

THE PHASES OF THE POST-SUBLIME:  
REDEFINING *HAN*'S SORROWFUL FRATERNITY THROUGH THE WORKS OF  
YI SANG AND HWANG SUN-WON

by

LUCY BENNETT ROBERTSON  
(Under the Direction of Hyangsoon Yi)

ABSTRACT

Sublime experiences can become illusory. Yi Sang's "The Wings" (1936) and Hwang Sun-Won's "Rain Shower" (1953) aptly prove this fact given their attempts to understand life after the destruction of a sublime experience in their writings. Each of their narrators experience a traumatic epiphany when their suffering, and their sublime fantasies, become tangibly invalid and unreal. Having lived in their own constructs of a sublime world, prevailing Japanese colonialism and the ongoing Korean War eventually move each of their characters away from their sublime experience. The post-sublime realm highlights the aftermath of such separations, demonstrating how one's misconception of happiness and grandeur is destined to reach an inevitable climax. Exploring Yi's and Hwang's discourse through the Kantian sublime and the Korean concept of *han* supports the phenomenon of the post-sublime. Fundamentally ordinary in their sufferings, each narrator seeks to validate their individual selfhoods amidst the post-sublime's communion with the other.

INDEX WORDS:     Sublime  
                      Colonialism  
                      Korean War

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LUCY BENNETT ROBERTSON

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LUCY BENNETT ROBERTSON

Major Professor: Hyangsoon Yi  
Committee: Thomas Cerbu  
Mi-Ryong Shim

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott  
Interim Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
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## DEDICATION

For my loving and endlessly supportive parents, Forrest Robertson III and Kathryn Robertson. I owe my life, my soul, and my whole being to you both. I also dedicate this thesis to my six younger siblings (Emma Robertson, Abigail Robertson, Mollie Robertson, Elizabeth Robertson, Bennett Robertson, and Mary Robertson). Through my good times and through my bad times, you have never doubted me.

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## I. Introduction

Relationships between the self and the other have been a matter of prominent research within recent years. Theorists like Jacques Derrida have analyzed the role of selfhood both inside and outside of the linguistic. He refers to the “symptoms” of a “crisis” of our own being suddenly confronted with a mere specter of this self, highlighting a phenomenon of the infinite within a void of the unknown (Derrida 15).<sup>1</sup> Others, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, through her post-colonial theory and in a move indebted to Derrida, have tied an understanding of selfhood to Western colonial roots.<sup>2</sup> As a plague of literary theory, how we learn to love one another, or how we learn to reconcile our selfhood, becomes a constant topic of interest when forces beyond our own control have made these feats nearly impossible.

This issue has, so far, not been researched or examined through the lens of the sublime. I want to argue that the relationship between the self and the other becomes clearer when considered through the perspective of the sublime. For within the sublime, one’s feelings help to define living in a space that is filled with the sweeping influence of the unknown; how one reconciles one’s existence as valid and significant when everyone else must also face similar periods of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida’s *De la Grammatologie* refers specifically to the problem of language as crucial to understanding the signs and symbols of limitations within the “problematic horizon”: “Cette inflation du signe « langage » est l’inflation du signe lui-même, l’inflation absolue, l’inflation elle-même. Pourtant, par une face ou une ombre d’elle-même, elle fait encore signe : cette crise est aussi un symptôme” (Derrida 15).

<sup>2</sup> As seen in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, the question of alterity calls for an understanding of otherness both at home and abroad. What Spivak notes as the phenomenon of the “subject-effect” becomes: “The possibility of possession, of being haunted...cut by the imposition of the tough reasonableness of capital’s mode of exploitation... The theory of pluralized ‘subject-effects’ often provided a cover for this subject of knowledge” (Spivak 21-22).

unknown at some point in their lives. While the sublime is a European theory, I argue for a set of classifications under a more general term of sublimity in this thesis, urging readers to consider new ways of looking at the world from non-Eurocentric perspectives. Despite a myriad of different opinions, observations, and conclusions concerning the sublime as an abstract theory, it nonetheless recognizes our greatest joys, our greatest fears, our greatest loves, and our greatest sorrows; at its core, it is the inexpressible.

The role of the sublime in an East Asian context has not been examined. As the sublime encompasses multiple threads of discourse concerning the magnificent, the great, and the majestic, it intersects the concept of liminality at several points. Such a blurring of boundaries calls attention to those who live in a liminal state. Koreans as a people have undergone many of these liminal moments. Given the historical experiences of Koreans with liminality (both as colonial subjects and as subject to war), this thesis examines the sublime in relation to Korean literature's selfhood and otherness as explored in two Korean short stories, Yi Sang's "The Wings" (*Nalgae*) and Hwang Sun-Won's "Rain Shower" (*Sonagi*).<sup>3</sup> I will explore how these authors use the sublime to heighten the collective nature of the human experience.

Yi's "The Wings" (1936) basically explores the relationship between a man and his wife. Yi presents his narrative through parallels and dichotomies, questioning what is at stake when attempting to read deeply into this troubled relationship: does the man love his wife? Why does the wife act the way that she does? Does the man have a mental or intellectual disability? Does the man die at the end?

Hwang's short story, "Rain Shower", written in 1953, presents similar parameters for discussion concerning how we view the key relationship between a young boy and a young girl:

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<sup>3</sup> This thesis follows the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization for Korean words.

does the boy love the girl? How do they meet? What does their relationship mean? Why is the young boy left alone at the end? Each story presents a type of three-pronged or schematic prognosis creating a space for the readerly experience. Readers are drawn into the pages of these stories, recognizing the similarities between each story and their protagonists' symbolic growth through life: we start with our innocence, we grow disillusioned with life, and we find a way to escape life in some way or another.

Life's ups and downs resonate at the foundation of modern Korean literature. In Yi's case, his story progresses towards a symbolic "bird's eye view", his unreliable narrator observing the world from the inside looking outwards.<sup>4</sup> The man laments and ponders his situation, subjected to confinement in a row-house while his wife, a prostitute, earns sums for which she provides him meager coins as recompense for the man's living situation. The man represents a "flâneur" intellectual; Yi makes the strong case that his narrator neither recognizes his role as a man navigating through the realm of colonial modernity nor acknowledges his own self as reactionary towards it. The highly debated finale of the story finds the man pondering this existential crisis at the top of a department store. Having managed glimpses of the burgeoning world outside of his wife and the row-house he is subjected to, the man considers the true cost of freedom at the expense of understanding his own selfhood.

Hwang presents a similar problem for his own narrator, the young boy questioning his selfhood's purpose when faced with the inevitability of death. Having met a neighborhood girl, the boy resolves to spend time with her each day, and slowly realizes the beauty of simplicity and pureness: the flowers, the sky, the wind, and even the girl's pink sweater, all hold symbolic meaning and provide incentive in the boy's life. Their young love cements itself when they are

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<sup>4</sup> Yi Sang's "bird's eye" perspective is a notable component in John H. Kim's "As the Crow Flies: Yi Sang's Aerial Poetics" during his analysis of "The Wings" (John H. Kim 241-242).

forced to take shelter together from a sudden rain shower. Although the boy realizes his love for the girl in that moment, she dies just a few days later having fallen ill from exposure to the weather. Just as the man in Yi's work experiences the painful reality surrounding him, so too does Hwang's young boy encounter a similar fate. His innocence shattered, the boy confronts the brevity of life against the forces of death as an uncontrollable phenomenon.

Approaching these stories from the point of view of the sublime is not possible without understanding the concept of *han* in Korean culture. Fundamentally, *han* is acknowledged as the recognition of deep turmoil, suffering, and sorrow at the unfairness of life. This occurs when the individual is faced with the atrocities of uncontrollable fate, or, when one reconsiders one's self in light of the many atrocities and injustices that life presents.<sup>5</sup> Because Korea has been subjected to foreign invaders, colonial rule, an ongoing frozen conflict, and military dictatorships, the concept of *han* is an enduring and heavily debated topic in Korean scholarship and historical memory. Yet I would like to argue that there are thematic affinities between elements of *han* and the sublime.

The origins of *han*, however, are deeply problematic. The roots of *han* extend back to Sumerian etymology but became recognized as a distinct Korean concept at the onset of Korea's modernist period.<sup>6</sup> At least one source of the controversy lies in the writings of the early twentieth century's Yanagi Soetsu, a Japanese art mogul and critic, who still remains a controversial figure. This is due to discussions in the early 1900's regarding *han* as a construct of lingering Japanese Colonialist

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<sup>5</sup> Chang-Hee Son's analysis of the development of *han* actually separates between two threads of philosophy: the difference between *haan* and *han*. This thesis only focuses on *han*, which Son describes as rooted in the fundamentals of Korean identity: the "*Hankuk* nation", the "*Hanminjok* ethnicity", the "*Hankul* language", and the philosophy of "*Hanism*" (Son 74). Furthermore, *han* is also a mindset, or, a way of being: "*Hanism*, as it breathes and lives in the mind...of the Korean people is tantamount to the logos of the Greeks and Yahweh of the Hebrews" (Son 77-78).

<sup>6</sup> Son explains that while *han* is an ancient concept, some of its prevalence in recent debate owes its recognition from foreign sources: "the problem is this; much of the writings and artifacts regarding *han* have been destroyed by invaders throughout history, and much of the literature regarding Korea has been produced by non-Korean historians, particularly the Japanese" (Son 74).

memory. These accounts emphasize *han* as moving rapidly away from the Korean people's historical experiences and more towards idealization and aestheticization, for which Yanagi is partly to blame. Yanagi's essay on Korean art, "The Beauty of Sorrow" (originally referring to that of Korean celadon and ceramics), emphasizes *han*'s legacy as tied to emerging artistic movements rather than as a historic recognition of Korea's pre-colonial identity. The suffering of Koreans has therefore united the population together in an unspoken acknowledgment of shared understanding, broadening the concept of *han* as a larger and more collective experience.

More recent views of *han* can also claim their origins to South Korea during the 1970's with new enthusiasm for Christianity enforcing Minjung Theology's communal philosophy of togetherness. Through Minjung Theology, *han* became a shared philosophy that encouraged fraternity and solidarity amongst the Korean people, combatting the eras of oppression and hardship they had faced all of their lives. Although rooted in emerging Christian doctrine, many people credit Minjung Theology's campaign of *han* in emphasizing the idea of "combined suffering" as a way for all of the Korean people to come to terms with their grief and anguish.<sup>7</sup> Yet for many still, *han* should not be associated with togetherness or collectivism, but should instead embody the experiences of an individual's anguish or suffering. Tensions concerning *han*'s existence as a collective or personal experience question the significance of Korean individual suffering versus suffering that is non-unique, or, experienced by everyone. Since the 1970's, debates over *han* often concern its place within Korea's cultural and social history, challenging the

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<sup>7</sup> Minjung Theology was based on a need for Christianity in relation to the "development of the political hermeneutics of the Gospel in terms of the Korean reality" (Suh 17). *Han* became a slogan of sorts to promote Christianity as a way to reconcile the Korean people's hardships. By advocating the mindset of communal suffering, Minjung Theological Christianity brought large groups of people together under the same headlines of communal prayer, redemption, and salvation, in the same way that *han* offered comfort through trauma solidarity.

role of the Korean individual given *han*'s artistic and theological role in shaping the country's modernity.

The concept of *han* is complex enough for me to use it to explain a common element in Yi's and Hwang's characters. I can also use the concept as grounding for a union with the sublime. *Han* becomes essential in understanding the fates of Yi's man and Hwang's young boy, both of whose experiences are not singular. My research on *han* and the sublime create a logic of the inevitable and unavoidable shared experience. *Han* may exist as an individual experience, but due to its emergence from causes beyond personal control, it allows for a bonding or fraternity between people who are united over shared trauma, either from colonialism or from the pain of the Korean War.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the experience of the sublime helps one understand their place in the world through an indescribable encounter. Both *han* and the sublime embody that which is beyond the individual's power.

Conceptually, *han*'s broadness allows for an explanation of ideas of the unknown, those that the sublime cannot address by itself. As I pointed out earlier, *han*'s historiography embodies a contradiction. Some rely on *han* as a form of collectivism when, at its core, *han* is also something deeply personal; a questioning of why and how life works through levelling hardships against the

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<sup>8</sup> While not explored fully in this thesis, I want to mention the existence and relevancy of the term "traumatic sublime". In Sonja Jankov's exploration of the term, the "traumatic sublime" is a concept coined by Hal Foster to explain trends and patterns within the "Kantian framework" of the sublime's philosophy (Jankov 139). As Jankov explains, "It relates to both repetitive appearance of one action, such as looped projection, and, recalling Immanuel Kant's philosophy, the impossibility of something being critically comprehended, because of the psychological intensity it initially produces in the conscience of the viewer. The era of de-territorialisation is signified by increased use of digital technology and algorithms in re-shaping the dimensions of reality, which in turn impacts the process of thinking" (Jankov 140). The term is not used in this study; however, its links between trauma theory and *han* suggest possible correlations that can be used to further understand my ideas of the post-sublime.

individual. Yet because one aspect of the sublime is also deeply self-examining, I endeavor to unite these two concepts to suggest an alternative way of critiquing ideas of the shared versus the distinctive experience. By reconfiguring a meaning of the sublime, that which presents the effects of sublimity through beauty, fear, and grandeur, one can also examine the encounter as emblematic of the deepest kind of sorrow and tragic love. Associating *han* with the sublime allows us to re-examine how Yi and Hwang's cultural legacy transcends personal encounters with the other. I argue that both stories reflect, in different ways, *han* when faced with the sheer impact of the sublime: through the loss of the self, *han* represents sorrow as a fundamentally collective human experience.

When combined with the concept of *han*, the sublime encounter becomes irrelevant and illusory, thus embodying a new way of reading Yi's and Hwang's texts through the "post-sublime". I suggest that the post-sublime, as present in the Korean context of "The Wings" and "Rain Shower", invites people into a collective group of universal suffering through the destruction of the individual. The post-sublime forces us to consider where one stands and what one does when a singular experience is no longer one's own. Through an inevitable union with the other, one is made to question the validity of one's solitary existence.

