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Tender is the Flesh: A Freudian Reading of Choi Jin-young's Hunger

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Abstract: *Cannibalism has long functioned as a metaphor for love, circulating across cultural, religious, and popular imaginaries, where images such as the pomegranate and the vampire have linked acts of consumption to intimacy, desire, transgression, binding love to food through the language of excess and incorporation. This essay offers a psychoanalytic reading of Choi Jin-young's Hunger that foregrounds food as the novel's central site for negotiating grief, desire, and death. Rather than approaching cannibalism as a mere aberration, it argues that eating operates as an affective bodily logic through which the text dismantles dominant narratives of love, survival, and futurity. Drawing on Freudian theories of melancholia and dialectics between Eros-Thanatos, the analysis demonstrates how hunger in the novel exceeds the restorative function of nourishment, emerging instead as a compulsive practice that sustains attachment to loss. Through Dam's consumption of her dead lover, Hunger collapses the distinction between care-destruction, intimacy- self-erasure, private mourning-social rites, revealing how desire persists not despite death but through it, and reimagining love as a melancholic fidelity to what cannot be recovered. Ultimately, situating the novel within the broader socioeconomic landscape of disposability and deprivation, it further contends that Dam's grief is not merely individual but structurally produced.*

Keywords: Cannibalism, Melancholia, Food and Grief, Affective Economies, Eros and Thanatos, Sigmund Freud

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1. Introduction

> "Will humanity last another thousand years?... I must live for an extraordinarily long time, long enough to witness the end of humanity, which is to say, I want to be the last human alive. That is my only wish." (8-9)

These words open Choi Jin-young's *Hunger* (translated by Soje), voiced by one of its protagonists, Dam. From its first line, the novel articulates a desire strikingly antithetical to dominant narratives of survival, love, progress, or futurity. Rather than affirming life as continuity or preservation, Dam's wish imagines existence prolonged beyond sociality, history, and relational meaning. To wish to outlive humanity is not an attachment to life but its negation. Dam's declaration establishes the novel's central affective register, one in which existence persists not as fulfilment but as depletion, and longing is inseparable from erasure. At the heart of the text lies a love story, if a profoundly distorted one. Dam and Gu are, in conventional terms, star-crossed lovers, first meeting in elementary school and growing inseparable through a slow, enduring intimacy. Yet when the novel opens, Gu is already dead, his body abandoned on the street. Dam retrieves her lover's corpse, brings it home, and consumes him. She eats him. This act is a literalization of melancholic incorporation, the psychic mechanism where the lost object is not relinquished but symbolically, or in this case, literally, taken into the body, collapsing the boundary between inside and outside. It is also at this moment that Choi introduces the novel's most unsettling motif: food.

Food has long occupied a paradoxical position within literary and cultural narratives of grief and desire. It sustains life even as it bears the imprint of loss, functioning simultaneously as nourishment and absence, comfort and compulsion. Across traditions, eating often appears as a gesture of care, continuity, and communal belonging. In texts shaped by mourning, however, food frequently becomes a site where appetite persists without satisfaction, where the body registers grief it cannot otherwise articulate. Within many Asian domestic contexts, food in particular operates as a cultural grammar of love— be it the Korean concept of '반찬[1]' (banchan) or the Japanese '相席[2]' (aiseki), these highlight gatherings at shared tables, intimacy expressed through feeding, and care rendered material through consumption. In this sense, food conventionally aligns with Eros.

Hunger, however, violently unsettles this association. Choi mobilises cannibalism to collapse the Freudian dialectic between Eros, the life drive toward connection, and preservation, and Thanatos, the death drive toward destruction and an inorganic state, forcing the two into intimate proximity. Hunger here is not a lack that can be resolved through consumption, but a compulsive force that exceeds nourishment altogether. Eating becomes inseparable from mourning, and desire from annihilation. Dam's consumption of Gu does not

[1] Portions of side dishes in Korean cuisine served alongside rice and main dishes, embodying a deeply rooted culture of sharing, hospitality, and communal dining. Placed in the center of the table for everyone to share, reflecting the Korean spirit of togetherness.

[2] Japanese dining concept that translates to "sharing a table" or "shared seating," where customers, typically strangers, are seated together at the same table in a restaurant, cafe, or bar.

symbolise incorporation or healing; instead, it enacts a melancholic attachment which Freud defines as a "pathological refusal to release a lost object", where loss is neither released nor overcome but "endlessly internalised", often unconsciously. Food in *Hunger* does not restore the subject to life. Rather, it participates in a slow inward erosion of the self, where desire sustains fidelity to death and intimacy becomes indistinguishable from self-undoing, as the 'human world' itself is emptied of meaning in the absence of the beloved.

