



## A Hunger Artist

*Franz Kafka , Kevin Blahut (Translator) , Helena Vl?novská (Illustrator)*

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The last book published during Kafka's lifetime, *A Hunger Artist* (1924) explores many of the themes that were close to him: spiritual poverty, asceticism, futility, and the alienation of the modern artist. He edited the manuscript just before his death, and these four stories are some of his best known and most powerful work, marking his maturity as a writer. In addition to "First Sorrow," "A Little Woman," and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse People" is the title story, "A Hunger Artist," which has been called by the critic Heinz Politzer "a perfection, a fatal fulfillment that expresses Kafka's desire for permanence." The three volumes Twisted Spoon Press has published: *Contemplation*, *A Country Doctor*, and *A Hunger Artist* are the collections of stories that Kafka had published during his lifetime. Though each volume has its own distinctive character, they have most often appeared in English in collected editions. They are presented here as separate editions, in new translations by Kevin Blahut, each with its own illustrator from the Prague community.

## A Hunger Artist Details

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Author : Franz Kafka , Kevin Blahut (Translator) , Helena Vi?novská (Illustrator)

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## From Reader Review A Hunger Artist for online ebook

### Vipassana says

This is a tiny story and I'd recommend that everyone read it. Think about your hunger. Do you starve yourself for lack of nutrition or do you poison yourself with what you are given? Do you choke your children with your own inadequacy and suffocate those try to live consciously?

In the moments when one is faced with something intense, it is easy to get overwhelmed. But take twenty minutes, read this story and answer your questions.

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### Duane says

A Hunger Artist is a Franz Kafka short story that was published in the early 1920's. A Fasting Artist would be a better title because that's what the protagonist is, that's what he does, and he does it publicly, seemingly for the entertainment of the "people". He is very good at it and takes pride in his ability to fast for up to 40 days. But as time goes on the people begin to lose interest in his fasting's until there is no one left, no one who is interested. The story is obviously an allegory but what does it mean, what does the fasting represent? I think it's meanings and interpretations are almost infinite. They could mean anything to anybody. To me it was a reflection of life, of my life, and how things change as you get holder, and how people begin to perceive you differently. It's a short read and certainly worth taking the time.

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### Guillermo Gonca says

En tiempos pasados el ayuno fue visto como un gesto noble. Los antiguos ascetas (especialmente los de oriente) acostumbraban el ayuno como una ofrenda o sacrificio ante la divinidad; no era raro ver a místicos y frailes (flacos hasta los huesos) que evitaban casi por completo el "alimento material" para conformarse con el "alimento espiritual". Con el tiempo, apareció otra manera noble de evitar las bondades de la nutrición; un activista o luchador social podía declararse en "huelga de hambre" y dejar de comer como protesta ante la injusticia o el abuso del poder, poniendo su vida en manos del tirano. Sin embargo, la honorabilidad de estos motivos, podría esconder un impulso autodestructivo; una patología que llevaría a estas personas a ofrecerse como el cordero puesto para el sacrificio. A este impulso de dejar de comer, se le reconoce hoy en día como anorexia, una enfermedad psiquiátrica

"Un artista del hambre" relato escrito por Franz Kafka en 1922 trata sobre ese impulso destructivo ya despojado de su dignidad mística o justiciera, pero revestido de una cualidad circense. El artista del hambre es una persona que ostenta poder sobrevivir sin probar bocado durante cuarenta días. Esta habilidad es tomada por el personaje como una profesión de la que se enorgullece, por la que se contrata y recibe una remuneración, misma que le obliga a ser enjaulado, exhibido y vigilado día y noche, cual si fuera un animal salvaje.

La psicología profunda del personaje es muy interesante, pues a sabiendas de sentirse completamente incomprendido, arremete con furia contra quienes intentan empatizar con él. En repetidas ocasiones nuestro protagonista expresa plena convicción por su modo de ganarse la vida y por el dominio de su "arte", pero termina aceptando que su ayuno no es más que una inclinación incontrolable, una adicción que va más allá de sus fuerzas. El lector encontrará el desenlace de la historia tan desconcertante como la personalidad del





How will I fulfill the desire of acceptance then?

Will I be ever able to live my life normally? If yes then HOW?

Will the world end?

Who will notice when I die?

Is my usefulness to others is the means to an end or an end in itself?

This sad tale by Kafka narrates the dilemma of a man whose only trait has become irrelevant to the world.

It's a lot to ponder !!

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### **Elyse says**

“he was working honestly- - but the world was cheating him of his reward”

The hunger artist's life's 'work' as a public spectator in a cage - starved from food - is one hell of a career choice.

