

Absurdity, masochism  
and paradox:  
unraveling kafka's "a  
hunger artist"



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“ For he alone knew, what no other initiate knew, how easy it was to fast. It was the easiest thing in the world.” – Kafka’s “ A Hunger Artist” What does it mean to willfully fast, or to deny hunger, the most fundamental of human drives? The short story, “ A Hunger Artist,” penned by Franz Kafka explores the absurdity of one man’s ability to fast indefinitely with unnatural ease. At the same time, his insatiable appetite for fame and success as the record-breaking hunger artist of his time is unmistakably contradictory to his physically starved state. Throughout the text, the futility of ascribing meaning to our lives is demonstrated by the masochistic and paradoxical nature of the Hunger Artist’s lifetime of fasting. The hunger artist, who paradoxically chooses to give his mortal life meaning by making fasting his profession, is able to go without the most basic of human comforts due to his masochistic convictions. To start, his goal to fast immeasurably is essentially a paradox, since forgoing food is incompatible with the human condition. Although the hunger artist feels “ that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting,” (884), the only possible ending for this life story can be death by starvation. And yet, the hunger artist is bent on receiving the admiration of the public for his limitless fasting: “ He was quite happy at the prospect of spending a sleepless night with such watchers..” (883). At the same time, Kafka writes, “ Nothing annoyed the artist more than such watchers; they made him miserable,” (883). The unfounded “ suspicions” of the watchers, which understandably upsets the hunger artist, is believed to be “ a necessary accompaniment to the profession of fasting,” (883). In essence, his misery is also the cause for his happiness and vice versa. This twisted relationship with his audience, wherein his sense of validation is based on the reaction of the crowd, reveals a masochistic quality in our protagonist.

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His life's work is based on deprivation, self-denial and degradation in the face of an audience. A once-eager audience soon grows restless after forty days, and needs time to refresh their enthusiasm, showing that the hunger artist's happiness hinges on such fleeting capriciousness- a situation highlighting the absurdity of the world. As he strives to " become the record hunger artist of all time," the hunger artist's thoughts after each forty-day bout of fasting reveal his addictive personality- " Why stop fasting at this particular moment..? Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer..?"(884). This ever-lasting ambition to fast continuously, ignoring the fact that it is an unattainable goal of happiness, depicts the hunger artist as gaining gratification through pain and suffering. The final passage of the text, in describing the hunger artist's death in such a trivial manner, becomes the ultimate commentary on the absurdity, or meaninglessness of life. By this point, the terribly misunderstood hunger artist has fallen out the public's favor and has resorted to becoming a circus freak. Here, his goal in impressing the public is literally insurmountable, for no one goes to the circus for high art. Set up in a cage as an eyesore alongside the main-show attraction of lively beasts, this is where the hunger artist accomplishes his longest-ever fast and consequently perishes. At long last, he has succeeded in a record-breaking bout of fasting, and the ultimate irony of this is that no one would know; they are too distracted by the animals. More so, the death of the hunger artist is dealt with fleetingly, insultingly so; his body is cleared and immediately a " young panther" is put in. The relative insignificance of the hunger artist's entire life of drawn-out misery is compounded by Kafka's narration, " Even the most insensitive felt it refreshing to see this wild creature leaping around the cage that had so

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long been dreary," (889). As the hunger artist's death is eclipsed by the hasty replacement of a " young panther," the artist soon fades into obscurity. His imagined journey to greatness, the meaning he has given to life through fasting, has been futile. Kafka represents the Hunger Artist as a tragic hero plummeting to his inevitable demise through the paradox of his lifetime artistry in fasting. The hunger artist, in his commitment to artistry, loses all control over his humanity- throughout his career, he has been handled like " a wild animal" (885) by the impresario. The hunger artist experiences alienation from society not just spatially but temporally as well. Stationed in a barred cage, he is physically isolated from the spectators. Temporally, the hunger artist has lost the human grasp of time, which is evidenced by his voracious appetite for even more prolonged fasting. His hunger for success only grows infinitely, even when the world moves on from the fad of " professional fasting," (882). His masochistic tendencies, in deriving satisfaction from self-denial, are simply an indication of his disjunction from society. While it seems illogical for his happiness to be so dependent on the whims of a faceless crowd, Kafka develops fully the hopelessness of our protagonist's attempts to ascribe meaning to his life through the metaphor of hunger and appetite.