This essay therefore, argues that *Hunger* reconfigures food as the primary site through which grief, desire, and death converge, unsettling conventional oppositions between nourishment and destruction, love and loss, survival and self-annihilation. By staging cannibalism not as spectacle or transgression but as an intimate, private, melancholic act, Choi exposes how Eros in the novel operates not as a force of futurity or repair, but as an attachment to what has already been lost. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytic frameworks of melancholia and the interplay between Eros and Thanatos, this essay reads Dam's hunger as a mode of grieving that refuses resolution, wherein eating becomes a way of keeping death present within the body rather than overcoming it. In doing so, *Hunger* challenges the ethical and affective assumptions that underwrite narratives of healing and survival, proposing instead a vision of love that persists not through recovery or continuity, but through sustained intimacy with erasure itself.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on cannibalism in contemporary literature has increasingly framed anthropophagy as a metaphor for consumption, commodification, and the ethics of late capitalism. Studies such as *Goremands: Human Cannibalism and Eating the Other in Contemporary Fiction* demonstrate how modern cannibal narratives expose the reduction of human bodies into consumable objects, revealing anxieties about neoliberal markets, bodily exploitation, and the collapse of moral boundaries. Within this framework, cannibalism becomes a symbolic language through which literature interrogates the commodification of intimacy, labour, and desire. While this body of work offers valuable socio-political readings, its emphasis tends to remain at the level of cultural critique, often privileging systems of power and consumption over the psychic and affective mechanisms that make cannibal desire narratively meaningful.

Psychoanalytic scholarship provides a different but complementary lens by tracing cannibalism back to the origins of subject formation. Freud's theorisation of incorporation in *Totem and Taboo* positions cannibalism as a foundational psychic act through which desire, identification, guilt, and social bonds emerge. Subsequent work, including *Freud and the Cannibal: Vignettes from Psychoanalysis' Colonial History*, demonstrates how psychoanalysis inherited colonial narratives of the cannibal, revealing incorporation as an ambivalent process shaped by desire, domination, and the wish to merge with the Other. This body of scholarship foregrounds cannibalism as a symbolic structure of intimacy and loss, the self and other, yet despite these converging fields, psychoanalytic approaches to cannibalism in contemporary literature remain relatively underdeveloped, particularly in relation to East Asian fiction. Existing scholarship tends either to privilege

socio-economic critique or to treat cannibalism primarily as a cultural metaphor, leaving the psychic mechanisms of grief, attachment, and melancholia comparatively underexamined. Likewise, psychoanalytic literary criticism has rarely engaged sustainedly with contemporary Korean fiction, especially texts that situate intimacy and mourning within conditions of neoliberal precarity.

This essay addresses this gap by bringing psychoanalytic theory into dialogue with cannibal studies, food studies, and socio-economic critique through a close reading of Choi Jin-young's *Hunger*. By foregrounding melancholic incorporation as both a psychic and structural condition, the essay argues that cannibalism in *Hunger* operates not merely as a metaphor or social allegory but as a literalized mourning practice shaped by class precarity and the commodification of bodies. In doing so, the article contributes three key interventions: first, it extends Freudian melancholia into the domain of late capitalism by demonstrating how structural precarity intensifies psychic attachment; second, it repositions cannibalism as a form of grief work rather than spectacle or a dystopian trope; and third, it situates *Hunger* within global conversations on cannibalism, mourning, and the politics of the body, highlighting contemporary Korean fiction as a vital site for psychoanalytic literary inquiry.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This essay draws primarily on Freud's theorisation of mourning, melancholia, and the life-death drive as articulated in *Mourning and Melancholia* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud distinguishes mourning from melancholia by arguing that in mourning, the lost object is gradually relinquished, whereas in melancholia, the loss is internalised and becomes constitutive of the ego itself. As Freud suggests, in melancholia, "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego," such that the subject preserves the lost object through psychic incorporation rather than detachment. Closely related to this process is the interplay between Eros ("Lebenstriebe") and Thanatos ("Todestriebe"). This essay reads *Hunger* through this Freudian framework, understanding Dam's cannibalistic consumption of Gu as an extreme literalization of melancholic incorporation in which the distinction between preservation and destruction collapses. While Freud provides the essay's primary conceptual framework, a brief turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes necessary in the later discussion of erotic incorporation and the symbolic function of the phallus. For Lacan, the phallus does not simply denote the anatomical organ but functions as a signifier of desire, lack, and symbolic authority within the structure of language and subject formation. This distinction allows the analysis to move beyond Freud's account of melancholia to consider how erotic attachment, desire, and symbolic power intersect in the novel's representation of bodily consumption.

