

Absurdism in Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*

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Abstract

Albert Camus' philosophy of the Absurd has been used as one of the many interpretative dialogues for Franz Kafka's literary works, particularly his short story, *A Hunger Artist*. This paper explored the various facets of absurdism described in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and connects it with the short story by arguing that *A Hunger Artist* has more to reveal than its narrative content. Examining the similarities and differences between Camus' *Sisyphus* and the protagonist of *A Hunger Artist*, helps produce absurdist interpretations of the text. The question of finding meaning in an indifferent universe and the predicament of being wedged in an endless loop of a monotonous cycle of life is explored until the very end of the short story. The dilemma of the protagonist, the disillusionment with society fused with the complicated reality of the human condition are all elements present in *A Hunger Artist* that help identify existentialism through fiction. When seen through the absurdist perspective, the hunger artist stands as a figure, depicting the disunity between man and the universe, and the internal and external conflict between the rational and irrational in an unresponsive universe. Analysing this fiction through the philosophy of absurdism generates significant standpoints that bring forth the author's individual reasoning as a consolation to the questioning, existentialist mind.

Keywords: Absurdism, Camus, Kafka, hunger artist, isolation, Illusion of freedom

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INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka, one of the major literary figures of the twentieth century, commonly been considered as a “staple of absurdism.”¹ Born into an upper-middle class Jewish family in 1833, Franz Kafka led an arduous life – from his early childhood to adulthood until his death from tuberculosis in 1924.² The loss of his siblings in earlier years during World War II, his strained relationship with his father, the difficulties faced during his school and work years are, in some form, reflected in the literary works he produced. Most of Kafka's work and literary fame achieved appreciation posthumously, through his friend Max Brod. His novels and short stories transcended his times, and were immensely influential in the war era in Germany.³ Kafka's stories are still popular and significantly analyzed by scholars and students alike for their themes of alienation, absurdity, existential guilt of characters that face inexplicable and insurmountable predicaments that are often a fusion of realism and fantasy.

Kafka's writing has been so innovative and far-reaching that the term ‘Kafkaesque’ is often use to describe situations, whether in fiction or in reality, that are similar to those depicted in his works. A New York Times (1991) article, written by Ivana Edwards, focuses on Franz Kafka's critical biography whose author is Frederick R. Karl. The article specifically endeavors to define what the term ‘Kafkaesque’ means to prevent its common misconception. Edwards says, “What's Kafkaesque is when you enter a surreal world in which all your control patterns, all your plans, the whole way in which you have configured your own behavior, begins to fall to pieces, when you find yourself against a force that does not lend itself to the way you perceive the world.”⁴ He further states that despite it being impossible to win against, it is Kafkaesque to never accept defeat in the face of that force.

These situations are vividly depicted in Kafka's most popular *The Metamorphosis* and *The Castle*. The protagonists in the short story and the novel respectively are isolated and are seen struggling against the greater forces of socio-bureaucratic power. There have been numerous critics who have analysed these works through the existentialist philosophy. Francis and Prahaladaiah, exploring the theme of alienation and the absurdist perspective in *Metamorphosis*, wrote: “...(Kafka) brought out human condition in industrialized world.”⁵ He primarily addressed the human alienation in the world and absurd life, which causes guilt. ‘The Metamorphosis’ is such one writing where he reflects human state in the world of industrialization.”⁶

The topic of the human condition has been analyzed from various perspectives, including philosophy, religion, psychology and literature. Kafka is an author who depicts the gruesome yet hopeful nature of the human condition remarkably well in his stories, while using language that appears ‘natural’ yet is rich with numerous symbols and metaphors. John Sutherland in his book *A Little History of Literature* writes about Kafka's depiction of the human condition as something that is “well beyond tragic or depressed. It is ‘absurd’. [...] There is no ‘meaning’

¹ Cornwell, N., Franz Kafka: otherness in the labyrinth of absurdity. In N. Cornwell, *The absurd in literature*, Manchester University Press, 2006, pp.184-214

² Biography.com Editors. Franz Kafka Biography. From The Biography.com Web site: <https://www.biography.com/writer/franz-kafka> accessed on (2021, May 10)

³ Ibid

⁴ Edwards, I. (1991, December 29). The Essence of 'Kafkaesque'. From The New York Times Web site: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/29/nyregion/the-essence-of-kafkaesque.html> accessed on 2021, June 20

⁵ Francis, S., & Prahaladaiah, D., Existential Approach to Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'. *Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, (2019), 22-27

⁶ Ibid.

to make sense of our lives.”⁷ The focus of the current study is on one such short story of Kafka, *A Hunger Artist*, which represents this absurdity and human condition. He wrote this while being ill and completed it shortly before he passed away.

The Absurd is an idea that first appears in Kierkegaard’s works, but it was later popularized by and further developed into a philosophy by Albert Camus, in his detailed essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He opens the essay with one of the most iconic lines in the history of philosophy: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”⁸ The Absurd arises from the meeting of our hunger for meaning with a universe that is meaningless. Camus explains this through the analogy of Sisyphus who is condemned by the gods to roll a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down every time it nears the top, with Sisyphus stuck in an endless loop of coming close but never completing the task. The tension between the discord for meaning and the impossibility of satisfying it is, according to Camus, the core of absurdism.

It is this tension for finding meaning that can also be investigated in Franz Kafka’s short story *A Hunger Artist*. The story revolves around death, art, isolation, asceticism, futility and personal failure, all faced by a ‘hunger artist’ as observed by an unnamed narrator. The hunger artist’s determination and pride in his art showcases a series of symbolic representations that form an important discourse of finding one’s purpose, striving towards happiness and suffering in an absurd life.⁹ The disillusionment with society, a non-reaction to the strange, absurd realizations, and the illusion of freedom and control in the cyclical meaninglessness of life are all notions that exist within Camus’ absurd universe – which can also be explored in *A Hunger Artist*.

As it is often considered that literature holds a mirror to society, reality can be observed or mirrored in fiction; Kafka’s characters in this narrative cause its readers to open up significant deliberations on the inherent meaninglessness of life in a society that values finding purpose and wanting to better itself in every aspect. Yet the indifferent universe does not let society, or the individual, become successful in their purpose. Camus himself describes how important art and literature are for society in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He writes, “Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future.”¹⁰

Hence, this paper seeks to find certain connections to Camus’ philosophical perspective of the Absurd and the struggles of leading a meaningful life in a universe that does not foster purpose, with Kafka’s succinct yet engaging literary piece *A Hunger Artist*. Conducting this study allows to view this fictional piece from an entirely different perspective, one that is not dependent on the mainstream interpretation of the hunger artist standing in for the struggle and suffering for art, rather through the philosophical representation of the hunger artist’s turmoil with society, himself and the indifferent universe. This study seeks to do an in-depth literary analysis of Franz Kafka’s short fictional story, *A Hunger Artist*. It attempts to examine the story based on the philosophical perspective of absurdism as developed in Albert Camus’ essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Only certain facets of the absurdist philosophy are taken into consideration when analysing *A Hunger Artist*. These are absurdity (and how it is applied in literature), disillusionment from society, realization of the absurd, the human condition, absurd freedom

⁷ Sutherland, J., Absurd Existences. In J. Sutherland, *A Little History of Literature*, Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 179-184

⁸ Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1979, p 20

⁹ Kafka, F., *A Hunger Artist*. In F. Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*, Oxford University Press. 2012, pp. 94-103

¹⁰ Op.Cit. Camus, A. *The Myth of Sisyphus*

and the entrapments of a meaningless, cyclical life – as illustrated through the Greek myth of Sisyphus.

Objectives

- To identify the idea of the absurd and how it is represented within Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*.
- To determine how the characters and their behaviour in the story reinforce the notion of the absurd man.

