

PLOT SUMMARY OF

“A Hunger Artist”

“A Hunger Artist” tells the story of an obsessed man whose profession and art is fasting. In the old days, the hunger artist was a figure of awe and respect for the populace, and staging one of his fasting performances was profitable for him and his partner. People would visit the cage in which he spent the fast every day to watch him as he sat on a bed of straw, sometimes responding to questions from the crowd, occasionally holding out a thin arm to show how bony he’d become, but most often as he simply sat there withdrawn into the innermost part of himself.

We learn that the hunger artist takes his fasting as just that—an art—and he is fervently devoted to his craft. Children find him especially inspiring, even if their elders often scoff at the artist and claim he is somehow swindling them all, but the artist himself takes the most interest in those who are hired by the impresario to watch him and make sure that the fast is legitimate. Many of the professional watchers, thinking they are helping him, withdraw from the cage at night, presumably to give him the chance to eat some food he has carefully hidden in the straw or on his person. But far from pleasing him, these watchers enrage him, both because they assume he is cheating in his art and because nothing he can do or say convinces them that he is a hard and honest worker. He much prefers the skeptical watchers who never leave the side of the cage, who are always on guard to catch him in his tricks. These he respects, and he takes pleasure in proving to them that he is truly fasting.

But even the careless, unbelieving watchers are not what upsets him the most. In fact, he is his own greatest disappointment. Not only is he alone in understanding what fasting actually means—and how easy it actually is—but, he finds that he wishes he could continue his fasting past the proscribed limit.

Because of the public’s attention span—it remains keenly interested in the fast for only so long—by tradition the fasting period lasts “only” forty days. At the end of that time, a great ceremony is held, and the artist is led from his cage (dragged in fact) and forced to eat a bit of food. Among speeches, general fanfare, and rousing

music, the end of the fast is announced, and all are satisfied in the end—all that is, except for the hunger artist, who wishes to extend his fasting indefinitely.

For many years the hunger artist and the impresario enjoy great fame and attention, all at once, though perhaps not without warning, the public's taste for fasting wanes, and the hunger artist finds himself less and less often at the center of attention. When at last it seems as if the revulsion against fasting and the hunger artist have become nearly universal, he leaves his partner and takes up with a large circus, hoping to find peace and quiet and perhaps a little attention—much to his chagrin, he finds neither.

His own cage is placed near the circus' animal cages, and while throngs pass by him, few, if any, take notice of him let alone have any understanding of what he is doing. His cage, at first brightly decorated with placards and a tally of his days fasted, eventually falls into a shabby state of disrepair. Eventually, even the circus staff takes little notice of him and finally forgets about him altogether. Not at all alarmed by this development, the hunger artist continues his fast, unnoticed and unrecognized, but still hoping to break all past records for fasting.

Eventually, an overseer with the circus spots the apparently empty cage and wonders what a perfectly useful piece of equipment is doing there unused. No one can remember why the cage is even there, but finally someone recalls something about a hunger artist. They begin to poke about in the straw, and ultimately they find the emaciated artist is indeed still there, still fasting.

When asked when he intends to stop fasting, the hunger artist asks for their forgiveness rather than offering an answer. He tells the circus workers that all he ever wanted was to be admired, and when they go along with him and say that they do admire him, he answers that they shouldn't. Thinking him fully out of his mind, the overseer asks why his fasting shouldn't be admired. The hunger artist tells him that his fasting is unworthy of admiration because he can't help but fast. And why can't he help it? Because, the hunger artist answers, he could never find the food he liked. If he had been able to, he assures them, he wouldn't have eaten his fill, the same as they. With these words, the hunger artist dies. And with no further ado, the overseer immediately has him buried along with the filthy straw that

had lined his cage. The cage itself is cleaned and in it is placed a healthy young panther. At the end of the story, people crowd around the panther's cage, both shocked by and drawn to the power and freedom the animal exudes.

