



“Life is but a Weaving”: *Writing as a Quest for the Gold Thread*

Light and Thread. By Han Kang. Translated by Maya West and e. yaewon & Paige Aniyah Morris. London: Penguin Random House, 2026. 161 pages. ISBN 9780241817018.

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Light and Thread (*Bich-gwa sil*) is Han Kang’s first book after winning the Nobel Prize in literature in 2024, with an English translation by Maya West and e. yaewon & Paige Aniyah Morris appearing in 2026. Naturally, it has drawn the attention of readers around the world. *Light and Thread* is a collection of twelve nonfiction pieces by Han Kang, spanning a range of genres, including her Nobel Prize lecture, award acceptance speech, journal entries, unpublished poems, and photography. Given the poetic abstruseness of the author’s novels, this newly published volume offers readers a helpful entry point for gaining a deeper understanding of Han’s literary worldview as developed in her earlier novels. It is especially notable that she reflects here on both the creative aspirations and motivations behind her fiction.

Above all, *Light and Thread* reveals Han’s character and her sincerity as a writer. Just as a classic work conveys enduring human values, this book encourages the reader to reflect on the essential meaning of life and existence in a neoliberal society characterized by the law of the jungle and human isolation. In particular, contemporary readers may find it easy to feel disheartened in the face of an increasingly precarious struggle for survival amid rapid digital transformation.

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In the 1980s, many university students in Korea felt a strong sense of moral responsibility for the state violence against society committed by the country's military dictatorship. As a result, young people were often drawn into student activism, and opposition to authoritarian rule was understandably regarded as both heroic and just. In contrast to this prevailing atmosphere of the period, Han Kang, who entered Yonsei University in 1989, was a shy and introverted student who often dressed simply in black, much as she does today. However, she was also endeavoring, in her own way through writing, to grapple with the tension between unjust violence and moral responsibility in a conflicted society, a concern that continued after her graduation.

Han begins to seriously deal with this sense of moral responsibility in the face of state violence with the publication of *Human Acts* (*Sonyeon-i onda*, 2014) and *We Do Not Part* (*Jakbyeol haji anneunda*, 2021). While many student activists from those earlier days are now in full pursuit of personal wealth and ambitions, this novelist, with her warm eyes and silent smile, continues to illuminate the barbarity of historical state violence through her writing. Historical state violence and the trauma it produces are not merely events confined to the past, but present-tense cruelties that continually issue from it. The author's meditation intrinsically changes from "*Can the present help the past? Can the living save the dead?*" (p. 11; italics in original) to "*Can the past help the present? Can the dead save the living?*" (p. 12; italics in original). This contemplation compellingly awakens the author to the inseparable connections not only between past and present, but also between the dead and the living.

At its core, Han Kang's work is concerned with the problem of violence and expresses a profound compassion for its victims. In her fiction, violence encompasses a broad spectrum of intentional human behavior, as seen in such novels as *The Vegetarian* (*Chaesikjuuija*, 2007) and *The White Book* (*Huin*, 2016). *The Vegetarian* exposes violence and patriarchal power relations within the family, while *The White Book* philosophically illuminates violence from a transnational perspective. Yet Han Kang is not a writer who superficially exposes the cruelty of violence, but a literary artist whose

narratives center on compassion for the vulnerable and on the affirmation of their courage to endure and exist.

In *Greek Lessons* (Huirabeo sigan, 2011), for example, the male protagonist, who is losing his eyesight, comes to communicate with the female protagonist who is losing her ability to speak. When the woman begins tracing words with her finger on the man's palm, the two vulnerable persons become connected through the tactile contact of their bodies. Although Han Kang's works engage with diverse forms of violence, her central concern ultimately lies in the possibilities of healing from violence and the human solidarity that can emerge from it. For Han Kang, literature is a journey toward the potentialities of hope and light despite the trauma of violence and suffering in human existence. At the same time, she also emphasizes that as long as a person lives, he or she cannot help but imagine the possibility of hope, a theme contemplated in the poem "The Sound(s)" (pp. 62–69). *Light and Thread* fundamentally portrays the author's literary journey and artistic aims through a wide range of literary genres.