Camus' solution to the existential dilemma is presented through the absurdist philosophy, which suggests accepting that life has no purpose, and to revolt against this idea. The hunger artist, however, fails to revolt and instead embraces an elusive purpose in his life, his art of hunger performance. This proves to be emotionally, physically and mentally challenging for the artist, which eventually leads to his death. By analysing Kafka's text and characters, this research aspires to explore the extent of Camus' absurdist philosophy presented in the selected fictional piece.

Research Questions

- How is finding one's meaning in life and indifference of the universe presented in the short story?
- How does the story reflect Camus' relation of the Greek myth of Sisyphus?
- If the hunger artist experiences a realization of the absurd, how does he react to it?

This study is significant in developing a greater insight through Kafka's writing, on the struggles of creating meaning in the absurd world. With consciousness on absurdism increasing ever more in the current globalized yet isolated world, this study can provide a symbolic approach to one of the most significant philosophies in existentialism for literary scholars, students, workers and the average human alike.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Neil Cornwell in *The Absurd in Literature* goes on to define it as the “broader cultural context of existentialism” that Albert Camus purports to be a depiction of the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without value, which is reflected in Kafka's characters and the events in his stories. He goes on to say, “The absurd is born of nihilism, out of existentialism, fueled by the certainty of death (anxiety, dread and death being the scourge of the existentialist). Often characterized by meaningless actions, events and unstructured plots, absurdist fiction explores the experiences of characters in situations where their lives have no meaningful purpose. It borrows concepts like inherent value and the truth of human condition from existentialism. Different theories exist in the literature regarding Kafka showing such concepts in his stories.

In *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, the author claims that Kafka's works reflect the notion of the absurd as “the reader of Kafka's stories and Kafka's characters are left reeling in a nonsensical world, trying, but failing at rational enterprise to make sense of what is happening”. When there is no “questioning voice” of the omniscient narrator or no sufficient context provides the absurdist view Camus build upon in his analogy

of Sisyphus.¹¹ Furthermore, Franz Kafka is regarded as one of the forefathers of the literary absurd, along with Alfred Jarry, OBERIU, and Antonin Artaud, as they brought in certain elements that helped build the absurdist literary movement. For Kafka, the elements included the introduction of the “strange” and the “absurd situation” through non-experimental language and straightforward stories. Bennet further notes the response, or lack thereof, to the absurd situations faced by Kafka’s characters. He writes, “The mark of the Kafkaesque and really absurd literature is the (non)reaction to a strange and unique situation”¹² which can be observed in Kafka’s novel *The Metamorphosis* and other stories.

Lee in his paper titled *Fathering the Kafkaesque: Transcendental Authority and the Problem of the Absurd in Kafka*, deems the absurd in Kafka’s works to be of a social nature, where the greater societal and authoritative forces are in battle with the protagonist’s ability to comprehend and fit in with these forces.¹³ He writes, “Kafka’s characters are trapped in two conflicting situations: the necessity of understanding others to find a place among them and the fundamental human condition of being unable to understand others.”¹⁴ The depiction of social relationships in Kafka’s fiction are seen as unhinged, and often the characters are seen to be struggling to know their role in society.

The author makes several connections with Kafka’s personal life to his fiction. He is questioning “the absurdity of obligation in the general social mandate” is reflected in his conflict-ridden relationship with his father, Hermann: “Just as Kafka’s characters are involuntarily subjected to a social mandate, Kafka was forced into bondage to his father,... subject to the non-negotiable authority of his parents.”¹⁵ This struggle between obedience to authority or the bourgeoisie and independent action in Kafka’s stories is seen as a reflection of his private life, which was dominated by the trauma inflicted upon him by his father.

According to Steinhauer the mainstream interpretation of the hunger artist representing the struggling artist role in the modern world is “unanimously wrong.” Steinhauer goes on to mention Kafka’s writing as something that is written explicitly and without complicated language, stating that he “has no style and no literary diction.”¹⁶ He further states that Kafka often presents his characters trying to balance the demands of the ideal with their worldly aspirations. *A Hunger Artist* is no different in this regard. In fact, it is not at all a story about the fate of an artist in the modern world; rather, it is a “phenomenology of religion” and symbolism, representing the loss of religion due to immense focus on faith and religious beliefs in the medieval ages.