I have organized the thesis into five chapters. Chapter Two explains the post-sublime by looking at the sublime proper in Kant before analyzing the theoretical roots of *han* in Yanagi's writings and Minjung Theology. Chapters Three and Four are devoted to analyzing Yi's and Hwang's respective works and include sections that examine each author's historical significance, followed by close textual readings of "The Wings" and "Rain Shower". Chapter Five serves as my conclusion, where I endeavor to apply the concept of the post-sublime towards its role in prospective literary theory. Ultimately, my writing seeks a novel perception of modern Korean

literature to explain how one's experiences, however grand, wondrous, and obscure, are actually not as singular as one thought. This thesis hopes to consider now, more than ever, the fragility of human existence in relation to an understanding of fear, selfhood, and beauty.

## II. The Post-Sublime

### 1. Understanding the Sublime

My first section within Chapter Two focuses on looking at the sublime in Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, where I attempt to define the sublime experience. Kant's explanation of the sublime experience is crucial to understanding the development of Yi's and Hwang's main characters in "The Wings" and "Rain Shower". I argue that Yi's man and Hwang's boy undergo a sublime experience akin to what Kant describes as the ultimate recognition of the sublime, for the characters' individual encounters with the sublime eventually prove to be their undoing.

As a theorizer of the sublime in the European literary context, Kant underscores the sublime as both an idea of magnificence as well as a pondering of the unknown itself. Kant explains early on how one's imagination highlights the power of an unreality fostered through the sublime: "after waking up we lie in an idle and gentle distraction, our imagination draws the irregular figures such as those of the bedroom curtains or of certain spots on a near wall, into human shapes, and this with a seeming correctness that entertains us in a not unpleasant manner but the illusion of which we dispel the moment we want to" (Kant 211). In Steven Vine's *Reinventing the Sublime*, the occurrence of the sublime phenomenon therefore appears at the crossroads of "materialistic" sources and involves a dual process between the one who experiences it and the one who reads it. Vine explains: "The 'sublime' is a rational exceeding of the project of sensuous presentation in

the subject's experience of simultaneous rational evaluation and sensuous deprivation", which encourages "an 'ongoing process' that asks to be 'continued in the reader'" (Vine 24, 26).<sup>9</sup> The sublime encounter is an enduring relationship between a work and its reader, where the character's experiences are constantly straddling the boundaries between what they believe to be real or unreal, versus what the reader knows to be authentic. The "infinite" is disclosed in the "body" itself, allowing for imagination to reign as a true understanding of how one recognizes the sublime as an ongoing threat towards reality (Vine 26). Yet it is important to realize that the sublime experience, while infinite, is not always distinctly singular. As with many similar ideas of the sublime, imagination plays a key role in supporting the sublime as a fundamentally unreal ideal. Recalling Vine's description, I argue that experiencing the sublime requires a necessary "exceeding", or surpassing, of the real in order to fully grapple with such ideas of the infinite. The sublime is unrecognizable and undefinable, rationalized through one's ideas concerning the future of the great unknown: "if it is projected forth into an unforeseeable future", says Kant, "then there is something terrifying in it" (Kant 18).

Kant emphasizes imagination as a construct of a man-made dichotomy, and therefore, man must distinguish between the two modes of fantasy and reality:

Casts of mind that possess a feeling for the sublime...gradually drawn into lofty sentiments, of friendship, of contempt for the world, of eternity, by the quiet calm of a summer evening, when the flickering light of the stars breaks through the umber shadows of the night and

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<sup>9</sup> Vine emphasizes that the sublime is rooted in the individual's own reaction to their historical circumstances: "In this way, the reader of the 'sublime' text grasps the transcendental only in its deferral, in a process of hermeneutic construction and deconstruction whose idiom is more historical than transcendental" (Vine 26).

the lonely moon rises into view...The sublime touches, the beautiful charms. The mien of the human being who finds himself in the full feeling of the sublime is serious, sometimes even rigid and astonished. By contrast, the lively sentiment of the beautiful announces itself through shining cheerfulness in the eyes, through traces of a smile, and often through audible mirth. The sublime is in turn of different sorts. The feeling of it is sometimes accompanied with some dread or even melancholy, in some cases merely with quiet admiration and in yet others with a beauty spread over a sublime prospect. (Kant 16)

Kant uses three attributes of the sublime (the magnificent, the terrifying, and the noble) to define the sublime experience as a simultaneous meeting between the human and the unknown. The result of these encounters creates feelings that do not envision the sublime's effects of amazement or "nobleness". Just as much as the sublime is overwhelming, Kant also suggests that a sublime encounter heightens one's awareness to feelings of "dread" and "melancholy", made more prevalent through man's inability to reconcile with the complexity that the sublime fundamentally offers. The sublime therefore reveals man's greatest fear: the unknown itself. Kant underscores the sublime disparity through man's dilemma between realistic and ideal being; it is both intrinsic and foreign, a reaction to one's realities as well as our own imaginations when one faces the unconquerable. Kant continues by explaining, "Sublime qualities inspire esteem, but beautiful ones inspire love...One esteems many a person too highly to be able to love him. He inspires admiration, but he is too far above us for us to dare to come close to him with the familiarity of love...Friendship has primarily the character of the sublime," suggesting that the sublime encounter is also rooted deeply in an understanding between the self and the other (Kant 16).

Although the sublime has been theorized as a vital concept in Western literature and philosophy, it is a universal phenomenon applicable to an analysis of the Korean short stories, such as “The Wings” and “Rain Shower.” Kant demonstrates how the sublime encourages endless possibilities of an encounter with beauty and wonder, even though such feelings of wonderment are not entirely unique to the individual. The sublime experience is the purposeful living of a fantasy, of something so wonderfully abstract, that it is impossible to fully live through the experience without a reliance on imagination. One can therefore suspect that the sublime rests solely within man’s singular reaction to his or her reality. Yet my reading of Kant leads me to question what happens when the sublime, if treated as an illusion, suddenly shatters the beliefs man was so desperately clinging to. There is the possibility, therefore, that sublime encounters work against beautiful encounters: when the imaginative reality shatters, what is left to justify man’s sentiments as tangibly valid?

Ranging from death, to the loss of friendship, to poverty, and even to illness, man must sooner or later realize that the sublime experience is akin to an unrealistic fantasy. As Kant notes, the sublime experience will inevitably ground mankind in a depressing and hopeless reality:

If the person is brought back by understanding from this world of fables, of which he is himself creator through imagination and in which he so gladly resides, to that which providence has truly designed for him, he is thereby put into confusion by a wondrous contradiction that he encounters there and which brings his plans entirely to naught, by presenting to his comprehension insoluble riddles. (Kant 5)

The reaction of Yi’s man and Hwang’s boy to the destruction of their own sublime illusion changes their understanding of the circumstances in which they live. The sublime’s “limitlessness” suggests

an inability for someone to possess an individual sublime experience. Everyone is beholden to the sublime in one way or another, just as they are destined to lose it. Through “The Wings” and “Rain Shower”, I will explain that the sublime experiences of each protagonist are rendered incomprehensible, undistinguished, and ordinary. The characters are forcibly confronted with the normalcy of their individuality. Waking up from the sublime illusion, each character moves towards the post-sublime.

## 2. Understanding *Han*

There are parallels between *han* and the sublime when the illusion is destroyed. At the intersection between the sublime and *han*, I explore the concept of *han* as an embodiment of Kantian ideas of despair and “melancholy”. Like the sublime, *han* presents justifiable parallels in Korean literary art by focusing on two clashing ideas within both Korean and South Korean history.

While *han* is both far-reaching and controversial, the concept of *han* is a divisive subject that calls for further study inside and outside of South Korea. For this thesis, however, I view it as imperative to explain one of *han*'s origins as a construct of Japanese colonial ideology. By doing so, I will be able to provide justification for my understanding of *han* in subsequent Minjung Theology, and thereby utilize the concept of *han* in “The Wings” and “Rain Shower” in relation to the sublime.

Some of Japan's sentiments and sympathy towards colonial Korea arise from Yanagi Soetsu (1889-1961) during the early twentieth century. As a leading advocate for the *mingei* artistic folk movement in Japan, Yanagi is often remembered for his attempts to preserve traditional artistic culture throughout Japan. Yet his concerns for visual art and its cultural nuances extended beyond

his personal understanding within his home country. Yanagi applied his aesthetic principles to the people and culture of colonial Korea. Yanagi's training in the visual arts seemingly justified his commentary of "Japan's culpability" towards the Korean colony (Bailey 28). Penny Bailey explores the significance of Yanagi's misinterpretations through his understanding of *han* as a by-product of Japanese colonial tone-deafness:

Yanagi penned *Chōsenjin o omou* 朝鮮人を想ふ (*Thinking of the Koreans*), his first essay on Korea. The work marked the starting point of a campaign polemicizing against Japan's colonization of Korea through essays, public speeches, art exhibitions, musical performances by his wife, Kaneko 兼子 (1892-1984), and the 1924 establishment of the Chōsen Minzoku Bijutsukan 朝鮮民族美術館 (Korean Ethnic Art Museum) in Keijō...One of the most intriguing (and eventually controversial) aspects of Yanagi's campaign was his aestheticization of Korean suffering in a discourse he named the "beauty of sorrow" (*hiai no bi* 悲哀の美). (Bailey 28)

Yanagi's understanding of *han* fetishizes Korean art and, subsequently, Korean colonial culture. *Han* therefore becomes an afterthought, an unreliable observation choosing to conceptualize long-standing cultural traditions as ones that should be sympathized with as a means to uphold an illusion of colonial fraternity. Korean art had never just been an emerging discovery by the Japanese, and neither had its history nor its traditions. Korea has always held steadfastly the belief in a strong, independent, and deeply cultural nationality. Yet through the "conviction that peace could be achieved through a mutual recognition of the intercultural relevance of art", we are offered a shallower view of *han* that in no way addresses the constitution of what it represents to

the Korean people (Bailey 28). Yanagi proposed that “the spirit of a nation (*ikkoku no shinri* 一国の心理)” may be interpreted through its artworks and that art historians, being agents of interpretation, must also become psychologists.<sup>10</sup> Even if Bailey goes as far as to “commend” Yanagi for his interpretation of *han* as the “beauty of sorrow”, I do not support this notion (Bailey 38).

The most significant part of Yanagi’s essay appears in his insistence that Japan and colonial Korea are “art brothers” (Bailey 37). In this way, “unperturbed by the enormity of the task, Yanagi proposes to explicate the complex links between Korean history, ethnicity, and materiality. He expresses his belief that if the subjects of Japan and Korea become cognizant of his ‘beauty of sorrow’ discourse, ‘the day when peace will firmly unite the East’ will surely be realized” (Bailey 37). His phrase, the “beauty of sorrow”, has been often employed to explain *han*. Yanagi’s terminology, however, weakens the concept of *han* by rendering it a trend in artistic principles. Yanagi ironically contributes to *han*’s fundamental idea of Korean oppression by purposely ignoring the pain and suffering that *han* already entails. Sandra So Hee Chi Kim considers such an interpretation as perpetuating *han*’s prevalence in Korean history: “It has been understood not only as the deep-rooted grief, bitterness, and longings that Koreans experience as the result of a long history of oppression and injustice, but also as the pain that Koreans experience from their individual life circumstances” (S. Kim 255). Yanagi’s mistreatment of *han* thus “encapsulates how collective trauma and individual hardship can create a complex feedback loop” (S. Kim 255).

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<sup>10</sup> Bailey’s analysis of Yanagi provides more background information concerning Japanese and colonial Korean relationships: “The essay begins with a short paragraph describing how the challenges presented by the ‘Japan-Korea Problem’ might be remedied by a mutual appreciation of art...however, this appeal to utilize art to repair the deep and long-standing animosity between the two nations appears somewhat naïve and ambitious” (Bailey 37).

Understanding Yanagi is nonetheless important considering how he touches upon an aspect of “sorrow” crucial within the construction of *han*.

While acknowledging Yanagi’s contribution to the global discourse on *han*, I now turn to Chang-Hee Son’s and James K. Freda’s analyses concerning *han*’s later association with “radical melancholy” and its importance in both Korean and Korean colonial identity. Initially, Son attributes the rise in *hanism* to the direct aftermath of the Korean War between the 1950’s and 1960’s. Fundamentally, *han* appeared as a piece of solidarity that emphasized unity and harmony between the Korean people. Especially in times of literal spatiality, *han* became “the essence of Korean identity or Korean mind. *Hanism* as a philosophy of totality or unity contains within itself the principle of harmony” (Son 88). Yet at its core *han* embodies a duplicity, one that encapsulates a theme of togetherness while simultaneously highlighting the importance of one’s individual experiences with *han*.

As Son notes, *han*’s dichotomy appears between “one” and “many”, the ironic paradox that embodies the undefinable aspect of *han* itself. Son insists that the origin and meaning of *han* is only understandable through a feeling of synchronization with one’s individual self, as well as the collective or group self of an entire nation. *Han*’s idea of “oneness” encapsulates a new identity that births a collective group spirit; the individual, while powerful, becomes inevitably ingrained within the harmony of the multitude. Therefore, *han* represents the fundamentals of Korean thought and nationalistic imagery in defining the nation’s history and spirit.

Son suggests visualizing *han* as an equation, “1+1=1”, or as the concept of yin and yang: “Although yin and yang are added individually, yet the combination of yin and yang ends up as one, which becomes the ultimate one. Yin and yang are harmonized and unified to become the ultimate one” (Son 90). Son’s emphasis on the “mystery of *han*” therefore becomes key to my own

understanding of *han* in accordance with the sublime. Emphasizing *han* as an individual experience can combine with the sublime experience to represent the infinite. Through the main qualifiers of *han*'s experiences, its "oneness", "inclusiveness", and its "creativity", *han* transforms the individual into one being inside of a collective spirit (Son 90-91). Similarly with the sublime, the collapse or destruction of the sublime experience suggests the indistinctiveness of imagination, as well as the realization of an infinite circle of trauma and shared experiences. Essentially, *han* and the sublime experience unite to explain the "mystery" of life and of the Korean (both colonial and non-colonial) experience: "The combination of life and death is led to embrace eternity, not as a separate entity but as a circle of one. *Han* as one is infinity since it transcends time and space or sphere. Infinity is nothingness in a deep sense since it transcends somethingness" (Son 91). Yi and Hwang's protagonists undergo a specific type of *han*-related experience due to the trauma of losing the ideal sublime fantasy in each of their respective stories. As a reaction to these realizations, each character sacrifices their illusory happiness for sorrow when recognizing their actual realities.