Methodologically, the essay adopts a psychoanalytic close-reading approach that moves from theoretical exposition to textual analysis. Freud's framework structures the first stage of interpretation, where selected scenes, narrative tone, and recurring metaphors of hunger, intimacy, and bodily dissolution are examined as manifestations of melancholic attachment and the persistence of the lost object. The analysis then signals a deliberate shift toward Lacanian theory only when questions of erotic symbolism and the phallus

become central, using Lacan not as a competing framework but as a supplementary lens that clarifies how desire operates at the level of signification. This staged movement mirrors the novel's shift from grief and loss toward erotic and symbolic incorporation, allowing the reading to trace how cannibalism evolves from melancholic attachment into a reconfiguration of desire and gendered symbolism.

4. Class Desperation and Melancholic Attachment

The love story that unfolds within *Hunger* is never permitted the consolation of reciprocity or futurity. Even before Gu's death, Dam and Gu's intimacy is steeped in an ambient melancholia that precedes loss itself. Their affection does not bloom toward possibility but develops under conditions of constraint, namely economic precarity, spatial compression, and the quiet exhaustion of lives lived on the margins. Freud observes that the condition of melancholia may arise when the loss is "withdrawn from consciousness". This is evident in the reading of Dam and Gu's deprivation, that it is not merely emotional but structural, preceding its formal recognition. Their love is shaped by loss before any single object is taken away. As children, they steal sugar during playdates because they do not have money for sweets. This progresses into petty theft, shaking down Dam's aunt's clothes for loose change. Ice cream money is what they are hunting for, revelling in the youthful rush of a shared secret, yet they carry the guilt of these infractions into young adulthood as innocence is slowly squeezed out by familial trauma and grinding poverty.

Within a South Korean society defined by cutthroat competition and structural favouritism toward the wealthy, Dam and Gu are keenly aware that they are born already at a disadvantage. Dam's parents are long dead, and Gu's are largely absent. Love, for them, is not an escape from deprivation but something that takes shape within it, bearing the imprint of scarcity from the outset. Choi's lovers do not dream expansively; their desires are modest, fragile, and perpetually deferred, shaped by an environment that offers little room for aspiration beyond endurance. As long as they are together, however, nothing else seems to matter.

> "I had no interest in the future. The moments spent holding him, leaning on his back, were enough. I needed nothing more." (44)

This refusal of futurity resonates with Freud's observation that the "psyche may abandon the pursuit of pleasure altogether", settling instead into repetition and stasis when the promise of satisfaction collapses.

Hunger remains acutely attentive to the banal violences of poverty: unstable housing, underpaid labour, bodily fatigue, and the relentless pressure to survive within a system that renders certain lives disposable. These conditions eventually erupt into spectacular tragedy. Lying beside Gu's dead body, Dam feels the room to be as "cold as stone and enveloped in darkness". The physical "tightness" of this scene mirrors the financial "tightness" of their lives, where debt acts as a "parasite" repeatedly. Speaking of the loan sharks who kill Gu, Dam observes:

> "Gu has to stay alive in their minds… No one cared about him anyway. They put a price on his life, used him and discarded him, and then acted like he never existed." (28)

Freud's account proposes that the death drive operates not only through dramatic self-destruction but through slow attrition, through forces that "work silently toward dissolution". Gu's disposability is thus not accidental but systemic. And in this sense, Dam's cannibalism is also fueled as much by love as it is by rage, directed at the rich and powerful, at a class system that has treated her and Gu as expendable. Her exhaustion is not only emotional but structural; her body registers the toll of sustained deprivation as hunger, numbness, and attrition. Private grief thus aligns with collective exhaustion, suggesting that melancholia here is not merely an individual pathology but a socially produced condition.

Upon graduating high school, Dam notes that her classmates are busy applying to universities, "sold on the popular belief" that this is the only viable next step. For her, however, it does not register as a choice at all. She would have to spend years working for one employer to afford the qualifications demanded by another, with no guarantee of securing "a spot at a top company." The entire trajectory reads to her like some "science fiction". Education, stable employment, and the basic conditions of a livable life remain structurally inaccessible, foreclosed by the circumstances of birth. Comfort and choice, the novel suggests, are privileges reserved for the rich. In this context, Dam is sure that even though she, "hadn't even got started, and failure was already guaranteed. Life had won," (57) while Gu says: "Our society seems to think it's okay to look down on the poor. And… money's the only thing that matters" (84).

Within this landscape, love itself then becomes precarious. Dam and Gu's attachment offers neither protection nor transcendence; instead, it is saturated by the same forces that circumscribe their lives. Their innocent hand-holding as children is treated as something obscene by their peers, surrounded by leering bullies and resulting in their immediate social ostracisation, which is, in fact, a prefiguration of their later marginalisation. When their teacher and Gu's parents force them to let go of each other's hands, Dam is struck less by loss than by shame. "It was like giving in to the mockery," she reflects, as if letting go of Gu's hand, validated the rumours and made them feel "dirty". They barely see each other throughout secondary school after that.

