
Religious Imagery in The Hunger Artist

In *A Hunger Artist* by Franz Kafka, one can argue the character of the Hunger Artist is an absurdist anti-hero parallel to the heroic figure of Jesus Christ in the Holy Bible. The Hunger Artist is a narration of a "starving, dying art", and one of the most relative interpretations for its time can be attributed to religion. Although Kafka was born Jewish and later devoted himself to atheism, he had no trouble alluding to things that were central to European society. That being said, "A Hunger Artist" is a Christ-like figure, or a martyr, as Kafka believed, who would absurdly devote himself to religion during the modernist age when there was a declining interest in religion.

The story opens with "In the last decade, there has been a declining interest in hunger artists", which possibly may be a reference to the rise of atheism in the nineteen twenties, supported by Kafka's atheism. First, let's define what it means to be a hunger artist. A hunger artist in this story is a "an artist who masochistically starves himself for the pleasure of others as an art form", but could be extended metaphorically to mean "a starving artist of a dying art". Either way, "starving or pleasing others as an art and suffering for it" or "doing what you want" all pertains to the conundrum of the modernist age where people don't seem to care unless you are with the times.

Skepticism and uncertainty in the Hunger Artist can also be compared to Christianity. People doubted the Hunger Artist's fasting just like people doubted Jesus Christ's words. Those who truly believed would have to believe in the number of days that the Hunger Artist fasted even though it's physically impossible for one to fast for that long. There's also the question of the reliability of the narrator, as we question the word of the Bible. Is the Bible really the word of God? And did this narrator really know the Hunger Artist and follow him and know if he ate or not? Is he or she too proud to say anything?

The Hunger Artist's period of fasting, forty days, alludes to Christ. However, the Hunger Artist chooses to go beyond the maximum period of fasting and fast much longer, which makes him a "Super-Christ" figure. Ironically, after he surpasses Christ, people lose interest in him for nobody can surpass Christ. Both Christ and the Hunger Artist were martyr characters. Both characters starved for many days. Both characters died merciless and painfully. While Christ was murdered, the Hunger Artist practically committed suicide. However, he was dying for the people like Christ. He was sacrificing himself. Christ sacrificed himself for the good of God, while the Hunger Artist did it for an "art", the only thing he knew, which is similar to Christ.

Some of the Biblical allusions in the Hunger Artist include the two women and the watchers who represent "God" and "the wilderness". The Hunger Artist was tempted to eat food by the watchers and the women but he never broke. He kept his resilience and remained unbroken. The cage of the Hunger Artist can be compared to Christ on the cross as a state of imprisonment, shame, lack of freedom, although the obvious contrast is the cross was much more significant and attributed to death and holiness while the cage reverts to animalism and barbarianism.

Animals are important to the Hunger Artist and represent "science" and "forces of nature".

When the Hunger Artist is taken to the circus, he is placed near the animal cages, and he doesn't get much attention. Everyone wants to see the animals. The fate of the Hunger Artist as opposed to the fate of Christ is quite different in that the Hunger Artist wallows in self-pity. He pities himself for his actions. He feels like a miserable wretch. Christ is humble however the Hunger Artist is self-loathing while at the same time proud and narcissistic for he knows nobody can do better than him.

The resurrection of the Hunger Artist is an interesting comparison to Christ's resurrection. While the Hunger Artist isn't exactly "resurrected", he is "replaced" by a wild panther that impresses the crowd so much that they don't want to go home. Finally, from these nine points we conclude that the Hunger Artist bears a strong parallel to the figure of Christ in the Bible and therefore is taken as one of Kafka's many parables. The parable is one of atheistic and modernist applications of the early twentieth century.

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