Up until now I have explained Son's research as fundamental to the origins of *hanism*, but his emphasis on collectivism nonetheless is grounded in emerging concepts of *han* and Minjung Theology. The theological movement began as an organization of South Korean Christians during the 1970's to combat the notions of oppression stemming from colonialism and the Korean War. Freda notes that while *han* had already existed before the onset of Minjung Theology, much of its popularity in mainstream Korean thought is attributable to its attractiveness as a religious slogan. As founded by Sŏ Nam-Dong and An P'yŏng-Mu, *minjung* (meaning "masses" or "people") and *han* were "[a]t the heart of An's theology...his conception of *life* in the modern world is an excruciating sensibility to suffering...For An as for many other Korean *minjung* theologians,

comprehension of this element and the requisite overcoming of complacency is the mandate of a socially responsible and correct theology and is moreover the proper basis of humanism” (Freda). Freda explains how *han* reconstructed ways to identify and relate with Korean humanism, especially when considering the Korean peoples’ experiences with colonialism and war.

Critical to understanding Freda is how *han* depends on the notion of the “radical melancholic” in order to create “structural knowledge with the troubling detritus of the past...in this redistribution of epistemic weight it becomes possible to liberate the frozen function of *myth* into a more workable one of *meaning*” (Freda). Minjung Theology elevated the status of *han* by reclaiming it from its colonial attachments and reintroducing *han* as a strictly Korean concept: “Korea's discourse on *han* seeks to retrieve the cultural forms through which the experience of suffering can be recognized and dealt with” (Freda). While *han* is often undefinable, it persists within the Korean consciousness to acknowledge existing histories of trauma, oppression, and sorrow.

*Han* becomes significant through these junctures of lingering Japanese colonial memory, its “mystery” as an oxymoron between “oneness” and “collectivism”, and its revival within Minjung Theology. *Han* fundamentally highlights a greater sadness and tragedy within individualism, especially when either one’s people are subjected to a loss of freedom and self-identity, or they are attacked by the very same citizens that used to be part of a nationalistic whole. *Han*’s tragedy emerges when the individual is neither able to recognize himself nor the other, and when liminality becomes so poignant that reality constantly merges between two forms of existence: authenticity and fantasy. As I will explain in my next section, the post-sublime both embodies and surpasses ideas concerning the reconstruction of private and spatial worlds. I argue that an exchange takes

place at the culmination of Yi's and Hwang's characters' traumas: their sublime fantasies are erased at *han*'s inception.

### 3. Introducing the Post-Sublime

The qualifier “post” carries various implications. Notable threads of literary theory often seek to document the before and after of literary movements: modernism to post-modernism, colonialism to post-colonialism, and even humanism to post-humanism. “Post” becomes a marker, revealing certain points when critics, writers, and philosophers begin reconsidering their time and place within a broader scheme of global history. The “post”, and its subsequent partners in literary theory, motivate discussions concerning ideas of relativism and literary critique. Yet it is a misnomer of sorts, for the term “post” implies just as much a “going towards the future” as it does the relevancy of reaching “beyond” preconceived notions of selfhood and otherness.<sup>11</sup> My use of the word “post” focuses on the horizon of Korean literary studies. On this horizon lies the vanishing point where I base my ideas: the intersections between the sublime and *han*.

I formulate my definition of the post-sublime as a point of aftermath; the post-sublime is a new realm of existence. It is the realm that Yi's and Hwang's characters occupy when their illusion of the sublime is crushed, when they recognize their real turmoil through *han*, and when their individuality is made invalid. Through the post-sublime, the individual actually realizes that their

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<sup>11</sup> The online Merriam-Webster dictionary cites the etymology of “post” from nouns in French (*poste*) and Italian (*posto*). “Post” also originates from a very literal understanding of its Latin roots. *Postis*, as an extension of *por-* meaning “forward” and *stare-* meaning “to stand”, as in “standing or going forward” (“Post”). As a prefix, “post” definitively means “after”, “subsequent”, and “later”, implying that which reaches and moves beyond any definitive form of the present. As a prefix, “post” also relates to the Greek *apo*, meaning “away from” (“Post”).

experiences of beauty, their experiences of sorrow, and their experiences of anguish, are not singular, distinctive, or individual at all; instead, everyone goes through these same experiences, and therefore, they are neither special nor unique to that one person.

When a character realizes their insignificance, they enter into a crisis concerning the justification of their own selfhood. How can one define one's sense of self if the experience they thought was so wonderful or so terrible is actually illusory and a commonplace happenstance? When one realizes that one is not special, as in the historical circumstances of both Yi and Hwang, the person will then find some way to try and reconcile their individuality amidst a sea of sameness.

The personal turmoil for Yi's and Hwang's protagonists begins their passage into the realm of the post-sublime. At the inception of the post-sublime, an exchange takes place at the culmination of each character's traumas: their sublime fantasies are depleted at *han*'s onset, when trauma replaces the feelings that the sublime initially instigated. "Post" works with the sublime to emphasize what happens when one moves beyond the sublime encounter, forcing its narrators to reconsider how to proceed in a non-sublime reality.

Because both Yi and Hwang operate within two distinct and critical periods of global and Korean modernity, they uniquely explore how their individual characters are faced with the weakness of their sublime fantasies. Neither one of Yi's nor Hwang's characters is unique, a realization that becomes painstaking. The characters' sublime ideas work with the sadness of *han* to create an acknowledgment of congruity and absolute sameness. The man and the woman, the boy and the girl, are emblematic of the post-sublime for they realize how their emotional experiences are connected. Every character is subject to the post-sublime, for Yi's and Hwang's characters demonstrate the collapse of the self's feelings of individualized suffering, terror, and grandiosity in the face of cultural collectivism. At stake within the post-sublime is how one's love

is reconfigured around an axis of communalism, questioning at what point we can truly seek to uncover one's self in changing parameters of morality.

#### 4. The Three Phases of the Post-Sublime

Not every character or text undergoes what I would argue to be a post-sublime experience, or, enters into the post-sublime realm. The post-sublime only exists at the boundaries between the sublime and a cultural form of acknowledged historical tragedy and anguish. When there is an established undercurrent of historical significance regarding trauma, then the post-sublime can exist as a way to understand the role of selfhood beyond the pretenses of singularity and individuality.

Yi's and Hwang's roles as modernist Korean authors already rely on a sense of the Korean concept of *han*, and therefore, an opening for the post-sublime encounter exists. "The Wings" and "Rain Shower" each follow a similar pattern concerning their unnamed narrators, their relationships with a female counterpart, and their shattering illusions of a sublime encounter. Furthermore, given Yi's and Hwang's historical significance within Korean literature, the turmoil and sadness at the destruction of their narrators' idyllic illusions are made relevant due to the already pre-existing notion of *han*. Understanding how each character enters into the realm of the post-sublime relies on a three-pronged model of narrative phasing. That is because each story is emblematic of a triangular formation between their main characters, their encounters with otherness, and their rebirth through traumatic epiphany.

First, I explore the crises of the self. I do this through an introspective look at how isolation and solidarity create such feelings of powerlessness amidst the vast array of a deepening universe that

is destined to keep one subjected, or, what I refer to as the phase of denial. Next, I explore the crises of the other through a deeper exploration into how each singular character (i.e., the man or the boy) reconciles their thoughts about the symbolic and the perceivable other in their lives (i.e., the wife and the girl) as they both struggle with an intense feeling of fear and love against their respective character foils, a stage I call the phase of growth. Finally, I explore the crises of the epiphany by analyzing the ending of the stories where each main character transcends into a realm that is not only past the realm of understanding but contributes towards a realization that they themselves are nothing but small persons within each of these intricate landscapes. The autonomies of Yi's and Hwang's characters are the only way to overcome both the overwhelming and devastating realizations of insignificance. I refer to this finality as the phase of acceptance, explaining the realization of how their singular experiences are not so different from those of others'.

I endeavor to read "The Wings" and "Rain Shower" through this model of three phases: the phase of denial, the phase of growth, and the phase of acceptance. By doing so, I attempt to understand the deeper complexities of Yi's and Hwang's works given their historical significance as Korean authors. Furthermore, I hope to relate the sense of the sublime with the Korean concept of *han*, opening more pathways of understanding the role of selfhood within the confines of the modernist era.

### III. Yi Sang: “The Wings” and Split Self within the Post-Sublime

#### Girl

But it cannot be that the girl is not a wife of someone. In the middle of my womb the girl has given birth to whatever it is— But I have yet to birth it from myself. If this scary knowledge is not thrown out—such a thing—it will end up corroding me like a piece of coal that eats up the body from inside. (20-24)<sup>12</sup>

Yi Sang

#### 1. Yi Sang as a Colonial Intellectual

I approach Yi Sang with a dual analytical purpose using a chronological biography to emphasize his early educational life and historical significance. I will then link these educational influences to his development as Korea’s most prominent surrealist writer. By doing so, my analysis will further explore Yi’s highly unique style and impact through a perspective of the post-sublime in relation to his writing under colonial censorship. A post-sublime reading of “The Wings” relies on my previously mentioned three-phase analysis of Yi’s protagonist, opening up larger and more complex meanings of the concept of *han*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This excerpt from “Girl” comes from a collection of poems titled “Paradise Lost” by Yi Sang, as translated by Jack Saebok Jung (Jung 341-342).

<sup>13</sup> “The Wings”’s official Korean name is “날개” or “Nalgae”.

The image of a body being eaten from the inside, as visualized in Yi's poem quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is an especially apt metaphor for the fundamental conflict the subjected experiences under colonial rule. Lasting between 1910 and 1945, the Japanese colonialist period of Korea can be regarded as a distorted time of pain, trauma, and the highly controversial formation of Korea's social and cultural modernity. Korea's annexation had already begun during a crisis of Korean governmental autonomy, beginning with the forced abdication of King Kojong of the Chosŏn dynasty (lasting between 1392 and 1897). Japanese colonial rule thus begun would soon evolve into an oppressive assimilationist program aimed at the elimination of Korean cultural identity. It is during this time of eradication and subjection that critics often attribute certain styles or coping methods to colonial period writers in Korea. Korean writers during colonialization would adopt a stylistic niche to allow their voices to be heard. Toddy Henry highlights this phenomenon as an early coping mechanism amongst the Korean people to combat complete control established by the Japanese Empire, whose sole aim was to make "Koreans as subjects of the Japanese emperor" (Henry 28). Yi's above poem "Paradise Lost" ultimately evokes the imagery of the Korean colonial spirit, one symbolizing the strenuous Japanese censorship and the hidden "silence" of a voice of a nationalistic people. This poem speaks of a reality strongly imbedded within the public consciousness, serving as a prelude to understanding Yi's place as an individual caught between two areas of political and social control; how turmoil is as outward as it is inward, literally eating the colonized from the inside.

## 2. Yi's Family and Educational Background

Yi was born as Kim Hae-gyŏng in Seoul on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1910. Yi was adopted by his paternal uncle, Kim Yŏn-p'il, when he was still a toddler (Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 319). His uncle is understood to have had the "social and financial means to ensure that Yi could be properly educated", suggesting not only that his birth parents were in an unstable financial condition, but also emphasizing how Yi's subsequent education played a large role in defining his place as a colonial Korean intellectual (Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 319). Yi therefore attended many prestigious schools throughout his relatively short life, including the Sinmyŏng School and the Tonggwang School. By 1922, he was attending high school at the respected Posŏng School in Korea before graduating at sixteen and entering the Keijō Industrial High School to study architecture, "[t]he precursor to Seoul National University's College of Engineering" (Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 319). Constant exposure to different schools and education ensured Yi's role as a "colonial elite", warranting his burgeoning life as an emerging and upstanding colonial student ready to serve in the civil service (Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 319). As one of the only ethnic Korean students to study architecture and engineering at Keijō, Yi was no doubt highly aware of the dichotomy between himself and the other Japanese students in his class. Rather than shying away from this fact, Yi seized this opportunity to solidify his placement within higher society as a privileged and educated colonial Korean, later joining the civil service arena of the Governor-General of Korea where he worked as an official architect between 1934 and 1936. Yet Yi's interests were not solely based around technological and architectural pursuits. Yi was also highly gifted in the arts, as seen by his dabbling in painting as a fourteen-year old, and by "becoming the editor-in-chief of the student magazine *Shipwreck* (難破船)", further publishing

his own poems in Japanese while also writing a Korean language novel at the age of nineteen (Frankl, “Leveling the Metropole” 319-321). Early demonstrations of his bilingual writing abilities highlight the emergence of his role between two separate social spheres, both inside and outside of the academic arena.

The time between 1929 and 1930, amidst school and his early publications, proves vital for understanding Yi as a highly unique colonial individual. The colonial social arena saw the emergence of a split between Yi’s views as an upcoming civil worker and as an artist, further spurred by his literary pursuits and his frequent alternation between using the Japanese and Korean language. While his dual language abilities were not uncommon among Korean writers, his life within colonial Korea still differs from most standard associations of the Korean literary movement and its writers during this time. Despite his connections to both Imperial Japan and colonial Korea, it is important to note that Yi was never truly considered as aligned to a certain viewpoint or ideology during this period. Henry points out that this dichotomy is crucial to understanding the Japanese colonial question, as Japan’s subsequent domestication of Korea was glossed over under the guise of seemingly intact and professional veils of peace, prosperity, and order: “they mobilized the lure of modern development to induce participants to view the recent past as personally beneficial, rather than as an exploitative system of economic domination” (Henry 104).<sup>14</sup> This “lure of the modern” becomes key, as both a stable and unstable indicator of what it means to fall through the cracks of a seemingly unbreakable system. Yi’s education provided the means to not only explore his abilities through two different disciplines, but to also develop his skills within the arts as both a Japanese and Korean writer. Yi’s access to education underscored

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<sup>14</sup> Henry further emphasizes this point through parallels between the past and the future, writing, “By juxtaposing an allegedly oppressive and unproductive precolonial Korean past with a supposedly liberating and productive Japanese colonial present and future, officials sought to convince viewers of the putative benefits of historical progress writ large” (Henry 104).

his early attempts of establishing a personal identity through his artistic prowess, a conflict made possible by his role within the intellectual sphere and his inability to exist solely on either side of the Japanese or Korean cultural divide.

