"I was hungered and ye gave me meat": I n search of the Ultimate Eating Experience in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Gourmet*

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Abstract
This article reads Ishiguro's early screenplay The Gourmet *(1986) as a work of comic Gothic, blending archetypal Gothic elements (ghosts, cathedrals, crimes) and a dark, eerie, and supernatural atmosphere with elements of comedy and satire. The main character's quest for the most unusual food on earth, or rather unearthly, serves as a mere pretext to depict a post-Thatcherite London, where homelessness and hunger were at every corner of the street. The screenplay explores two types of hunger: the literal starvation of the poor who have nothing to eat and depend on night shelters for survival, and the insatiable cravings of the rich, embodied by the epicurean Manley, for whom nothing is good enough and who treads the earth far and wide and depletes his great financial resources to satisfy his gastronomic desires. Manley finally manages to reach his goal but is disappointed: the ghost he has eaten does not taste good and he feels sick afterwards. In the end, the two worlds remain separate as they have always been: while the ever-dissatisfied Manley is likely already plotting a new culinary adventure, the hungry remain forgotten and ignored, the real flesh-and-blood ghosts of the story.*

Keywords: *Comic Gothic, ghost, gourmet, hunger, tramp*

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, the acclaimed British-Japanese novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017, is best known for his "novels of great emotional force" that reveal "the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world" (The Nobel Prize in Literature 2017). In addition to these celebrated novels such as *Never Let Me Go* or *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro has contributed to world literature through short stories, screenplays, and song lyrics.

His screenwriting, just like most of his novels, is influenced by cinematography, in particular, Japanese movies as Ishiguro himself confesses:

> I had a 'Japanese phase' in my early twenties when I was hungry about everything about Japanese culture. I found that Japanese filmmakers, such as [Akira] Kurosawa and [Yasujiro] Ozu, had a profound effect on me, and they probably influenced me enormously as a writer (quoted in Matthews 2009: 116).

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His most recent screenplay—*Living* (2022)—is a remake of Akira Kurosawa's film *Ikiru* (1952). A lesser-known work from his early career is the screenplay *The Gourmet*. The script was created for Channel 4, a British television network, as part of a two-teleplay deal which also included *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (a Chicago Film Festival Award winner). *The Gourmet* forgoes themes that would later appear in his more famous works, most importantly the obsession with professional fulfilment that would be enlarged upon in *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989). *The Gourmet* was directed by Michael Whyte and produced by Ann Skinner and was broadcast in May 1986. The main character is portrayed by Charles Gray, best known for his role as the villain in the James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*.

Like numerous British made-for-television films, *The Gourmet* seems to have slipped into oblivion as it has not been regularly re-aired and is not available on home video. However, following the author's rise to international acclaim, a copy appeared on YouTube in April 2019. The screenplay can be read in *Granta*, a highly esteemed online literary magazine in the United Kingdom, to which Ishiguro had previously submitted a short story—*Getting Poisoned*—but had not been published.

The Gourmet tells the story of an upper-class gastronome who, after having tried it all, becomes obsessed with the ultimate culinary experience. This leads him to all kinds of unusual gastronomic adventures, such as eating garbage and even human flesh. The play foregrounds themes of obsession, the continual quest for perfection, and the sharp divide between the rich and the poor. It also highlights the disappointment and dissatisfaction that the pursuit of ever-greater heights can bring about in those who continually push boundaries without ever finding true contentment.

This article reads *The Gourmet* as a piece of comic Gothic, combining the dark, eerie, and supernatural aspects of Gothic fiction (ghosts, cathedrals, crimes) with the elements of comedy and satire. The main character's quest for the most unusual food turns out to be just a pretext to depict a post-Thatcherite London where homelessness and hunger are at every corner of the street.

Representations of food in Ishiguro's writings

At first glance, food does not hold pride of place in Ishiguro's writing. When it does appear, it has a symbolic meaning often related to memory, identity, class, and human connection.