LIST OF CHARACTERS IN
“A Hunger Artist”

The Hunger Artist, the only true character in the tale, is a man driven by an obsession to fast longer than anyone else ever has. A true artist, he demands perfection of himself, and at the same time is continually disappointed by what he knows are his shortcomings. Both dependent on and repelled by the response and understanding of the public, he is constantly suspended between uncertainty and disgust. Unable to accept the change in public taste, he goes on fasting with essentially no recognition, purely because he seeks to outdo the record for fasting: a record he himself has obviously set. Thus, while his motivation is unclear—until the very end of the story at least—he is essentially trying to outpace himself, trying to best himself as best he can as it were.

CRITICAL VIEWS ON
“A Hunger Artist”

KURT FICKERT ON THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN THE STORY

[Kurt Fickert is Professor Emeritus of German at Wittenberg University. He is the author of *End of a Mission: Kafka's Search for Truth in His Last Stories* as well as many articles on Kafka and Czech and German literature. In this selection from *End of a Mission*, Fickert argues that the unreliability of the narrator in the story does not, as some critics have suggested, lend a humorous tone to the story but rather further develops Kafka's theme of the tragic role of the artist in society.]

The crucial function that the presence of an unreliable narrator would have to have, in my understanding, would be to serve as a double for the impresario. The latter is, as the fact that he is not named, but only designated by his occupation attests, the intermediary between the hunger artist and the public. At an important turning point in the performer's career, he dismisses his booking agent and manager; when he disappears from the scene, it seems clear that Kafka has allowed the “personalized” narrator to take over his role. The essential part he plays in the story consists of his bringing it to a close, for he reports events which occur after the hunger artist's death, including the climactic one of the replacement of the exhibit of the fasting man by the exhibit of the ravenous panther. The doubling which occurs in “Ein Hungerkünstler” is not without precedent in the Kafka canon; K's two assistants in *Das Schloß*, the two celluloid balls in “Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle” (“Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor”), and, to a considerable extent, Robinson and Delamarch in *Amerika* are prominent examples of the use of this device in Kafka's fiction. Both the impresario and the narrator show sympathy for the person who apparently has been impelled to perform a strange and difficult task in the public arena, but they understand neither the significance of his act nor the nature of the torment he inflicts on himself. In this regard the two represent the members

of the society, the common lot of people, within which and in relation to which the artist makes his presentation. For the public, art which claims to have a higher purpose than that of entertaining an audience or of diverting their attention away very briefly from their quotidian cares and responsibilities lies in an extraneous area of their lives. (Obviously, the impresario whose livelihood is earned by providing entertainment for the masses has for this reason more concern for the artist's tribulations than they do.)

—Kurt Fickert, *End of a Mission: Kafka's Search for Truth in His Last Stories*. Columbia, SC: Camden House (1993).

FRANK VULPI ON THE FAUSTIAN ASPECTS OF THE STORY

[Frank Vulpi is a professor in the dance department at the University of North Carolina. Here he argues that 'The Hunger Artist' is a representation of the "Faustian man": a remorseless contender after something extraordinary.]

If an individual pursues an idea or creates something primarily to please himself, gain power, or satisfy his ego, then the originator of that idea or creation can properly be termed a Faustian man.

Does Kafka call into question the wisdom of the Faustian man? I think he does. Kafka's hunger artist is a powerful example of a Faustian man who, in his preoccupation with his ego and personal objectives has become irrevocably estranged from his community and the life around him.

The alternative to working primarily for oneself and towards goals which are established by the individual (and consequently often valuable or relevant only to that individual) is to work in community with others towards a common goal. (. . .)

The hunger artist is a most extreme illustration of the Faustian man: as he reaches perfection in his work (that is, as he starves himself longer and longer) he naturally approaches death and thus, not only figuratively, but literally dies to the possibility of communion.