### 3. The *Kuinhoe* Society and Yi's Emergence as a Surrealist Writer

Yi's formal training as an architect influences his role as one of the most important writers of modern Korean literature. Given that Yi notably worked beyond the confines of any traditional literary circle early in his career, his eventual association with certain groups of colonial Koreans raises questions concerning the standards of what constitutes a "good" Korean citizen. Within the broader schematics of colonial existence, this is a concern that would plague Yi for the rest of his life.

It was not until his involvement with the *Kuinhoe* (circle of 9) Society in 1934 that Yi became most active in his writing, a feat in and of itself considering the society's role in cementing the depth and scope of Korean literature within the colonial period. As a reaction to the governmental institution, the *Kuinhoe* authors attempted to understand the notion of "*wigi*", or crisis, through their corresponding writings. Each writer hoped to rationalize the nature of their Korean self-identity, especially when faced with oppositional power under Japanese censorship of their printed materials and publications. As an ongoing problem found amongst most authors, "Each of these critics uses the term 'crisis' (*wigi*) to describe the social and discursive context faced by writers in mid-1930's colonial Korea. In particular, a split is theorized in the modern subject, a division between self and not-self, exterior and interior, what is meant or thought and what is said or represented", hence utilizing the sense of the split self as justification for the *Kuinhoe*'s societal

predicaments (Hanscom 31). Questioning the role of selfhood was a way to assert that the *Kuinhoe* writers, indeed, had a sense of nationalistic self to begin with; the literary circle's writing provided a kind of escapism to raise their concerns of colonial existence, thereby cleverly avoiding Japanese censorship without being too assertive of any certain declaration of their identity. Yi's voice emerges as a response to the *Kuinhoe*'s literary practices, its influence and exploration of selfhood serving as a critical starting point in which to understand the development of Yi's own voice and writing style.

Yi's involvement within this society eventually matured his skills as an empathetic individual, inspiring some poems including "Paper gravestone", "Street exterior, street passage", and "Condition serious", and the short stories "Meeting of a spider and a pig", "The Wings", "Meetings and Farewells", and "Children's Skulls".<sup>15</sup> Noticeable about these pieces is the fact that Yi's ability to perceive his world as a colonial subject deeply underscored his own narrative concerning his split identity between Japan and Korea. While unquestionably beholden to the *Kuinhoe*'s influence, Yi nevertheless established himself as a unique writer in the sense that his technique differed from other members of the society. Inspired by his own turmoil within colonialism, Yi's writing style is often regarded as heavily influenced by Dadaism and Surrealism, leading to his inception as one of the founding fathers of the Surrealist literary movement in Korea. Yet had it not been for Yi's extensive primary and secondary education, there is a strong possibility that Yi would have never been exposed to the rise of global and European literary modernism. Won-Shik Choi suggests that Yi's "desire to recode contemporary Korean literature, possessed by the evil spirit of 'reality'...shows that his standards for judging Korean modernism really came from Western modernism," emerging as highly emblematic of his own questions about selfhood and issuances

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<sup>15</sup> Text names as seen from the LTI Korean Library online ("Yi Sang").

of colonial modernity, inspired by his presence as an intellectual elite in both Japanese and Korean schools (Choi 122).

For leading twentieth century colonial literary theorist Kim Ki-Rim, Yi's purposely vague, confusing, and often dreamlike writing style also reflected the constant tension between his private and professional life, once more aggravated by Japan's extreme censorship of the Korean language and Korean identity: "Kim too glimpsed the various contradictory and enigmatic elements that comprised the man and artist when he lamented that Yi 'contained in a single body' not merely Korea's 'most excellent and final 'modernist,'" but also the one saddled with the grave fate of overcoming 'modernism'" (Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 336).<sup>16</sup> Yi's practice with the surrealist style developed his personal character, made all the more problematic when his subsequent writings in Korean actively went against everything he represented as an architectural civil appointee.

I argue that Yi's surrealist style, however, is so highly complex that it embodies the reality of living with a split self as a colonial Korean, a writer, an architect, and a colonial government employee: confusions of selfhood create an existential crisis. Readers are perhaps familiar with W. E. B. Dubois' phenomenon of the "double consciousness", the recognition some people have concerning their existence at a liminal boundary, whether it be for ethnic, racial, or gendered issues.<sup>17</sup> From these margins arises the juxtaposition between turmoil and self-doubt. Dubois' terminology can be used to describe Yi's self-predicament, due to his involvement in a literary

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<sup>16</sup> The original Korean sentence reads: "가장 優秀한 最後의 「모더니스트」 李箱은 「모더니즘」의 超克이라는 이 深刻한 運命으로 한 몸에 具現한 悲劇의 擔當者였다" (qtd. in Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 336n28).

<sup>17</sup> Dubois' notion of "double consciousness" first appears in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, emerging as one of the most fundamental concepts of the split self in twentieth century literary studies. More information can be found in John P. Pittman's article in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Pittman).

movement attempting to subtly defy colonial subjection, and, because of his seemingly active participation in the Japanese government.

#### 4. Yi's Death in Japan

Yi's eventual death in Japan is heartbreaking, made even more so by the account that Yi had been looking forward to traveling to Tokyo for most of his life. Yi traveled to Japan during the final year of his life in 1936, a trip that would be his last, as he ended up being arrested on baseless charges of anticolonial instigations before falling ill in prison and dying at Tokyo Hospital. Frankl notes his arrest as ironic, especially given Yi's prolonged work, writing that, "While in Tokyo, he continues to write in both Korean and Japanese. He is arrested in mid-February of 1937 on the generic but oft-employed charge of being a *futei senjin*", or otherwise known as a "malcontent Korean" (Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 336). As already struggling to discover the true nature of his self, Yi would find that Japan did not truly have the answers he was looking for. Frankl attests to this fact by citing Yi's essay "Tokyo", where "he systematically catalogues the city's landmarks and monuments, and his disappointment and disillusionment at them" (Frankl, "Distance as Anti-Nostalgia" 43). This sense of disillusionment provides an understanding for Yi's overall attitude towards his place in colonial society, while also relating to Yi's own narrator in "The Wings" as an extension of his displaced self.

## 5. Yi as a Post-Sublime Figure

Yi's life was a constant contradiction, embodied through his language, his writings, and his occupations, relying constantly on a sense of otherness to narrate the trajectory of his character.<sup>18</sup> Censorship and his life as a colonial subject created the disparities between Yi's voice and reality, his time in the literary society and within the government strongly prompting the incoherency of his writing style. The complexity of "The Wings" embodies the sublime through the narrator's own crisis of identity, a characteristic for much of Korean colonial literature and further signified by Yi's posthumous legacy. As such, one could argue that the recognition of space and selfhood divided the Korean people as much as it also united them. In ways that colonialism "forced many of them to adjust to the conditions in which public and private, ethnic and national, and traditional and modern identities were often in conflict with one another in a single person", this period also supported future writers and artists associated with modernism, campaigning for individuality in a highly complex world (K. Kim 36-37).

Using my theory of the post-sublime, I argue that the narrator's disillusionment, and subsequent realization of the harsh reality, jeopardizes the notions he holds regarding his identity and selfhood. As will be explored in my textual reading, the intellectual protagonist found within "The Wings" appears at the threshold of a modernist and colonial dilemma, realizing towards the onset of the story's climax that he is neither significant nor special when it comes to the narrator's own recognition of trauma. The narrator's sense of self, and the turmoil that he faces upon realizing his

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<sup>18</sup> Frankl suggests that Yi must have felt some self-consciousness in his artistic and social endeavors, but that these insecurities manifest as characters in his writing through his wanderlust for Japan: "Yi simultaneously appears to have suffered from a slight inferiority complex combined with a bold confidence and desire to venture to Tokyo and prove himself at the center" (Frankl, "Leveling the Metropole" 318).

anguish's mundanity, exposes his individuality as nothing more than a pawn within a larger and grander scheme of the colonial, and post-sublime, landscape.

#### 6. "The Wings": Textual Reading

Ideas of Yi's split self are at the center of "The Wings", embodying a crisis of identity. A close reading of "The Wings" questions how selfhood and the idea of splitting within the text showcase a tight linkage to the post-sublime. In this section, I will trace how Yi's narrator undergoes the three phases of the post-sublime by examining his experiences with the sublime and with *han*, as supported by Yi's surreal writing. Doing so will allow for an understanding of the narrator's emergence into the modern colonial world.

I refer specifically to a quote from Kant explaining sublimity through nature, in combination with a discourse on *han* as seen from Son's and Freda's ideas of *hanism* and Minjung theory, as mentioned in Chapter Two. For Kant, erupting ventures into the sublime appear specifically as symbolic towards understanding one's most natural sentiments:

The finer feeling that we will now consider is preeminently of two kinds: the feeling of the sublime and of the beautiful. Being touched by either is agreeable, but in very different ways. The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by Milton arouses satisfaction, but with dread. (Kant 14)

Kant's statement implies that one is always subject to a type of fantasy that is neither here nor there, real nor imaginary. *Han* theory experts also present an analysis that is fundamentally similar

to this idea of “finer feeling”. These notions will be explored within the discussion of the three phases of “The Wings”, especially when at stake is the presence of selfhood amidst these notions of the unrealistic or unreachable landscape.

The beginning phase of denial is indicative of a crisis of the self, of the individual, and of one’s personal autonomy. Denial begins most prevalently in the opening scenes of Yi’s “The Wings”, in which the narrator lives out a secluded existence in his one room row-house (one among many), seemingly oblivious to the outside world and its happenstances: “Have you ever seen a stuffed genius? I am happy. At a time like this, even love is pleasant. Only when the body sways from fatigue does the soul sparkle like a new, shiny coin. As nicotine seeps into my stomach infested by round-worms, a sheet of white paper opens in my head...It is an abominable disease of common sense” (Yi 7). The opening passage establishes the narrator as unreliable, for he neither knows where he is nor what is going on, but still seeks to bring the reader into this enigmatic space, a dis-reality that remains rooted in some sort of psychic liminal area.

Yi’s surrealist style represents an escape from reality more so than an emphasis of the dreamscape. His seamless traversing between metaphors and allusions constitutes his distinct ability to navigate the torrid waters within his actual life. The “genius” ironically references Yi’s own experience as a stifled colonial intellectual, while his constant evasion of the real mimics the confusion he must have felt on a daily basis as a Korean colonial. André Breton’s manifesto of the surrealist style supports Yi’s practices in narrative, especially when tying back the narrator’s existence within a closed off world as symptomatic of the surrealist fantasy through unrealistic escapism. Breton’s insistence on “imagination...your unforgiving nature”, supports this phase of denial for the sake of happiness, creating a sense of “one’s deepest self” (Breton). The emotions are very clear, even while Yi leaves us reeling in the dark. The narrator does not truly recognize

his entrapment, for he has managed to create all that he needs within his space through imagination. In this way, he can remain happy.

The man operates with naïveté or innocence, ultimately creating an artifice of safe space within happiness. The man's constant inability to grapple with surrounding reality reverts him to a state of childlike demeanors, a way to reconcile what he cannot cope with in the outside, or real, world. It is a kind of "madness", one which Yi neither denies nor confirms, but that is imaginable through the lens of a surrealistic style. Yi's technique is further supported by Breton's terminology, that there is "the madness one locks away", and that we are all at risk and "in some measure, victims of...imagination" (Breton). Through the power of imagination, mad as it may be, Yi emphasizes how, "I did not consider happiness or unhappiness. I never needed to wonder whether I was happy or unhappy...My room, this absolute shelter, is the seventh from the gate- lucky number seven. I loved that number like a medal of honor...Lying in bed, I started new research leading to the conclusion that there was no reason but simple pleasure that might have prompted my wife to tip me and the visitors to offer her money...Pleasure...pleasure...I found myself unexpectedly engrossed in that joy" (Yi 7-21). The room's space marginalizes this form of social order, signifying safety away from the outside world where the narrator does not belong. The outside world in Yi's text references many different types of images, signs, and symbols, or, as some critics have noted, the plague of the urban environment on the subdued intellectual and individual. For instance, Hyeshin Kim contrasts perspectives of the urban versus the rural, and the industrial versus the organic, claiming: "Urbanization and the arrival of new artistic movements from Japan and Europe introduced novel subject matters for visual representation in colonial Korea" (H. Kim 97). Kim's point accounts for Yi's treatment of the space in which his protagonist is situated. The outside world for this character suggests that despite all of the glamour and prosperity, something

is still slightly off kilter within the colonial system (H. Kim 97). The narrator thus rejects the urban in favor of what he can recreate within his own room. His “shelter” and his “medal of honor” provide the “liberty” away from his urban surroundings.

The narrator undergoes a crisis concerning his place in time and in the social sphere, but Yi seeks to underscore the narrator’s denial of any problem through his relationship with his only other form of contact: his wife. Many critics have debated over what Yi’s wife as a character contributes to the story, whether she coddles the narrator into living constantly in a shut-off room (for she is the one who forces him to stay there), or whether she provides true love and companionship for the narrator. As seen from the previous quote, more than providing a companion for the narrator, the wife serves as a source of constant contemplation concerning what she does with her visitors on the other side of his bedroom door.

The narrator’s world is fundamentally a “life with a woman”, one that is split in half between two different modes of being, “One foot planted in that sort of life, a half of myself chuckles at the other half, like two suns” (Yi 7-8). Through the narrator’s ramblings, Yi shows how a denial of reality contributes to the “absurdity” in this story, for the narrator is content being trapped within his childlike form as long as his wife is present beyond the door (Yi 8). The reader realizes how the narrator has created his own sublime reality, one that avoids actuality: “Your creation would be sublime and conspicuous among the ordinary products you have never seen. Close down the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, if at all possible” (Yi 8). This is how “The Wings” creates a phase of denial; through Yi’s insistence on an unreliable and childlike nature, the narrator, who longs to live within the realm of escapism, denies what actually happens within the confines of his entrapment.