Food makes a passing appearance in *The Remains of the Day* (1989) when Stevens, the butler, muses on the meticulous preparations and presentation of meals and grand banquets at Darlington Hall. As Stevens's job is literally to wait tables for his master and his guests, the act of serving is a symbol of the divide between two worlds: the servants' and their employers', reflecting the

rigid class-ridden hierarchy and the butler's own sense of duty and identity. While the readers understand the gap between the two classes, Stevens somehow believes in greatness by proximity: because he served tables for the rich and powerful of the day, he, too, is important and contributes to the making of history.

In *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the students' meals at Hailsham are part of their structured, controlled environment. Food in this context helps the guardians to create the illusion of normalcy as opposed to the stark reality of the students' fate: they are mere clones whose organs will be harvested once they have reached adulthood. While they become engaged in typical human activities—eating, attending school, making friends, and even falling in love—they are ultimately genetic copies created to prolong the lives of the originals.

A Family Supper is a less known short story first published in 1982 in the literary magazine *Firebird* and later included in the short story collection *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009). The story set in Japan revolves around a family reunion and explores themes of cultural conflict, generational gap, and the prolonged effects of World War II. The patriarch of the family wants to serve fugu fish to his children for dinner although the mother's death was caused by ingesting an improperly cooked fugu fish delicacy. The father, an old-fashioned man, stands for the traditional Japanese values and the honour code of the samurai culture with its suicide connotations, while the protagonist and his sister symbolise the younger generation, influenced by Western ideas and more sceptical of traditional values. The true nature of the father's intentions remains ambiguous throughout the story.

In *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Ishiguro's latest novel, the Sun is represented as a source of nourishment for Klara, the intelligent self-aware robot. While human characters in the novel are subject to genetic modifications and artificial enhancements in a dystopian technologised society, Klara's dependence on the Sun's power reflects the natural world. The irony is obvious: while humans have become more artificial and lost connection with the natural sources of life, the androids depend on nature for their sustenance.

***The Gourmet* — Outline of the plot**

The Gourmet is unlike any of Ishiguro's writings. Usually centred around a quiet and reserved protagonist, his stories are psychological studies in self-delusion and trauma. *The Gourmet* brings to the limelight an extrovert, Manley Kingston, a wealthy and eccentric foodie who becomes obsessed with finding the perfect meal. As he has tasted everything under the sun, his greatest desire is now to eat something which is not of this earth: a ghost.

The movie does not follow the script faithfully. The screenplay opens with a scene from an unnamed church in London that offers a soup kitchen and

overnight shelter for the city's vagrants. The year is 1904. A close shot focuses on a wooden plaque on the church gate reading:

> I was hungered and ye gave me meat
> I was thirsty and ye gave me drink
> I was a stranger and ye took me in.

The verse is from the Bible, Matthew 25:35 and is part of a larger passage where Jesus describes the final judgment and the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous. It points to the importance of compassion, hospitality, and charity as acts of kindness and care for those in need—such as feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, and welcoming strangers—seen as acts of service to Jesus himself. This Christian teaching, albeit in a satirised form, is to be found at the end of the play after Manley has reached his purpose and feels sick: "I was hungry. I ate. Now I am sick" (Ishiguro 1986).

Against this background, there is a suggestion that a murder might have taken place in the vestry: "a thin line of blood run out from the blackness towards us" as two men carry something heavy between them. Outside, the full moon illuminates an entrance: "This doorway has no door–it is black and ominous, like the gateway to another world" (Ishiguro 1986). The scene features many Gothic elements, such as a crime taking place at night, a full moon, a crypt, and supernatural suggestions.

The time frame then abruptly shifts to 1985: a jetliner is landing, and Carter, a chauffeur described as "sinister and assassin-like" and wearing dark glasses, is waiting for Manley Kingston. His description is equally unsettling:

> Manley is in his fifties; large, formidable British upper-class presence. He wears a habitual expression of disdain and boredom, but there is also a maverick streak in his face–a hint of the decadent or criminal (Ishiguro 1986).