—Frank Vulpi, "Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist': A Cautionary Tale for Faustian Man Caught Between Creativity and Communion." *Germanic Notes and Reviews* 24 (1993): pp. 9-12.

BREON MITCHELL ON THE FACTUAL PRECEDENTS FOR KAFKA'S STORY

[Breon Mitchell is a professor of contemporary literature and Germanic studies at Indiana University. He has translated Martin Grzimek's *Heartstop* and is the editor of Ezra Pound's own translations of Paul Morand's *Fancy Goods/Open All Night*. In this essay, Mitchell points out that far from fable or allegory, Kafka's story has an historical, factual precedent: there were real hunger artists in Kafka's time.]

Many of the general characteristics of Kafka's hunger artist were shared by more than one professional faster and might have been known to Kafka from any of several sources. Given the inevitable boredom of confinement during a long fast, for example, it is not surprising that stories were often told to pass the time. Tanner was reported to have spent most of his days lying in bed, reading newspapers, or "in conversation with his watchers." Succi's tales had even included affairs of the heart: "he told the young men serving as watchers during the fast about an amorous adventure during his thirty day fast in Paris." And even on the thirty-first day of his fast, A. Levanzin, the subject chosen for the Carnegie Institution's experiment, "talked very rapidly and in a lively manner for nearly 40 minutes." Kafka's hunger artist talks in order to show those watching him that he is not eating: "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."

Succi's sense of honor and pride was also shared by at least a few other hunger artists. Levanzin, who set out explicitly to break Succi's thirty day record (which had remained the longest scientifically controlled fast), impressed the members of Carnegie's research team by his integrity: "Throughout the fast he was under constant surveillance by various responsible members of the staff and there were nearly always two or three assistants on duty in the room. It was therefore impossible for him to leave the balcony or to obtain food without its being known at once. . . . Moreover, he had too much

interest in the fast to do anything of the kind, and we firmly believe that if he had been surreptitiously offered food, he would have, refused it." The resemblance of this passage to the parallel situation in Kafka's text is remarkable: "there were also relays of permanent watchers . . . and it was their task to watch the hunger artist day and night, three of them at a time, in case he should have some secret recourse to nourishment. This was nothing but a formality . . . for the initiates knew well enough that during his fast the artist would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food; the honor of his profession forbade it."

Like Kafka's hunger artist, Levanzin was noticeably depressed by the fact that he was not allowed to fast for a longer period of time. Toward the end of his fast he became irritable and "complained bitterly to Dr. Langfeld regarding Mr. Carpenter [one of the staff], saying that he would like to break every bone in his body," which, as the author dryly noted, "would pronounce against fasting for amiability." Levanzin told Dr. Langfeld "that he was very sorry that [they] wanted him to break the fast and that he could easily fast for 10 days more," and "when seen five months after the fast was broken, he appeared rather unhappy. . . . He was plainly disappointed because the world had not given him the recognition due him for the sacrifice he had made for the benefit of mankind." As the narrator of "A Hunger Artist" says, "he was working honestly, but the world was cheating him of his reward."

But Kafka knew more about hunger artists than just their temperaments and their code of honor. He was also clearly familiar with the main facets of fasting as a form of public entertainment. Except in the unlikely event that he had actually witnessed such a display, he must have learned about them through newspaper reports, for even in "the great cities" these spectacles were covered on a daily basis by the press. Some hunger artists simply conducted their fasts under observation while living in lodgings, and felt free to take walks in the park, or go for carriage rides around the city. Others, however, were under stricter management, and were presented by their impresarios in the amphitheatres of one or the other of the great public exhibition halls such as the Crystal Palace and the Royal Aquarium in London, or the Panoptikum in Berlin. Spectators were charged admission, although of course there was little to see.

Reports indicate, however, that visitors streamed in and were allowed to talk to and question the hunger artists. These were exhibitions “under one’s own management,” as Kafka puts it, financially independent of any other acts or performances.