The opening situation with the narrator marks the first phase of a post-sublime realization. Yi insists however that the narrator's denial of normalcy appears solely through a love for his counterpart. I will further evaluate his "small and lovely" wife:

I am a spiritual straggler who has been, so to speak, after a momentary peep at crystalized intellectualism, alienated from the strategies of love...I play with nobody, nor do I ever say hello to anybody. I do not want to exchange formalities with anybody but my wife. For me to play with or to say hello to anybody won't do any good in saving my wife's face. I regard my wife as that precious...I cherish my wife so dearly, because among all the women of the eighteen families at House No. 33, my wife is the most beautiful and, like her name card, the most petite woman. (Yi 7-10)

The man lives entirely isolated from the outside world with only his wife to rely on. They live in the previously mentioned room, coincidentally named a "pleasure" room, suggesting that he has no understanding or comprehension about what his wife does for a living. Their ironic perversion of love is based in a sense of un-reality. Yet the love Yi's narrator feels for his wife seemingly surpasses his idealization of living a normal life. The man's environment plays a key role in maintaining his illusion, supporting the fact that he need not leave the comforts of his room and join the outside world as long as he "was allowed to loaf day after day. That I could idle in the room fitting like a well-tailored suit to my body and soul was a convenient and comfortable situation to be in, an ideal atmosphere far apart from the worldly speculations of happiness or unhappiness. I like that environment" (Yi 11). I am adamant that Yi is playing a trick on the reader, as the phase of denial seems to poke fun at the conceptions one has concerning the sublime.

While I have previously mentioned that Yi's writing matches the tendencies of surrealist style, I now aim to underscore how surrealism supports the narrator's creation of a sublime encounter. This is because the narrator, through ironic placement within his small bedroom, thinks he is having an otherworldly experience, that his entrapment is privy to his place in the universe, that the grandeur he needs lays within the sliding door in his room, and that finally it "symbolized" the narrator's "destiny" (Yi 12). Breton's founding preamble for the surrealist manifesto supports Yi's idea of destiny, for his number one rule for the surreal concerns how our uppermost duty is to create the appearance of a dream or sublime fantasy: "Within the bounds in which they operate (or are thought to operate), dreams, to all appearances, are continuous and show signs of order...By the same token, we possess at any moment only a single distinct configuration of reality, whose coordination is a matter of will" (Breton). The narrator is so lost in his 'dis-reality' that the imaginations and fancies he has while hiding under his quilt grant him the ability to experience the sublime through a metaphysical contact with the unknown, for example, with those men he hears visiting his wife every day. The narrator's own "free-will" is a materialistic and shallow concept, inorganic and preconstructed. In such a way, the man feels he has already felt all that he needs to know. Yi creates the narrator's "finer feeling" through a surreal writing style, leaving more room and interpretation for the reader to truly grapple with the enormity of the narrator's self-created delusion. He has his wife, he has his room, and everything beyond is only a façade of the living; true life and true sublimity cannot surpass anything greater than what he is already imagining within his very bedroom:

Under the limp quilt, my imagination invented many things and wrote many treatises. I composed a lot of poems...In my contemplating sessions under that damp quilt, I never

engaged in positive thinking. For me, that was not necessary at all. If I discovered something positive, eventually I had to discuss it with my wife and she would scold me...I could never tell what her occupation was...My wife in a way confined me all the time. I, of course, had no complaints. Yet I wanted to learn from experience if that pleasure existed or not...The wonderful outside world, which I had not seen for a long time, did not fail to arouse my nerves. (Yi 21)

Yi's surreal writing allows the man to see his own implications of the sublime through such a narrow perspective, one that sets the precedent for a post-sublime experience through the realization that these are the same perceptions that can be shared with all, including the man's own wife; our denial can become a mutual concept, and through growth, one is able to redefine the conceptualizations of one's sense of selfhood.

Yi's position as a surrealist writer creates parallels between his narrator and the relationships he perceives with his surrounding world, his wife, and with what his life entails. The narrator's preconceived sublime world, a grander and more powerful space, exists as a conceivable notion created within the confines of his own mind, one that cannot break free from the constructs bound to the infinite possibilities that his thoughts lend themselves to. The denial of reality comes from us the readers as we realize that he is in a physical prison, analogous with the current situation of the colonialist temperament, and subjected to a singular "other" through his wife's domination.

From this denial arises the second phase of the post-sublime, that is, the phase of growth. I argue that the world of Yi's narrator is initially a type of sublime creation, one which aligns with the moral and ethical standpoints of being thoroughly and wholeheartedly engrossed with a sense of the sublime more than anything else. Scrutiny rises at the onset of his relationship with his wife.

Where before, the narrator was entirely devoted to her, Yi suddenly switches the tone of his writing to emphasize changes in behavior, narration, and understanding, questioning the roles that one is forced to play in the narrator's colonial narrative. Readers will notice a switch when the narrator fully lives and breathes in his sublime world from the beginning, even as a denial of the outside world begs to create happiness through an illusory glance into "sentiment" as "a certain posture" (Yi 8). Yet Yi knows his writing cannot hinge on this denial; the narrator's emotional growth is inevitable.

Yi's switching of characterization is no more or less emblematic of surreal writing, the instance where our madness becomes the "hero", and he or she is forced to redefine their identity lest he is doomed to "wander about the world" (Breton). Yi's surrealistic use of the fool archetype is just as much true writ for the character as it is also a playful stereotype concerning the man's behavior with respect to his denial, especially as he is treated like a child by his wife and constantly subjected to multiple threads of trite criticism and concern: "In my shorts that had rubber bands at the waist and the thighs, I played meekly like a good boy...She spoke with affection. She said she understood why I cried" (Yi 30). The man associates himself as a child furthermore when playing with random items found alongside the house, ranging from the "magnifying glass", the "cosmetics", and the "50 *jeon* silver coin" coins that his wife gives him on certain occasions and that he keeps by his bedside, later using them to discover what his wife's profession could truly be and what "riddles" about his life could be solved (Yi 16-18). Yi's surrealist writing heightens the sublime fantasy, even as it begins unraveling at the seams through questions of the changing relationship between the man and his wife.

The phase of growth comes about when the narrator begins to question his love for his wife, emphasized through his decision to finally venture outside of his row-house. The narrator's sudden

change of heart is instigated by a suspicion of his wife's actions and occupation. The existence of textual and objectified symbols within "The Wings" supports the illusion of the sublime he had been living under. I draw attention specifically to the symbolism provided by the coins that serve as the catalyst for the narrator's changing attitude. The coin operates as discord between the man and his wife, a shiny token that seemingly shows her love for him while puzzling him as to its ultimate purpose: "Though I did not disapprove her of tipping me the coins, it offered me no more pleasure than the short happiness lasting from the moment my fingers touched the coin until it disappeared into the miniature coffer's slot" (Yi 20). Already, readers sense that the illusions are beginning to unwind, the first rising action of the story appears when the man inexplicably throws all of the coins away into the toilet. The coins exist as these small peeks into the world outside of the man's head, the materialistic draw of the urban environment questioning where and why they appear every day on the other side of his room. Even though his wife does not reprimand him for throwing away the coins, he soon has a small, new pile by his bed, and as such, starts to realize the correlation between a constant supply and demand with give and take; his own wife is not ready to destroy her husband's illusion through her constant giving of the gold coins (Yi 21).

The story from this point shifts considerably in tone, the narrator changing from the fool archetype into a more reliable and inquisitive persona willing to venture into the sacred unknown. In this way, he concludes, "My wife...confined me all the time. I, of course, had no complaints. Yet I wanted to learn from experience if that pleasure existed or not. I sneaked out of my room while my wife was out" (Yi 21). This expedition outside proves to be his undoing. Breton's description of the metaphorical surrealist awakening emphasizes Yi's narrator's sense of "becoming awake", emphasizing how Yi's narrator suddenly will become entrapped within a surrealistic nightmare.

Yi's narrator apprehends his venture into the outside world with distinct clarity, realizing how much his memory and life have failed him and how useless he has become operating in the city. His venture is what finally alerts him to his wife's prostitution, and he is struck senseless by the change he feels: "I simpered. I, who had lived in ignorance of that delight, had been so naïve, it seemed...The only thing that bothered me was the slowness of time" (Yi 27). Ironically, while out once more in the street, Yi's narrator runs into a rain shower and falls ill, only for his wife to give him aspirins. As he regains his strength, he makes a startling discovery, finding tablets of different drugs and narcotics (including aspirins). The narrator realizes his wife has been secretly drugging him, forcing him to live in a constant haze while remaining unaware of his surrounding reality. His question, "For what purpose did she have to make me sleep day and night...Did she want me to die gradually?", marks a new turn in Yi's story (Yi 34-36). Both of these discoveries emphasize the phase of growth, altering the man's preconceived notions and attitudes towards familiarity: a sense of love, and of comfort through familiarity, is suddenly replaced by anger, hate, and sorrow. Yi's narrator feels sudden rage at his wife, questioning his entire life, and whether his wife had been attempting to keep him under a constant state of sedation. His anger culminates in a physical fight between them, replete with screaming, blaming, and biting. For the first time, the narrator begins to feel unfamiliar feelings towards his wife: "I hated her... destined not to harmonize with each other's gait. I did not need to summon any logic to justify her behavior or mine. There was no need for any defense" (Yi 37-39).

Blind love and acceptance have now changed into an unrecognizable form of anger that serves as the ultimate recognition for the narrator: his fantastical sublime reality is shattered, and what he is left with is anger and sorrow at having mistakenly trusted his partner for so many years. In other words, the sublime experience is exchanged for the turmoil associated with *han*. Elaine Kim

supports this notion as essential to understanding *han*'s emotional influence. Due to the recognition of his calamity, the narrator's "sorrow and anger...grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression...When people die of *han*, it is called dying of *hwabyong*, a disease of frustration and rage following misfortune" (E. Kim 1). I quote this here to point to the final phase of the post-sublime encounter, how this realization of *han* at the onset of the sublime's falsity threatens the self.

The last phase of the post-sublime focuses on an epiphany associated with death. Death serves as the ultimate reminder of the post-sublime, the way that Yi's protagonist is able to reconcile his humanity and the ongoing torture of what is and what is not available in one's world. From the point of view of the post-sublime, Yi's narrator is able to achieve a new threshold through his death, or, his freedom through death. If death is not achievable, we are only left with the aftermath of the potential for our post-life, and therefore one is left with a sentiment similar to *han*. In Yi's and Hwang's works, one character achieves this epiphany through death; the other one only witnesses it.

Death works in two ways to explain what I am organizing in my final chapter on Yi. The narrator realizes how linked his experiences are to the colonial mindset, that which contributes to the sublime fantasy. Yi's narrator, his whole life a small haze, does nothing more than escape again to the outside city and sit on the roof of the Mitsukoshi Department Store. There he ponders, "What desire do you have for life?' But I did not want to answer whether I had any desire at all. For me, even the significance of my own existence was difficult to decipher" (Yi 38). It leads him to further wonderings about the relationship he has with his wife, where his love has gone, and if she ever even loved him. It is an exposure of ideologies that leads towards these encounters with the other, the ultimate realization that this phase allows for him to see what it is that the other truly

must go through. Yi's narrator considers that perhaps he and his wife were never truly meant to be with each other, that she too harbors these same feelings of discontent, and that they were always destined to be "like a lame couple", constantly misunderstanding their own ideologies (Yi 39). The narrator arrives at this conclusion based on the collapse of his sublime fantasy; the confines of the real are beginning to close in around him. As the most pivotal part of the post-sublime, the narrator's ultimate epiphany appears when he questions the validity of his previously constructed sublime world within his bedroom.

During the final phase of acceptance, the narrator starts to wonder what is at stake when his own ideas and sense of self are no longer singular or personal. What more would inspire his wife to act the way she did, if she was not also reconsidering the value of herself when faced with her only means of survival by prostitution? Unable to control her place in life, she could surely control her husband. Her husband's discovery of her actual practice demolishes any preconceived notion of the power she had to subjugate her husband: "Then a really terrible thing happened. I happened to see what I should not...The next instant, the door opened, and my wife, her clothes ruffled, rushed out of the room to clutch my neck" (Yi 36-37). At this juncture in his life, the narrator wonders that if by venturing outside, he unintentionally shattered both his and his wife's idyllic illusions of personal worth.

This leads to the narrator's physical death and escape from this world. Death thus works in two ways to support my ideas about the epiphany as evident in the final phase of the post-sublime. As Yi notes, the narrator suddenly recognizes the fragility of the split self he has been facing all along, whether he is independent, whether his wife has truly had ulterior motives, and what his role is in describing and deciding the trajectory of his life. In fact, the narrator starts to realize that he has never had any control, that all of it has been a source of illusion brought about by small but

poignant observations of the world around him: “The sun in the window...dazzled my sight...Down there, the tired life swayed heavily like the fins of the gold fish...They could not free themselves from the glue – the invisible tangle of threads shackling them” (Yi 26-38). The narrator realizes that he is not the metaphorical “glue”, nor has he ever been. He has never been holding himself together; this freedom, the coins, and this perceived life of familiarity provided by his wife were only illusions: “I realized that I could not but mingle in that littered street, dragging my body suffering from fatigue and hunger. Suddenly, I stopped to think. Where was I now going? My wife’s face popped out before my eyes. Aspirins and adalines” (Yi 39). The epiphany arises at these crossroads between his illusory life of sublimity and the new reality he is being forced to face.

What I want to highlight, however, is that not only does the narrator realize that his life is a lie, but also sees that the realization itself fails to make him special. Just like his wife, his sufferings and his loss of the sublime only make him painfully ordinary. Yi makes it abundantly clear that the narrator’s experiences are connected on a larger scale to a cyclical tragedy. At some point, the sublime illusion crashes down for everyone, and soon enough, we will all suffer similar crises of selfhood: “We would stumble on, truth and misunderstanding on their own separate ways. Was that not the usual way?” (Yi 39). Because of this, not only does the narrator recognize his own disillusionment, but he also understands that man is subjected to similar kinds disillusionment at some point or another.

Yi’s narrator thus engages with post-colonial theory. Even though after Yi’s time, the narrator’s experiences of pain and extreme humanism are at the forefront of long-standing ideas about the connection to alterity for a subjected speaker. Spivak accounts for this fact through the act of speaking itself, that a “post-colonial migrant investigator is touched by the colonial social

formations” (Spivak 64). “The Wings” makes sure that the narrator’s role of undergoing a predicament of identity is at the forefront of broader national crises concerning the colonized people of Korea.

