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Franz Kafka: A Hunger to be Understood

Blinded by pride, a man knowingly inflicts harm onto himself in an effort to prove his worth in a trivial matter. Franz Kafka presents this situation in “A Hunger Artist,” in which a man abstains from eating food as a profession and spirals into self-destruction when his audience doubts the integrity of his act. The hunger artist inevitably dies in an effort to push the boundaries of his profession, but he dies unappreciated because he fails to overcome the communication barrier between himself and his audience. Kafka largely mirrors his own challenges in his portrayal of the hunger artist, as both struggle to gain popularity in a society that is unappreciative of their work. Kafka highlights the illogical orchestration surrounding the hunger artist, his audience, and the act of professional fasting with an abundance of logical fallacies and situational irony, ultimately voicing his frustration with the poor reception of his thought-provoking writing style.

Kafka uses the irony of professional fasting to satirize provocative art, arguing that it inevitably results in a loss for the artist from every perspective. Fundamentally, the act offers individuals a chance to gaze at death from a safe distance. To the children, seeing the hunger artist is a “special treat,” whereas the elders consider him to be “a joke that happen[s] to be in fashion” (1). The act is initially successful because it provokes thought on the enigmas surrounding death: a concept that is foreign to the youth and too familiar to the elderly. The disparity in the reception of the hunger artist between these two age groups suggests that, as death becomes less intriguing, public interest in the act itself decreases accordingly. Here, Kafka

introduces the primary flaw in professional fasting and thought-provoking art forms in general: they rely heavily on the novelty of the topic they address. When the public becomes acquainted with the subject in question, the ideas that the artist attempts to convey are no longer unique but a mundane perspective. Ironically, the more engaging the art—the more it prompts the audience to think about a topic—the faster those ideas become commonplace and the art obsolete.

Furthermore, since nobody except for the hunger artist can be certain that the act is legitimate, he is “bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast” (2). The hunger artist means to perform for the public, but in practice, the fundamental nature of professional fasting dictates that he perform only for himself. Kafka connects this contradiction with the irony of his writing style, which is so heavily layered that only he understands the true intent of his work. In a sense, his writing is more introspective than not, as he develops his philosophy more as the writer than his audience can glean. However, Kafka argues that creating art introspectively is not a sound course of action either; by further exploring the act of fasting without regard for public opinion, the hunger artist wastes away in his cell but whispers “forgive me, everybody” to the audience before meeting his inescapable death (5). The hunger artist’s plea for forgiveness suggests that he still seeks validation from the audience, even though the differences in their interests are irreconcilable. Kafka understands that his ideas are only valuable if he shares them with others, but struggles to do so in a manner that pleases the audience. The last option is to appeal to popular interests, but Kafka rebuts this possibility as well: the hunger artist resigns to a popularly held belief—that his ability to fast indefinitely is merely a boast—but refers to this as a “perversion of the truth” (3). In the same way that conforming to public expectations perverts the truth in the hunger artist’s case, appealing to popular interests—by, for example, adopting an optimistic resolution—distorts the depiction of Kafka’s ideas.

Kafka accentuates the hunger artist's irrational ideology with situational irony and rhetorical questions, suggesting that his pride blinds him from recognizing the futility of his intentions. The hunger artist believes that "there [are] no limits to his capacity for fasting" and that his audience is "cheat[ing] him of the fame he would get for fasting longer" (2). The hunger artist's confidence in his abilities indicates some degree of pride, but intrinsically, his profession does not merit pride. His pursuit of an indefinite fast is ironic; only death can put an end to it, at which point any recognition of his accomplishment would serve no purpose to him. However, the hunger artist is too concerned with proving his authenticity to realize this fact. Furthermore, his belief that the audience is cheating him of his fame indicates feelings of resentment and entitlement. Ironically, artists typically succeed by meeting the expectations of the public, not the other way around. The hunger artist's frustrations likely reflect Kafka's frustrations with his writing, as his works were not well received during his lifetime. Kafka draws parallels between the hunger artist's difficulty in proving the authenticity of his fast and his own struggle to write effectively for his audience, suggesting that he attributes this problem at least partially to his pride. For both Kafka and the hunger artist, choosing a different profession is the logical best choice, but they are too prideful to do so. The hunger artist's use of rhetorical questions further reflects Kafka's thoughts: "why should it have so little patience with him; if he could endure fasting longer, why shouldn't the public endure it?" (2). The phrasing of these questions portrays the hunger artist as a victim of a ruthless society, unaware and uncompromising of his desire to express his fasting ability. Though this still displays entitlement, Kafka questions whether it is truly unreasonable of an audience to commit an amount of effort into truly understanding an artist's intentions.

Kafka satirizes the hunger artist's audience with logical fallacies, relating them to the bureaucratic nature of society and criticizing their lack of understanding. Distrust is inherent in professional fasting, and, though the hunger artist attempts to prove his abstinence from food by singing to the audience, they only "wonder at his cleverness in being able to fill his mouth even while singing" (1). In relation to the hunger artist's initial attempt at discrediting their suspicions, the audience responds with a disproportionately illogical counterargument; singing and swallowing food at the same time is not humanly possible. Unable to accept reality even when presented with undeniable evidence, they instead invent a senseless explanation in an effort to perpetuate their suspicions—a clear example of a *reductio ad absurdum* fallacy. The hunger artist adds that the act requires little effort on his part in another attempt to assuage the audience's suspicions, but they believe this claim to be "at best... modest," or else "he had discovered a way of making it easy, and then had the impudence to admit the fact" (2). Given the lack of supporting evidence to back their claims, the audience wrongfully questions the hunger artist's integrity. The argument quickly spirals into an attack on the hunger artist's character, as the audience accuses him of being impudent. The use of *ad hominem* arguments further demonstrates the audience's incapacity for logical reasoning, which ultimately serves to voice Kafka's frustration with bureaucratic systems that fail to accept his ideology. Consistent with bureaucracies in his other works, the audience in "A Hunger Artist" offers little explanation for their decisions despite having such a profound impact on the hunger artist's success. Kafka implies that the same criticisms made of society in his previous stories apply to his personal experiences, in which he struggles to communicate his ideas to the public. Though his philosophy is complex, he argues that his audience fails at even attempting to consider his views.

Kafka highlights the illogical orchestration surrounding the hunger artist, his audience, and the act of professional fasting with an abundance of logical fallacies and situational irony, ultimately voicing his frustration with the poor reception of his thought-provoking writing style. Kafka consistently follows a Juvenalian outlook in his works, leaving an incomplete resolution as to how to address the problem at hand. However, as a final bout of irony, “A Hunger Artist” serves as a direct counterexample to his criticisms: a work that proved simultaneously introspective, provocative, and well-received—albeit only after his death.

Works Cited

Franz Kafka. *A Hunger Artist*. 1979.