Freud's account of mourning and melancholia foregrounds this vulnerability produced by attachment, as he writes, "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." (32) Eros therefore does not protect against social violence but becomes one of its most legible targets; and tenderness always exists alongside an acute awareness of fragility, of how easily stability collapses, how quickly bodies can be rendered absent. After Gu's death, Dam imagines him in a familiar afterlife, laughing with an old, dead friend, Noma. She asks, "What is it to be human?" The notion of the "human" recurs insistently, raising the uneasy question of whether it bears any real relation to the idea of the "humane." Dam continues to reflect on what it means to be human even as she is actively "eating Gu," a stark juxtaposition that collapses ethical and bodily boundaries between the ideas. Gu's death, thus, does not rupture an otherwise hopeful narrative but intensifies a condition already in place. Loss feels inevitable, not because it is fated, but because the social world the novel depicts offers so few buffers against it. Anything, Dam suggests, would be preferable to being born human.

"Maybe it was easier to be an old tree or a red squirrel… Let's be animals. Let's be anything but." (51)

Dam's fantasy of non-human existence echoes the desire for release from the burdens of psychic and social life, and leads it back to the "inorganic state" of Freud.

Melancholia thus emerges as a mode of living under late capitalism, one in which subjects are compelled to persist even as the structures surrounding them erode the possibility of meaning or reprieve. Dam's refusal, or inability, to relinquish Gu after death, culminating in cannibalism, can be read not simply as pathological attachment but as an extreme response to a world that has already stripped life of its promises. To consume Gu is to refuse a reality in which love is extinguished, and the poor are expected to absorb loss silently and move on. Cannibalism becomes a grotesque form of resistance: an insistence on intimacy in a society that systematically withholds care. It becomes an extraordinary act of defiance, revenge, burial, and resurrection all at once. This is melancholia pushed to its absolute limit, where incorporation is no longer psychic but literal, eros bound so tightly to thanatos that love can persist only through destruction.

5. Cannibalism as Ritual and Faith

From the outset, Choi demonstrates acute awareness of the interpretive contract she asks her readers to enter. *Hunger* demands not only a suspension of disbelief but a willingness to inhabit sustained moral and emotional discomfort. The novel anticipates resistance and names it directly through Dam's own reflection:

"...Faith is the key to grasping absurdity. The ultimate test happens when you're faced with something that makes you want to cry out, *But that doesn't make any sense at all! '*... Faith is what I need." (11–12)

These lines function almost as a metafictional gesture; Choi addresses her readers through Dam, preparing them for the ethical and affective terrain ahead. Yet this faith is not merely a narrative strategy directed outward; it is also the fragile interior scaffolding that sustains Dam herself. She lacks faith in life, society, or futurity, but she never wavers in her love. "We were meant to be. I had accepted that fact as a kid" (52). Love, for Dam, becomes the only stable ontology she ever possesses. Freud's account of melancholia describes precisely such fixation, when "the object-loss is transformed into an ego-loss," love becomes the structure through which the self persists.

Her consumption of Gu thus emerges as an extension of that faith, one that departs from institutional religion and relocates belief within the body. This belief is instinctual, functioning as a pagan refusal of modern symbolic order, and Dam is lucid enough to recognise its illegibility within a 'cultured' society. By relocating faith from the soul to the flesh, she rejects the transcendental promises of institutional religion, opting instead for a primal, embodied ritual that seeks to lead Gu's organic life back into the inorganic interiority of her own body.

"What should I do once this story is told? Where should I go? I could go to the police and confess. I could visit a priest and confess. I ate a person. Is that a sin?" (13)

This ambiguity of sin is crucial. Is the transgression the act of cannibalism itself, or the audacity of loving in a world where love is structured by class privilege? Is it sinful to resist a society that renders the poor disposable, or to cling to a body already claimed by systems of debt and violence? Dam's moral anxiety reveals a subject acutely aware of social law yet unconvinced of its justice. She neither fully justifies nor condemns herself; she remains suspended in mourning. This suspension of moral anxiety aligns with the Freudian reading of melancholia as "an extraordinary diminution in [her] self-regard, an impoverishment of [her] ego on a grand scale" (120). Thus, Dam's cannibalism suggests a psychic state where the ego is treated like the abandoned object, complicating the subject's ability to distinguish between its own actions and the demands of the beloved.