As the car drives away, Manley examines a photograph of the church from the previous scene. In his attaché case, there are also two sketch plans of the church and three mortis keys on a ring, each with a large tag—one marked 'vestry'. Carter has a London working-class accent, and his employer constantly gets his name wrong, which highlights his lack of importance in his employer's eyes. Manley instructs him to drive to a certain Dr Grosvenor's residence in a very expensive area of the city. A reception is being held there for Eduardo Perez, who is evidently a gourmet himself and is eager to premiere some of his new dishes. As some of the guests attempt to engage Manley in conversation, he dismisses them, clearly believing himself to be superior.

Manley is received by Dr Grosvenor in his office. His description matches Manley's and they seem to be cut from the same cloth: "fifty-five, elegant, assured, but also with an air of depravity; he may be a wealthy doctor in private

practice who performs shady operations" (Ishiguro 1986). The books on his desk speak of his interests: "*Eating Rituals of the Aborigines in the Nineteenth Century*, *Protein and Culture*, *The Evolution of the Carnivore*". Dr Grosvenor considers Manley a great pioneer of taste who dares venture into unknown culinary territories:

> In the primitive world, man was obliged to go out into an unknown wilderness and discover food. He was unbound then by prejudices about what did and did not comprise the edible. He tried anything he could get his hands on. You, Mr Kingston, are one of the few in modern times worthy of our great pioneers in taste. The rest of us, even someone like myself, we're akin to the womenfolk who waited in the caves worrying about how to cook what the hunters brought back (Ishiguro 1986).

Dr Grosvenor tells him where he can hunt for an edible ghost. Manley goes home and prepares for the hunt by "fastening a small saucepan" (Ishiguro 1986) to his belt. While driving to the church, he remembers Rossi, a Latin American gourmet, who gave him advice on how to catch and prepare a spectre because she had eaten one once: "The process by which one consumes a ghost is not a simple one", but "the taste is exquisite. […] Like nothing on earth" (Ishiguro 1986). During their encounter, they dine on "soft, pinkish, bloody" joint of what is clearly human flesh.

Having tried it all, Manley wastes no time and goes to the church, hungry not for spiritual food, but for a spectral one which will help alleviate his existential boredom. Equipped with various cooking utensils, a butterfly net, a stove, and a wok, he is ready to capture and cook the ghost that he has been assured haunts the vestry. The church has become a place to shelter and feed the hungry and the homeless. As he waits in a queue, Manley befriends David, a homeless pauper, who waits for his meal. The dialogue between them is satirical because David mistakes Manley for one of his kind. Manley confesses to his insatiable hunger. When David suggests eating garbage from bins, Manley replies he has already done that:

> An interesting process takes place inside a refuse bin. A kind of stewing pot of randomness. The chance factor often produces recipes far beyond the capabilities of ordinary imaginations (Ishiguro 1986).

Unable to understand that there are people who are truly hungry because they have nothing to eat, Manley, too, mistakes David for a gourmet who came to the church to eat the ghost that haunts it. In the crypt, the vagrants are all eating:

> Some of the men, not far from the trolley, are eating standing up. Others eat sitting on their mattresses, backs against a wall. Not only the environment, but

> the means by which they are obliged to eat makes the whole procedure appear rather disgusting. The men 'drink' the beans from the beaker, then chew, taking an occasional bite from a roll. Some eat hungrily. Others appear to be eating only because they know they should, without really caring if they do or not. Many look mentally and physically exhausted (Ishiguro 1986).

After all the vagrants have fallen asleep, Manley wakes up David to help him satisfy his hunger. Although David does not fully understand what is going on, he agrees, recalling the pangs of real hunger, and leads Manley to the vestry. Upon arrival, David begins to sense that something is off about his new friend when he notices an arsenal of dangling pans, spoons, and other kitchenware: "the stove, the various metallic utensils, the net, jars and containers–and Dr Grosvenor's box" (Ishiguro 1986). Manley then reveals his true intentions: to capture the ghost of a pauper who was murdered in the church eighty years before. With David's assistance, Manley successfully traps the ghost using a butterfly net and a mysterious white powder. To David's horror, Manley then cooks the ghost in his wok. We are not told how the cooked ghost tastes like, only that meat smells "powerful and awful".