—Breon Mitchell, “Kafka and ‘The Hunger Artist’.” *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance*, ed. Alan Udoff, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987): pp. 236-255.

NATHAN CERVO ON THE SATIRICAL NATURE OF THE STORY

[Nathan Cervo was a poet and professor of English at Franklin Pierce College. In this essay, Cervo asserts that the story is a combination of a shaggy dog story and a Jewish joke that parodies both the Nativity and the Epiphany.]

The chief character in Franz Kafka’s short story “A Hunger Artist” (1924) has one talent, which he professionalizes, that of starving himself. Eventually, due to lack of popular interest, he is relegated to a side cage, where he languishes on straw, almost indistinguishable from it—a parody of both the Nativity and the Epiphany.

On one level, Kafka is telling both a shaggy-dog story and a Jewish joke. When the chief character, really dying from starvation this time, has a chance to deliver the punch line, he does: he has fasted, he confesses to the overseer, because he couldn’t find any food he liked. In the style of the Jewish joke, he deflates all speculations involving the overblown or pretentious.

After a career that featured listlessness, abulia, and obsession, during which he starves himself rigorously and apparently gratuitously (therefore “artistically”), the hunger artist’s appeal begins to wane. In an effort to regain popularity, he starves himself to death. Then the foul straw in his cage is swept out, and a new attraction is installed to delight the crowd: a panther—sinuous, voluptuous, young, and vital. The etymons of the word “panther” (Greek *pan* and *ther*: “all,” “beast”) suggest the Dionysian, or Bacchic, aura emanated by the story’s subtext. In ancient depictions, the Theban Bacchus carries a thyrsus, and a panther generally lies at his feet.

In Kafka’s parable, it is Jesus who signifies the divine intoxication, the vital “freedom,” bestowed by the Christian mysteries:

Christianity surcharges its undaunted believers with the authentic gusto that is the existentially kept promise of faith, hope, and charity.

Kafka was a sophisticated Czech Jew and must have been aware of certain bizarre accounts of Jesus' genealogy. (For data and epithets pertaining to these accounts, see Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 4 vols., Munich, 1922–28, particularly 1, 33ff, 42–43, 1040, and 4. 1240.) According to these often self-contradictory accounts, Jesus the Nosri (Nazarene) was born of a hairdresser named Mary. The true father of Jesus was a certain *Panthera*, sometimes identified as a Roman soldier. Assuming good faith on the part of some of these chroniclers, the name *Panthera* might have resulted from a mishearing of the Greek genitive form of *parthenos* (“unmarried woman”). The phrase *huios parthenou* (“son of an unmarried woman”) might have been misheard as *huios pantherou* (“son of Panthera”). Jesus is frequently called a “bastard” in these accounts.

In light of the above, and given Kafka's yearning treatment of Catholicism in his novel *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*, 1925), it is easy to see why the free and joyful presence of a panther is necessary to Kafka's fulfilled meaning in “A Hunger Artist.” The panther (Jesus) may be caged (systematized) but “freedom” is seen by “even the most insensitive” “to lurk” “in his jaws” (tr. Edwin and Willa Muir, 1948). Calumny is thus transformed ironically to soothsaying, and here, in this symbol of the panther, is the New Dispensation.

Which shall it be—the Endura, the fast unto death of the old Jewish mystics, or the panther's revelry?

—Nathan Cervo, “Kafka's ‘A Hunger Artist.’” *Explicator* 50 (1992): p. 99-100.

JOSEPH M. GARRISON ON THE COLLECTIVE POWER OF ART

[Joseph M. Garrison is a professor emeritus of English at Mary Baldwin College. He has written extensively on Poe, Kafka, and others. In this essay, he contends that the story is not so much about the alienation of the artist from society but rather it is about the ways in which art affects society deeply enough to bring all of its members together.]