What did he feel the world owed him? Perhaps asked another way - “what did he feel he owed himself?”.

The older the Hunger Artist became - rather than experiencing inner peace - his heart grew heavy.

Fasting itself was easy for him. Forty days at a time were not so much a personal challenge

— it was simply the number of days of a fasting cycle until the public got bored with paying attention.

One of the things I thought about —

besides...the sadness of this man's life —perhaps wanting control - but control is limiting- an illusion- and ultimately disappointing—

I thought about the deep sadness of the GREAT ARTISTS...

The GREAT HONEST WORKERS in our world — doing what they do that comes natural and easy to

'them'... yet they are never satisfied with their self worth. Many of the greatest people feel invisible- lonely - like they've failed at their own dreams....

And they are sorry.

The Hunger Artist tried to do honest work....and make a difference.

What the artist doesn't know....

Is that he is still making a difference after his death.

Being human hurts - and if this short story doesn't point to that - I don't know what does!

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### **Brian says**

Re-read 3.6.18:

Kafka has been, to me, a deeply spiritual writer, speaking deep truths in spiritual and allegorical words, which speak to the heart and spirit. This gorgeous, sad story speaks to me, but I find it hard to convey with my mind.

This spoke deepest to me:

"I always wanted you to admire my fasting,' said the hunger artist. 'And so we do admire it,' said the overseer accomodatingly. 'But you shouldn't admire it,' said the hunger artist. 'So then we don't admire it,' said the overseer,'but why should we not admire it?' 'Because I must fast, I cannot do otherwise,' answered the hunger artist. 'What a character you are,' said the overseer, 'and why can't you do otherwise?' 'Because,' said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and puckering his lips as if for a kiss, and he spoke directly into the overseers ear so that nothing would be missed, 'Because I could never find food I liked. Had I found it, believe me, I would never have created such a ruckus and would have stuffed myself like you and everyone else.' These were his last words, but in his glazing eyes there remained the firm if no longer proud conviction that he was still fasting."

These were Kafka's last words to us, in a sense, having died soon after the arrangement. I think Kafka was the hunger artist. He lived an emaciated existence, consumed in his writing, loving it, knowing he had an extraordinary gift, but knowing the reality that he didn't write popular fiction. His writing revealed his emaciated, nutrition-neglected existence, in his loneliness, his internal conflicts, his concern for the true matters of life. He didn't live to merely entertain people, and use the money to be entertained. He went deep, and wanted to take people deep, and died believing he had failed. Perhaps his hope was that some day people might hear, and see him after death as in life, feeding off the food of what truly matters.

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Original, 3.2.16

The life of a nutrition deprived man in a cage, a prisoner by will. One of those stories you keep thinking about and sink into days after.

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## Jeffrey Keeten says

**When . . . some leisurely passer-by stopped . . . and spoke of cheating, that was in its way the stupidest lie ever invented by indifference and inborn malice, since it was not the hunger artist who was cheating, he was working honestly, but the world was cheating him of his reward.**

The main character is a professional, fasting artist. His manager takes him from town to town across Europe, locks him in a straw filled cage for forty days, and advertises his feat of hunger, drawing large crowds. He becomes indignant when the town would assign men, usually butchers, to watch him to make sure he is not cheating. As time goes on, interest in his form of entertainment wains, and he ends up working for a circus, still fasting, but now his cage is nestled among the wild animals outside the main arena.

Why would anyone want to be a professional hunger artist? Interesting that he refers to himself as an artist, which would imply creating something or doing something. I'm not sure **not** doing something really counts, but it shows how he sees himself and why he is so indignant when people do not recognize his sacrifice for his art. So pride is a big part of what drives him to starve himself. He wants to show the world that he can deprive himself, and he wishes he could go longer than forty days, but part of the spectacle is the ending of the fast when people watch him removed from the cage and put before his first meal.

He admits something that also changes the perception of what he does. **“If I had found [the food I liked], believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else.”** So giving up food isn't really a sacrifice for him, not in the way it would be for me, anyway. I'm sure he still has the gnawing hunger and the flurries of desperations that accompany the craving for food.

I understand someone fasting to bring attention to an injustice, maybe their own; maybe they have been unjustly incarcerated. Gandhi might be one of the most famous “hunger artists,” but he was trying to change the world. Going to see someone intentionally depriving himself of food to entertain people is about as interesting to me as going to see a beheading or a hanging. I don't see other people's misfortunes, or in the case of the hunger artist someone intentionally torturing themselves, as a form of amusement for myself. Paul Theroux talks about people going on “safari” in Africa to experience what he calls **poverty porn**. They would intentionally drive into the poverty stricken areas of Africa to see the desperate situations in which the very poorest people on earth are trying to exist, trying not to die from hunger or exposure due to drought, civil war, or any number of reasons beyond their control.

