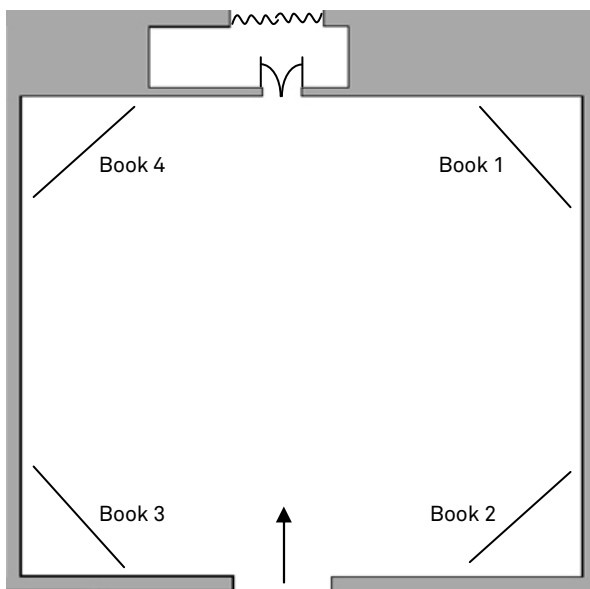


Summary of the book that inspired the work

WORLD LIGHT – LIFE AND DEATH OF AN ARTIST by Ragnar Kjartansson



Book One – The Revelation of the Deity

Ólafur's life is overshadowed by misfortune. Unloved and abandoned by the person who charged him with the burden of living a pitiful existence, as a young child, he longs for an escape from this painfully ugly isolation, which he endures on a farm in rural Iceland. Suffering from vague maladies, abused by his adoptive family in whose eyes he is nothing but ignorant, lazy and useless, he turns his entire being towards the deity of nature. What is more fulfilling than taking in the blue sky above? More exhilarating than watching the sun go down behind the glacier? Immersed in the greatness of God's revelations, Ólafur's soul enters a safe place, a place of joy that makes him forget the harshness of the world, and eventually himself. Love and reverence, glory and radiance in an intimate understanding of the higher realm spontaneously burst into his tragic circumstances. In his longing for beauty and salvation, he spends his time reading and writing: "Often the boy was overwhelmed by an uncontrollable yearning to write down in a hundred books everything he saw, despite what anyone said—two hundred books as thick as the Book of Sermons, whole Bibles, whole chests full of books." Rescuers like Jósep, the traveling folk poet slithering into Ólafur's life, and Magnína, the obese daughter of the house who shares the sickly boy's fascination, cater to his growing love of poetry that gives his life meaning and unwavering purpose. An uncertain journey begins when Ólafur is carted off in the middle of the night. It is a journey that leads to Ólafur's miraculous cure by the hands of a beautiful priestess, and eventually he enters back into the world: into the struggles and frictions of an isolated fishing village called Sviðinsvík.

World Light, was written in 1937-40 and published in four separate tomes at the height of the European tragedy of WWII by the fervent Communist Halldór Laxness. Paradoxically perhaps, it is not as much a realist drama championing social and political justice, as are some of his other books. Based, at least in part, on events and episodes from the life of the Icelandic folk poet Magnús Hjaltason, many parallels exist between Magnús's life and the tragic fate of our hero, Ólafur Kárason. The mastery that Laxness is able to develop in this novel is best described by Ragnar Kjartansson: "World Light is an epic about the artist. An ironic tale of beauty and artistic integrity written in the crucible of modernism, it is equally an ode to beauty and a deconstruction of it. It speaks to an important 21st-century core: the politics of beauty." This is indeed a question that will have to be discussed in further details.

Following the same structure as the book, the film *World Light – The Life and Death of an Artist* presents a scenario in four parts, shown simultaneously on four screens.

Book Two – The Palace of the Summerland

The young poet's exceptional sensitivity towards the beauty of nature and his creative imagination do not prepare him for the intensities that capture the everyday life of Sviðinsvík's inhabitants. Diverse encounters as well as social and political externalities shape this part of Ólafur's life. Only his longing for love can create permeability in his soul, only the eyes of a mysterious young woman and the pursuit of his writings can engage his interest and involvement. Exposed to the struggles of socialist political idealism against the expanding forces of capitalism and nationalism, for Ólafur, personal transformation is only to be found in the aesthetic experience of untamed nature and powerful feeling. The Palace of the Summerland—the squatted, abandoned manor house, that gives the seedy poet a shelter—is doomed to be burnt down, and Ólafur once again finds himself homeless: "Nature had given him the happiness of a blossom. She gave him love and a palace, and put precious poetry into his mouth; it was all one long, unbroken romance. And now everything was lost, his poems, his love and his palace, withered, burnt; forlorn and helpless, he faced the desolation of winter." It is in this very frail situation, in which Jarþrúður, the indistinct girl he met when was a young, ill, and impressionable boy on a farm in rural Iceland, finds her way back into his life.

Book Three – The House of the Poet

Five years of living with this older, worn-out woman and having become the father of a beloved daughter that would soon be taken away from him by illness brings about dependencies and responsibilities that our hero had sought to avoid: "Had he, who had chosen her for his lot, the right to punish her—for shortcomings she couldn't help? [...] he felt pity for this one more keenly than ever before, and the pity fettered him more than any love could." It is in solitary moments that he feels freedom and happiness, moments in which he is reunited with the magnificent spirit of "the Voice:" "To be alone, that is to be a poet. To be involved in the unhappiness of others, that is to have a house." As conflicts of labor and management which are obfuscated with nationalism increase, it becomes impossible to keep out of the fray, which he so desperately seeks to avoid.

Ólafur's artistic integrity enables us to find a unique and unforgettable beauty and hope in the flawed world. Is the devotedness and integrity of the poet—who surrenders his life to beauty and love, who "loves the world more than all others do," who makes perceivable to the world the radiance and glory of the divine—not a form of martyr? Ambiguity and division between the world and the spirit increase around the political struggle, resolving in the tragic-romantic apotheosis that the poet embarks on in the course of the fourth and final book.

Book Four – The Beauty of the Heavens

The final book piercingly crystallizes the troublesome tension that has marked Ólafur's fateful journey. It leads through the eventually accepted imprisonment of that unfulfilling marriage, an absurd trial and ultimately to the walls of prison in the capital. In midst of carnal abjection of the profane, though, his admired poet Sigurður Breiðfjörð visits Ólafur in a dream, speaking to him of a love yet to come: "And he spoke four words. He spoke one mysterious name. This name echoed through that myth-like dream, and in a flash it was woven with letters of fire across the soul's heaven: 'Her name is Bera.'" If her name might not be Bera, for Ólafur the encounter with the young woman, her appearance an aesthetic experience of its own right, is magical and doubtlessly sent to him by a higher spirit. Transcended by the most powerful feeling of all, true love, he exclaims: "today the world was born." All that was has no meaning, all matter dwarfed by this fulfillment. This makes the shattering pain caused by his beloved's death ever more unbearable. He thus finds his deepest resolve and absolution in the infinite "mystical union:" through the landscapes of Iceland, over the great glacier, towards "the beauty of the heavens." In death, he leaves the world behind him and enters a kingdom in which "beauty shall reign alone," forever reunited with his beloved.

The texts come from a bulletin edited by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary in the context of the production of *World Light*. Courtesy of the artist, Luhning Augustine, New York, i8 gallery, Reykjavik, and Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna.