

Analysis of franz kafka's book, a hunger artist

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Starved for Attention

The problem with a public spectacle is often that its flame of enticement burns out over time. This premise serves as the central focus in, “A Hunger Artist” by Franz Kafka. The author depicts the hunger artist’s eventual downfall through themes of isolation to society and his extreme hubris that only further separates him and makes his reasoning and ambition even more misunderstood by his spectators.

The hunger artist’s relationship with humanity is weakened severely as time progresses. Within the text Kafka repeatedly mentions the hunger artists detachment through the theme of isolation. He states, “So he lived for many years, with small regular intervals of recuperation, 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” (Kafka, 330-331). Even though he is first glorified by the world for his spectacle, the lack of understanding for what it takes to do what he does makes him uneasy in his mind and spirit knowing that the public is celebrating him for something they can neither comprehend, nor relate to. The irony is that his fierce desire to accomplish his goals and be lauded for doing so, only serves to drive a greater wedge between himself and the spectators whose approval he so desperately seeks. Because they cannot comprehend what his talent takes, they are not fully fazed by what they see since they cannot appreciate the spectacle. Kafka illustrates this in the following quote: “...and no one had any cause to be dissatisfied with the proceedings, no one except the hunger artist himself, he only, as always” (Kafka, 330). His artistic person is almost

completely separated from his actual physical being and additionally the rest of the world because he truly believes no one can understand his purpose or why he is never satisfied.

The hunger artist's hubris is both beneficial and hurtful to his career and connection to society, which helps links the two main themes in the story together. In fact isolation goes hand in hand with pride, a fact best demonstrated by the way in which the artist isolates himself due to his determination to accomplish his goals and focus only on his artistic purposes. So, it is ultimately his excessive pride that fuels the public's diminishing opinion of him. Kafka illustrates his immense ego in the following quote, "...he was ready to exchange jokes with them, to tell them stories out of his nomadic life, anything at all to keep them awake and demonstrate to them again that he had no eatables in his cage and that he was fasting as not one of them could fast" (Kafka, 328). Here, he brags about his abilities that his onlookers clearly do not possess. And while it is apparent that he thinks rather highly of himself, at the same time he still seems desperate to make people aware of his remarkable talent. Sadly, he goes about it the wrong way, showing his conceit, which only makes people appreciate him less. Kafka further demonstrates this concept in the following, "...for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a performance beyond human imagination, since he felt that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting" (Kafka, 329-330). Despite the fact that his immense pride isolates him from society, it is also what allows him to push himself further and starve himself until a point where his talent becomes second nature to him. Leaving one to

wonder that if something becomes so innate, is it even really a talent at all anymore, or perhaps merely a learned behavior, born out of a need for acceptance and adulation.

Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" offers a perfect example of how a reader's extensive analysis of the story can lead to having a better grasp of its purpose. By dissecting the author's work and performing a close reading the reader is better able to understand some of the key concepts, one being theme. In "A Hunger Artist" two key themes, isolation and pride become readily apparent and ultimately lead to the artist's demise. By understanding these themes and their relevance to the story, the reader is able to both empathize with and condemn the main character; as he allows pride in his talent to completely consume him and further isolate him from society. It is only through appreciation of the main themes and their impact on the story that the reader can truly try and identify with the idea of performance versus spectacle and in the process, form an educated opinion about where the hunger artist lies on that spectrum.