If mourning rituals traditionally rely on symbolic gestures to secure the passage of the dead and console the living, Dam's cannibalism literalizes what such rites only metaphorically promised: that the dead remain with us, that love survives material dissolution, that separation can be deferred. Her eating of Gu is therefore not only a melancholic incorporation but an assertion of continuity beyond death; of faith enacted through flesh rather than prayer. Freud describes incorporation as a mechanism primarily linked to the infantile oral stage, where the subject "incorporates" an object, often leading to a "narcissistic identification" with that object, particularly in instances of melancholia.

The visceral horror of Dam consuming Gu's remains, his stray fingernails, fallen hair, and flakes of skin, is undeniably nauseating. Yet the novel refuses to frame these moments as spectacle and treats them through a mundane, clinical lens. Dam says: "I clipped his fingernails... Toenails, and then swept the clippings into my mouth. I combed his hair… swallowed the strands that fell out." (27) Within its own logic of grief, these acts function less as crime than as a ritual of incorporation. Dam's consumption becomes Gu's wake: a private, embodied mourning practice enacted in the absence of socially sanctioned rites. She does not eat to transcend the body but to prevent its disappearance. Cannibalism becomes a desperate theology of immanence, making the body a "mnemic symbol", a physical manifestation of repressed unrepresentable experience, and the site of meaning-making.

Across religious and cultural traditions, ingestion carries sacramental weight: to consume is to internalise, to bind devotion to the body. For instance, the establishment of the Christian Eucharist which ritualises the symbolic eating of Christ's body and the drinking of his blood during Catholic Mass. As the *Gospel of John* proclaims:

> "For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him." (John 6:54-58)

From the early Church onward, then, the act of consuming God, albeit metaphorically, has been institutionalised as a central form of prayer. This sacramental logic established a powerful equivalence between ingestion and intimacy, collapsing the distance between the believer and the divine. Out of this framework emerged a long tradition of mystical eroticism in which love, faith, and union are repeatedly figured through the language of eating and drinking, desire rendered as incorporation and devotion as bodily absorption.

Hunger mobilises this sacramental logic while stripping it of transcendental assurance. Dam's faith is not oriented toward salvation or an afterlife. Rather, she believes, perhaps irrationally yet insistently, that consuming Gu prevents him from vanishing into anonymity, into the same cycles of debt, exploitation, and disposability that governed his life. Burial would surrender him to the very systems that failed him, while consumption allows her to claim him absolutely. Her belief is not in return, but in remainder. It is, in fact, a vow against erasure.

To imagine a world without the beloved, therefore, becomes not merely unbearable but unthinkable. As Dam insists, "How could I ever burn or bury such a beautiful body?" Burial and cremation, rituals designed to mediate loss and restore symbolic order, demand an acknowledgement of finality that Dam cannot grant. Cannibalism emerges as an alternative funerary logic, one that keeps the beloved materially, viscerally present within her. At the same time, the act allows Dam a final reclamation of agency. However grotesque the intimacy, she orchestrates a funeral she can afford, a ritual calibrated to her material limits. In this sense, the novel invites comparison with practices such as the Tibetan sky burial, where bodily dismemberment functions not as desecration but as an ecological and spiritual accommodation to a landscape that forbids traditional interment. For Dam, the 'landscape' is one of structural lack and predatory debt. Just as the sky burial utilises the environment to preserve the cycle of life, Dam's cannibalism becomes a necessary 'funerary logic' calibrated to her material limits, transforming a body reduced to collateral into a body preserved for love. Against a system that values bodies only for profit, Choi reframes cannibalism as paradoxically "humane", an act that restores intimacy and meaning under capitalism.

Later, Gu's narration to Dam, of the Scottish legend of Sawney Bean, further complicates the religious register of cannibalism by presenting it as a competing form of belief structured around bodily need rather than institutional doctrine. The tale of Sawney Bean, his wife, and their family of thieves, including fourteen children and twenty-two grandchildren, solely surviving by ambushing travellers and consuming their bodies for twenty-five years, introduces a family unit organised around consumption as its central law. Unlike the Eucharistic logic of institutional religion, which transforms flesh into a sacred symbol, the Sawney Bean narrative refuses metaphor and insists on the body as literal sustenance. The family's survival depends on the continuous conversion of strangers into food, producing a form of faith grounded in repetition and necessity.

The legend reframes cannibalism as a practice sustained by what might be called corporeal greed. The Bean family's reproduction of itself through generations of cannibals suggests a closed system in which hunger becomes hereditary and self-justifying. Faith here is not oriented toward salvation or moral order but toward continuity, so much so that when the remaining family is arrested and executed, they don't show any remorse or guilt, because that is a "normal skill" to them. By invoking this legend, the novel situates Dam's actions within the same broader genealogy of survivalist belief systems in which the body replaces the church as the primary site of ritual, repetition, and meaning. Cannibalism thus appears not merely as transgression but as an alternative theology of survival, one that exposes how institutional religion and bodily necessity share a common reliance on ritualised consumption.

