

The theme of life,
existence and
consciousness



In his short story “A Hunger Artist,” Franz Kafka uses the extreme example of the fictional hunger artist to discuss the dichotomy between art and life. Usually, an artist uses his life to create his art. Thus, an artist alienated from the world will use his art to represent alienation, which ironically might bring him closer to the world. Kafka did this by writing about his sentiments of isolation and frustrations with society in stories such as “The Metamorphosis” and his novel *The Trial*. By writing these stories, Kafka expressed some of his disappointment with the world, and leaves it to his audience to analyze them as such. In this cycle, the artist channels his problems into art to manage his difficulties, and the audience accepts the art, providing the artist social acceptance and relief from solitude.

Kafka sheds light on this healthy cycle by portraying the production of art in “A Hunger Artist,” in which the artist’s creation of art does not lead to a positive cycle, because his suffering begets suffering. His desire to be an artist is explained via “his inner dissatisfaction” (246) with the world. The hunger artist does not starve himself because he believes starvation to be a respected art form, but “because I couldn’t find the food I liked” (255). Instead of channeling his problems into creating art, the hunger artist uses himself as canvas and personifies his dissatisfaction, which leads to a lack of separation between artist and art. Without such a separation, the hunger artist depends entirely on the audience’s appreciation in order for the piece to function. In fact, “nothing annoyed the artist more than” the night watchers who paid little attention to him, giving him ample time to sneak food, and “much more to his taste were the watchers who sat close up to the bars...who focused him in the full glare of the electric pocket torch”

(245). The artist turns to his audience for approval, and would do, “ anything at all to keep [these watchers] awake and demonstrate...that he was fasting as not one of them could fast” (245). He must prove himself to the audience by showing his talent and gaining its approval, and only then, when he is “ honored by the world” (249), can the hunger artist consider himself accomplished. However, the more the artist fasts, the more the audience disbelieves he actually does so, which causes him further suffering and leads to a negative smaller cycle within the already detrimental larger cycle of the hunger artist’s production.

Although the hunger artist mainly receives negative feedback from the audience, he is only able to live because the audience pays him attention. This point is more obvious when, “ the interest in professional fasting... markedly diminished” (243), which eventually leads to the hunger artist’s demise, since no one takes an active interest in his life, allowing him to starve to death. The hunger artist is not closer to the world through his creation process, but finds he can only even survive by creating art and having the audience view it. Instead of using art as an expression of his life, the hunger artist uses his art to live. Thus, he has no life outside of his art.

Through the hunger artist, Kafka defines the dangers of depending on art for life. The hunger artist expresses his dissatisfaction with the world by using himself and not an external canvas to create his artwork, forcing a lack of separation between the artist and his art. Therefore, instead of the art depending on the audience, the artist depends on the audience, meaning when the audience’s appreciation for the work dwindles, their appreciation for the artist diminishes as well, leading to the hunger artist’s death. In this

work, Kafka provides a prime example of how not to create art, and somewhat resolves the conflict between art and life. Kafka demonstrates that the artist must separate himself from his work by channeling creating something external from the self. Thus, the artist will not be as critically dependent on his work for survival.