The narrator’s concerns, feelings, anger, and betrayal are therefore not unique; they are shared with others under colonial domination. The colonized commonly fall into this same type of disillusionment, only to be faced with the epiphany that their lives and feelings are not solely their own, and they are instead destined to constant copying or “imitation”: “My armpits suddenly itched. Ah, it was where my imitation wings had split out. The wings that I had no longer; the deleted phantasms of hope and ambition” (Yi 39). The sublime illusion of the narrator’s space (the grandeur, the wonder) shatters, highlighted by the narrator’s attempts to escape this life and go to where he can truly be his own individual self. Yi’s calls to “[f]ly. Fly. Fly. Let me fly once more. Let me fly just once more”, are a harkening back to finding a sense of justification in selfhood (Yi 40).

I have attempted to analyze Yi’s “The Wings” through the three phases of the post-sublime that I defined in Chapter Two. In phase one, the phase of denial, Yi focuses on the fool mindset, or the childlike philosophy, as stemming from a deep-seated critique of the presence of the colonial urban environment. It is the narrator’s refusal to understand the reality of his poor situation by depending upon the lure of the sublime world, in which he recognizes beauty and grandeur in all things insignificant, whether it be from light beams, floating specks of dust, or the items on his wife’s toiletry table. Yet the surreal reality calls to mind instances of deeper set problems within the colonized mind, and how the narrator’s absurdity and naïveté shows the loss of the self through a rejection of this reality. The phase of growth occurs at the crux of understanding between the relationship between the man and his wife. It is debatable whether one should label the wife as

inherently bad or evil; rather, the dilemma only highlights the complexity of their situation. I argue that the love he feels for her is masked under the question of the colonial or the insipid gaze, one made all the more recognizable due to the fact that this phase of denial leads towards a phase of growth occurring at the crossroad of self-hood and questioning his own reality. Immediately, Yi switches the point of view of the character by giving him a more critical mentality, emerging as a phase of growth from the fool to the more self-aware and self-observant character. This thoughtfulness indicates the character's evolution. The violent confrontation between him and his wife, his discovery of her secret attempts to drug him, and his ventures into the outside colonial world, dissolve the boundaries of his own commitments in the sacred internal sphere. The liminal space yields to an understanding that, perhaps, his growth as a more reliable and observant character simultaneously threatens his sense of self that he has always carried with him. I attribute this back to my previous understandings of the colonial and post-colonial gaze. The phase of growth is a growth of understanding in defining the self, that the love the narrator felt for his wife emerges at the crux of these disparities between the love we feel as a carnal and innate desire, versus love that arrives through a love of the humanities, through the self, and through the knowledge of the other, i.e., his wife.

Through the last phase, the phase of acceptance, Yi's narrator finally undergoes an epiphany. The illusion of sublimity is crushed under the realization that these same dependencies the narrator needs are neither unique, singular, or entirely sensitive to his own understanding of the world. In fact, his world is crushed under the realization that he is nothing but a goldfish in a sea of other fish, all of whom are experiencing the same crisis. *Han* appears then as a source of the communal through the colonialist perspective: "For me, even the significance of my own existence was difficult to decipher" (Yi 38). Facing the incongruencies of life bring about a sadness of

circumstance, emphasizing the community of common grievances and suffering. By accepting that his life is not unique nor personal, Yi's narrator sacrifices the sublime in exchange for *han*'s feelings of collected sorrow and trauma: the destruction of the individual and the welcoming of accepting "wings" to escape from the reality of unending sameness and turmoil. When this exchange happens, one enters into the realm of the post-sublime. Ultimately, "The Wings" creates empathy through its readers when even our own experiences of beauty and wonder are not only insignificant, but they are also part of a collective understanding of the situations of the narrator's colonial life.

#### IV. Hwang Sun-Won: Losing Innocence Through the Post-Sublime

##### 1. Hwang's Life in Writing: The "Liberation Space" and the Korean War

Hwang Sun-Won was born in what is now modern-day North Korea, in South Pyŏngan, in March of 1915. Like Yi, much of his early life resonated with his experiences as a colonial Korean. He wrote poetry during childhood, later expanding to novels and short stories throughout a career that lasted well into the 1980's. Hwang holds a distinct place in literary history because he witnessed nearly every major historical event throughout the course of modern Korean and later South Korean history. His sixty-year career spans multiple involvements with literary circles and organizations, including the Three Four Literature Club, the Creative Writing Club, and the Dislocation Club between 1934 and 1938. By the time of his death in 2000, Hwang left his readers with over 200 publications, as well as a legacy of endearing stories drawing on Korean popular culture. Hwang's first publication of "My Dream" in the *Eastern Light (Tonggwang)* journal in 1931 served as a catalyst for the rest of his writing. Unlike Yi, Hwang traveled to Japan much earlier in his life, attending Waseda University in Tokyo in 1934 to study English. At the beginning of the 1940's, Hwang chose to move southward in the Korean peninsula, eventually relocating to Busan temporarily before beginning an official writing vocation.

Hwang's initial activity during the 1930's and 1940's draws later attention to a distinct area between 1945 and 1950 in Korea, the noteworthy "liberation space" (*haebangkonggan*) that recollects a sense of liminality both literally and figuratively. Hwang's writing during these years

and subsequent time during the Korean War shows a paradox between the mid 1900's in colonial Korea and South Korea, a time in which South Korea neither owned itself nor fully contributed to these narratives that would further reconstruct the layout and eventual conflict happening beyond the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Jeong Sim Yang labels the "liberation space" as an interesting time of mixed emotions and uncertainty, especially given that the country was still reeling from its recent emancipation from Japan: "The joy of liberation from Japanese colonial rule and hopes for the new world came and went in a flash" (Yang 71). The "liberation space" radically changed convictions of selfhood within Korean literature. Not only had the extreme pressure to publish in Japanese been eliminated, but also, eventual writings in the 1950's stemmed from the "liberation space"'s ideological concerns of selfhood during these tumultuous times. The "liberation space" reminds us that fraternal conflict is vicarious: most of what constitutes as discourse on the Korean War results as a post-colonial conflict between two other nations and not Korea itself, making it a problematic notion to call it a civil war by reducing the actual role South Korea played in defining their own narrative.

By the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1950, similar problems in establishing Korean identity were further brought to the forefront of a political and violent conflict. Aided by the Soviet Union, North Korea invaded South Korea across the previously established 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, created as a result of the end of the colonial period and of Japan's rule. As the war continued, and ultimately reached an ongoing standstill at the forefront of 1953 following General MacArthur's turn of the war during the Battle of Incheon, the halt speaks to the silence of current day realities that South Korean people are facing, serving as a constant reminder of separation marked by the construction of the Demilitarized Zone.

The Korean War uprooted any sense of domestication and normalcy for Hwang's life. Yet it also provided new context and meaning for his subsequent works. During the beginning of the conflict, Hwang turned to writing as a way to combat the uncontrollable forces happening around him: "Even during the years of the Korean Conflict, 1950 through 1953, when Hwang and his family were refugees in Taegu, then Pusan, and later on Cheju Island, he continued to produce, publishing some of his work even during the worst days of the war... Hwang began to write longer works" (Poitras 46-47). Following the Korean War's pause, Hwang chose to remain in South Korea, later working as a literature professor at Kyung Hee University between 1957 and 1980. Hwang became renowned for multiple pieces of fiction and poetry collections, including but not limited to "Stars", "Cranes", and "Rain Shower". The broad span of Hwang's writing allowed for a plethora of observations concerning the Korean human condition within the "liberation space" and the Korean War. Hwang's writing is emblematic of *han*'s experience, his stories exploring how to live within subjugation while also carrying on with a sense of normalcy amidst chaos, the same chaos that shaped his role as a realist writer.

Both of these major events inspired future themes and structures in Hwang's writing. This ambiguity allowed for the fluidity to explore what it meant to truly hold onto a sense of Korean identity, and through what junctures one could justify their own selfhood, even when one's surroundings are inherently unidentifiable. If not without this time of liminality, one would not notice the much deeper implications behind Hwang's realistic prose in "Rain Showers". Similarly, the ensuing Korean War inspired in Hwang the beauty of simplicity, how so much can be said in so little and so much implied through the unspoken. While neither the Korean War nor any Korean conflict is mentioned explicitly within the text, there is no doubt to the undercurrents of Hwang's literary themes and emphasis on the common Korean man. Hwang redirects our attention away

from surrounding political complexities in “Rain Shower”. The reader’s journey is instead a journey through a fundamental human experience, highlighted by the daily trials and tribulations felt by the Korean people.

Hwang was no doubt inspired by the confusion and turmoil of his life, actively seeking to rationalize the complexities of his environment through his writing. His achievements in Korean literature demonstrate the craft of his Korean language abilities, both simple and poignant: “The first and most obvious characteristic of Hwang’s writing is his sheer genius at using the Korean language... which goes far beyond any ‘inspiration’ which may lie behind the gestation of the work” (Poitras 57). Influenced by such monumental historical periods, Hwang reminds readers of humanity’s spirit and durability. His stories remain rooted deeply in Korean nationality, relying on realism and surrounding anecdotes to understand the shifting tides of an everchanging South Korean reality.

## 2. Hwang as a Storyteller: Emerging Themes and Narrative

Bruce Fulton, a leading scholar of Hwang’s fiction, labels Hwang as a storyteller, one who navigates attention away from surrounding reality through an emphasis on the beauty in life’s simplicities. As Fulton notes, “Hwang’s accomplishment as a storyteller rests in large part on his ability to weave this conversational approach into a large body of sophisticated, richly imagined narratives that are nevertheless often deceptively simple in their syntax” (Fulton, “The Legacy of Hwang Sun-Won” 8). I attribute Fulton’s use of “storyteller” in order to understand Hwang’s role in developing his realistic style. My further analysis notes that Hwang’s place in multiple events within Korean history begs for an understanding of his dependency on an uncomplicated narrative.

Hwang as a storyteller both nurtures his narrative style while also encouraging an organic relationship between his text and the reader. His storytelling is apparent in “Rain Shower”, contributing to its legacy as a classic of Korean modernist canon.<sup>19</sup> “Rain Shower” creates multiple levels of understanding that allow for the story’s constant reshaping of meaning. Hwang is therefore regarded as the representative realist writer in Korean and South Korean literary history. His literary themes and writing techniques underscore his view of both the “liberation space” and the Korean War which inspired his ideas of space and split selfhood.

Space and liminality are ironic terms given that Hwang himself lived through many different periods and “spaces” throughout his life. Recalling the “liberation space” directly after the end of the Japanese colonial period, Hwang relied on this ambiguous period to uphold his own sense of Korean identity, while also solidifying the undercurrents of his preliminary writing themes and nuances. In a time of confusion, Hwang reaffirmed his Korean identity through his insistence on writing and publishing solely in the Korean language. Fulton emphasizes that Hwang’s resolve for the Korean language would later instigate and reformulate his archetypes concerning distinct literary characters. These familiar models include how his characters often live within an unidentifiable “space” themselves; they grapple with inconsistency in their world by reversing society’s structural modes of order and tradition, most notably through gender roles, age, temporal placement, and narrative setting. Hwang also relies on the use of children to distract from the confusion of a surrounding reality. Hwang’s childlike illusions are key to asserting authority within his narrative structures: “That is, females in Hwang’s stories often represent civilization, knowledge, maturity, health, and common sense, and sometimes the excesses of those

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<sup>19</sup> The original Korean term for “Rain Shower” reads as “소나기” or “*Sonagi*”. Varying sources translate the story differently, including “Cloudburst”, “A Sudden Shower”, or “A Shower”. This thesis refers to the story from this point as “Rain Shower”.

characteristics as well; artificiality, corruption, and cynicism. These characteristics are more commonly associated with men than with women. Males, on the other hand, are often associated with innocence, purity, frailty, powerlessness, timidity, and indecision—characteristics often associated with women” (Fulton, “Colonial and Modernist Origins of the Early Short Fiction of Hwang Sun-Won” 31). The period of “liberation space” offered a unique type of freedom that established Hwang’s role as a serious and deeply thoughtful writer by underscoring his primary development as an observer of the world around him. Making sense of unknown “space” created the junctures through which Hwang’s own Korean identity could flourish in his writing, a skill that nonetheless continually developed his narrative style later in his career.

“Space” itself also appeared as a notable theme in Hwang’s work, often emphasized both literally and figuratively through his character’s dialogues. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi attributes the notion of “space” as central to Hwang’s early novelistic attitude given his historicity, and how Hwang reconciled the resulting split years later between North and South Korea as a way to acknowledge the sense of “otherness” as a literal notion, “this admirable awareness of other people's suffering... This progression of genres reveals that he made a leap from the craft of synecdoche to that reflecting a broader look at life’s truths through a web of meaning expressed in more substantive works” (Gelpi 1185). Hwang’s legacy concerns the significance of space as distinctly operating under a pretense of the many multifaceted forms of his being. Hwang’s emphasis on space rewrites a landscape of selfhood, questioning how one person can identify themselves on either side within the Korean War’s borderline. Through a situation not caused by their own persons, Hwang’s characters are forced to reconcile the jeopardy of their humanism:

Hwang's writing was born of a respect for the beauty and purity of the human spirit and for human dignity and nobility, which he faithfully maintained throughout his writing career...This also resulted in a recurring motif in his works—the struggle to restore humanity in the face of dire circumstances—and is the reason why he has come to be remembered in the history of Korean literature as a romantic humanist. (Jong-Hoi Kim 84-85)

Thus, the eventual Korean War shifted the parameters of Hwang's writing style. Hwang's realism therefore deals with the same subjects of the split self I mentioned regarding Yi, but for a different set of reasons. For Hwang, it was no longer the colonial versus the colonizer, but instead, the man versus the powerful intuitions of foreign and domestic power (DMZ, North Korea, and the United States), those serving as a constant reminder of Korea's separation. Hwang's writing uses humanity to embody the conflict between selfhood and these unreachable institutions. While the parallel now symbolizes the idealization of this representation, the most fervent dream that one day the whole peninsula will be reunited once more, Hwang himself is a writer who must physically grapple with living inside of a split.