6. Ghost of Gu and the Posthumous Voice

Hunger does not confine itself to Dam's interiority alone. In a surreal overturning of narrative perspective, the novel grants Gu a voice as well, one that speaks from the other side, a consciousness that persists beyond the annihilation of the body. His memories, like Dam's, are fragmented, yet the nature of this fragmentation differs crucially. Where Dam's recollections are shaped by the violence of loss, Gu's are marked by a faltering grasp on life itself, an inability to remember the world as it existed before death. Despite this asymmetry, grief remains intact on both sides, binding the living and the dead within the same affective circuit. Through brief, unmarked chapters and dispersed prose told in alternating perspectives, the novel creates a permeability between Dam and Gu, such that their stories become, in the reader's mind, shared and overlapping memories. This ontological instability is articulated with striking clarity in Gu's own words:

> "Or maybe I'm not here? But I am. I am here, and so are you. And I am also not here, and neither are you. Dam is here. And here is a world without Dam" (26).

The unconscious does not recognise death as an absolute. Gu's voice hovers between presence and absence, refusing the binary logic of life and death. His consciousness exists in suspension, aware, observing, yet unable to anchor itself within a coherent temporal or spatial reality. In this sense, Gu does not function as a conventional ghost. He is neither a figure of return nor of haunting, but an index of relational disintegration; a subject who persists only insofar as love and grief continue to bind him to Dam.

Crucially, Gu is not merely the passive object of Dam's cannibalistic desire. Before his death, it is Gu himself who introduces the possibility of cannibalism into their shared imaginary. When he asks Dam what she would do if he were to die first, her inability to answer exposes the limits of language in the face of anticipatory grief. Gu responds instead with an offer: "If you die before me, I will eat you." (17) What initially appears as dark humour or morbid tenderness becomes, after his death, a psychic anchor for Dam. Rather than a formal grant of consent, this speculative gesture provides a narrative justification for her grief to turn inward. By anchoring her actions in a past conversation, the novel does not resolve the question of Gu's agency; rather, it complicates the ethics of responsibility, making it unclear whether Dam is fulfilling a shared pact or projecting her own inability to let go onto a dead man's words.

By granting Gu a voice alongside Dam's, Choi disrupts the traditional hierarchy of the active mourner and the passive corpse. However, this posthumous voice does not function as a straightforward restoration of Gu's autonomy. Instead, it creates a profound ethical ambiguity: because Gu speaks from a "realm of nothingness" and a "formless void" (26), his narration functions as a site where agency and passivity are indistinguishable. We cannot be certain if the 'Gu' who speaks is a sovereign spirit or a melancholic hallucination generated by Dam's refusal to mourn in the traditional sense. Thus, the text refuses to ethically absolve Dam through Gu's approval; it merely forces the reader to inhabit a space where the self and the other have become so radically entwined that the concept of individual consent no longer applies. Moreover, the narrative keeps shifting between their childhood, adolescence, and the grim present. This non-linear style

reflects the cyclical nature of their trauma, further suggesting that the characters are trapped in a 'hunger' that spans their entire lives.

It is also crucial to note that *Hunger* was originally published in Korean under the title *구의 증명 (Proof of Gu)*, a shift that marks a significant conceptual and affective reorientation. Where the Korean title centres Gu, foregrounding his presence, agency, or even juridical status, the English title recenters Dam, emphasising appetite, lack, and the cannibalistic logic of her love. *Hunger* frames the narrative through desire and consumption, aligning the novel with Dam's embodied grief, while *Proof of Gu* gestures toward Gu's existence as something that must be demonstrated, justified, or accounted for.

Literally translated, 구의 증명 means "Gu's Proof," a phrase that invites multiple, unresolved interpretations. Proof of what, exactly? Of innocence perhaps, or an acquittal for a life burdened by inherited debt and quiet suffering, paid for with the ultimate price. Or proof of existence itself: a body that testifies to having lived and loved, even as that very body must be erased. Dam repeatedly invokes the black-market value of Gu's organs as a "rational" justification for preventing the discovery of his corpse, fearing that predatory systems will dismantle him and sell him piece by piece. In this logic, Gu's intact body becomes evidence that must be destroyed to be protected. Proof, paradoxically, requires obliteration.

"…they'll try to sell him for parts… They'll claim his corpse and sell it off like a slab of meat." (28)

At the same time, Gu's posthumous voice suggests that the true proof may lie not in the body but in memory and speech, in the consciousness that persists beyond death. Yet certainty is withheld even here. As Gu watches Dam grieve over his body, he wonders whether he has already said enough:

> "I convinced myself that, over the years, I had said everything I needed to. Even if I'd missed something, there was no need to speak about it now. Some things are better left unsaid." (42)

This reflection echoes a condition that defined his life as much as his death, and an acceptance of the unknowing. His only imaginable future had been Dam, a conviction he retains even after death: "These memories are my future…. My future is you." (42) Death grants Gu no privileged access to truth, meaning, or reconciliation. It offers neither retrospective clarity nor final confession.

