by forming little seas in the interior of the land, damages the field, and yet cannot maintain itself for long in its new expanse, but must turn back between it banks again, must dry up wretchedly in the hot season that presently follows."

There are two definite, mutually exclusive elements in this somewhat rustic scene. There is the unbridled, destructive force of the water following its gradient down the path of annihilation. This unconscious drive, represented here by the rushing stream was referred to above as "flirtation with death," and may be identified as an integral part of the regression syndrome. There are, however, on the other hand, the defensive forces that almost simultaneously counter the brute, insensitive element until it has been subdued and summoned back to its natural boundaries. This rather conscious reaction that calls the entire array of positive reserve into action against the threat from the sinister depth of the unconscious has been associated with the lifeaffirming potential of the "contract." The breaking asunder of the huge body of water into small inlandseas constitutes, aside from its symbolical representation, the dissociation and disintegration of the ego complex.

Here, Kafka's reference to the "overburdened memory" gives us a clue. If, as I have stressed, the ego sphere is inflated into a monotheism of consciousness, we have *ipso facto* denied the existence of the "tremendum," the autonomous, subliminal contents prevalent in the human psyche. What happens is this: The individual having declared the "tremendum" to be dead "should find out at once where this considerable energy ... has disappeared to. It might reappear under another name, it might call itself 'Wotan' or 'State' or something ending with -ism, even atheism, of which people believe, hope and expect just as much as they formerly did of God. If it does not appear under the disguise of a new name, then it will most certainly return in the mentality of the one from whom the death declaration has issued. Since it is a matter of tremendous energy, the result will be an equally important psychological disturbance in the form of a dissociation of personality. It is as if one single person could not carry the total amount of energy, so that parts of the personality which were hitherto functional units instantly break asunder and assume the dignity and importance of autonomous personalities."

We are dealing here with what Janet has called "abaissement du niveau mental" (reduction of attention). When this etiological requisite is posited, the individual has reached the critical stage where the ego cannot successfully counter the onslaught of the powerful subliminal forces. That Kafka envisaged the possibility of a fateful crossing of the border-line without the alternative of return is suggested in the last part of "A Hunger Artist." Theoretically, at least, that is, within the framework of the story, the author made the possibility of no return a viable alternative. The dismissal of the impresario is the first danger signal in so far as it spells the end of the period associated with the "contract," the symbolical guaranty that the ego defences are fit to ward off any intrusion from the subliminal strata. With the removal of this last safety measure, the existential setting of the Hunger Artist is no longer dominated by the ego complex since it has been divested of its supremacy. In terms of expenditure, the hero of the story has paid in full for his unbridled desire to continue the fast. His death constitutes the final atonement of the artist in relation to the community whose tenets he has violated. This is the literary device by means of which the *dramatis person* can bow out of his performance. The real hero, however, the author behind the uncompromising figure of the Hunger Artist, the man of flesh and blood, is not quite so negative as his literary figure. He is aware of the possibility of returning to his previous *modus operandi*. This is indicated by the receding water that "must turn back between its banks again."

A thorough perusal of Kafka's work will furthermore confirm my suspicion that Kafka was fully aware of the danger inherent in his border-line existence.