Hwang, however, was not the only writer contending with the boundaries created by the Korean conflict. Other writers caught on either side of the Korean struggle were often forced to work together in order to develop frameworks and ideas concerning what was happening in their respected areas of North and South Korea. Taeho Oh notes this codependency as key to developing Hwang's further niche within a succinct writing style, writing "Hwang also closely communicated with other literary figures that were taking refuge in Busan during the Korean War in the early 1950s, including Kim Tong-ni's wife, leading female novelist Son So-Hui (1917- 1986), and Kim

Malbong (1901-1962), a writer who made his name writing popular fiction”, and showing how Hwang’s correspondences helped create his most pivotal works (Oh). A result of these creative relationships during the war is Hwang’s “Rain Shower” itself. According to Oh, Hwang’s close friend Kim Tong-ni remembered that he, “could joke about his good moral character saying, ‘Hwang could pass through the ‘Rain Shower’ without getting wet” (Oh). Similarly, Hwang also utilized this time during the Korean War to reach out to translator Won Eung-Seo, who went so far as to help Hwang finish the ending of “Rain Shower” (Oh). Thus by 1953, the Korean War had entered into a standstill, and Hwang had published his story as a long-lasting tribute to the havoc that the war had caused.

Hwang’s writing was survival. Selfhood and ideas of space are center to Jerome de Wit’s analysis of political motivations for writing during the Korean War, suggesting that Hwang fell into a distinct category of motivated writers: “The motivations for most writers to write for the South Korean state during the Korean War cannot simply be explained with patriotism or for getting basic commodities to stay alive. Considering the volatile anti-communist atmosphere in South Korean society and the developments early on in the Korean War it became a necessity for many to redeem themselves, or to remove any doubts on them being in any way favorable to the communist ideology” (Wit 17). Even while Yi and Hwang lived in different periods of modern Korean history, their social, cultural, and political concerns have commonalities. As remaining in *han*’s modern tradition, each of their main characters undergoes a sublime experience that is later rendered insignificant through the post-sublime. The union between the two authors is found within the post-sublime after effect, the moment when Hwang’s story follows a similar three phase recognition process that seeks to disrupt the concept of the individual in “Rain Shower”.

Hwang's approaches in literature therefore adhere to a set of perspectives that could have only come about after the days of both the "liberation space" and the conflict between North and South Korea. Hwang's reaction to the Korean War was spent fostering a relationship with other Korean writers, while the "liberation space" no doubt inspired a sense of self-consciousness concerning where Hwang lied as an artist and as a Korean cultural advocator. Hwang's writing relied on themes of empathy, innocence, and loneliness as a way to both highlight and question the role of the individual within these constantly changing times across his home landscape. While perhaps not as dependent upon this idea of the split-self as Yi was, Hwang's writing asserts his Korean nationality, ultimately evoking "a sort of lyrical pathos" (Im 152). Hwang's use of sympathy creates a sense of nostalgia for the reader, one that yearns for a longing before the conflict of the Korean War. Understanding the Korean War context, however, is only achievable by understanding the "liberation space" that came before it. The emergence of Hwang's storytelling as a product of the "liberation space" and the Korean War will better ground my analysis of "Rain Shower" as it enters a conversion through the post-sublime.

Hwang used nuanced writing to juxtapose his personal life. Hwang is a writer in control of his craft, his principles appearing exactly where he wants them to be. The acute realism in Hwang's works emphasizes how every character, every sign, and every symbol, is there for a reason: nothing is misplaced, and nothing is misguided. The paradox of Hwang's writing appears at the forefront of what I argue for in terms of the sublime and *han*: the groundworks for Hwang's realistic tendencies highlight, even more so, the reality of a cruel world shaped by the Korean War conflict. Hwang's writing is concerned with "fratricidal war" which problematizes the Korean concept of the other, which is in fact one of their own (Wright 6-7). At the root of Hwang's dialogism lies the role of man in an everchanging and ever fluctuating reality; Hwang's narrators are never stable,

but rather, constantly adapting around a precipice of what their world means at any given moment. Yet his character's complexity is still grounded in unassuming narration, demonstrating Hwang's ability to seamlessly master realism as a reaction of the changing tides of South Korean nationhood. Reconciling a notion of the post-sublime is an endeavor to understand the separated other, and my reading of "Rain Shower" through a lens of the post-sublime requires the same beforementioned three-phase analysis: the phase of denial, the phase of growth, and the phase of acceptance.

### 3. "Rain Shower": A Textual Reading

Hwang's "Rain Shower", fundamentally, addresses the concerns of two children attempting to understand the world around them. The story's notable and beautiful simplicity shines through their initial meeting:

As soon as the boy saw the girl beside the stream, he realized that she must be the great-granddaughter of Master Yun. She had her hands in the water and was splashing it about. Probably she had never seen a stream like that in Seoul. She had been playing with the water in the same manner for several days now, on the way home from school. Until the previous day she had played at the edge of the stream, but today she is right in the middle of the stepping-stones. The boy sat down on the bank. He decided to wait until she got out of the way. As it happened, someone came along and she made way. The next day, he arrived at the stream a little later. This time he found her washing her face, sitting there in the middle of the stepping-stones. In contrast to her pink jumper with its sleeves rolled up, the nape of her neck was very white. (Hwang 1)

Hwang's beginning words make readers neither aware of the sentimentalities nor the feelings of the young boy as he approaches the young girl at the stream. Readers are, however, all too conscious of what the boy's natural surroundings are. The stream, the stones, and the color imagery are all rooted firmly in a picturesque scene.

The color white implies their innocence. The "pale reed heads" and the white neck suggest feelings of untouched skin (Hwang 1). The post-sublime's first phase of denial, therefore, is shrouded with symbolic imagery of innocence and purity. Hwang's highly specific and unelaborate prose ironically fuels the sublime: from a childlike perspective, innocence becomes grand. Hwang's writing heightens the mundaneness and purity of the boy and the girl's activities together, that elevates the burgeoning emotions between them: "There is no knowing if the girl is aware or not of the boy sitting on the bank as she goes on making nimble grabs at the water. But each time to no effect. She simply keeps grabbing at the water as if for the sheer fun of it. It looks as though she will only get out of the way if there's someone crossing the stream, as on the previous day. Then she plucks something from the water. It was a white pebble. After that, she stands up and goes skipping lightly across the stepping-stones" (Hwang 1). The young girl is almost always associated with imagery of nature as a divine, pure, and seemingly untouchable context; the only proof that she is even real comes from the pebble that he keeps with him always: "Once across, she turns round: 'Hey, you.' The white pebble came flying over. The boy found himself standing up. Shaking her bobbed hair, she goes running off. She took the path between the reed beds. Then there was nothing but pale reed heads shining bright in the clear autumn sunlight" (Hwang 1). Hwang creates an illusory experience from the story's onset. His words are so carefully selected

and placed together that Hwang's tone suggests the dreamlike qualities of these encounters between the boy and the girl.

Kant's ideas underscore Hwang's reaffirmation of the existence of something so pure, lovely, and beyond comprehension, that the meetings between the boy and the girl often render him speechless. Kant emphasizes the phenomenon of chance by relating it to one's deepest unknown fancy, "For the beauty of all actions it is requisite above all that they display facility and that they seem to be accomplished without painful effort; by contrast, efforts and difficulties that have been overcome arouse admiration and belong to the sublime" (Kant 36). Thus, the boy and the girl revel in their encounters by the stream as figments of pure joy; their space is made all the more poignant because of its unobtrusiveness and simplicity. In that moment, all that exists in the world are the boy and the girl. There is effort put into their union, yet from the boy's perspective, he is "overcome" by his "admiration" for the girl, his daily meetings with her emblematic of the sublime encounter.

Yet the simplicity in their encounters by the stream is truly not so "simple" in a sense. Their confrontations elicit the boy's sense of moral obligation for protecting and preserving the girl's sublimity. Given that the Korean War serves as an undisclosed happenstance within "Rain Shower", Hwang's own sense of political turmoil appears as the young boy's burden, desperate to preserve his happiness with the young girl amidst life's cruel injustices currently happening. Hwang is purposely playing a trick on his readers. Even with its bareness and nakedness, the story uses the concept of innocence to purposefully counteract the horrors and complexities that were surrounding Hwang's own reality. By circumnavigating attention away from the current reality, one realizes that the young boy and the young girl come to mean so much more on a basic human level. Their love and their purity serve as a foundation for justice towards human sentiments.

Hwang attempts to justify the feelings of purity by verifying the validity of one's emotions. The phase of denial therefore works as a twofold way, both forcing the reader to disassociate the happenstances of Hwang's reality in the case of this story, while also reflecting these same illusions within the boy's experience with the girl.

Denial ultimately allows Hwang to work in a linear, albeit interesting, progression of character development. Denial arises further from the boy's tangible feelings he has towards seeing the girl daily by the stream, even while he himself tries to withhold the outward impression of his love for her:

Starting the next day, he came down to the stream a little later. There was no trace of her. A good thing, too. It was strange, though. As the days without a sign of her went by, somewhere in the boy's breast a feeling of loneliness was growing. He got into the habit of fingering the pebble in his pocket. One day, the boy sat down in the middle of the stepping stones, just where the girl had sat playing with the water. He dipped his hand in the water. He wiped his face. He stared into the water. His darkly tanned face looked back at him. He hated it. (Hwang 2)

Loneliness is fundamental within the boy's sentiments. The longer the boy continually denies surrounding issues of his world, by clinging to his innocent and childlike love through the sublime, the sooner his illusions will come crashing down. Yet Hwang expertly distracts the reader from any of sense of doubt concerning the boy and the girl. Hwang's technique of turning attention away from realities surrounding problems is through the dialogue between the two main characters. Meaningful words throughout the prose, ranging in part from the "girl's eyes seemed to be saying,

‘Silly boy! Silly boy!’), to further complex ideologies concerning the girl’s later illness, “At that moment an alarming thought struck him. He had failed to tell the girl that once she was better, before they moved away, he wanted her to come out one last time to the streamside. You fool! You fool!” (Hwang 4, 8). Hwang emphasizes a similar “fool” archetype present within the phase of denial.

The memory of loss is poignant as it recalls *han*. The young boy’s constant memory of the girl is in fact symbolic of a type of universal problem of the human experience. Readers are prone to the same temporal and liminal separations of memory when we read about the boy, when he is with the girl, and when Hwang foreshadows what is yet to come: “It looks just like wisteria. There was a big wisteria in our school up in Seoul. Seeing those flowers makes me think of the friends I used to play with underneath it...The boy felt his face flush. At the parting of the ways, the girl added: ‘Here, we picked the jujubes up at our house this morning . . . for the ancestral rites tomorrow . . .’ She offers him a handful of jujubes. The boy hesitates” (Hwang 5). In “Rain Shower”, the phase of denial therefore emerges from the boy’s own reactions to his meeting with the girl. His illusion of the sublime becomes shattered, and the illusion of the boy’s innocence with the girl is exchanged for an encounter with sorrow. The sublime landscape is overtaken by an experience with *han*, one that works entirely within the context of Hwang’s historical setting. The reality of everyday life, with all of its mundaneness, must come to terms with one’s sense of denial regarding the outside world. Denial veils truth in life, manifesting itself in the form of a separation. While the girl offers a space for a type of sublime love to grow, she also offers the possibilities to step away from a reality and towards a newer, larger, and more terrifying space of love within the unknown; the sublime becomes emblematic of fragility that will eventually shatter, even if the boy’s innocence prevents him from truly accepting this fact at face value.

Through the next phase of growth, “Rain Shower” transports Hwang’s boy away from his preconceived innocence and towards his entry into adulthood. Hwang depicts the stage of growth by decompressing his story through a series of symbols and images, mainly, through the role of the rain shower and of the colors gold and yellow. Yellow pops up constantly in the text, representative throughout the first half of the story as youth itself. Hwang uses the color for multiple instances relating to the girl’s appearance, ranging from “[t]hen there was nothing but pale reed heads shining bright in the clear autumn sunlight” to the illusion of the sunshine itself: “The girl was hugging the reeds. Now she was walking slowly. The exceptionally bright sunshine shone on the girl’s reed-like hair. It was as if a reed, not the girl, was walking across the fields” (Hwang 1, 2). Yet the color yellow could also operate also as a sign of decay or of transcendence. Hwang uses yellow as an opposition to the color of white, which unmistakably foreshadows imposing death and demise. The two colors balance each other through a dichotomy of life and death or youth and antiquity, constantly shifting between one another and setting up the presence of an underlying conflict of mortality. The turning point emerges through the appearance of the small calf, described as a “yellowish calf. It had not yet had its nose pierced with a ring”, making an appearance right before the beginning of an unexpected rain shower (Hwang 5).

As the namesake for his own story, “Rain Shower” itself relates to a multi-nuanced term, which translates appropriately to a sudden and brief shower. The instantaneousness is essential, for it works as a sign of imposing forces working together to combat unconquerable notions of fate and time. Undoubtedly Hwang accomplishes this play more than just with the boy serving as the narrator in his text. Through his natural symbolism, “Rain Shower” is able to simultaneously emphasize the grandeur of its non-human elements while reminding the reader of the story’s uncontrollable nature. Through this phase of growth, the sublime balances over a precipice during

the climax of the story, after which the sublime illusion is thoroughly shattered through a recognition of change in this natural world.

Water plays a similarly large role within the story. It marks the basin where the boy and girl first met, but also, as another indication of where their fate leads. When the boy and girl are out exploring, only to be caught in one of these sudden rain showers, they take shelter together ultimately in a golden millet stock to hide out for the rest of the storm:

Indeed, a dark cloud is rising over their heads. They suddenly find themselves surrounded on all sides by noises. The wind blows past with a rustling sound. In a flash everything around them turned dark purple. As they make their way downhill, raindrops can be heard striking the oak leaves. Big raindrops. The napes of their necks felt cool. Then in an instant a curtain of rain bars the way ahead. Through the rain, they could see a shack standing in a field. They would go and shelter there. But the pillars were all aslant and the roofing was in tatters....They emerged from among the millet stalks. Not far in front of them sunlight was already shining down dazzlingly. Arriving at the ditch, they found a great flood of water filling it. In the sunlight it shone red, a muddy torrent. They could not jump across it. (Hwang 5-6)

The rain shower, while a crucial and sentimental aspect of the story, is reminiscent of the injustice of fate and the cruelty of coincidence. At the same time, it is the moment where the boy and girl solidify their love for one another. This journey into the rain shower symbolizes an ultimate phase of growth for each character, a turning point symbolizing the boy and the girl's inability to return

to their sense of innocent normalcy and must now face the reality of an unjust world outside of the millet stock.