Furthermore, Han Kang's reflections ultimately develop into a profound inquiry into the nature of love and whether it truly exists in the world. Questions such as "*Why is the world so violent and painful? And yet how can the world be this beautiful?*" (p. 20; italics in the original) reveal the author's recognition of the world's inherent cruelties. In order to grasp the inscrutable paradox whereby humans embody both violence and love at once, she explores how violence is perpetrated and how its victims endure suffering and survive through pain. She further considers whether hope, as both a cognitive and emotional state, can render the world beautiful in an abyss of suffering, and directs her attention to the cosmos in an effort to confront aspects of human existence that cannot be fully understood through logic or within the confines of ordinary reality. Han Kang guides readers toward questions concerning "*humans in history and humans in the cosmos*" (p. 16; italics in the original), encouraging them to seek the ultimate meanings of life on another level. More importantly, this effort to contemplate the paradoxical condition of human existence from a cosmic perspective distinguishes *Light and Thread* from her earlier novels. Viewed from this

perspective, *Light and Thread* can be regarded as a pivotal turning point in her literary career.

Han Kang seeks to articulate a cosmic worldview when she writes, "*The wind and the ocean currents. The circular flow of water and air that connects the entire world*" (p. 38; italics in the original). As *Light and Thread* suggests, human beings who realize the inner workings of the universe and the interconnectedness of all entities in the cosmos can be paradoxically regarded as cosmic beings. Although all humans differ in nature, all are linked within a vast and unending circulation of living and nonliving forces through the cosmos. From this perspective, historical humans can also be understood as cosmic beings who recognize the finitude of life, the temporality of existence, the limits of individual significance, and the consuming flow of time. Even though they exist at an unstable point between universal contraction and expansion, humans are capable of shaping the world's beauty through the flames of time, a force that holds both the capacity to endure grief and the strength to resist violence.

In the cosmology of Han Kang's literary world, all living organisms possess the potential to perish, but the essence of their being cannot perish because there is no boundary between substance and non-substance and the world consists of the contraction and expansion of the universe. On the one hand, humans in history retain stochastically momentary temporality and a corporeal body. On the other hand, humans in the cosmos, whose entities belong to neither the category of substance nor the category of non-substance, might lose the tenement of clay but are intrinsically immortal beings. A cosmic perspective supposes a way of viewing everything in the universe as interconnected and in motion. This can also be applied to water and wind, substance and non-substance, and the living and the dead. Therefore, humans in history necessarily experience meetings and partings, but there are ultimately no meetings and partings for humans in the cosmos. After all, the mystery of how barbarity and beauty can coexist within human beings may be explained through philosophical theories about the workings of the universe.

According to the theory of contraction and expansion, a paradox

emerges in which all entities and movements may both exist and not exist. In the same manner, there may be separation, or there may not be separation. In this context, the essential task of mortal human beings as finite creatures is to recognize the ephemerality of the universe and to live with the understanding that each and every existence is interconnected with each other in the momentariness of flames and temporality. The reason Han Kang is attracted to the beauty of the world is also due to the paradoxical wonder of the interconnectedness of all beings, despite life's brevity and suffering. This moment of wonder operates as the power helping humans in history to become humans in the cosmos, transcending the cruelty and torment of the present world. In the long run, it is possible for humans in the cosmos to overcome their opposing and contradictory aspects, and to ultimately embody a complete form of humanity.

At the same time, it is notable that Han Kang places particular emphasis on the significance of light, especially in *Light and Thread*, even though light symbolically plays an important role throughout her novels. She regards light as the energy of the universe that illuminates the somber aspects of human existence and connects every object to the universe. Light is not merely the life-sustaining energy source for all living things, but also a force connecting one object to another and subsequently to the universe. In addition, light symbolically functions for Han Kang as the root of life, enabling all humans to endure pain and heal wounds. In this sense, the life-giving power of light transforms into the image of a candle flame that connects the living and the dead, operating as a form of universal love that binds finite human beings to one another through the flames of time.