Critical Essay #10

In his story "A Little Woman," in which the process of alienation touches on the very psychic balance of the author himself, the synchronicity no longer reflects the artist as an island of psychic manifestations. But unlike the Hunger Artist who crosses over into the sphere of oblivion, the hero in "A Little Woman" establishes a *modus operandi* this side of the danger-line. He is, of course, aware of his predicament he must live with day in and day out, but has come to understand that one cannot stray off the beaten track or flaunt the capricious whims of society with the hope of going unnoticed for any length of time. Thus the author states with plausible confidence: "From whatever standpoint I may look at it my opinion remains unshaken. If I keep this matter [the questionable relationship with his feminine counterpart] under cover, I will be able to continue living in this world." A similar, strong desire not to carry the dissociation of his psychic makeup to an extreme is depicted in "First Sorrow," a short story in which the trapeze artist maintains his existence by physical isolation. He makes his abode high up in the dome structure of the circus and refuses to come down or to have any truck with his fellow workers. The flight of the trapeze artist into his self-chosen "splendid isolation" is, however, not to be looked at as a psychic finality, because the world below—his co-workers and audience—are at all times visible and within earshot, hence at the lowest perimeter of his conscious awareness. This ambivalent situation is part of the Kafkaesque absurdity as well. He can't live with the community, and can't perform without it. The flood-lit vaulted roof above, representative of the sphere of ego consciousness, does not provide for repressive tendencies as such. Thus his "overburdened memory," or in psychological terms, his dissociated existential setting has forced him to live in constant awareness of his absurd state of affairs. The border-line is ever dangerously near, but so are cast and audience to whom he is obligated under "contract." As a result, his delicate psychic condition is kept in a precarious balance.

In sum: The study of the literary masterpiece "A Hunger Artist" has revealed a number of danger zones to which the ego in isolation is prone. There is the particularly grave threat implicit in the "Liebestod" syndrome which initiates the process of nostalgic regression. There is furthermore the Kafkaesque absurdity, a setting which is thoroughly a causal, hence to be grasped in terms of synchronicity only. The implication of latent homosexuality which is intimately tied up with the regressive propensity of Kafka's psyche, and his constant need to rationalize his dilemma are additional phases in this never ending game of brinkmanship. Added to this is the threat to the psyche from utter dissociation due to modern man's "overburdened memory," a gentle reminder to our present day world that the breaking asunder of the ego sphere may engulf humanity in the psychotic darkness of chaos. This legacy of doom transmitted by the artist, due to his exposed station in life, is countered by the life-affirming, psychic contents, represented symbolically by the "contract," the concrete expression of public approval that checks excessive, individual appetites. Thus, the individual can never completely escape the scrutiny of the society that sets his limits. In fact, the process of individuation is only possible because of the *a priori* existence of the undifferentiated state of the sphere of collective consciousness. With this realization, Kafka creates a *modus vivendi* for himself that enables him to skirt the dangerous border-line, the vicissitudes of which the ego in isolation is constantly exposed to.

Source: Paul Neumarkt, "Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist': The Ego in Isolation," in *American Imago*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Summer, 1970, pp. 109-21.

Critical Essay #11

In the following excerpt, Stallman explores the multiple levels of meaning in "A Hunger Artist," proclaiming that it is one of the "greatest short stories of our time."

"A Hunger-Artist" epitomizes Kafka's theme of the corruption of interhuman relationships, as one of his critics defines it. It is one of his perfections, if not his best story, and it belongs surely with the greatest short stories of our time.

The present essay attempts to open up the cage of Kafka's meaning in "A Hunger-Artist," But first, as a starting point for our analysis, here is the story at its literal plane, a matter-of-fact account stripped of interpretation:

The story is about a once-popular spectacle staged for the entertainment of a pleasure-seeking public: the exhibition of a professional "hunger-artist" performing in a cage of straw his stunt of fasting. His cage's sole decoration is a clock. His spectators see him as a trickster and common circus-freak and therefore they expect him to cheat, to break fast on the sly. But fasting is his sole reason for existing, his life purpose; not even under compulsion would he partake of food. For him, to fast is the easiest thing he can do; and so he says, but no one believes in him. Because the public distrusts him, he is guarded—usually by three butchers— and prevented from fasting beyond a forty-day period, not for humane reasons, but only because patronage stops after that time. His guards tempt him with food and sometimes mistreat him; yet they breakfast on food supplied at his expense! A great public festival celebrates his achievement, and thus he is "honored by the world." But when he is removed from his cage he collapses in a rage, not from hunger, but from having been cheated of the honor of fasting on and on and on and of becoming thus "the greatest hunger-artist of all time." Though emaciated almost to the point of death, he quickly recovers and after brief intervals of recuperation performs again and again.Nowadays, however, he has been abandoned for other spectacles. People visit his cage in the circus tent, but only because it is next to the menagerie. His spectators are fascinated by the animals. All's changed: there is, apparently, no clock, and the once beautiful signs to announce the purpose of his act have been torn down. Now no tally is kept of the number of fasting days achieved. There are no guards. "And so the hunger-artist fasted on without hindrance, as he had once dreamed of doing ... just as he had once predicted, but no one counted the days; no one, not even the hunger-artist himself, knew how great his achievement was and his heart grew heavy." Thus the world robs him of his reward. Indifference replaces admiration and on this note he expires. He is buried with the straw of his cage and replaced by a panther, who devours fiercely the food he naturally craves. The people crowd about his cage.