\* A bone shaking shudder along with a healthy dose of loathing for those entertained by poverty.\*

### **Franz Kafka by R. Crumb.**

The moral of this story revolves around the pitfalls of the hunger artist's pride. I also believe that Franz Kafka is casting a light on those who are entertained by his starvation. This short story is considered one of his masterpieces, which as I was writing this review and accessing my emotional response to the story, I have to say, mission accomplished, Mr. Kafka. It is so tragic that he died at age 40, long before he reached the zenith of his abilities. What masterpieces died with him when the final flicker of neurons in his brilliant brain went dark forever?

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>  
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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### **Huda Yahya says**

I am too overwhelmed to write , for i AM the hunger artist !

It's like watching yourself , your life , your decisions ,and above all your DEATH !

This is how i visioned my death ! I just didn't have any idea that another person knew how exactly it's going to be !

Kafka creeps the hell outta me . Seriously !

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### **Elie F says**

When the external critics lost interest and the artist lost his external measure of success, he is left with his internal critic, himself, who unfortunately knew very well how mediocre his performance actually is. Is the pathetic condition of the hunger artist also a reflection of Kafka's own condition?





The point is his passivity, and it's a trap. When people stop paying attention he is without recourse. He is without words--that's the awful truth.

But, after all, Kafka is not without words as he has written this!

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## Sidharth Vardhan says

For most part it could be read in different ways:

1. **as an allegory on life of Jesus.** Jesus died trying to tell the people about righteous path. However, just like hunger artist he was never understood and soon ran out of fashion. To me personally, it appears weakest of interpretations.
2. **About path of abstinence.** Hunger artist was personification of abstinence and was replaced by ever hungry beast showing a change in values of society. He chooses abstinence because he could not be at peace with joys society has to offer as his last words show.
3. **Obsession.** Hunger artist had a blind, and as was proved fatal, obsession for hunger. Like anybody living through obsession, he couldn't understand other people's indifference towards what he considered so important, carried his obsession to extremes with no sense of measure or proportion; continued out of habit to the point of his death. His last words may be seen as a desperate effort at self justification (those weren't the reasons mentioned in the beginning.)
4. **A critical artist.** The hunger artist may stand for an artist (read **Kafka**) or even a social activist (read **Gandhi** with his satyagrahas and **Mother Teresa** with her self imposed poverty) who feels compelled to make, or rather turn himself into a statement against things he or she can't turn his gaze away from - the way rest of us do. Although instead of being understood, he or she becomes a source of curiosity and entertainment, and ends up being replaced by another entertainment of very opposite sort as society's tastes changes. Hunger artist's last words may mean to show he has been so because he couldn't living with existing vices of society.

Like all Kafka's works, it is absurd and is liable to multiple interpretations, but we need not worry ourselves with what author was thinking when he wrote it. Great works often end up saying and doing then they are trying to.

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## Cecily says

This is a collection of four short stories, at least three of which concern performance art. These four are also included in some version of The Metamorphosis.

### The First Sorrow

This tells of a trapeze artist so dedicated to his art, that he lives for and on his trapeze. Travel is torturous because he has to come down (though for longer journeys, he goes by train and lies in the overhead luggage rack!).

Voyeurism often features tangentially in Kafka's works (and sometimes explicitly), but that is not the trapeze

artist's motivation. He is a pure artist, and prepared to sacrifice everything for that, regardless of any fame or approval.

### **A Little Woman**

This seems to be the odd one out, as it doesn't feature a performance or any sort of artist. Instead, it is an apparently paranoid narration of a man who is despised and thus tormented by a woman who "is a complete stranger to me". She is "repulsed" and "highly dissatisfied with me" to the extent that she cannot sleep and thus cannot work. He does not know (or admit?) the cause, but feels guilt, as well as shame arising from the assumption that others condemn him. He claims "the relationship between us is entirely of her making and only exists from her point of view", but his reaction implies otherwise. He asks a friend for advice and awaits her judgement.

### **The Fasting Artist**

This is presumably where David Blaine got his inspiration, but Kafka, of course, is far more profound and disturbing.

Is he just a dedicated performer, or does self-starvation serve some higher purpose, or reflect Kafka's own concerns and problems with health and eating? Much of the inner turmoil sounds like someone with an eating disorder: "I have to fast, I can't help it" and "I could never find the nourishment I liked".

