QUESTIONS ON “A HUNGER ARTIST” (all classes)

1. People often coin the phrase “attention starved” to refer to someone who craves attention from others, and Kafka’s short story “The Hunger Artist” displays this quite literally. Is Kafka displaying the benefits or harms to this way of thinking? Kafka uses the epithet “unfortunate martyr” to describe the hunger artist. A martyr is someone who refuses to advocate a belief that is demanded by an external party and is persecuted for it. Could the hunger artist be considered a martyr? If so, what belief or mindset is the hunger artist rejecting and in what ways does he suffer because of it? Is “A Hunger Artist” based on a theme of sacrifice, or a theme of selfishness? Could you argue that both themes are present, and if so, how does this paradox contribute to the absurdist element? How might these themes tie into a contrast between personal reality and the public’s reality? Consider both the point of view of the hunger artist, and his audience/other characters in your analysis.
2. In Kafka’s life, he endured much oppression. Being Jewish, he was forced to live in a ghetto by the Austro- Hungarian bureaucracy. He was also forced into a job as a lawyer by his father. At the time “A Hunger Artist” was written, Franz Kafka was dying of tuberculosis; this caused him to slowly starve to death. How does the hunger artist’s view of starvation give hints as to what Kafka’s thoughts were about his own situation? Do you think that Kafka was attempting to convince himself that starving/fasting was an honorable way to die, or was he using the hunger artist to juxtapose his actual views? What do the hunger artist’s opinions reveal about Kafka himself? Does the artist’s work allow him to be truly free, or is he simply a slave? Or is he a combination of the two? If he is free, what is he free from? If he is a slave, who is he a slave to? What social commentary might these points be making?
3. Everything about the hunger artist's demeanor screams desperation and agony. There is a severe discomfort while reading the short story since one's starvation is portrayed as a form of entertainment. Rhetorical questions are often used during this story. Often, rhetorical questions assert or deny a point in the story. What is the purpose of the rhetorical questions and what do they reveal about the hunger artist? How do the hunger artist’s inner thoughts contribute to the overall story? How would you argue that discomfort and questioning contribute to the larger theme of those who are misunderstood and meaning of the work as a whole? There is a fine line between fasting and starving oneself, yet throughout the story they are used interchangeably. At what point does the story shift from a fasting to starving and why? What impact does this transition have on the hunger artist himself?
4. Can “A Hunger Artist” be read as an allegory? If so, then explain who the hunger artist, the impresario, the two women, and the community represent. Why is the community constantly doubtful of the hunger artist’s integrity? What does that say about the same doubtful community who consistently come to celebrate the hunger artist’s work? How is Kafka commenting on how the world responds to others’ tragedy or suffering? Also, why does the hunger artist refers to fasting as easy? How does this contribute to Kafka’s social commentary considering the horrid depiction of the hunger artist’s body after the forty day fasting period? Why can the fasting period only last for forty days? Many biblical characters, including Moses and Jesus, participated in fasts for forty days. What statement is Kafka making with religious allegory to portray the true meaning of faith in society? Why do you think the hunger artist wants to keep fasting after the set 40 days? Why could this be considered absurd itself based on Kafka’s religious background?
5. Kafka published very few of his stories during his lifetime, likely due to his intense feelings of self-doubt. He wrote this story while on his deathbed. The hunger artist similarly feels like a fraud, since towards the end of the selection, the hunger artist states that he starved himself because “[he] couldn’t find a food that tasted good to [him],” which are the last words he utters before he dies. What is the more profound meaning behind this quote? What final epiphany does the hunger artist come to terms with when he understands what defines his existence? At the end of the selection, the supervisor buried the hunger artist along with the straw and then put the young panther in the cage. How did the panther at the end of the short story serve as a foil to the hunger artist? Consider what Kafka is suggesting about pride and vitality. The young panther is also well received by the audience. How could the ending be interpreted other than its literal interpretation, and how could it relate back to Absurdist ideas? How can this story be seen as Kafka commenting on his own insecurities regarding both his art and his life?