Previous research has established that Kafka’s stories are meaningful in the sense that they have no meaning; they hold the form of the absurd in them. Akbar and Khan in their analysis assert that ‘being’ and existence of the protagonist in *A Hunger Artist* are connected with his determination to continue his art, because “without art, he is nothing but a herd whose existence

¹¹ Bennet, M. Y., Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd. Cambridge University Press, 2015, p.15

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lee, K. (2017). *Fathering the Kafkaesque: Transcendental Authority and the Problem of the Absurd in Kafka*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17615/k34c-g386>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Steinhauer, H., *Hungering Artist or Artist in Hungering: Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist”*. Criticism, 1962, pp.28–43.

does not matter to anybody.”¹⁷ His identity and existence rely at the expense of refuting food to progress his art and give meaning to his life, ironically, by ending it from starvation.

Apart from the thematic interpretations, scholars also examine Kafka's masterful ability to have his works radiate hidden meanings through a symbolic approach. One research conducted by Abu-Snoubar takes the symbolic approach of deconstructing Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and exploring the different meanings and interpretations of them. In the paper, symbols such as the cage, clock, act of fasting, hunger, the artist himself, the impresario and the panther are discussed in order to illuminate the themes of isolation and the existence of the hunger artist.¹⁸ The researcher further claims that the story delves into examining humanity and artists alike; “The psyche and perspective of the hunger artist represents the thirst of artists who delve into the apotheosis of their art.”¹⁹

Looking at *A Hunger Artist* from a different perspective, Hooti and Borna suggest in their study the implicature of failing to complete one's ideals yet possessing them anyway holds the essence of human reality – this can be seen in the hunger artist's quest for public admiration in place of physical nourishment.²⁰ They further elaborate on the hunger artist's conflict with facing reality and instead opting for the ideal by keeping himself isolated from social forces; “The hunger artist, in the cage has separated himself from the other people, and without communicating with people, attempts to prove himself to the other people.”²¹

Theoretical Framework

The research builds upon Albert Camus' philosophy of Absurdism as written in his book-length essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* and makes use of his concepts of the realization of the absurd, a disconnect from society and the endless cycle of an individual trying and failing to find purpose in an indifferent universe.

METHODOLOGY

The current research is a qualitative study, which makes extensive use of reading relevant literature on understanding Camus' philosophy of absurdism and its conceptual engagement with Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*. It analyses the content of various subjective texts appropriate for the aim of this study by relevant scholars that helps develop an interpretation on the underlying absurdist ideas in Kafka's narrative. This paper attempts to unfold the hunger artist's existential dilemmas and his reaction to the absurdity of his situation. The data is collected from various journal articles, books, book sections, web articles, reports, and theses that are closely connected to the crux of this study's investigation.

¹⁷ Akbar, M. A., & Khan, N. U., Anguish and Nothingness in Kafka's 'A Country Doctor' and 'The Starvation-Artist'. Elementary Education Online, (2021) 2835-2841

¹⁸ Abu-Snoubar, T. K. Symbolism and the Alienation of the Artist in a Hunger Artist. Forum for World Literature Studies, (2020), 158-173

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hooti, N., & Borna, M. R., The Profound Sense of Dissatisfaction: A Comparative Study of Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and Maulana Jalalu-d'-Din Muhammad i Rumi's *A Man of Baghdad*. Advances in Language and Literary Studies, (2014), 53-57

²¹ Ibid.

Discussion

The short story *A Hunger Artist* is a third-person narrative depicting an artist who performs the act of starvation in a world where “interest in hunger artists has greatly diminished,” sitting in a cage containing nothing but the straw he lies on and a clock that tells time.²² The story does not introduce a setting, a developed location or time. It exists solely to focus on the hunger artist’s condition and the public’s reaction to his performance. The story more so places attention on the hunger artist’s physical and mental challenges of his art and the realization of his situation; stuck in an absurd universe that does not entertain the illusions of purpose or a meaningful life.

