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"Spectacles of Suffering: The Hypocrisy of Martyrdom in Kafka's A Hunger Artist"

In the modern day, suffering is often celebrated and commodified from staged content to mass warfare. In Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" the namesake hunger artist starves himself as a form of professional entertainment and reverence; however, as with all entertainment, his time in the spotlight fades and so too does his holiness. Through frequent symbolism, imagery, and rich subtext, Franz Kafka creates an extended allegory, demonstrating the hypocrisy of the Church; in specific, how through the creation of a false martyr, one dilutes the sanctity of life.

Even within the contextualization of his story, Kafka begins his criticism of the Church through creating an extended contrast between the hunger artist's (supposed) viewpoints during his peak and at his lowest. In the beginning of this short story where the readers view the hunger artist at his peak, the narrator avows the former's conviction in the "honor of his profession" through his continuous fast (670). This evokes imagery of a holy nature with similarities to the "honor" of sacrifice and martyrdom for one's faith. In the end of his life, the hunger artist has fallen from status and holiness as represented by the Judas-esque kiss he shared with his overseer (675). Furthermore, he disavows his holiness, demonstrating the hypocrisy of those the Church idolizes such as false martyrs. Through this journey, Kafka criticizes the performative martyrdom

present in human society and the ways it corrupts the spiritual. Moreover, this martyrdom becomes valued not for its spirituality, but for its entertainment and economy.

Kafka also uses vivid symbolism to evoke biblical imagery, in the process, describing society's interaction with the Catholic church. In specific, the odd happenstance that the "permanent watchers selected by the public [were] usually butchers," is in reference to the Eucharist (669). Butchers cut the meat and present it for those to consume in a similar way one might receive the "body of Christ," his flesh. However, butchers are also symbolic of violence, oppression, and the dark side of human nature. Together, this double meaning represents a perversion of the holiness of the Church, indicating a darker, more visceral worship. Additionally, Kafka's specific inclusion that there were always three watchers points to a satire of the Holy Trinity. He indirectly addresses the paradoxical nature of religion through the subversion of biblical imagery. Kafka then demonstrates how when institutionalized, human nature corrupts purity. Furthermore, this corruption often occurs through the commodification of status.

In this instance, Kafka once again uses specific symbolism to create a juxtaposition between concepts. By choosing a "flower-bedecked cage" on page 671 as the hunger artist's enclosure, Kafka juxtaposes the purity of flowers with the connotations of the cage: impiety and imprisonment. Just before this contrast, he also alludes to Jesus' forty-day fast within the bible, setting the hunger artists "limit" there. In doing so, the hunger artist cannot become blasphemous by surpassing the Son of God himself. Lastly, Kafka writes of the ladies who were selected to "help the hunger artist ... to a small table ... [with an] invalid repast" (671). A wealth of imagery is within this scene: the table and feast correlating to the last supper and the ladies "help" being

representative of the Church's forced doctrine. Kafka reveals that humanity reveals its societal structure through the ebb and flow of the paradoxical nature between freedom and doctrine. At its most basic level, society communicates through a twisted form of self-inflicted vicarious suffering.

With the addition of the panther, Kafka added rich subtext. If the hunger artist is to represent a perversion of the biblical image of holiness through Jesus, the panther is the antithesis. Moreover, the symbolism extended to Kafka's allusion to medieval art's portrayal of the panther being Jesus's avatar. His description of the panther is diametrically opposed to that of the hunger artist by using words such as "refreshing," "freedom," and "noble." Kafka even goes so far as to write the panther to be a source of "the joy of life" as opposed to the hunger artist's torturous one (669). Kafka reveals that through the search for righteousness, humanity can become blinded to the transcendental way of natural life. Furthermore, this implies a divorce from rigid doctrine and a step toward "natural" existence.

All in all, Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" presents a profound critique on the exploitation and commodification of suffering through its reframing as "holiness." Now, more than ever, one can see how suffering has become commodified and exalted. And while Kafka's work may have been written over a century ago, its points still remain salient and important to consider in the modern day.

Works Cited

Kafka, Franz. "A Hunger Artist." *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, edited by Sarah Touborg et al., 13th ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2019, pp. 669–75.