**A Hunger Artist**

**Suffering as art**

[The hunger artist](https://www.gradesaver.com/a-hunger-artist/study-guide/character-list#the-hunger-artist)'s art is, at a metaphorical level, suffering. The pleasure and artistry of fasting comes from the free will he exercises in his self-denial and masochism. Though he is confined to a cage, he has complete control over his pain and hunger (except when the impresario manages him), pushing himself past human limits in his constant search for a new masterpiece of starvation. Kafka romanticizes the hunger artist as an alienated "starving artist" who flouts capitalist society and concentrates solely on his own art from his virtual one-room apartment.

However, the hunger artist questions the importance of his strange art at two different points. He admits that fasting is easy, although no one believes him, and with his dying words he says he should not be admired for fasting; he simply never found any food he liked. In other words, he is by nature alienated from the world, and this alienation causes him to suffer; had the world been a better fit for him, he gladly would have chosen not to suffer. This claim undermines the free will he seemingly exercises in his fastingnot eating is merely an alienated reflex, not a deliberately chosen endeavor.

Another problem crops up with his art. Most artists have temperaments of suffering, and artists often express themselves through art to relieve this suffering and share it with others. This sharing can be seen as a noble gesture, but there is also something selfish and bitter about it; artists want the audience to suffer as much as they do. The hunger artist fails to enlarge the audience about his suffering, as it is interested in his suffering only as an entertainment (see The audience's fascination with suffering, below), and he selfishly tries to inflict suffering on his watchers (to make them "endure" what he must "endure"). His failure to make people understand him only makes him suffer more, creating a vicious cycle of suffering. Ultimately, a divide springs up in his art: the hunger artist remains artistically unsatisfied, while the audience leaves entertainingly satisfied.

**The artist's dependency on the audience**

The artist has a complicated relationship with his audience. Like most artists, he needs constant validation. He believes fasting and suffering is a high art and not mere entertainment, and as such he needs to prove that he is not cheating. However, no one believes he is truly fasting all the time. This misunderstanding of his art produces more suffering for the hunger artist, so he enters a vicious cycle: the more he suffers, the less his audience understands him, so he suffers even more.

The hunger artist also needs to feel superior to the masses. He elevates his fasting to mythical proportions, trying to break world records, even when no one else pays attention. Most importantly, he delights in maintaining his fast while his overnight watchers (usually gluttonous butchers) gorge themselves on a breakfast at his expense; in his eyes, they are weak-willed while he has god-like determination and concentration. Perhaps this feeling of superiority also ensures that no one can criticize him; if no one else understands his art, then no one can pass informed judgment on it. This blend of dependencya need for validation and a need to feel superiormay explain why the hunger artist remains eternally unsatisfied. He wants to be understood and have his art validated, but he also wants to be not understood so he can feel superior and remain impervious from criticism.

The hunger artist hints at what he has been truly seeking all along only at the end. With his dying words to the circus overseer, he purses his lips as if to kiss the overseer. He has wanted to use his body as a vessel of love, not of starvation and suffering.

**The audience's fascination with suffering**

The audience does not appreciate the hunger artist's fasting as a serious art, but is interested in it only as an entertainment; at the circus, the hunger artist is a freak show with less credibility than the animals. The spectacle of suffering rivets the audience, much as people are still fascinated by highway car crashes and horror movies. Even one of the female escort's horrified tears is cause for delight among the suffering-obsessed audience.

Of course, the audience is interested in suffering only when it happens to others; it never reflects on its own potential for suffering when it sees suffering in others, especially the hunger artist. Perhaps because of this denial, the audience does not want to believe the hunger artist is suffering as much as he claims. They set up watchers who believe the hunger artist cheats, a convenient way to negate the potency of his suffering and prevent it from reaching them.

The audience is also fickle and quickly abandons the hunger artist; it consumes him, one might say, then disposes of him. The crowd settles on a new spectacle, the panther. The panther is a symbol of appetite and sufferingexcept that the violent, horrific animal inflicts suffering, and does not absorb it. Though Kafka tells us at the end of the story that the audience never wants to move away from its fascination with the panther, the audience's capricious history of consuming entertainment puts that claim in doubt.

**Christ and Judaism**

The impresario limits the hunger artist's fasts to forty days, the same length of time Jesus fasted in Matthew 4:1-2. Christ is the ultimate figure of suffering, but the major difference between Christ and the hunger artist is that the former suffered for humanity; the latter suffers because of humanity.

The two may also have something else in common: Christ was, originally, Jewish, and his forty-day fast was most likely an allusion to the Jews' wandering for forty years. Though the hunger artist's religion is unspecified, Kafka's marginalized, alienated characters are often symbolic Jews. It does not seem incidental that the hunger artist's watchers are usually butchers. While the profession indicates the gluttony of capitalist, entertainment-hungry society, it also recalls Jewish kosher guidelines, which prohibit eating pork and prescribe specific ways to prepare meat. (Judging from the butchers' lax attitude toward watching the hunger artist, it is doubtful they meet these stringent conditions.)

Christ eventually became one of the most significant people in history by absorbing suffering from others and helping them become better people for it. The hunger artist is referred to as a "suffering martyr," and the first two definitions of "martyr" are noble and Christ-like. A martyr is either a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of refusing to renounce a religion or, more generally, a person who sacrifices something of great value often his own life for a principle. The third definition is less heroic: a victim, or a great or constant sufferer. The hunger artist fits more readily into this last category, and here his association with Christ ends. No one benefits from his deathif anything, the audience has renewed its fascination with suffering as it takes in the violent, appetitive panther.