We notice that the facts in this "matter-offact" account are not in themselves complete or sufficient, and that our attempt to take them at their matter-of-fact or literal level is quite impossible. They seem to compete with each other and to thrust us beyond their literal properties into the plane of their allegorical significance. That clock seems to be simply a clock; it does not apparently represent anything else. And yet no literal meaning can be ascribed to that bizarre clock. It strikes the hour just like a real clock, but (so to speak) it does not appear to tick. The life of this hunger-artist is unclocked. He exists outside time, and periodically he survives starvation sieges no ordinary man could endure. (Actually, a calendar would be the logical means for reckoning the artist's fasting days.) As for the other facts, these objects likewise suggest symbolic significance. It is impossible to reduce Kafka's facts to a single self-consistent system of meaning. The trouble is that his meanings emerge at several planes at once, and the planes are interconnected. No complete paraphrase is possible.

We cannot confine Kafka's meaning to a single circle of thought. The plight of the hunger-artist in his cage represents the plight of the artist in the modern world: his dissociation from the society in which he lives. By this reading of the story, "A Hunger-Artist" is a sociological allegory. But we can also interpret the hunger-artist to represent a mystic, a holy man, or a priest. By this reading the story allegorizes in historical perspective the plight of religion. A third possible interpretation projects us into a metaphysical allegory: the hunger-artist represents spirit, man as a spiritual being; the panther, in contrast, represents matter, the animal nature of man. If the story is translated into metaphysical terms, the division is between the spiritual and the physical; into religious terms, between the divine and the human, the soul and the body; into sociological terms, between the artist and his society. Kafka's blueprint—the groundplan of ideas upon which he has built this structure of parables—is toolmarked with these three different systems of thought.

Consider first the story as an allegory of the dilemma of the artist. He is set in contrast to the multitude. The people who attend his exhibitions of fasting cannot comprehend his art. "Just try to explain the art of fasting to someone! He who has no feeling for it simply cannot comprehend it." The artist starves himself for the sake of his vision. He has faith in his vision, faith in himself, and integrity of aesthetic conscience. As the initiated alone understood, "the hunger-artist would never under any circumstances, not even under compulsion, partake of any nourishment during the period of fasting. His honor as an artist forbade such a thing." It is his vision, solely this, which nourishes him. Of course the artist can "fast" as no one else can do. It's not everyone who is an artist. We concede, "in view of the peculiar nature of this art which showed no flagging with increasing age," the claim he makes of limitless capacity for creating works of art. But if his public is devoid of any sympathetic understanding of the artist and of his art, if his public has no faith in him, how then can he cling to this faith in himself? It is because his public is an unbeliever that the artist is in a cage (the cage symbolizes his isolation). Society and the artist—each disbelieves in the other. And so the artist comes to disbelieve, finally, in himself; he cannot survive in isolation.

The hunger-artist is emaciated because of the disunity within himself, which is the result of his dissociation of soul from body, and because of the disjunction between himself and his society. It is his denial of the world of materiality that is the source of his gnawing doubt and "constant state of depression." He repudiates half of life, and the multitude repudiate him. The public reject the emaciated body of the artist for the healthy body of the panther— they reject art for life itself. These two occupants of the cage, the purely spiritual and the purely bestial, represent, then, the dual nature of man.