Instead, Gu's afterlife is marked by radical asymmetry. He can see Dam, but she cannot see, hear, or feel him. He remains bound to her through memory and observation, while she remains sealed within her corporeal grief, performing an act of consumption that he can witness but no longer influence. This suggests that the 'consent' explored in the novel is not a moral triumph, but a symptom of methodical erasure. In a world that commodifies bodies for debt, the posthumous voice reveals that even in death, Gu lacks the agency to truly 'refuse' or 'accept' his fate; he simply persists as a fragment of a relationship that the world has already dismantled.

7. Erotic Incorporation and the Phallic Signifier

"I opened my eyes to his penis. All night long I stroked and sucked on it, before finally biting in." (34)

Significantly, the first part of Gu's body that Dam consumes is his penis. This choice is neither incidental nor merely provocative; rather, it establishes the erotic logic through which *Hunger* reworks desire, intimacy, and power in the wake of death. To analyse this, the essay navigates the conceptual shift from Freud's biological focus to Lacan's symbolic framework. In Freudian terms, the penis is a material organ entangled with the "libido", the psychic energy of the life drive. By beginning the act of consumption here, Choi stages an encounter where erotic attachment and Thanatos coincide. Dam's act suggests that Eros does not oppose death but frequently collaborates with it.

However, while a Freudian reading focuses on the melancholic introjection of the object, a Lacanian framework reframes the social power dynamics of desire entirely, where the anatomical penis is distinguished from the symbolic "phallus". In Lacanian theory, the phallus is not an organ but the primary signifier of desire, authority, and the "lack" that drives human relations. It represents a structuring fantasy of power that is never fully possessed by any subject. Thus, Dam's act of eating Gu's penis performs a radical collapse of this Lacanian symbolic economy. Rather than desiring the phallus as something external or unattainable, Dam literalizes Freudian incorporation. Incorporation is the most extreme mechanism of melancholia, where the lost object is taken into the body to prevent separation. By consuming the organ, desire is no longer oriented outward toward a future, as Lacan might suggest, but inward, toward a possession that annihilates both the object and its symbolic meaning. By shifting from the Lacanian "lack" back to Freudian "saturation," we see that Dam does not mourn Gu; she swallows the very possibility of his absence. The writing frequently uses words like "licking," "sucking," "tearing," and "swallowing". These choices are decisive in moving the narrative into the realm of the primordial.

Eroticism in *Hunger* is therefore inseparable from death. The consumption of the penis does not function as a pornographic or sensational gesture but as a melancholic one: an attempt to retain Gu at the site where intimacy once promised connection and reproduction. In many cultural imaginaries, the phallus is aligned with continuity, with sexual difference, lineage, and the reproduction of life. Choi's inversion is devastating. By consuming the organ most closely associated with generativity, Dam forecloses futurity altogether. This is eros emptied of its reproductive horizon, desire severed from continuity and redirected toward preservation through destruction.

The act also destabilises conventional gendered economies of desire. Dam does not become empowered through phallic appropriation, nor does she symbolically 'possess' Gu in a way that restores agency for herself. Instead, the act exposes the futility of incorporation as a strategy of survival. Once consumed, the phallus loses its symbolic function; it can no longer organise desire or mediate relationality. What remains is the body as a site of melancholic inscription, where love persists not as relation but as residue.

By beginning with the penis, *Hunger* makes explicit that what is being mourned is not only Gu himself, but the very possibility of desire as a force oriented toward life or renewal.

The novel makes this collapse unmistakable further when Gu juxtaposes sexual intercourse with Dam biting into his penis after his death, collapsing erotic pleasure and cannibalistic hunger into a single register:

> "Our bodies intertwined, becoming one. Our writhing, both thrilling and pathetic… And now she's eating me… Was that blood or pus running down her face?" (42)

The description refuses to separate intimacy from abjection. The phrase "becoming one," a familiar romantic cliché of erotic union, is immediately recontextualised by the grotesque uncertainty of "blood or pus," a detail that dissolves the boundary between pleasure and decay. Erotic union and bodily destruction are thus not opposites but repetitions of the same drive toward fusion and disappearance. The scene stages the death drive not as the negation of love but as its extension.

