**Themes**

**The Separation of Artist from Society**

In “A Hunger Artist,” the hunger artist’s troubled relationship with his spectators suggests that the artist exists apart from society and must therefore be misunderstood. In the hunger artist’s case, being an artist means cutting oneself off from the world, a conclusion reflected in the hunger artist’s conscious choice to sequester himself in a cage. This physical separation of hunger artist and spectator mirrors the spiritual separation of the individual artistic ego and public will. This gap in mindset leads to a critical gap in understanding. Set apart from others, only the hunger artist realizes the importance of his ambitions and accomplishments, and only he knows that he is not cheating. The further the hunger artist goes in pursuit of perfection, as he does in the circus, the further away he moves from the understanding of the people for whom he performs. The artist will always be separated from society because the qualities that distinguish him as an “artist” and are worth preserving are the ones that ensure he will never be understood.

**The Harmful Effect of Pride**

Although the hunger artist’s fierce pride in his art enables him to improve his fasting, it ultimately stops him from reaching his goals because it hurts his public appeal and connection to others. He looks on his emaciated frame and protruding ribcage with vanity, deeming them badges of honor, but his pitiful, grotesque body repulses the women who initially want to carry him from his cage at the end of his fast. In this case, his starved body—which is the manifestation of his pride—is the thing that ensures he will never be loved and admired by the public. Pride turns the hunger artist away from others and into himself, and he reinforces his isolation by imprisoning himself in a cage and meditating intensely. In the end, pride guarantees the hunger artist not fame and transcendence, but obscurity.

**The Fruitlessness of Hunger**

The hunger artist relishes in his hunger throughout the story, hoping that it will lead to spiritual satisfaction, but in the end, his fasting leaves him empty both physically and spiritually. The hunger artist refuses food, but his self-denial reveals his need for a different kind of nourishment: public recognition and artistic perfection. Hunger, for both physical and spiritual nourishment, is the subject of his performance. Beyond the performance, however, the hunger artist yearns only for what the physical world, including his audience, cannot give him. Fasting becomes the “easiest thing in the world” for the hunger artist, but what he struggles to do without is the spiritual nourishment that remains out of his reach.

While he performs with the impresario, the hunger artist never succeeds in fasting indefinitely, and this failure results in constant dissatisfaction. But the hunger artist fails to understand that the spiritual satisfaction he yearns for relies on the physical life he believes that he must give up. In renouncing his claims on life, the hunger artist makes himself incapable of achieving spiritual satisfaction. The panther that replaces him in the cage has a lust for life, satisfied “to the bursting point with everything that it needed.” Even though it is trapped in a cage, the panther seems to need nothing because, in essence, it lacks nothing. The hunger artist dies empty, having given up everything and still attaining none of his goals.