His greatest frustration is people assuming he cheats somehow. He is the only person who is 100% certain of the truth, and yet he is dissatisfied with himself because fasting is "the easiest thing in the world".

He's never allowed to fast for more than 40 days because the public lose interest, but you should be careful what you wish for. Fasting as a spectacle goes out of fashion; he is no longer the big draw he once was, and he ends up in a circus, alongside the more interesting animal.

You can read the full text here (8 pages):  
<http://www.kafka-online.info/a-hunger...>

### **Josefine the Songstress or The Mouse People**

One of Kafka's animal stories, though apart from the subtitle, you'd barely know it. It's also (probably) my least favourite, though I can't quite say why.

An unnamed narrator talks about Josefine: "the beauty of her song is such that even the dumbest ear cannot resist it" and goes on to ponder whether it is really art, or merely an extension of the natural tendency to "pipe" (I presume "squeak" would be a better translation).

She has diva-ish tendencies and is revered by her people, such that "Josefine stands almost beyond the law". She says work impairs her voice, so invents work-related injuries, "So now we get a theatrical performance in addition to the concert". Should society support great artists?

You can read the full text here (20 pages):  
<http://www.kafka-online.info/josephin...>

See my Kafka-related bookshelf for other works by and about Kafka  
(<http://www.goodreads.com/review/list/...>).

## Petra X says

What he did for fame. What he did to prove himself. How some people take things to extremes and then find the thing itself has taken them over. How pointless it is to die for something so petty. How perhaps the clarity of imminent mortality makes the protagonist confess the true reason for his self-starvation. If he did, if it was.

Or if it was really about that at all? Was it really about the existential pleasure of living for the day and enjoying what there is? Or perhaps it was about if a tree falls in the forest but no one is there to see it... A novella, or a long short story it is of infinite depth and endless interpretation. But then that's the genius of Kafka all over.

*Updated 10 May 2015*

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## Chaymâa says

I always try to view a piece of art as abstract and intricate as the soul of its creator. Judging it by its surface would be like judging a person by their appearance, an opinion biased to its very core. Worshiping it according to its fame or its signature is discrimination against Art in its purest sense. I honestly have no idea where my thoughts will lead me. I know though that feelings are submerging me right now and I feel shrouded by the sight of this *hunger artist*. He was a master in the art of fasting. The suffering of a desperate soul was what he could symbolize the best. He was both the artist and the masterpiece and he devoted himself to what seemed to him the heart of his existence, fasting in a cage in front of an apathetic society. All he was longing for was some recognition, a fickle attention or just one brief glance of a stranger passing by him. A sign acknowledging his existence and his work of art, for god's sake!

I respect you, dear hunger artist. I would even go further and say I adore you. I might not be an artist, but I am a hunger person whose mind is abstained from anything fake. Fain would I await the time when authenticity shall prevail and fain would Art die, if hunger artists get satiated by money and publicity.

*A hunger artist* is a very layered work which makes it hard –even impossible- to read without omitting a sign or a meaning. As the last book published during the lifetime of Kafka, I wonder if he doesn't project himself on some aspect of this *hunger artist*. It is said that Kafka may have suffered from Schizoid personality disorder which is characterized by a lack of interest in relationships and a tendency towards an isolated lifestyle. It is hard to draw any conclusions about this but to me Kafka would always remain this mysterious genius and, *A hunger artist* utterly testifies to his greatness.

"Try to explain the art of fasting to anyone! If someone doesn't feel it, then he cannot be made to understand it."

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## Scarlet Cameo says

*"Un hombre condenado a mirar al mundo con una claridad tan enceguedora que éste le resultó insoportable y se encaminó hacia la muerte"*

Esta es la descripción que hace Kafka del ayunador, un hombre que conforme se describe su mundo y su necesidad de sentir hambre transmite un velo de angustia y desolación que sólo él, y sus semejantes, podían entender. El arquetipo del hombre solo cuando está rodeado de gente, siempre inconforme con el mundo y completamente incomprendido pero, que al mismo tiempo, entiende al mundo mejor que todos los habitantes que lo conforman.

Un cuento que abarca la inconformidad, la necesidad de sobresalir y hacerse invisible en un mismo momento, y la belleza/sufrimiento de morir por el amor al arte son sólo algunos de los aspectos que son demostrados en esta magnífica obra que no sólo analiza al artista en su desesperación y conformismo sino también al espectador en su fascinación y desprecio.

*"Tal vez su esquelética delgadez procedía de su descontento consigo mismo"*

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## Supreeth says

You always end up doing shit you never wanted to do.

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