Moreover, in death, Gu is finally able to nourish Dam, to sustain her materially and corporeally in ways that eluded him in life. This inversion is particularly resonant given Gu's repeated self-description as a source of precarity, his refrain being, "I'm trouble. I'm not good for her,"(33) and the sense that he is almost "always on the run." When life renders him unable to protect or provide, death offers a paradoxical reparative gesture. His body becomes what his labour never could be: a source of sustenance, shelter, and care for Dam. Yet this apparent reparative act is inseparable from loss. The same gesture that allows Gu to provide also forecloses the future he desired, his wish to become a parent, to have children, to extend himself through continuity rather than disappearance. Cannibalistic nourishment hence replaces reproductive futurity, substituting incorporation for inheritance. What remains is not empowerment but a melancholic economy in which survival is secured only through the erasure of the very future the phallus traditionally promises.

8. Hunger, Late Capitalism, and the Structural Lack

Within grief studies and food studies alike, eating is often framed as a means of restoring order after loss. Mourning meals, communal tables, and ritual offerings are understood to help reintegrate the bereaved into social life. *Hunger* radically overturns this paradigm. Food does not return Dam to the world; it draws her further inward. Consumption isolates rather than connects, converting what is typically a social ritual into an intensely private practice of attachment. Hunger here is not only physical but temporal: the object of longing is irretrievable and therefore structurally unsatisfiable, ensuring that each act of eating can only repeat rather than resolve desire.

However, the novel underscores the foundational role of food as a language of care long before cannibalism emerges, when Dam recalls that her busy aunt expressed affection primarily through provision: "putting food on the table was how she expressed her love." (20) The statement frames nourishment as a basic grammar of intimacy, a form of care articulated through material sustenance rather than verbal declaration. By establishing food as the earliest and most ordinary register of love, the novel renders Dam's later acts of consumption legible as a distorted continuation of this logic rather than an abrupt deviation from it.

Cannibalism, therefore, appears as an escalation of an already familiar equation between feeding and loving in the face of irrevocable loss.

This reconfiguration of food is inseparable from the socioeconomic landscape the novel inhabits. Dam and Gu's lives unfold within the broken promise of what might be called the 'Korean Dream,' a structure of aspiration that, much like the American Dream, insists that discipline and hard work will yield stability and dignity. For Gu in particular, this promise proves hollow. No amount of labour releases him from the predatory systems that relentlessly pursue his body. The dream of upward mobility collapses into a reality where survival itself becomes precarious.

"I.. found myself buried in debt, owning money I'd never seen or touched." (25)

Freud's insight that civilisation itself produces neurosis: "If the development of civilisation has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual... may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become 'neurotic'?" (125), resonates here; the death drive is not outside society but cultivated within it. Against this backdrop, hunger assumes a structural dimension; the symptom of a world that has failed to provide either material or emotional security. The couple's deprivation is not metaphorical; it is economic, bodily, and unrelenting. In a society where value is measured through productivity and solvency, those who cannot "keep up" are rendered disposable. Gu's body, pursued in life by loan sharks and, in death, by the threat of organ trafficking, is treated as divisible capital. Dam's act of eating him becomes a grim counter-gesture, and paradoxically, his last relief.

9.Conclusion

Hunger thus operates on multiple registers at once. It names grief that cannot be appeased, desire without futurity, and a socioeconomic condition of chronic lack. Dam and Gu are left, ultimately, with their appetites, emotional, bodily, and existential, because the promises meant to sustain them have already withered. Food, stripped of its comforting symbolism, becomes the medium through which this failure is most starkly registered. It marks the distance between what life was supposed to provide and what it persistently withholds. In this sense, *Hunger* offers a quiet but devastating critique of aspirational modernity. When dreams of stability collapse, what remains is not abundance but craving; not fulfillment but the management of scarcity. Dam's hunger is therefore not aberrant but symptomatic. It reveals a world where love must contend with orderly social violence, where bodies are valued more as assets than as lives, and where the only thing left to consume is the memory of what has already been lost.

What Choi Jin-young then offers is a social commentary disguised as an unconventional romance, which is brief, direct, and unflinching in its portrayal of how grief and desperation push individuals to extremes. Where cannibalism in contemporary fiction is often read as dystopian allegory or socio-political metaphor, *Hunger* foregrounds its intimate and affective dimensions, presenting consumption as a desperate effort to preserve relationality in the face of systemic erasure. In doing so, the novel invites a reconsideration

of how grief operates when communal infrastructures fail and when bodies themselves become subject to commodification; and it exposes how mourning becomes classed, privatised, and pathologised once communal infrastructures fail. The horror of cannibalism, in this light, is inseparable from the horror of a world that renders such acts imaginable. The novel ultimately leaves its readers with the fundamental question it posed from the beginning: "What is a human?" Yet where conventional love stories ask what makes us human, Choi instead presses a more unsettling provocation of what it means to be 'humane', when the human world itself has collapsed. The novel's final force resides in this unresolved tension.

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