The water marks a sense of rebirth just as much as it does impending sadness, despair, and sorrow, one that the young boy recognizes all too closely when the girl returns to their stream after many days, now dangerously ill: “The boy felt his heart begin to race. ‘I was sick all this while.’ Certainly, the girl’s face had grown paler. ‘Wasn’t it because you got wet that day, in the shower?’ The girl nodded silently. ‘Are you better now?’ ‘Not yet . . .’” (Hwang 6-7). The boy enters upon a new realization: if he had not gone out farther with the girl, they would not have been caught in the rain shower and he could have prevented her illness from becoming worse. Hwang’s young boy soon realizes that his venture too far into the unknown sublime has also led to his own ruin: the young girl faces death due to his need to be with her. He does not realize that their impending parting is approaching, and that soon his shame from her absence will re-surface: “For some reason, I hate the thought of moving house. It’s the parents’ decision, of course, so there’s nothing I can do . . .’ For the first time, a sorrowful look came into the girl’s dark eyes...He did not feel particularly regretful or sorrowful. However, the boy was unaware of the sweetness of the jujube he was chewing. At that moment an alarming thought struck him. He had failed to tell the girl that once she was better, before they moved away, he wanted her to come out one last time to the streamside. You fool! You fool!” (Hwang 7-8). Each of these characters stands on the brink of an abyss, one that questions how they come to reconcile their role in reshaping and recreating their own narratives.

The phase of growth serves as an ongoing change for the boy’s temperaments and realizations towards the young girl and his situation. It feeds seamlessly into the third phase of the sublime concerning acceptance. As was also in Yi’s case, the third phase of the sublime deals with an

instance of the girl's death. Yet Hwang never mentions death specifically in the text. The girl's passing is only alluded to when the young boy returns home from school:

The next day, on returning home from school he found his father dressed in his best clothes, holding a chicken. He asked where he was going. Without bothering to reply, his father weighed up the chicken he was holding: 'Will one this size do?'... This time the boy tried asking his mother where his father was going. 'Why, he's off to the house of Master Yun over in the valley by the old school. He can use it for their offerings...' The boy felt abashed for no real reason, so he threw his school books down, went across to the stable and gave the cow a good slap on the back as if he were killing a blowfly. (Hwang 8)

As Epstein notes, this deliberate attempt to avoid discussion of death is prevalent in his works: "Hwang separates the reader from the tragic center of these tales by a narrative wall. The text always ends up directing our attention away from the 'place of death' to another setting" (Epstein 107). While death is not an explicit term, it is heavily referenced to throughout the passage, culminating with the boy's epiphany that the girl has died and he is now alone in the world. The boy being "abashed", he reacts in anger by throwing his books and acting out the notions of "killing" and violence. His responses are all symptomatic of realizing that the wonder of the sublime has failed him.

Through the girl's death, the boy realizes his own mortality. As Poitras points out, "The result is an intensity and force we would not expect within the confines of such a short and deceptively simple and laconic work... we are somehow unprepared for an idyllic, delicately wrought description of the very young budding of feeling between a boy and a girl suddenly to turn into a serious encounter with death" (Poitras 51). The boy's epiphany highlights not only how he partially

contributed to the girl's death, but that he himself is unable to overcome the brevity of his own life. The girl now passed away, the boy ponders by the stream they always visited, musing how "The water in the stream matured daily", while at the same time he, "Unthinkingly, the boy caressed the walnuts in his pocket while with the other hand he was bending and breaking off a host of reeds" (Hwang 8). The boy's actions symbolize the tension between his new recognized place as living after death. The "mature stream" is symbolic of his ending childhood, yet his rubbing of the walnuts in his pocket mimics his earlier rubbing of the pebbles, a motion he practiced when the girl was still alive.

The question the phase of growth poses concerns the stability of the young boy's self, and how the post-sublime has reconstructed his sense of individualism. The death of the young girl has severely altered the boy's sense of self, so much so that he realizes he must start over in order to recreate his individuality. Yet as Hwang notes at the end of "Rain Shower", the depletion of the sublime illusion has not only alerted the young boy to his ending childhood but has furthermore reminded him on the fragility of human existence. Hwang's ending dialogue represents two major critiques of the existential question, including the unfairness of life and the inevitability of death:

Just look at the family of Master Yun, now. All their fields sold off, the house they've lived in for generations handed over to other folk, and then the child dying before the parents. . . His mother, sitting sewing in the lamplight, replied: "That great- granddaughter of his was the only child, wasn't she?" "Yes. There were two boys but they lost them both when they were still small . . ." "How can a family be so unblessed in its children?" (Hwang 8-9)

Hwang notes that life's injustices, trials, and tribulations arise from the epicenter of uncontrollable fate.

The girl's death now brings forth the subject of *han* as the boy's recognition of his place in the world has been shattered. *Han* is prevalent as a form of injustice within Hwang's ending because, overall, "Rain Shower" speaks deeply to the constructs of humanism when faced with an impending divide caused by the Korean War. The separation between the boy and the girl is emblematic of the separation between the North and the South, underscoring how her death is symbolic of a needless conflict that is as unavoidable as it is also wasted in bloodshed. The fragileness of time is all the more poignant, allowing the young boy to experience *han* through the uncontrollable nature of fate and all of its cruel ironies. I argue that the girl's sudden death acts as a precursor for the boy's loss of innocence, the memory of his first love serving as a constant reminder for the future and what actually matters before death; the boy, perhaps, will be destined to continue a disillusioned existence: "That's a fact. The girl, now, she was sick for several days and they couldn't even afford any proper medicine. Now the whole family line of Master Yun is cut off. . . . But you know, that little girl, don't you think it's a bit odd? Why, before she died, believe it or not it seems she said that if she died, she wanted them to bury her in the clothes she'd been wearing every day, just as they were. . . ." (Hwang 9). The girl's burial in her everyday clothes represents the unending cyclical nature of one's state of being. The concept of death becomes so feasible and tangible that the boy is shaken by the prospects of his own weakness within the grander scheme of life, especially because his fate is uncontrollable. The realist in Hwang fundamentally grounds the boy in a reality at the end of the story that is neither escapable nor truly palpable. The boy goes through a type of bildungsroman conversion after the death of the young girl, a death unintentionally caused by the rain shower that he convinced both himself and her to

venture out in. The rain represents love and innocence so clearly, as it is fast acting, sudden, and gone only in a moment.

This chapter has traced the psychological stages that the boy undergoes in “Rain Shower” through the concept of the post-sublime. The post-sublime works with Hwang as a way to demonstrate the collectiveness we feel at the onset of powerlessness, that the boy knows his feelings are only mute on the grand scheme of existence; everyone will, at some point, experience the same type of conversion. Death is the ultimate indicator of life, not the sublime, and thereby everyone is beholden to it. My reading of the post-sublime in “Rain Shower” demonstrates that the boy’s conversion onto a post-sublime plane of existence highlights the mundaneness and powerlessness of humanity in the face of death. Given the context of the surrounding Korean War conflict, while not explicit within the text, makes a statement concerning the futility of the war as wasteful and unnecessary, especially when all humans (either in the North or in the South), are subject to death. The concept of the individual does not matter, for in the end, death is unconquerable. At such a crux of an epiphany, the young boy converges to the post-sublime world, speculating about the tangible illusions of sublimity to which he was subject, and how in the case of distanced conflict it is a fallacy of human emotion. The boy and the girl become one and the same, even if they are temporarily separated through spheres of existence and bereavement.

The simplicity at the forefront of larger outside mimics the use of Hwang’s sublime tendencies, lending themselves further towards the use of key symbols in Hwang’s text. Symbols of colors, water, and innocence therefore emphasize the role that separation plays in such ideologies concerning Hwang’s view of his natural world. Hwang’s world in “Rain Shower” is a world fully stripped and fully bare to the surrounding elements, a way to reevaluate autonomy against the forces of a peripheral political crises. When faced with one’s own autonomy, as instigated by a

conflict beyond one's control, the beauty of the natural and simplistic world can become sublime, and eventually, post-sublime. For the young boy in "Rain Shower", his entrance into adulthood mirrors his entrance into a post-sublime landscape, one that cements the self and the other in a common understanding of life and death.

## Conclusion

This thesis serves as both an introduction and an endeavor towards new ways of understanding two prominent Korean writers. At the onset of reading Yi Sang's "The Wings" and Hwang Sun-Won's "Rain Shower", I was drawn immediately towards the man and the woman and the boy and the girl. The stories are so unique in their writing styles, and yet my readings of each text reaped meaningful discourse between "The Wings"'s and "Rain Showers"'s central relationships. For Korea and South Korea especially, I read each relationship as a statement towards the authors' current temporal and historical placements in their respected societies. My research developed as a critique on historicity concerning Yi's and Hwang's sense of individuality against the forces of inevitable change and trauma.

My notion of the post-sublime arose as a reaction to what I read in Yi's and Hwang's texts regarding notions of selfhood amidst two monumental occasions in Korean and South Korean history: the Japanese colonial period and the Korean War (and by extension, the "liberation space" between both periods). Yi's and Hwang's depth of writing, their characters' similar arches, and the progression of their narratives, revealed to me the transcendence of their protagonists to another state of existence as initiated by a sublime encounter. Yi's and Hwang's main characters undergo a conversion based on a sublime illusion, one that catapults each character into a new phase of understanding concerning his place in a staunchly un-sublime reality. The character's traumatic experiences trigger an exchange of the sublime in favor of *han*'s sentimentalities, creating a union

between Western and Eastern concepts. Through Yi and Hwang's respective uses of the surreal and the real, the main characters at the end of each text (the man and the boy) are able to understand that they are living in a post-sublime existence; they enter the epiphany that their places in this world are all but mute, all but sorrowful, and yet, not entirely their own. *Han* originates as a deep sadness when realizing the post-sublime phenomenon, while simultaneously attempting to grapple with the realization of living within a larger political system. At the mergers of these realizations lies the opportunity for the post-sublime: man is either able to achieve the freedom of a "post-existence" or "post-life" through an eternal death, or, to recognize the connectivity of human existence through death.

My use of the post-sublime occurs throughout this thesis. In Chapter One, I introduce Yi and Hwang's significance in Korean history and the relevance of their works, "The Wings" and "Rain Shower" to the concept of the post-sublime. Chapter Two serves as my theory analysis, where I explain my understandings of Kantian sublimity in relation to controversial origins of *han* in modern Korean cultural discourse. I argue for a reading of Yi and Hwang in terms of the sublime as it also deeply relevant in Korean traditional culture. From Kant, the sublime works simultaneously as both a kind of fear as well as an unspoken force of the un-imaginable. It renders us speechless while acknowledging the self in a broader concept of one's own world.

The sublime is a singular experience that forces one to face his own mortality. I link this notion to the Korean notion of *han*, while exploring the sublime in relation to *han*'s fundamental embodiment of sorrow and pain. Through notions of *han* and the sublime, I explain the paradigms of post-sublimity. I include justification for its existence as a potential Korean literary theory by relating the post-sublime's relationship between a sublime illusion and *han*'s formulation,

resulting in my endeavor for a three-phase analysis: the phase of denial, the phase of growth, and the phase of acceptance.

Chapters Three and Four are devoted to understanding Yi and Hwang respectively. Each chapter includes sections where I explain their early lives, their early writings, their involvement with literary groups, and their historical realities as crucial to analyzing their writing styles within surrealism and realism. I then analyze “The Wings” and “Rain Shower” through the three phases of the post-sublime in order to validate the complexity of Yi’s and Hwang’s protagonists as individuals struggling with the loss of selfhood through the sublime encounter. Each character’s trauma manifests itself in the form of *han*, thereby questioning the experience of each narrator concerning their ability to truly recognize the validity of a personal experience through death. I ultimately use the post-sublime as a way to reconcile these notions, because deeply, I feel that Yi’s and Hwang’s works warrant more complex terminology because the relationships they present cast light on tortured human existence. The post-sublime exists and operates through a channel of differing perceptions, namely, *han* and the sublime, as a way to reevaluate the relationships within each text. Reading “The Wings” and “Rain Shower” allows for the individual experience to grapple with larger questions of mortality during the destruction of the individual.

I challenge the notions, the boundaries, and the limitations of surrealistic and realistic prose on the basis of both Yi and Hwang, how their writings within two distinct periods of Korean history unite to create an understanding of post-sublimity that highlights these key factors: the power of fate, the inability to control our own surroundings, and the ability to achieve freedom through a life that is beyond current reality (i.e. the post life, the post grandeur, death through post-sublime).

My hope for the post-sublime is not that it becomes a point of interest within contemporary theoretical discourse. Rather, my use of this concept serves as an experiment concerning my own

understandings of language, theme, and narrative. I present the post-sublime in its prototypical form in this thesis, encouraging a unique view of modern Korean literature while also exploring my captivation with Yi and Hwang as modernist writers. I propose the post-sublime's existence as a third realm surpassing all possibilities and realizations, serving as a foundation to evaluate varying meanings in Korean literature. The post-sublime encourages us to reconsider human diversity when we all enter a third space via the same pathway: there is no justification for otherness.

Through such a complex and intricate reading of the texts, I hope to broaden the scope of Western analysis of Korean writings and traditional literary culture. As *han* can be experienced, arguably, by many different cultures of many different ethnic groups, just as the sublime can also be experienced, I wonder what it means for the general course of post-colonial discourse when one rewrites the narrative of the individual. I speculate that questions of selfhood need to acknowledge that humanity's sufferings and wonderments are more closely linked than one may realize.

My conceptualization of the post-sublime encourages an awareness that humanity can unite on a core understanding of the sublime and of sorrow in some way or another. My exploration of Yi and Hwang attempts to give praise and understanding to the two monumental writers who were already so far ahead of their time. Through my thesis, I therefore hope that one is not discouraged by the post-sublime, and that it will inspire burgeoning scholars to explore personal and global meaning through new literary analyses. Do not let us balk at the prospect of the unimaginable and the complex, for indeed, "the unexamined life is not worth living" as Socrates wisely put.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Socrates (Plato).

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