The people outside the cage, with whom he is also contrasted, crave the same food as the panther. For them, as for the beast, their joy in living issues from their throat— and from their belly. These human and bestial beings represent the sensuous physical realm of matter. They are all-flesh, whereas the hunger-artist is no-flesh. In the one we have pure matter; in the other, pure spirit. But the hunger-artist, as pure soul, is a failure. Though he is apparently free from those gnawing dissatisfactions which our purely physical appetites create in us again and again, nevertheless he is not entirely free from the claims of the body, from the claims of matter, from the claims of the world in which he lives. At the same time that he denies the evil natural social world he longs for some recognition of his fasting from the public; he wants the people to crowd around his cage. Finally, "though longing impatiently for these visits [of the people on their way to the eagerly awaited stalls], which he naturally saw as his reason for existence, [he] couldn't help feeling at the same time a certain apprehension." He apprehends the truth that he who is the faster cannot be "at the same time a completely satisfied spectator of his fasting." He sees that an existence of pure spirituality is impossible to man. He sees that this insatiable hunger with which he, as artist or as mystic, is possessed is at bottom only the sign of his maladjusted, and therefore imperfect, soul.

Complete detachment from physical reality is spiritual death. This statement sums up the meaning of "A Hunger-Artist" insofar as the story is an allegory about the nature of man. What is man, matter or spirit? The story might be described as a kind of critique of this philosophical problem. Spirit and matter—each is needed to fulfill the other. At the moment of his death the hunger-artist recognizes his failure as an artist or creator. For this superannuated artist there is no possibility of resurrection because in our present-day world not spirit but matter is recognized. That matter has today triumphed over spirit is recognized by the dying hunger-artist as he confesses his secret. I had to fast, he admits, because I could find no food to my liking. Fasting, you see, was my destiny. But "'if I had found it [i.e., food to my liking], believe me, I should have caused no stir, I should have eaten my fill just as you do, and all the others.' Those were his last words, but in his glazed eyes there remained the firm, though no longer proud, conviction that he was still fasting." Here, then, is the key to his enigma. Cut off from the multitude, the artist performing his creative act (his fasting) has to die daily and be daily reborn. This is a martyrdom, but for what purpose? The creative artist cannot also be his own public; he dies when no one cares that he and his art should live. Devotion to an aesthetic or spiritual vision cannot be an end in itself. Pure creativeness is impossible, even as absolute spirituality is impossible. The creative imagination must feed upon all reality. For art is but a vision of reality. The artist, no less than the mystic-faster, must live in the world of mundane life. Art requires the material conditions of life, and these conditions nourish it. Life is at once the subject of art and its wellspring.

It is the clock in the hunger-artist's cage that triumphs over the artist. It is time that triumphs over the very one who denies the flux of time, which is our present reality. The clock in his cage is a mockery of the artist's faith in the immortality of his creative act or vision, a mockery of his faith in his art as an artifice of eternity. The tragedy of Kafka's hunger-artist is not that he dies, but that he fails to die into life. As he dies he seeks recognition from those whom he has all his life repudiated: " 'I always wanted you to admire my fasting,' said the hunger-artist." It is his confession that spirit has no absolute sovereignty over matter, soul has no absolute sovereignty over body, and art has no absolute sovereignty over life.... Kafka's hunger-artist represents Kafka's doctrine: "There is only a spiritual world; what we call the physical world is the *evil* in the spiritual one, and what we call *evil* is only a necessary moment in our endless development." "A Hunger-Artist" is a kind of critique of this doctrine. Matter here triumphs over Spirit.