This fictional narrative explores the hunger artist’s dedication to go to any length to achieve his ‘purpose’ of starvation. He does so to seek admiration from his audience, even though the art of starvation was not in popular demand at the time of his act. Regardless, the hunger artist remains popular; he would gather crowds, whether it be day or night, children or adults, they would surround his cage in order to satisfy their curiosity and be engaged with amusement by this act of emaciation. However, the artist himself would participate with his audience at first but “then would sink into himself, paying attention to no one,” which illustrates the first evidence of the artist experiencing isolation, a disconnect from society.²³

Later on in the story, the artist voluntarily isolates himself in his cage, away from the public, and this is because of the inward dissatisfaction he experiences by not being able to achieve his standard of starvation. The hunger artist always seems to be striving for more in his art, which is what gives him happiness and achievement. He wants to go beyond his limit of forty-day fasts set by the impresario and becomes frustrated by being forcefully fed at the end of his fasting period. Scrutinizing Camus’ version of the absurdity of the human condition in his essay, we find the reflection of the hunger artist: “He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”²⁴

This ‘unreasonable silence of the world’ is depicted in the story as the lack of understanding between the impresario, the guards that take watch, the public audience and the hunger artist’s motivation behind his art. Where the hunger artist finds purpose and meaning in starvation and strives to achieve it, he is halted by the impresario’s business-hungry mindset. When the hunger artist wants his art of starvation to be realized as something genuine and true, he is suspected of foul play, thinking that he might be possibly cheating and sneaking in food without anyone’s notice. Another aspect is that perhaps his performance is downplayed by the card-players, giving him opportunity to eat while they willfully not look towards his cage. The artist’s response to this is to sing loudly, in the hope of proving that his mouth is not full of food, but there too he is doubted. Such hindrances, coupled with the public’s skeptical perspective of his performance, creates a divide between the hunger artist and society that reinforces the idea of isolation and disillusionment.

This divide between the artist and his audience is further seen in the part where he claims how easy his act is, and he tries to convey this explicitly, but no one believes him: “For he alone knew what no other initiate knew: how easy hungering was. It was the easiest thing in the

²² Op.Cit. Kafka, F. *A Hunger Artist*. In F. Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Op.Cit. Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

world.”²⁵ This leads into another aspect of the absurdist theme where life is pointless, and the absurd man is faced with the deception of the freedom of action in his lifetime. The hunger artist believes and conveys in his actions that his life is meaningful as long as he can outperform his act of starvation. And he does this by firing the impresario who cannot find worthy shows due to the neglected fame of hunger artists in the world and joining a circus with no demands of his own. Camus talks about the idea of absurd freedoms as:

“I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand. And these two certainties - my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle – I also know that I cannot reconcile them”²⁶

In the short story, ‘the appetite for the absolute’ is the hunger artist’s never-ending desire to be better in his art. In the end, it becomes ‘impossible’ to fulfill this because the world is not rational enough to understand his motivation or inspiration behind his art and the ‘unity’ breaks down when his desire to achieve increasing hunger fails to be in agreement with the physical need for food and nourishment, eventually leading to his death. This is also explored in *The Profound Sense of Dissatisfaction* where the authors state that the Kafka introduces “characters (that) somehow are imprisoned in their ideal” and fail to form a balance between their desires and needs.²⁷

The hunger artist believes himself to be in control of his performance, when in essence, it is the art that has actually consumed him, and he is no longer the one in control. The rational world where he is to be expected to break his fast, survive for nourishment, is always rejected: “And at this moment the hunger artist always resisted.”²⁸ It is rejected in hopes of being released from the passions that have already consumed the hunger artist, who believes he wants to do this art. However, in the end, it is revealed that he had no choice because: “I could not find the food that was to my taste. If I had found it, believe me, I would not have caused a stir, and would have eaten my fill, like you and everybody else.”²⁹ When taken literally, this quote reflects Camus’ notion of absurd freedom.