The narrator styles himself, for example, as an observer of “professional fasting” (p. 268); he describes the events as “thrilling performances” (p. 275) in which “the whole effect was heightened by torch flares” (p. 268); he speaks of “records” (p. 276), “rewards” (p. 276), the “art of fasting” (p. 276), and “placards” (p. 276); he details, almost too fastidiously, the responsibilities and maneuverings of “the impresario” (p. 272). If the narrator is detached, his “detachment” creates a very curious and problematical pattern. Out of context, his dilettantism could be construed as a pose, taken for the purpose of critique. The whole story, however, indicates that the narrator genuinely subscribes to this value system and considers himself one of the few “initiates” (p. 270) who can genuinely appreciate the hunger artist. Item: every group of people in the story is held up to scorn, ridicule, or sarcasm for their failure to be knowledgeable in the art of fasting or for their willingness to abandon themselves to impulse once the task of “watching” is over. No one except the narrator and the artist, it seems, is capable of understanding; for others, enlightenment is “quite impossible” (p. 268). Hence, the narrator refers to the need of “the masses” (p. 268) to be reassured; and he observes that “not every watcher, of course, was capable of understanding” (p. 269) why the artist “would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food.” (pp. 268–269) He is openly contemptuous of the “people who argued that this breakfast was an unfair attempt to bribe the watchers” (p. 269) and preens himself, at the expense of others, by mentioning conditions “hardly to be understood by well-fed people” (p. 272). The artist’s misery, the narrator thinks, is caused by the public’s insensitivity: “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” (p. 272).

But does *the narrator* actually take the artist “seriously”? Or is he the most extreme example in the story of a lack of seriousness? The latter alternative seems more tenable, particularly in view of the cognitive priorities that are revealed in the narrator’s language. In almost every paragraph, we have evidence of a purely visual orien-

tation and a purely visual perception of art; references to eyes and seeing almost become a signature. Additionally, we have the logic of “good reason” (p. 270) and the conclusions that “experience had proved” (p. 270), implying an analytical approach to reality and an attempt to explain art as if its essence could be grasped by recognizing the “premonitory symptoms” (p. 273) and finding the “profound causes” (p. 273). The narrator assumes that he, like the hunger artist, knows “the real situation” (p. 274); and at one point he actually flaunts his enlightened status: “To fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of nonunderstanding, was impossible” (p. 273). Or again, even more presumptuously: “Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting! Anyone who has no feeling for it cannot be made to understand” (p. 276). And throughout the story, of course, there is a clear-cut differentiation between the “I” as connoisseur and the bumbblings of the passersby with their “indifference and inborn malice” (p. 276).

Read in this way, Kafka’s story is not an allegory with *cri de coeur* reverberations. It comes close, both in meaning and spirit, to Dylan Thomas’s “In My Craft and Sullen Art.” In that poem, Thomas tells us that he writes for the “common wages” of lovers. He does not write for proud men, nor for those who think his art is a commodity, nor for those who praise his craft or art, but for those who are experientially affected by what he has to say, who understand why he is “sullen” and who respond to the situation by taking the griefs of *the ages* into their arms and loving *them*, thereby spending the “common wages” not on a work of art for the art’s sake but on the acts of love which Thomas’s art commends. It seems to me that Kafka is saying essentially the same thing about the writer’s concern for sufficient love among people and that he uses the narrator in “A Hunger Artist” to make essentially the same point he had made much earlier in his career in a letter to Oskar Pollack: “What we need are books that affect us like some really grievous misfortune, like the death of one whom we loved more than ourselves, as if we were banished to distant forests, away from everybody, like a suicide; a book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us. That is what I believe.” Only readers can provide the food that would satisfy the hunger artist, and that food is found in a selfless commitment to the human agony of the

world—a total immersion and not merely a spectatorial adventure.

—Joseph M. Garrison, “Getting into the Cage: A Note on Kafka’s ‘A Hunger Artist’.” *International Fiction Review* 8 (1981): p. 61-63.