Throughout the story the author laments the passing of our hunger-artists, their decline and extinction in our present-day civilization. But nonetheless throughout the story all the logic is weighted against this hunger-artist's efforts at autarchy. In his last words we are given his confession that the artist must come to terms with life, with the civilization in which he lives, the world of total reality. "Forgive me, all of you," he whispers to the circus manager, as though in a confessional before some priest. And they forgive him. They forgive him for his blasphemy against nature. The hunger-artist seeks Spirit absolutely; he denies the "*evil* natural social world" at the same time that he longs for it. And this is his dilemma, even as it is ours. It is not possible for man to achieve a condition of pure spirituality, nor again is it possible for him to achieve a synthesis of spirit and matter. As the agent of divine purity the hungerartist is a failure. His failure is signified, for instance, on the occasion when he answers the person who has explained his emaciation as being caused by a lack of food: he answers "by flying into a rage and terrifying all those around him by shaking the bars of his cage like a wild animal." This reversion to the animal divests him momentarily of the divine, and it also betrays the split-soul conflict within him. His location next to the menagerie serves as reminder that the claims of the animal body are necessary claims upon the soul and cannot be denied. And this is true even though matter is wholly evil (i.e., "the evil odors from the stalls," etc.); complete separation from reality can never be obtained. (Compare the idea of "complete detachment from the earth" as it figures in "The Burrow.") Pure Spirit is as vacuous as Pure Matter.

In the same way that Kafka's sets of facts can be translated into allegorical terms at the philosophical and aesthetic levels of meaning, so too in terms of the religious allegory the multiple meanings of his facts overlap. Our post-Renaissance world has discarded the philosopher, the artist, and the mystic. The hunger-artist as mystic-faster is dead. Call him priest or artist, he has been rejected by the "pleasure-seeking multitude" and replaced by other amusements; for instance, by the exhibition of a live panther. It was different in times past. For example, in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance he "lived in apparent glory, honored by the world." Then he had his patron. (The patron of the artist was the impresario.) He had his critics, the butchers who guarded him out of the public distrust of his creative act. And he had his historians, the attendants who recorded his creative act or kept count of his remarkable performances. In those times he was at least admired for his achievements as an imitator of life.... But what a poor imitation of real life he presented! In those times he was at least celebrated (albeit, not without hypocrisy), honored by rituals conscientiously enacted upon appointed fast days. Consider this hunger-artist as mystic-faster or priest. At one time, everyone attended his services daily. Regular subscribers sat, as in church pews, "before the small latticed cage for days on end." Everyone pretended to marvel at his holy fast. Actually, however, not one worshiper had faith. Nevertheless, despite this sham of faith in him, he submitted again and again to crucifixion by these pretenders to faith. He was a martyr for his divine cause. The multitude, because "it was the stylish thing to do," attended his "small latticed cage"—they attended it as they might a confessional box. But the multitude, since it does not understand what Faith is, has no sin to confess. The hunger-priest hears no confession. (Ironically it is he who, in dying, confesses.) In short, all mankind— apart from a few acolytes to his cult, disbelieves this Christ who many times died for man's sake. And when he dies, see how these disbelievers exploit the drama of his death. Here is Kafka's parody on the drama of the Virgin mourning the loss of her Son.

But now there happened the thing which always happened at this point. The impresario would come, and silently—for the music rendered speech impossible— he would raise his arms over the hunger-artist as if inviting heaven to look down upon its work here upon the straw, this pitiful martyr—and martyr the hunger-artist was, to be sure, though in an entirely different sense. Then he would grasp the hunger-artist about his frail waist, trying as he did to make it obvious by his exaggerated caution with what a fragile object he was dealing, and after surreptitiously shaking him a little and causing his legs to wobble and his body to sway uncontrollably, would turn him over to the ladies, who had meanwhile turned as pale as death.

The ladies who so cruelly sentimentalize over his martyrdom represent sympathy without understanding; a sympathy which is devoid of understanding is mere self-sentiment. One of the ladies weeps—but not for him. She breaks into tears only in shame for having touched him. "And the entire weight of his body, light though it was, rested upon one of the ladies, who, breathless and looking imploringly for help (she had not pictured this post of honor thus), first tried to avoid contact with the hunger-artist by stretching her neck as far as possible, and then ... she broke into tears to the accompaniment of delighted laughter from the audience.... " It is a mock lamentation that these two Marys perform. What a difference between the theme of the Virgin mourning the loss of her Son as treated in Kafka's parody and as depicted in the famous *Avignon Pieta* or in Giotto's *Lamentation*.