According to Camus, the absurd man is free having given up the idea that his life has any value or any meaning and does not feel bound to pursuing any particular aims in life. Thus, he is able to approach every moment at hand without being held back by the constraints of thought and action that one normally conforms to in society. The hunger artist experiences absurd freedom when refuses to eat food and transforms his thoughts and actions into the art of emaciation. However, it can be debated from the previously mentioned quote whether the hunger artist made an active choice, or he was simply unable to find any food he liked.

Furthermore, in Camus’ essay, he mentions how the Greek mythological character of Sisyphus is condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity, only for it to come back down each time he reaches the top. This, he illustrates, reflects the mundanity and cyclical nature of life where man is forced to repeat his daily life doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results but not getting any because of the pointlessness of the human condition in a universe that does not entertain meaning. In Kafka’s story, this is perfectly portrayed in the

²⁵ Op.Cit. Kafka, F., *A Hunger Artist*. In F. Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*

²⁶ Op.Cit. Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus*

²⁷ Op.Cit. Hooti, N., & Borna, M. R., *The Profound Sense of Dissatisfaction: A Comparative Study of Franz Kafka’s A Hunger Artist and Maulana Jalalu-d-Din Muhammad i Rumi’s A Man of Baghdad*.

²⁸ Op.Cit Kafka, F., *A Hunger Artist*. In F. Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*

²⁹ Ibid.

hunger artist's ceaseless determination of starving himself for greater recognition that he never seems to achieve to his standards. He dreams "of becoming not only the greatest hunger artist of all times, which, indeed, he probably was already, but also to outperform himself far beyond all comprehension, for he felt there were no bounds to his capacity for hungering."³⁰

This idea of him believing in his boundless capacity for hungering even when he faces the misunderstanding of society and the struggles of not receiving enough reward echoes Camus' quote in his essay, "What I believe to be true, I must therefore preserve. What seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support."³¹ This shows, the hunger artist is trying to give meaning and following his purpose in the midst of an endless loop of cynical life that does not come to fruition; in the end, he dies of starvation and gets replaced by a zealous panther that attracts more people than he ever did. This reflects how humans' search for meaning in life has been rendered futile by the universe's disregard for them.

Likewise, the idea of the absurd and its realization is also depicted in the short story. Camus writes that before someone encounters the absurd, they live their life with "aims, a concern for the future or for justification" and once they realize the absurdity of life, they become unhappy, "That idea that 'I am' ... all that is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death."³² The hunger artist goes through this same process when he realizes his efforts, his art, and his goals of achieving more with his passion all come to dust when faced with the public that is seemingly indifferent to his motivations. He wonders, "If he could endure hungering still further, why wouldn't they endure?"³³

When the hunger artist joins the circus, everything in the beginning seems to be going well. After all, he is not weighed down by the impresario's rules and limits of forty-day fasting. Now, he can go on hungering for as long as he desires, outperforming any previous achievements he had gained. However, still yet he is dissatisfied due to the uncaring audience that would much rather go toward the stables than spare a glance in his direction. He becomes frustrated with this yet is stubborn in his belief that it is not the performance, his purpose that is not interesting; rather it is the lack of understanding for this art that has made the situation this way – "Anyone who doesn't feel it can't be brought to understand it."³⁴

This can be explained through the idea of thinking one has the freedom in action and choice while it is merely the illusion of such, seeing as through the absurdity of the universe. Drawing from Sander L. Gilman, the hunger artist "has no real control over his actions, he must become what he is fated to become, a hunger artist. Here Kafka evokes a ritual of starvation not through the agency of the artist but because of a programmed capacity of the artist's body over which he has no control."³⁵ The act of starving himself for whatever reason, the hunger artist in the end claims he had no choice. He says,

"I have to hunger; I cannot do otherwise, because I could not find the food that was to my taste. If I had found it, believe me, I would not have caused a stir, and would have eaten my fill, like you and everybody else"³⁶

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Op.Cit. Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus*

³² Ibid.