The next morning, Manley feels ill and vomits. Some homeless beggar, thinking he has had too much drink, takes pity on him and invites him to sit under his cardboard shelter. It is Manley's turn now to be mistaken for a common drunk just like he had previously mistaken David for a foodie. Manley tells him it was not the drink that had made him sick, but the food: "I was hungry. I ate. Now I am sick,"—a rewriting of the Bible verse from a free market capitalistic perspective: "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you invited me in". Disappointed, Manley remarks to his driver, who arrives to pick him up, "Life gets so dreary once you've tasted its more obvious offerings" —an oblique critique of the consumerist society as represented here by fine dining, and the hollowness and inevitable boredom that follow once you have obtained the object of desire.

The play ends with David waking up in the church, disgustedly examining the remains of the fried ghost, which he throws away—a twisted interpretation of the proverb "One man's food is another man's poison". Meanwhile, a Rolls-Royce glides through the morning streets of central London. Left feeling frustrated, unsatisfied, and still hungry, Manley may already be on the hunt for new extreme culinary adventures he believes will satisfy his sophisticated cravings.

The Gourmet as a Comic Gothic tale

Ishiguro's writings contain some recognisable Gothic elements. In an interview, Groes asks Ishiguro about the Gothic strand in his writings:

> In the early work, protagonists are haunted by ghosts from the past. The description of the country house in the *Remains of the Day* [1989] sometimes feels a bit 'Gothicky', and in *Nocturnes* [2009] you seem to be engaging with a literary tradition that represents Venice as a place associated with death. (Groes 2011: 248)

One could add other writings to the list. In the short story *A Family Supper*, the ghost of a mother who died from improperly prepared fugu fish haunts the narrative, symbolising unresolved issues from the past. In *A Pale View of Hills*, a mother is haunted by her daughter's suicide and the Gothic mode is manifested through ghostly imagery and an overwhelming atmosphere of horror and dread —what Sloane calls "Etsuko's quasi-gothic dreamscape" (2021: 47). *Never Let Me Go* creates an uncanny atmosphere as the characters, later revealed to be clones raised for organ harvesting, exist in a dystopian world. Ishiguro admits that there are Gothic elements in his work, yet they are more related to "a fascination with the supernatural. But it's an eerie Japanese supernatural" (Ishiguro qtd in Groes 2011: 248-249). Ishiguro even wanted to produce a documentary on Japanese ghosts, but the project was never realised.

In *The Gourmet,* Ishiguro makes use of Gothic imagery to expose and criticize the harsh realities of London in the early 1980s. He does that by blending comedy and satire into what ultimately becomes a tragicomic Gothic tale which is at no point developed into overt horror.

Comic Gothic has received relatively little scholarly attention. At first glance, it may seem at odds with mainstream Gothic horror. Yet, "if Gothic gives textual expression to the fragmentation of the modern subject, then we must recognise that this expression is characterised by irony, scepticism and the enjoyment of comic incongruity even as it engages with anguish, fear, isolation and alienation". (Horner and Zlosnik 2005: 165-166). Comic Gothic includes elements such as "parody […]; burlesque; comic grotesque; incongruity; comic inversion of the abject; exploitation of liminality in Gothic fiction" (Horner and Zlosnik 2005:166).

Horner and Zlosnik maintain that "the comic within the Gothic foregrounds a self-reflexivity and dialectical impulse intrinsic to the modern subject" (2005: 4). Gothic texts often use self-parody, intertextuality, and metafiction as tools to critically engage with and respond to various aspects of the contemporary world. While the atmosphere in *The Gourmet* may be Gothic, particularly in the scenes from the church which is described as a "gateway to another world" (Ishiguro 1986)—the underlying tone reflects the grim realities of capitalism, the limitations of Christian charity, and the detrimental social policies of Margaret Thatcher, which exacerbated homelessness in London. The tragicomic narrative thus becomes deeply politicised.