It is thus that the religious and the metaphysical and the aesthetic meanings of "A Hunger-Artist" coincide: (1) Christ is truly dead. Our post-Renaissance world has discarded the act of faith from its reality. (2) For the mystic, as for the artist, there is no resurrection because today not spirit but matter alone is recognized. And as we have seen, it is recognized, this triumph of matter over spirit, even by the dying mystic, who ends a skeptic and a defeatist (not unlike Kafka himself): I had to fast, because I could find no food to my liking. Fasting is my destiny. But " 'if I had found it, believe me, I should have caused no stir, I should have eaten my fill just as you do, and all the others.' Those were his last words, but in his glazed eyes there remained the firm, though no longer proud, conviction that he was still fasting."

Source: R. W. Stallman, '"A Hunger Artist,"' in *Franz Kafka Today*, edited by Angel Flores and Homer Swander, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1958, pp. 61-70.

Topics for Further Study

Kafka's stories have been compared to his contemporary, the painter Edvard Munch (pronounced Moonk). Find a book of prints of Munch's paintings and discuss the ways in which they portray a "Kafka-esque" mood. In what ways do they seem to depict a nightmarish world, similar to that in "A Hunger Artist," in which similar feelings of alienation, entrapment, oppression, self-hatred, and angst are expressed? In what ways is the effect of the visual medium of painting used by Munch different from the effect of the written word used by Kafka's in his stories?

Kafka and his writing have been strongly associated with the city of Prague. But since Kafka's birth in 1883, Prague has gone through many political, economic, and cultural changes. The national identity of the city has gone from being a part of the Kingdom of Bohemia to the Republic of Czechoslovakia, to occupation by Russia to the Czech Republic. Write a research paper on the history of Prague in the twentieth century. What is Prague like today, in terms of political, cultural and economic conditions? What would it be like to visit Prague as a tourist?

Kafka's painful relationship with his father has been widely discussed and analyzed. Write a psychological profile of Kafka, based on research into his biography and his published letters. Read his prose piece, "A Letter to His Father," and his story, "The Judgement," both of which are based on his relationship with his father. How has Kafka's family experience influenced his psychology and his writing?

Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" describes a man who fasts for long periods of time, while on public display, as a form of mass entertainment. But over the centuries, human beings have fasted for a variety of reasons, from religious and political protest to health to eating disorders. Research and discuss the various practices of fasting humans have undertaken, why they have done so, and what effect they have had on the person fasting and those around her or him.

Think of a particular artist or artistic style in any area of popular American culture today which seems to express "Kafka-esque" sensibilities. This could be a particular musician or musical style, a particular film or filmmaker, a particular television show, a comic book character, or visual artist (such as painter or sculptor). Discuss the ways in which this example from popular American culture refers to contemporary issues and concerns while expressing "Kafka-esque" sensibilities and themes, such as alienation, entrapment, oppression, self-hatred, and angst.

Write an original short story of your own in a "Kafka-esque" style. You do not need to write about similar topics or story lines. Rather, try to write a contemporary story based on your own ideas, but which captures a similar mood of anxiety, oppression, angst, darkness, entrapment and alienation. This could be a Kafka-esque parable, in which the main character is an animal with a human psychology, but which is ultimately a commentary on society or humanity. Or it could capture a sense of the absurd which Kafka often portrays, containing elements of both cynicism and humor.

Compare and Contrast

1883-1924: At the time of Kafka's birth in 1883, the city of Prague was ruled under the Hapsburg Empire, as part of the Kingdom of Bohemia. World War I, however, brought about significant changes in Prague's national identity. The War, which began with the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand, resulted in the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire. During the first two years after the War, Prague became the capitol of the newly formed Republic of Czechoslovakia. As part of this new Republic, Prague changed from a city dominated by German language and culture to one dominated by Czech language and culture.

