Directions: *Read through the text below and highlight things you like and are worth discussing during seminar…*

**Title: A Hunger Artist: Overview**

Author(s): [Grace Eckley](http://go.galegroup.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName(0)=AU&prodId=LitRC&userGroupName=msu_main&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue(0)=%22Grace+Eckley%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)

Source: [***Reference Guide to Short Fiction***](http://go.galegroup.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/ps/aboutJournal.do?pubDate=&rcDocId=GALE%7CH1420004471&actionString=DO_DISPLAY_ABOUT_PAGE&inPS=true&prodId=LitRC&userGroupName=msu_main&resultClickType=AboutThisPublication&contentModuleId=LitRC&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GALE%7C0PGY). Ed. Noelle Watson. Detroit: St. James Press. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Work overview, Critical essay

Bookmark: [Bookmark this Document](http://go.galegroup.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/ps/generateInfomark.do?docType=GALE&inPS=true&prodId=LitRC&userGroupName=msu_main&tabID=T001&pageNumber=&searchId=R5&docId=GALE%7CH1420004471&currentPosition=9&type=r&contentSet=GALE%7CH1420004471&pageIndex=)



Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1994 St. James Press, COPYRIGHT 2006 Gale

The haunted and suffering look in the standard photograph of Franz Kafka expresses his sensitivity to religious and political hatreds in his native city of Prague, ruled by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in his youth, and later, after World War I, subject to bureaucratic government typified in his novel ***Der Prozess*** (***The Trial***). His friend Max Brod preserved the manuscript of ***Ein HungerKünstler*** ("A **Hunger** **Artist**") among Kafka's works that he had directed to be burned, and Brod published it posthumously. The story reflects the aspirations of a middle-class Jewish artist, his preoccupation with suicide, and the wasting away of tuberculosis that eventually killed Kafka.

The details of the plot perhaps developed from a 40-day fast accomplished by Dr. Tanner in New York City in July and August of 1880. Widely reported abroad, the fast drew hoards of onlookers (many of them elegant ladies), as well as accusations that Tanner secretly took food, misconceptions of Tanner's motives, and comparisons with animals.

The stereotype of the starving and misunderstood artist developed in the 19th century. Kafka's artist lives in a cage instead of a garret, and makes his hunger a lifework and a performing art, with the added complication that in seeking perfection he wills his death. The public for a time callously entertains itself with his artful suffering, demonstrates a macabre and ghoulish pleasure in the moribund state, and even selects the butchers who comprise a continual guard; hence the public would appear to bear the blame for his progressive mistreatment, neglect, and eventual death. But the dedicated artist defies and refuses assistance to maintain life while exhausting himself with his lifework.

With a martyr complex, he exploits his animal nature: living in a cage, dressing in black tights with his ribs prominently displayed, and sitting in straw. The animal, it would seem demands to be fed. But the artist conversely refuses both food and exercise. The animal, in contrast with the man, is said not to have a soul; but as evidence that he has a soul, the **hunger** **artist** keeps foremost the human passions for integrity and perfection. He is willing to die for these.

Contrary and unreasoning, and proud of his professional achievement, the artist for a time sustains himself with the egotism of the esoteric-versus-exoteric conflict; at the height of his glory he consoles himself with the thought that a few initiates understand and appreciate the honor of his profession and recognize his professional supremacy. The initiates, however, are not permitted to share his innermost secret—how easy it is to fast. Gradually the esoteric assurances are dissipated for him amid doubts that both the initiates and the public share about his artistic integrity; unobserved, they suspect, he might take a surreptitious morsel. Eventually he becomes the only spectator and, ironically, the only skeleton at his own fast.

The Christ analogies, in part exploited by the impresario, are more than obvious. The watchers, similar to the soldiers at Christ's death who threw dice, play at cards; and death on the cross was reported to be a matter of dehydration and starvation. The impresario fixes the term of fasting to 40 days, and typically, at the moment of extreme faintness lifts his arms "as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the straw, this suffering martyr." Like paintings of Christ being taken from the cross, the artist's head lolls on his breast, his body is hollowed out; his legs, close to each other at the knees, scrape the ground; and, like the women tending Christ, fainting ladies assist him.

With his performance routine established and the viewers' behavior anticipated, the **hunger** **artist** lives for many years with the aura of a Christ—"in visible glory"—with only himself dissatisfied and "troubled in spirit." The impresario who, among all the others, should understand, fails to appreciate that the artist's work is still not perfected, that his work, which always exhausts him, should not be limited and prematurely ended at 40 days and himself cheated of his fame. Others do not grasp the ethic-esthetic connection; even his protests are misunderstood and masterfully exploited by the impresario, so that the artist grows discouraged with the task of fighting against a whole world of misunderstanding.

After the struggle to establish his fame and the incomparable excellence of his performance through many European settings, the artist finds that the public's enthusiasm gradually diminishes; when the older generation recalls him for the younger, his art seems to have been only a fad, and revulsion sets in. He parts from the impresario and hires himself to a circus.

Unfortunately, this transfer only speeds the process of decline, disinterest, and revulsion. The public hastens past his cage and, instead of honoring his achievement, seems to shrink from him. His chief competition is the exact opposite of himself, the lively circus animals, and gradually he comes to accept the fact that his presence is only an impediment for those visiting the menagerie. As the signs announcing his art fade and he becomes forgotten, a rare passerby dredges up the old charges of swindling. The artist, however, with deepening depression, continues to work hard at fasting.

He becomes a nuisance mostly forgotten; when too late he is discovered among the straw, his last words also recall those of Christ on the cross: "Forgive me, everybody." The overseer, like the public, still fails to understand. The artist's confession, when he faces the truth of his existence, climaxes the story; the overseer should not admire him because he could not do otherwise, because he could not find the food he liked.

The denouement reveals the artist replaced by a healthy black panther, as if the former garment of black tights had foreshadowed the artist's fate. The public's former fascination for the **hunger** **artist** is now transferred to his opposite; and the crowds admire the panther as if it were an artist.

The artist, then, lives an existence trapped in his own nature, and between two worlds of pleasing others and pleasing himself. If he were not an artist, no system could make him one; because he is an artist, no system can prevent his being so.

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Eckley, Grace. "A Hunger Artist: Overview." *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*. Ed. Noelle Watson. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.

Document URL
<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420004471&v=2.1&u=msu_main&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=fe86ea6a40d92bc1480a16d19c763f50> **Gale Document Number:** GALE|H1420004471