³³ Op.Cit. Kafka, F., *A Hunger Artist*. In F. Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gilman, S. L. (2005). *A Life ill*. In S. L. Gilman, *Franz Kafka*, Reaktion Books. 2005, pp. 102-130

³⁶ Op.Cit. Kafka, F., *A Hunger Artist*. In F. Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*

This builds upon the idea of the absurd that the strive for finding meaning in a meaningless universe is inherently purposeless because there is no choice or action that can lead one to such a conclusion; it was merely an illusion.

The hunger artist's death is a significant representation of the absurd as well, or an attempt to escape from it. According to Camus, one can either escape the realization of the absurd through suicide or confront it by accepting that life is inherently purposeless and revolt against that idea. In this story, however, the hunger artist fails to accept and realize the futile, meaningless nature of his motivations in life and ends up dying while still trying to cling to his purpose, "Death is the only reality."³⁷ However, when Kafka writes, "These were his last words, but his exhausted eyes still held the firm, though no longer proud, conviction that he was still continuing to hunger", he makes apparent the enduring hope and belief of the hunger artist. The hunger artist still believes his struggle was valuable, his art caused him to remain hopeful in a meaningless universe and perhaps, caused him happiness just as Camus asks us to "imagine Sisyphus happy" because the "struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."³⁸

In the end, when the hunger artist's cage is replaced by the energetic panther that attracts the larger audience, Kafka creates a strong contrast in the ambition and motivations between the new inhabitant of the cage and the hunger artist. The panther, though kept in a cage, it "didn't even seem to miss its freedom" and "its joy of life came with such fiery breath from its jaws that it wasn't easy for the spectators to resist it" yet the audience still surrounded the panther, mesmerized by its vitality.³⁹ On the contrary, the hunger artist is shown as feeble and ineffectual in gathering spectators around his cage.

This divergence between the two represents the different relationship with the absurd both beings have. The panther is carefree in the cage, it is happy as long as it gets its food on time (no matter what the taste) and because of its strong aura, it attracts a larger audience around him – "The panther is symbolic of the grace and power that can be attained by engaging with the world around."⁴⁰ It chooses to remain unaware of the absurdity of life, rejects isolation, and accepts mundanity. Though it is happy, it does not achieve self-actualization through the questioning or confrontation of the absurd – it is merely ignorant of the universe.

The hunger artist, on the other hand, strives for self-actualization through his art of hungering. Though there is a sense of alienation and isolation within him, and he fails to survive his conflict between the meaningless universe and his fight for purpose, the struggle alone is enough to deem him a man that has realized the absurdity of life. Hence, he dies without pride while maintaining conviction.

CONCLUSION

In the end, it can be observed that Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* holds several notions of the absurdist philosophy proposed by Albert Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This was particularly seen in the voluntary isolation of the hunger artist, the depiction of the futility of the human condition where the hungering was never understood or admired up to the artist's standards by the public, the ruthless, cyclical nature of life that never catered to the artist's attempts for

³⁷ Op.Cit. Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus*

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Op.Cit. Kafka, F., *A Hunger Artist*. In F. Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*

⁴⁰ Op.Cit. Abu- Snoubar

bettering himself and the illusion of freedom in the artist's action that gave him the deceptive idea of being in control of his own life.

This study viewed Kafka's efforts in exploring the human condition and the philosophical questions through the hunger artist's conflict between his ideals and reality. It motivates the reader to question the mundanity of life, to realize the absurd condition but most of all, it does not offer despair. Kafka's short story inspires within the reader to not remain vulnerable in the illusive forces of freedom and to realize that the universe is absurd, and that life may be meaningless. Nevertheless, to not give up hope in the face of this realization, and keep struggling like the hunger artist to achieve your sense of being, and not remain ignorant and obedient to authority like the panther that replaced him.

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