1990s: With the end of the Cold War, signified by the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, Prague was released from communist rule and made the capitol of the newly formed Czech Republic. As part of the Czech Republic, Prague has undergone a major transformation. There is now a free market, tourism, relaxing of censorship, and the welcoming of American enterprises, such as MacDonald's, into the city.

1883-1924: Though not widely recognized during his lifetime, Kafka was well-respected within his small literary, intellectual circle in Prague, who were aware of his considerable talents. Kafka published his first prose pieces at the age of 25 in *Hyperion*, a journal edited by his close friend Max Brod. Throughout his brief life, he continued to publish in journals, as well as several small volumes of his stories. He died in relative obscurity, many of his stories and novels still unpublished. A number of his unpublished manuscripts were destroyed during a Nazi raid on his companion Dora Diamont's apartment, and his work was not made available in Prague until a decade after his death.

1990s: Franz Kafka is indisputably one of the most important and influential writers of the twentieth century. However, in regard to the *meaning* of his stories, there is little in the way of critical consensus. Perhaps as a result, there is no sign of retreat on the part of critics from adding to the mounds of published critical material on Kafka.

1883-1924: Prague boasted an active caf culture during Kafka's lifetime, where artists and intellectuals met as informal "salons." The Caf Continental, of which Kafka was a regular attendant, was a well-known location for one such salon. More organized forums for literary discussion were various literary meetings and clubs. Kafka became associated with the "Prague Circle," an internationally recognized literary society of German-Jewish authors.

1990s: Since the end of the Cold War, the city of Prague's association with Kafka has become a tourist attraction. The area of the city which was once Kafka's loved and hated Jewish ghetto has become an American-influenced tourist trap, complete with Kafka T-shirts, souvenirs and guided tours. As David Zane has cynically, although perhaps realistically, described this phenomenon, Kafka is now "finding his place amidst the KITSCH." Zane goes on to explain that, "After years of ignoring him or treating him as a pariah, the new Czech Republic is finally discovering its strange Jewish son, no longer a threat and suddenly BANKABLE, as a tourist attraction." He concludes, "the irony would not be lost on him."

What Do I Read Next?

Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories (1971) includes some of Kafka's most notable stories, such as "Before the Law," "The Judgement," "The Metamorphosis," and "In the Penal Colony."

The Trial: A New Translation, Based on the Restored Text (1998) is a recent translation and is said to be a more accurate rendition of Kafka's original manuscript. The story is about Joseph K., who is interrogated by unidentified government officials and accused of an unnamed crime. He becomes entangled in a legal and bureaucratic maze from which there seems to be no exit.

Max Brod's *Franz Kafka*, a Biography (1937) is an early biography by Kafka's close friend and literary executor.

Letters to Friends, Family and Editors (1977) contains selections from Kafka's extensive letter- writing.

Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siecle (1992), by Mark Anderson, discusses Kafka's social milieu of fashionable Prague intellectuals at the turn of the Century.

Klaus Wagenback's *Franz Kafka: Pictures of a Life* (1984) is a book of photographs from Kafka's life, family, and home town of Prague.

Further Study

Beck, Evelyn Torton. *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater, Its Impact on His Work*, University. of Wisconsin Press, 1971.

Discusses Kafka's life and work in relation to dramas of the Yiddish Theater which Kafka frequently attended.

Gilman, Sander L. *Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient*, Routledge, New York, 1995.

Discusses Kafka's life and work in relation to perceptions of tuberculosis during his lifetime, as well Kafka's perceptions of his own body as Jewish, male, and suffering from tuberculosis.

Wagenback, Klaus. *Kafka's Prague: A Travel Reader*, Overlook, Woodstock, NY, 1996.

Literally a tourist guide to the contemporary city of Prague for the Kafka devotee. Includes many photos and suggested walking tours of cites significant to Kafka's life and work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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