By setting the story in modern London, Ishiguro taps into what is known as contemporary London Gothic, a resurgence of Gothic fiction set in London

in the 1980s and 1990s, represented by authors such as Peter Ackroyd, Christopher Fowler, and Neil Gaiman (Luckhurst 2002). According to Luckhurst, contemporary London Gothic is a product of the fusion of tyranny and farce that defines the city's history of democratic governance—a context that recent 'spectral' interpretations of the Gothic have largely overlooked. Todd maintains that London is reinvented as a "Gothic construct" (1996: 196), haunted by its dark histories. Ishiguro contrasts the London of the 1900s with the modern-day metropolis, shedding light on the impact of Thatcher's damaging policies that weakened the welfare state. He draws from his own experience as a social worker helping the homeless in West London in the late 1970s. By describing both the poor of 1904 and the post-Thatcherite homeless, Ishiguro explores the changing face of poverty in a new globalised world. While the tramp of the early 20th century is described as "old-fashioned" with a "big raggy coat" (Ishiguro 1986), homelessness in Thatcher's London includes all races and age groups:

> There are only men here because the church takes in only men. Otherwise, a mixed crowd–multi-racial, all ages. Only a few of them are 'traditional' tramps; most are losing a battle to maintain a conventional 'respectable' appearance. A significant number of teenagers. Their faces are bored and weary. (Ishiguro 1986)

Ishiguro inserts a refined figure from the pinnacle of Western civilisation—the gastronome—into a lowbrow Gothic setting. The screenplay's central metaphor of food and hunger is pushed to its limits: on the one side are the homeless, whose hunger is literal, and on the other is the gourmet—what we would nowadays call a "foodie"—obsessed with chasing the trendiest culinary experiences. Thrust into the world of the impoverished, which he cannot comprehend, Manley mistakenly assumes David is a fellow gourmet upon learning that he, too, eats from the garbage. The ghost itself initially seems to be a flesh-and-blood tramp:

> He is middle-aged, small, with a friendly, cheeky face. There is absolutely nothing eerie about him. The tramp rubs his eyes, as though he has just been awakened, then grins sheepishly. (Ishiguro 1986)

The story turns into a play of mistaken identities: Manley is taken for a tramp, David for a gourmet, and the ghost for a real man. Consumed by his quest for the most eccentric dish imaginable, Manley shows utter disdain for the real hunger of the homeless. He remains blind to their existence—they are invisible, the true ghosts haunting the narrative. When Manley mentions he is searching for a ghost, David responds: "I'm the ghost around here. Could vanish tonight, nobody would notice" (Ishiguro 1993).

Conclusions

In *The Gourmet*, Ishiguro reinterprets hunger not as a basic physiological need but as a refined pursuit of the "great pioneers in taste" (Ishiguro 1986). This raises the question: whose hunger is more real—the tramp's or the gourmet's? While the former seeks merely to fill an empty stomach, the latter's hunger represents an artist's yearning for increasingly sophisticated (culinary) experiences. When a homeless man empathetically tells Manley that he understands what it feels like to be hungry, Manley retorts, "You have no idea what *real* hunger is" (Ishiguro 1986) (emphasis in the original). Manley's dismissal of the tramp's hunger as "not real" symbolises the moral detachment of the upper class. In his pursuit of increasingly refined and exclusive experiences, Manley embodies the upper class's decadence and excess and exemplifies a kind of moral blindness to be found in the neoliberal obsession with individualism and consumerism. His ultimate act of consuming the tramp's ghost (i.e. the rich eat the poor) literalises the exploitation and disregard for the poor. The worlds of the rich and the poor are meant to stay apart, as always: while the ever-dissatisfied Manley is likely already plotting a new culinary adventure, the hungry remain forgotten and ignored, the real flesh-and-blood ghosts of the story.

Written just a few years after the end of Thatcher's term as prime minister, *The Gourmet* uses Gothic comedy to satirise and critique her neoliberal social policies which further impoverished the poor. Thus, the tramp, a victim of a violent and exploitative system which literally killed him to harvest his organs for research, is killed again, this time to be consumed as a delicacy by some rich gourmet. Not even in death are the poor equal with the rich. Central to this satire of a decadent society is the balance between horror and absurdity inherent in the Gothic comic.

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