In addition, light represents the connective energy of life and love that enables a vulnerable person to live as an ordinary human being in the world. Despite the duality of barbarity and beauty, humans as the *Homo sapiens* species are also individual, physical, and cognitive entities who retain the potentiality to witness a *Kairos* moment. Even if only briefly, light allows humans to look beyond the world in critical moments of pain and sustains life with universal love. Consequentially, Han's new insight into the principle of life and the light of the world strengthens her motivation to write with

both inspiration and conviction.

Han's epiphany on the significance of life and light is also portrayed in the episode of planting and growing trees and flowers in "North-Facing Garden" and "Garden Diary." Since the garden in her newly purchased small home is north-facing, the landscaper advises Han Kang to collect sunlight through mirrors. At this moment, her consciousness lingers on the statements such as, "*To catch the sunlight shining south*" (p. 79; italics in original) and "*After all, there's no light here, all day long*" (p. 79; italics in original). Even though she never knew "what sunlight was, before she had the garden" (p. 80), the author begins to recognize the meaning of sunlight. Her consciousness hovers around the idea that "*We're catching the sunlight shining south. By reflecting it with mirrors*" (p. 83; italics in original). After all, in the garden, she witnesses trees and flowers full of a vitality nourished by light. She confesses how, "It makes me happy when the light slants across the leaves—a feeling I assume is now a part of human nature itself, the result of evolution shaping us to live symbiotically with plants" (p. 99). The author deeply internalizes the plant-thinking philosophy that light serves as a force connecting human beings with plants.

In particular, Han Kang deliberately employs the rhetorical device of antépiphere to draw the reader's attention to *Light and Thread* as a unified whole, reinforcing the recurring message of love as a symbol of the interconnectedness of human hearts. Quite interestingly, she places the same two stanzas of a poem at both the beginning (p. 4) and end (p. 161) of the book. This framing not only gives the nonfiction collection a circular narrative structure, but also intensifies the emotional and emphatic impact of its central theme. The repeated stanzas are as follows:

Where is love?

It is inside my thump-thumping beating chest

What is love?

It is the gold thread connecting between our hearts. (p. 4; italics in the original)

The above passage is taken from the opening stanzas of a poem in a diary the author wrote when she was eight years old. This inspirational poem from her childhood awakens her present consciousness and inspires her to create a warmer and more hopeful narrative of her own. This strengthens her creative aspiration and creative motivation, and results in the publication of *Light and Thread*. While the gold thread clearly symbolizes the love that connects human beings, its implied meanings are especially significant. The gold, which emanates light, represents love itself, whereas the thread symbolizes connection. More specifically, the gold evokes the warm light of sunshine and candlelight, while the thread signifies the bonds of love that interconnect human hearts.

Thus, love acts as a foundational force that initiates various and multifaceted connections between the past and present, the dead and living, humans in history and humans in the cosmos, the author and the reader and so forth. Han Kang reflects on her life as a writer, stating, “From my earliest novel to my latest, hadn’t the deepest layer of my inquiries always been directed towards love? Could it be that love was in fact my life’s oldest and most fundamental undertone?” (p. 20). Metaphorically, the thread which connects each and every human being is another name for literature. In this context, literature can be understood as an aesthetic form that weaves together human lives through connection, suggesting, in the words of the opening line of Grant Colfax Tulla’s posthumously celebrated poem *The Tapestry*, that in the end all human “life is but a weaving.” Han Kang thus emerges as a literary weaver striving toward the ultimate purpose of literature. Likewise, *Light and Thread* is a nonfiction collection that portrays her earnest dedication as a literary weaver in search of the gold thread that binds human hearts together through love and connection.